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Volatile Years: Transnational Terrorism in 2027

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Acronyms

CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
CT	Counter-terrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DDoS	Distributed Denial of Service
EU	European Union
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IoT	Internet of Things
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIL-K	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OBOR	One Belt, One Road initiative
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
RDWTI	RAND Database of Worldwide Terrorism Incidents
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UN	United Nations
UNRCCA	UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia
VR	Virtual reality

Cover image: Pawel Janiak

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About the Program

The Global Governance Futures program (GGF) brings together young professionals to look ahead 10 years and recommend ways to address global challenges. Building on a decade of successful rounds of the GGF program, GGF 2027 convened 25 fellows from Germany, China, Japan, India, and the United States (five from each country). Over the course of 2016 and 2017, the fellows participated in four dialogue sessions: in Washington, DC (May 8–12, 2016), Tokyo and Beijing (September 18–24, 2016), New Delhi (January 15–19, 2017), and Berlin (June 11–15, 2017).

The GGF 2027 fellows – selected from a highly competitive field of applicants from the public, private, and non-profit sectors – were assigned to one of three working groups that focused on data governance, global health and pandemics, and transnational terrorism. Utilizing instruments from the field of futures research, the working groups produced scenarios for their respective

areas of focus. In addition to learning about and then implementing the scenario planning methodology, our fellows met with leading policy-makers and experts from each participating country, whose insights helped shape the scenarios. Based on their findings, the fellows produced a range of publications – including this report – that present the process of creating histories of possible futures.¹

The GGF team based at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) works closely with the fellows to help them achieve their goals, and in the process, cultivates a community that will extend beyond the duration of the program, thanks to a growing and active alumni network.

¹ The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the organizations they work for.

GGF is made possible by a broad array of dedicated supporters. The program was initiated by GPPi, along with the Robert Bosch Stiftung. The program consortium is composed of academic institutions, foundations, and think tanks from across the five participating countries. The GGF partners are GPPi, the Hertie School of Governance, the Brookings Institution, the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, the Tokyo Foundation, Keio University Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Ashoka University, and the Centre for Policy Research.

The core responsibility for the design and implementation of the program lies with the GGF program team at GPPi. In addition, GGF relies on the advice and guidance of the GGF steering committee, made up of senior policymakers and academics. The program is generously supported by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

The fellows of the transnational terrorism working group would like to thank the organizers of GGF 2027, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, and everyone else who contributed to making the program possible – especially Thorsten Benner, Johannes Gabriel, Mirko Hohmann, Eka Rostomashvili, and Joel Sandhu. We are also grateful to TAU for its design work, Oliver Read and Maddie Wells for editing, and colleagues at GPPi and the GGF alumni for commenting on this report.

Executive Summary

In recent years, technological advancements, globalization, attacks carried out on home soil by foreign fighters and lone wolves, and the rise of transnational takfiri terror² organizations, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have forced policymakers around the world to wake up to the changing nature of transnational terrorism. While unstable regions with weak political and security structures and limited socioeconomic opportunities in the so-called “Islamic belt” remain vulnerable to radical takfiri movements, the established democracies in the West are no less susceptible to such ideological persuasions and their related security challenges. The latest increase in lone wolf attacks in Europe, the United States, and in parts of Asia highlights the threat posed by takfiri terrorism. At the same time, the rise of populism in the West has shown that feelings of disenfranchisement, marginalization, and social impotence are not exclusive to any social or religious group. We believe that in the future the terrorism landscape will be much more varied than it is today, both in terms of its geography and drivers of radicalization. In this report, we present two scenarios that explore the evolution of these different strands – takfiri and populist terrorism – over the next decade.

SCENARIO A: CENTRAL ASIA AS A NEW HOTBED FOR TAKFIRI TERRORISM

Scenario A spotlights the Fergana Valley in Central Asia as a new hotbed for transnational terrorism in 2027. Terror hotspots in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa continue to remain volatile. These hotspots – along with the threat of home-grown terrorism in the West and overall geopolitical developments – draw attention away from developments in Central Asia. These developments, which take place gradually over a decade, are brought about by a combination of factors in Central Asian republics, including changes and ruptures in the state apparatus, power struggles, primarily at the elite level, overall weak governance, and a lack of reforms and socioeconomic opportunities. Adding to this mix, there is an influx of militants (both Central Asian and foreign) into the region, as well as their assimilation into existing local terror and crime networks. Taken as a whole, these developments act as a springboard for increased terrorist activity in the Central Asian region.

² This report employs the term “takfiri terrorism” to denote a form of terrorism that is based on a militant Salafist ideology. The term “takfiri” is derived from the Arabic *takfir*, or “unbelief,” related to the noun *kāfir*, meaning “unbeliever.” A takfiri is one who believes that those who do not share their religious convictions are unbelievers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Takfiri terrorism is a form of terrorism that is perpetrated against those designated as “unbelievers.” This term is in circulation in English, however it is not as widely employed as terms such as jihadist or Islamic terrorist. We prefer the term as it creates some semantic distance between Islam and terrorism, acknowledging that violent, radical Muslims are not representative of the Islam practiced by the overwhelming majority of Muslims, who suffer more from this form of terrorism than non-Muslims.

SCENARIO B: THE RISE OF POPULIST TERRORISM

By contrast, our second scenario focuses on new waves of decentralized “populist” terrorism in established and seemingly stable societies in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The threat of violent takfiri terrorism is superseded by a much more diffuse threat emanating from disaffected individuals who use terrorism as an expression of frustration. Populism, deep-seated social divisions, and labor market disruptions fuel this scenario, while affordable, advanced technologies enable the terrorists to expand their reach. Connected through loose networks, these individuals target what they perceive to be the sources of their discontent. The threat of populist terrorism thus arises less from traditional hotbeds in fragile states than from domestic challenges within developed economies. The result is a terror landscape in which targets and perpetrators are increasingly random and difficult to predict.

The scenarios offer two distinct possible answers to the question of what transnational terrorism could look like in 2027. While they focus on different actors in different parts of the world, they can coexist in the same future world. Further, they share several important insights:

- › Terrorism will continue to spread globally over the next decade, gaining in attraction and variety. Business as usual is not an option. Without addressing the economic causes and institutional systems attached thereto, the threat from transnational terrorism will continue to increase.
- › Any effort to tackle terrorism needs to maintain a balance between addressing imminent threats, through instituting higher security measures, and ensuring the protection of people’s rights, i.e., to privacy. Counter-terrorism (CT) measures must be in accordance with human rights.
- › Takfiri terrorism will continue to be a key security challenge in many regions, with new hotspots for transnational terrorism emerging over the next decade, in addition to the threat emanating from parts of the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.
- › By the end of 2027, non-takfiri terrorism carried out by disgruntled individuals, or “populist terrorism,” will gradually become more mainstream in developed economies in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Terrorist violence of this nature is more random and difficult to detect and contain.
- › Pre-emptive and preventive measures should be an immediate priority to prevent the spread of terrorism described above.

Introduction

Transnational terrorism has entered a new round of geographical expansion. While most attacks occur in countries with a significant Muslim population,³ no place in the world seems to be exempt from this security threat. The nature of terrorist attacks encompasses a vast spectrum, from highly organized group endeavors to lone wolf attacks. Today, terrorism is one of the most widely perceived security threats, dominating headlines and government agendas alike.

Terrorism, including transnational terrorism, is not a new or recent phenomenon. Rather, it has existed historically in a variety of forms. For instance, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, anarchists attacked European and American heads of state; in the 1970s and 1980s, left-wing revolutionary groups such as the Red Brigades, the Angry Brigade, and the Red Army Faction perpetrated transnational terror, with attacks across Western Europe and Japan. Since September 2001, takfiri terrorists have assumed center stage.

Considering the changing face of terrorism over the years, the Global Governance Futures 2027 working group on transnational terrorism explored the question: what could transnational terrorism look like in 2017? We worked from an understanding of terrorism as the unlawful use of violence and intimidation by a cohesive group of non-state actors or a loosely defined network of individuals, predominantly against civilians,

non-combatants, and infrastructure, committed in the pursuit of political, economic, or ideological aims. Terrorism serves to create an atmosphere of fear, often through the element of surprise. Perpetrators may capitalize on creating fear to challenge a status quo or coerce a society or government towards a particular goal.⁴ By extension, transnational terrorism denotes a terrorist activity that involves victims, perpetrators, targets, supporters, and/or territory from more than one country.⁵ Transnational terrorist groups may have a regional or global vision; individuals or groups may, however, also be willing to be part of a global terrorist network, even if their acts are local.

The nature of transnational terrorism in 2027 naturally depends on how related trends, and those already evident today, evolve over the course of the next 10 years. Is takfiri terrorism likely to dominate policy and public discourse, as it has over the course of the last two decades since 9/11? Or will other types of terrorism fueled by non-religious grievances – such as socioeconomic inequalities, racial and class polarization – emerge as well and be seen as a comparable security threat to religiously motivated terrorism? Will terrorism be the handiwork of a centralized, hierarchical group, or perpetrated by loose networks or individuals? Are the established flashpoints in the Middle East, and to an extent in Africa and South Asia, likely to dominate the world's attention as they do today? Or

3 In 2015, 50 percent of all terrorist attacks took place in Afghanistan, India, Iraq, Pakistan and the Philippines; 69 percent of total casualties due to terrorist attacks occurred in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen. The major findings and trends from the 2015 Global Terrorism Database, as compiled by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, can be found here: <http://www.start.umd.edu/news/2015-global-terrorism-database-now-available>.

4 The scope, variation, and employment of the definition according to varying contexts, cultures, and power configurations should also be recognized.

5 See: Enders, Sandler, and Gaibulloev, "Domestic Versus Transnational Terrorism: Data, Decomposition, and Dynamics," Paper, 2010. http://wenders.people.ua.edu/uploads/2/6/3/8/26382715/domestic_trans_ms_final.pdf. Accessed April 9, 2017.

will new terror hotspots emerge in other parts of the world, necessitating international attention? How could the democratization of technology, automation, and the growing digitalization of the globe fuel terrorism?

These are some of the questions that form the basis of our scenarios, which trace possible developments within transnational terrorism over the next 10 years. The first scenario explores the emergence of the Fergana Valley in Central Asia as a new hotbed for transnational terrorism, resulting from a combustion of structural and political changes in the Central Asian republics, socioeconomic factors, and the influx of takfiris into the Valley from the Middle East and Afghanistan. The second scenario focuses on the rise of populist terrorism driven by deep-seated social divisions, populism, and severe labor market disruptions.

Scenario A: Central Asia – A New Hotbed for Takfiri Terrorism

Snapshot of the Future

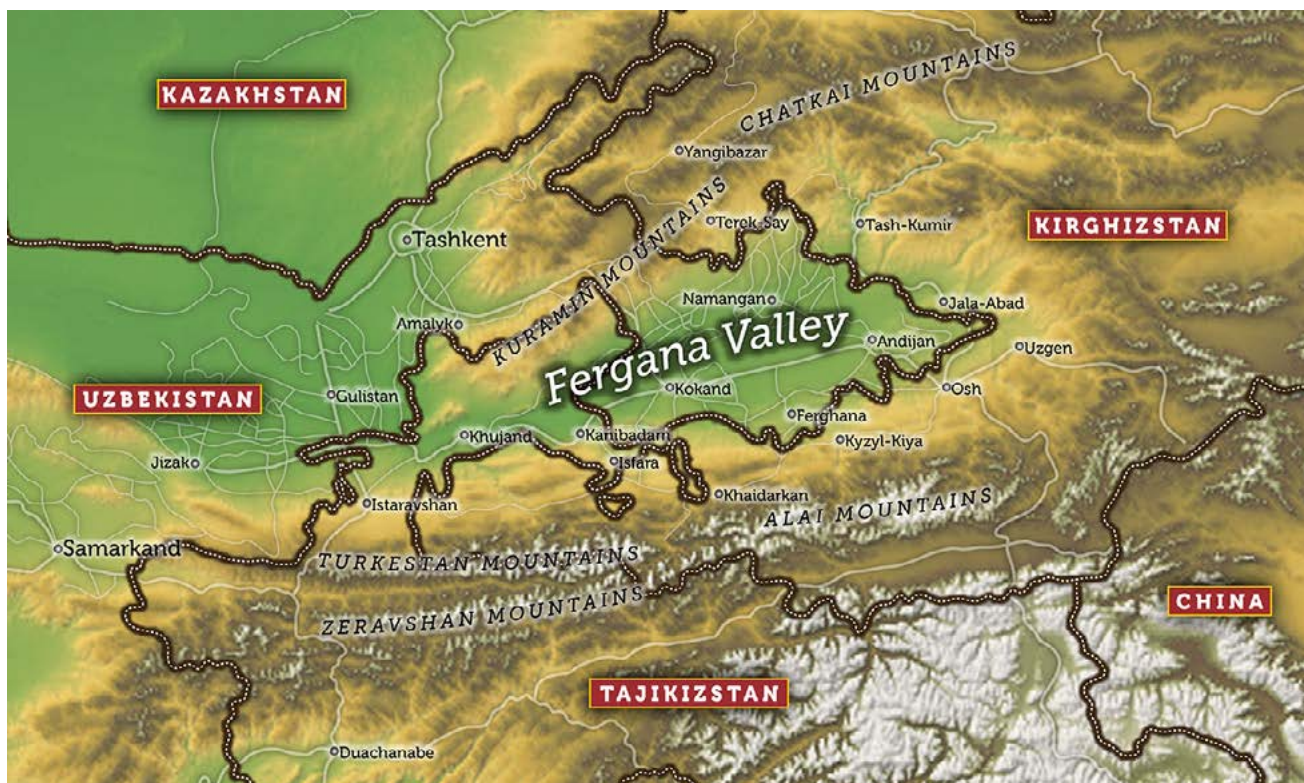
By 2027, close to a decade after a ceasefire agreement in Syria that saw the dismantling of ISIL, militant takfiri terrorism continues to exist, albeit in a more fragmented manner. It has spread through a crisis belt extending from the Maldives through Indonesia, over South Asia, to Yemen, and into Africa. The Middle East and Africa remain volatile, and the established flashpoints in these regions continue to dominate both media headlines and the political and security agendas of the international community, especially of Western countries. With attention directed toward the Middle East and Africa, along with the threat of homegrown terrorism in the West, a blind spot emerges when it comes to other regions in this crisis belt.

Central Asia falls victim to this myopic vision, where developments in the Fergana Valley leading to its emergence as a new hotbed for terrorism go largely unnoticed by Western powers. By 2027, the Valley – about 22,000 square meters in size and spanning parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – serves as an operational base for a network of Central Asian and foreign militants.⁶ This is the culmination of several factors: structural changes and ruptures in the state apparatus in the region, leading to weaker governance and security blind spots; lack of reforms and socioeconomic opportunities; and the return of militants from the Middle East and Afghanistan over the course of the decade, and their assimilation into the existing terror networks, bolstering local groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

⁶ During Soviet rule, the Fergana Valley was under the centralized control of Moscow and part of the Soviet military-industrial complex. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, poorly demarcated borders caused tensions among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which are the three neighboring countries, each containing parts of the Valley. The Valley's population consists primarily of Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, with sizeable respective minorities in all three countries. This region is also regarded as a religiously conservative part of Central Asia. While demographic developments in the Valley have led to an increase in population, the resources available in the area remain scarce. The Fergana Valley is known to be a potential melting pot for militant takfiri groups. A combination of these factors make it a potential security flashpoint.

Unlike their Western counterparts, Russia and China are concerned by the developments in their neighborhood; nevertheless, they fail to adequately address the threat posed by the unfolding situation in the Fergana Valley. While they take measures to enhance security, they do

not play a more proactive role in addressing this challenge until the mid-2020s. It is only after Chinese interests in the region are targeted by Uighur militants operating from the Valley that they begin to acknowledge the increased threat.⁷



How We Got There

RELEVANT GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

In 2017, the Counter-ISIL coalition made significant advances in the Middle East. Despite the progress in Iraq, such as the retaking of Mosul, ISIL remained active within Syria. Moreover, terrorist incidents continued to occur throughout 2017 in the MENA region, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and Europe. Concurrently, some ISIL

fighters began to leave the Middle East, following an order from ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Many Central Asian takfiris fighting in the region returned to the Fergana Valley.

This period also saw small-scale terrorist incidents – carried out by European takfiris returning from the Middle East – in Western European countries, including France, Germany, Spain,

⁷ Uighurs are an ethnic Turkic group, practicing Islam, based in China's Xinjiang province. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which has a pan-Islamic vision and the East Turkestan Liberation Organization, which has a pan-Turkic vision, are two of the Uighur militant groups that are struggling for greater autonomy from China.

and Sweden. In France alone, for instance, more than 17 small-scale incidents occurred in 2017 and 2018. European leaders subsequently agreed to enhance security measures within the European Union and to renew the EU's Internal Security Strategy. Stronger security measures were imposed at airports and in public places; additionally, intelligence sharing and international and European cooperation were strengthened. In the United States, President Donald Trump declared that his cabinet would prioritize counterterrorism in America's foreign policy while reiterating his electoral promise to reassess, and potentially downscale, US international military cooperation. At the United Nations, despite further impetus for countering violent extremism and substantive reforms under the leadership of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, international cooperation on underlying root causes and core conflicts remained weak due to geopolitical differences among key players, in particular Security Council permanent members Russia, China, and the United States.

Meanwhile in the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, and Russia were instrumental in forging a successful ceasefire agreement in Syria between rebel groups and the government in 2018. The imple-

mentation of the political arm of the agreement, which included provisions on constitutional reforms, elections, decentralization, governance, and rehabilitation of refugees, became drawn out, continuing until 2020.

Following meetings between re-elected Russian President Vladimir Putin and President Trump in June 2018, the United States agreed, with congressional approval (following Congressional elections in November 2018), to lift its sanctions on Russia. Russia and the United States subsequently reaffirmed closer cooperation on counterterrorism (CT). On March 14, 2019, a joint US-Russia air operation resulted in the death of senior ISIL leaders. Within weeks, the White House and the Kremlin declared Syria and Iraq "ISIL-free zones." Conflicting and unconfirmed reports emerged, stating that al-Baghdadi was still alive and presumed to be hiding in either Yemen or Somalia.

At a 2020 US-Russia Summit on global affairs to wrap up the joint CT-ISIL campaign, President Trump announced that all remaining US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by 2021. This announcement was soon followed by a similar declaration from NATO.

The Threat of Terrorism in Central Asia

These developments at the global level had a profound impact on the security situation in Central Asia, especially in the Fergana Valley. While Syria underwent its own transition, Uzbekistan, too, witnessed major changes. In Uzbekistan, tensions rose both at the elite level and between the state and society. The optimism about possible reforms under the new Uzbek leader, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who assumed office following the death of Islam Karimov in 2016, quickly evaporated. In the years following Mirziyoyev's ascendance, discontent within Uzbekistan due to institutional corruption, repressive

state policies, poor economic development, and lack of reforms – especially pertaining to freedom of expression, freedom of press, and the right to freedom of assembly – continued to grow, particularly in rural areas. The sudden death in 2019 of Rustam Inoyatov, head of the country's National Security Service since 1995, caused ruptures at the elite level. Although a succession plan was in place, political elites, sensing an opportunity, started vying with each other and with the security establishment for greater influence within the system. The lack of reform of the security agencies, in particular the decision not

to increase salaries for security personnel, caused resentment within the security establishment's lower ranks. Thus, the start of the new decade witnessed an intensification of the power struggle between the security sector and the ruling elite. This, in turn, led to weaker governance and security blind spots, and an apparent power vacuum in the Fergana Valley region.

Taking advantage of the fractured state of affairs, a number of Central Asian militant groups entrenched themselves in the Fergana Valley. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)⁸ became one of the most prominent of these groups. Its cause and ranks were strengthened by a confluence of events: the weakening of ISIL, the return of Central Asian (and other) militants from the Middle East to the region, and most importantly the IMU's efforts to attract these takfiris into their fold. The IMU developed a symbiotic relationship with the returnee takfiris: It facilitated the movement of these militants, allowing them to integrate themselves into the pre-existing terror network in the region. At the same time, the IMU became the main rallying point for the returnees, enhancing its own relevance in the process.

The influx of takfiris took place in three phases. The first phase started in 2017, when a number of foreign takfiris, fighting on ISIL's behalf in the Middle East, began to leave the region, with the Central Asian takfiris migrating eastwards towards the Fergana Valley. The second wave coincided with the decimation in 2019 of the ISIL leadership, which also saw several non-Central Asian takfiris – among them Uighurs – enter the Valley. Many of these takfiris could not return home following increased security measures and stricter punishments in their home countries, especially in Europe, for participating in armed conflicts abroad; this made the second wave more

diverse than the first. The Fergana Valley became an attractive option as the recent weakening of state control in Uzbekistan, along with weaker security apparatuses in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, helped facilitate the cross-border movement of takfiris.⁹ These returnees entered the Fergana Valley by slipping into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan from Afghanistan after travelling across Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The third wave began in 2024 following developments in Afghanistan, as described later.

The influx of takfiris into Central Asia following the second wave led to an increase in the radicalization of civil society, particularly in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Weak governance, lack of reforms, and limited economic opportunities created fertile ground for takfiri propaganda. Further, radicalization was facilitated by clandestine funding from the Arabian Peninsula, especially from Saudi Arabia, to promote “religious education” in the form of Salafist ideology. These funds went discreetly to existing centers in these countries as well as to individual imams and scholars amenable to this ideology. Even a marginal increase in Salafist sympathies within civil society was used as a springboard by militants to promote takfiri ideology, building this ideology upon foundations laid by non-militant Salafism. It also led to the emergence of a loose network of sympathizers for these militants, based in the Fergana Valley.

Many Central Asians were drawn by the takfiris' and militant groups' offer of a strong religious identity in a society where the state ruthlessly clamps down on people's right to practice Islam in non-government sanctioned ways.¹⁰ Even government officials themselves were not immune to its allure. In the summer of 2024, for

8 The IMU was founded in the 1990s with the objective of creating an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. Originally an ethnic Uzbek movement, over the years its membership expanded to include other Central Asian ethnicities, such as Uighurs, Afghans, and even Arabs. Post-9/11, it emerged as a strong ally of Al-Qaeda, but in 2015 a number of IMU militants, including some senior leaders, swore allegiance to ISIL.

9 The Fergana Valley is just one of the popular destinations for fighters fleeing Iraq and Syria at the time. Somalia, Libya, and Yemen also see a large influx of takfiris.

10 Central Asian authorities have always been concerned about militant Islam and, over the years, have taken measures they deem necessary to address this challenge. Uzbekistan, for instance, has banned beards, outlawed Islamic dress, shut restaurants that refuse to sell alcohol, and warned teahouses not to celebrate the nightly end of the Ramadan fast with “Iftar” meals. In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities vet preachers to ensure mosque sermons do not stir up unrest.

instance, the police chiefs of major border districts in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, along with hundreds of policemen, announced their defection to the IMU, weakening the border security apparatus and enabling the entry of takfiris into the region. By 2023, the IMU had developed a close connection with organized criminal networks in Central Asia, offering them protection in the Fergana Valley. Through this cooperation, the IMU improved its economic standing and developed ties with state officials involved in organized crime.

By 2023, the IMU had established an operational base within the Fergana Valley. From here, it carried out a series of terrorist attacks in 2023 and 2024, including an attack on the Fergana Airport in Uzbekistan, a Chinese cinema in Isfara, Tajikistan, and a hotel in Osh, Kyrgyzstan.

Developments in Afghanistan, which shares a border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, have also had implications for the Fergana Valley. The withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2021 undermined the Afghan government's military campaign against the Taliban. With no side able to break the military stalemate, regional powers – Pakistan, China, and Russia – were able to broker a deal between Kabul and the Taliban in 2024, after years of efforts. Based on this arrangement, the Taliban secured a degree of autonomy in its strongholds in southern and eastern Afghanistan. In return, the Taliban had to expel all foreign fighters based in its territories, resulting in the third wave of takfiri migration. As the Central Asian and Uighur militants who were based in Afghanistan reached the Fergana Valley, the militants fighting under the banner of the ISIL branch in Afghanistan – ISIL-Khorasan (ISIL-K) – as well as the remaining Arab mili-

tants in the region, were systematically eliminated by the Russia-backed Taliban forces.

Following the third wave of foreign fighters into Central Asia and the increase in terrorist attacks, officials in Tashkent, Bishkek, and Dushanbe reached out to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for help. Despite the increasing threats, however, regional cooperation through these multilateral fora remained limited, as China and Russia underestimated the threat posed by the unfolding developments in the Valley, as explained later. These terrorist attacks also received little media coverage in the West, with interest in the region having waned following the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

By 2025, Western countries had become more inward-looking, continuing to focus on protecting and safeguarding their borders, with very little appetite for intervening abroad. For the United States and Europe, the primary threat from takfiri terrorism came from within. Despite the stringent security measures taken by European countries, European countries remained domestically vulnerable to this threat, as attested by small-scale attacks in Brussels (2022) and Paris (2024), and an ultimately foiled plan to target central London (2024). Parts of Africa (Somalia, Nigeria, Sahel) and certain areas of the Middle East continued to be hotspots and therefore dominated political agendas. Moreover, Western governments believed that Central Asian regimes were labeling anything terrorism to suppress political dissent, as they had done before. It was argued in Western policy circles that if such a threat existed in Central Asia, then China and Russia should step up to deal with the challenge.

Russia and China's Responses

Russia and China were mindful of the developments taking place in their Central Asian neighborhood. However, neither perceived these

events as the most pressing security concern, and neither began to address underlying root causes for fear of alienating the Central Asian

parties. Russian foreign policy, for instance, was focused on its geopolitical core interests, in particular relations with Europe, China, and the US. In its more immediate neighborhood, Russia had to deal with fresh developments in Crimea, as well as an aggressive, anti-Russian government elected in Georgia in 2020, while also seeking to increase its presence in the Balkans. Moreover, until the end of the 2010s, Russia remained deeply involved with Syria. Beginning at the end of the 2010s, it also began to be diplomatically more assertive with Afghanistan. While Moscow was concerned with the unfolding situation in the Fergana Valley, it did not regard developments there to be a direct threat to its security, particularly as Kazakhstan continued to remain stable. It nonetheless took measures to prevent a spillover from its southern neighbors into its territories and stepped up its surveillance on the home front against migrant workers and its own Muslim population.

Likewise, China was slow to recognize the danger posed by the unfolding situation in the Fergana Valley. It was only following the spate of terror attacks in the region in 2023 and 2024 that concern grew; China had substantial economic interests in the region geared towards developing infrastructure for its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project.¹¹ In 2023, it announced an additional assistance package of 30 billion USD to the Central Asian Republics towards this end. At the same time, China put pressure on Central Asian governments, especially Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, to ensure greater security for its investment projects. Beijing's concerns grew as intelligence reports from 2025 suggested that the number of Uighur militants using the Fergana Valley as a training base – following the third wave of takfiri movement – had increased significantly. China signed security agreements with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan to enhance intelligence sharing.

China's growing economic footprint in the region was accompanied by increasing anti-Chinese

sentiment, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The Uighur militants capitalized on this anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asia, using it to justify activities against China. While the IMU carried out another series of attacks in countries surrounding the Fergana Valley in 2026 and 2027, Chinese targets were also attacked for the first time in the region: in November 2026, a group of Chinese engineers working on a construction project in Tajikistan were killed in an explosion using improvised explosive devices; in May 2027, another OBOR site in Kyrgyzstan was attacked by Uighur militants; and in October 2027, a suicide bomb attack against the Chinese Embassy in Tashkent was thwarted. The foiled suicide bomber was identified as Uighur.

These attacks on Chinese targets rattled the political establishment in Beijing. During the SCO Summit in November 2027, China called upon Russia and the Central Asian republics to take the security threat emanating from the Fergana Valley more seriously, something that finds mention in the SCO Joint Declaration.

Now, in 2027, it is evident that takfiri terrorism not only remains a major security threat in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, but a challenge in other parts of the globe as well – including Central Asia. This growth in terrorism shows us that international takfiris continue to be drawn to areas that are politically unstable and plagued by weak governance. After almost 30 years of countering takfiri terrorism, neglecting to address the root causes – a lack of socioeconomic opportunities, political marginalization, social impotence, state suppression of individual rights – will continue to make individuals susceptible to radical ideology. Trends such as digitalization, which lower the barrier for disaffected individuals to connect across space, will accelerate the pace at which social grievances are circulated, exacerbating any conflict situation present within society.

11 The One Belt, One Road initiative is a China-led development strategy to enhance cross-continental connectivity and cooperation between China and the rest of the Eurasian region.

Overview: Timeline of Events

YEAR	CENTRAL ASIA
2017-2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The first wave of takfiris travels from the Middle East to Central Asia. › A series of terrorist attacks in Europe leads to enhanced security measures.
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The Syrian ceasefire agreement is signed in 2018, followed by a US-Russia CT agreement to fight ISIL.
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Syria is declared an “ISIL-free Zone.” Al-Baghdadi’s whereabouts are unknown. › The second wave of takfiris into Central Asia begins. › Rustam Inoyatov, the head of the Uzbek National Security Service, dies, triggering a power struggle at the elite level.
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › In Uzbekistan, the power struggle intensifies, leading to weak governance and the emergence of security blind spots, including the Fergana Valley.
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The second wave of takfiri migration to Central Asia continues until 2021.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Takfiri terrorism strikes Brussels.
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The IMU creates a de-facto operational base within the Fergana Valley and claims responsibility for a series of attacks in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan between 2023 and 2025, all planned from the Fergana Valley. › China announces an economic package of USD 30 billion for Central Asian Republics.
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The Afghan government and Taliban reach an agreement, triggering the third wave of takfiris entering Central Asia. › A terror attack strikes Paris. An attempted attack on London is foiled. › Several police chiefs in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, along with over 100 policemen, defect to the IMU.
2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Chinese intelligence reports highlight a substantial increase in the number of militant Uighurs in the Fergana Valley following the third takfiri wave.
2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The IMU, further emboldened by a new takfiri wave, carries out another spate of terror attacks in the countries bordering the Fergana Valley. › A group of Chinese engineers attacked in an IED explosion in Tajikistan – the first ever attack on Chinese targets in the region.
2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Further attacks take place against Chinese targets in Central Asia. › At a SCO summit, China calls upon Russia and Central Asian Republics to take the threat emanating from the Fergana Valley more seriously. A SCO joint declaration outlines this threat.

Scenario B: Back to the Future – The Rise of Populist Terrorism

Snapshot of the Future

By 2027, the geography of terrorism has changed. Seemingly stable societies in Europe, the Americas, and Asia are no longer mainly the targets of terrorist acts; they are themselves the source of a new wave of terrorism unlike anything we have seen over the past two decades. Attacks against shopping centers, private companies, migrants, and politicians have become commonplace; developed economies grapple with an unprecedented number of terrorism-related casualties.¹² The perpetrators of these attacks are motivated not by religion but by a profound feeling of social impotence, marginalization, and inequality. Labor market disruptions, populism, and deep-seated divisions between economic and social classes

drive their discontent. They belong to a category that has become known as the “automation losers” – those crushed by the wheels of technological progress. Socioeconomically disaffected and desensitized to violence, they attack whomever and whatever they deem to be the source of their grievances. They meet in encrypted micro-communities in the dark web where they exchange information about using commonly available technology for violent ends. In contrast to “traditional” terrorist groups, they operate in small but loose networks without the guiding hand of a central leadership organization. They are the face of what we call “populist terrorism” – a new type of terrorism fueled by an extreme frustra-

¹² While many of these attacks are transnational in character – as defined in the introduction – some attacks fall in the category of domestic terrorism. The lines between transnational and domestic terrorism become thus increasingly blurred in this scenario.

tion with the status quo and rejection of the oppressive “others” held responsible for the plight of automation losers.¹³ And just as populism comes in a variety of ideological shades, populist terrorists converge with groups from

the extreme right or left of the political spectrum. Counter-terrorism thus shifts from an exercise in fighting a known enemy to protecting against random acts of violence by highly diverse, radicalized individuals with personal grievances.

How We Got There

THE IMPACT OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

In 2017, virtual assistants read and replied to email; pilotless buses and taxi drones ferried passengers around cities on a trial basis; and robots not only delivered groceries and escorted hotel guests, they also improvised jazz melodies. But what were limited and experimental innovations in 2017 quickly became, in the following years, a central part of everyday life, thanks to a decline in automation costs¹⁴ and an increase in the sophistication of equipment. In 2018, the first fully automated McDonald’s restaurant opened its doors; two years later, the majority of food service retailers replaced employees with self-service alternatives. In 2019, Sony released an affordable 3D printer using recycled plastic bottles; automated public transportation became a common sight by 2020; and in 2024, the first 3D-printed car appeared. By 2025, the Internet of Things (IoT), a network of everyday objects made smart through sensors and online access, had become a standard feature in most homes in high-income economies. While for many, these technologies made daily life more seamless, others feared – justifiably – job losses, increased surveillance, and marginalization.

Beneath the surface, new social and economic frictions took root. Emerging technologies thus represented both a blessing and a curse. For populist terrorists, they became a driver and enabler of their cause, manifesting in four different ways:

First, emerging technologies disrupted the labor market, effectively creating automation winners and losers. By the early 2020s, close to 30 percent of all jobs in the United States were at risk of computerization.¹⁵ This also applied to other developed economies. While new job opportunities materialized as well, they benefited mostly those trained in highly-skilled, cognitive jobs. Neglecting to anticipate this disparity, politicians failed to prepare society for the upheaval in the labor market: programs focused on retraining workers were not only sparse but often introduced too late to prevent job loss. The results were growing income inequality and widespread unemployment, notably in the logistics, transportation, manufacturing, sales, and service sectors.

Automation losers, disillusioned and resentful of those enjoying escalating comfort and wealth, began to take to the streets in several capitals across Europe, North America, and parts of Asia.

13 For a comprehensive overview of populism and its varying definitions, see: Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*. Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Working Paper Series. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2013), http://wcfia.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/gidron_bonikowski_populismlitreview_2013.pdf. Accessed April 10, 2017.

14 See: RBC Global Asset Management, “Global Megatrends: Automation in Emerging Markets” (2014), accessed April 9, 2017, https://us.rbcgam.com/resources/docs/pdf/whitepapers/Global_Megatrends_Automation_Whitepaper.pdf.

15 This assumption is based on a recent study by: Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne (2013), “The Future of Employment: How Susceptible Are Jobs to Computerisation?,” http://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/The_Future_of_Employment.pdf. Accessed April 9, 2017.

They felt socially isolated and were politically polarized;¹⁶ as a result, some of them resorted to terrorism as a means to express their frustration. They made headlines, for instance in 2021, when an unexploded improvised explosive device (IED) was found at McDonald’s headquarters in Chicago, and in 2024, when three disgruntled former employees attacked the Sony headquarters in Tokyo, killing 30 people, including two corporate executives.

Second, technologies facilitated radicalization through the creation of highly polarized online spaces and altered social interactions. While the internet helped to democratize access to knowledge, online reporting beyond the control of experts, editors, or censors also opened the gates to polarization, fake news, and hatred – an opportunity ISIS used to amplify its messages and attract new recruits. With the phenomenon visible as early as 2017, people began sequestering themselves in like-minded communities, choosing sources that reinforced their own views, which were then echoed not just locally but throughout a global online community. This broadened feedback-loop perpetuated group isolation and allowed blanket rejections of “others” to flourish. Encouraged by the anonymity and distance of online spaces, courtesy and respect evaporated. Emerging technologies only exacerbated these patterns: Disenfranchised automation losers came together in dedicated online spaces to share their grievances. Some became radicalized, turning their perceived social impotence into hatred for those they deemed responsible for their plight, be they corporate leaders, members of the elite, or competitors in a shrinking job market, including immigrants. In 2022, the British Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was assassinated in what was initially labeled as an act of a mentally

deranged worker who had recently been laid-off. Populist terrorists were also behind coordinated arson attacks against asylum centers in Germany, Italy, and Sweden. In addition, these terrorists benefited from the mainstreaming of virtual reality (VR) in the early 2020s. VR games and VR-based social media platforms not only allowed them to interact much more intimately, directly, or through their avatars. By blurring the lines between reality and illusion, they also intensified the effect of hate messages and lowered the threshold for individuals to commit violence. In 2023, French and Spanish law enforcement agencies discovered VR games simulating successful terrorist attacks in the darknet.

Third, emerging technologies provided easily accessible and affordable means to carry out terrorist attacks. Innovations appearing already in 2017 could be reconfigured to serve the nefarious objectives of terrorists: Multirotor commercial drones, for instance, could be equipped with bombs or guns, and triggered remotely. 3D printers were already able to print weapons, and bio-makerspaces were capable of incubating pathogens.¹⁷ Scientists also succeeded in engineering “gene drives” that could be used to alter the genetic traits of entire species and create weaponized insects.¹⁸ In the following few years, additional hardware- and software-related innovations contributed to improving product durability and overall sophistication. Dual-use technologies, such as drones, became a preferred tool for populist terrorists as they enabled them to inflict considerable damage without putting themselves in harm’s way. In 2026, a passenger-carrying drone was hacked and remotely flown into Boston Dynamics, a Google-owned company specializing in robotics. Later that year, an unmanned commercial drone was

16 See: David Autor et al., *Importing Political Polarization? The Electoral Consequences of Rising Trade Exposure*, NBER Working Paper No. 22637. (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016).

17 Bio-maker spaces are biological labs available to the public. For example, see: <http://biocurious.org/>.

18 For more information, see: <https://wyss.harvard.edu/staticfiles/newsroom/pressreleases/Gene%20drives%20FAQ%20FINAL.pdf> or Civil Society Working Group on Gene Drives: “Reckless Driving: Gene drives and the end of nature”. Heinrich Böll Foundation, November 2016, https://www.boell.de/en/2016/11/16/reckless-driving-gene-drives-and-end-nature?dimension1=ds_synthetic_biology_en. Accessed April 9, 2017.

used in an attack on an upscale mall in Madrid during the holiday season. Governments had difficulty in keeping pace with the rapid changes technology. For one, the creativity displayed by terrorists in misappropriating dual-use technologies complicated efforts to anticipate and regulate each potential misuse. Governments also found it hard to reach consensus on how best to address global risks posed by emerging technologies, in particular in the field of bioengineering. Finally, many new technologies were susceptible to hacking, triggering an ongoing competition between encryption and decryption efforts.

Fourth, emerging technologies created new vulnerabilities and enabled terrorists to identify targets. Smart houses, for example, had become privy to their owners' most intimate details, exposing them to blackmail if hacked. Network

connectivity for pacemakers allowed these devices to share patients' diagnostics with their doctors, but at the same time made them vulnerable to external interference. In 2016, the IoT provided a platform for a Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attack on several major websites in the United States. In 2023, an unclaimed cyberattack was directed against London's urban infrastructure, targeting the electrical grid and traffic light system in predominantly rich neighborhoods. Four years later, in 2027, the smart homes of politicians and chief executive officers of leading technology companies in the United States, Canada, and South Korea were hacked, and their data leaked. Massive protests followed as the media reported the targets' revealed wealth; popular terrorists killed one South Korean and two American CEOs.

The Effect of Political and Security Developments

In addition to emerging technologies, political and security developments played an important role in the rise of populist terrorism. Between 2017 and 2019, populist, predominantly right-wing movements gained in popularity and momentum in many developed economies, enchanting voters with promises to safeguard national values, curb immigration, and dethrone what was perceived to be an ineffective and elitist political establishment.¹⁹ While the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the French National Front (FN) did not succeed in obtaining a governing majority in the 2017 national elections, several moderate and centrist politicians adopted more radical messages, particularly on the issue of migration, in order to dissuade voters from flocking to the right. Populist language pervaded

politics, exacerbating existing social divisions between the establishment and cosmopolitan elites on the one hand, and middle and working classes on the other. Xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments continued to rise as well. In the Netherlands, a pro-migration politician, herself a second-generation immigrant, was fatally shot in 2018.

Populist leaders were also quick to capitalize on the adverse impact of automation on the labor market. They exploited voters' fears of unemployment, while further stoking resentment towards the political establishment and immigrants, who were portrayed as competitors in an ever tightening job market. What began with Brexit and the elections of Donald Trump in the

¹⁹ For an interesting discussion on the rise of populism, see: Fareed Zakaria, "Populism on the March – Why the West Is in Trouble," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2016); or: Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, "The Liberal Order Is Rigged – Fix It Now or Watch It Wither," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2017).

United States and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines continued in the early 2020s with the strengthening or expansion of power by populist, mostly right-wing parties in developed economies. Their success was in no small part due to support from automation losers who hoped to see their fate improved. Isolationist, inward-looking policies dominated national agendas. Yet, contrary to their election promises, populist leaders failed to restore the socioeconomic status of automation losers. In the face of widespread labor market disruptions, a large number of middle- and working-class citizens saw their incomes diminish or fall away altogether. Meanwhile, already well-off citizens reaped the benefits of automation, paying little attention to those falling behind (yet again). New, often unexpected fault lines emerged between automation winners and losers; social cohesion withered further. This, in turn, paved the way for the radicalization of populist terrorists among those who had their hopes first raised then crushed.

On the security front, the late 2010s were marked by the decapitation of major terrorist organizations, notably ISIS and Al-Shabaab. In 2017 and 2018, the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS – the largest international coalition to date – stepped up its military efforts to degrade and defeat the terrorist group. With ISIS fighters increasingly isolated in Northern Iraq and parts of Syria, Coalition members accelerated aerial operations, conducting more than 17,000 airstrikes on ISIS targets in two years. In 2019, the US government reported that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been killed in a Coalition-organized drone attack. Media across the world celebrated the demise of ISIS. Meanwhile in Somalia, troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) succeeded in weakening Al-Shabaab, exploiting the group's growing internal divisions – with increased military support from the UN and NATO partners. Similar to how Al-Qaeda buckled under the sustained focus of the Global War on Terror, ISIS, Al-Shabaab, and other major terrorist organizations found themselves weakened and unable to project power except in small, isolated pockets. By the early 2020s, the threat to the West from strong, hierarchical, takfiri terrorist organizations had been downgraded to a

secondary concern – the focus subsequently shifted to the threats posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters and religious extremists at home.

With regard to counter-terrorism, many governments in developed economies refocused their efforts in the late 2010s by investing more in security measures and less in prevention. Wary of putting boots on the ground, they relied on increasingly sophisticated unmanned aerial systems and surveillance technologies and strengthened border and airport control measures in order to stop the flow of foreign terrorist fighters. The United States and its Counter-ISIS Coalition partners in Europe focused primarily on improving cooperation among their law enforcement agencies to root out residual lone wolves with ISIS affiliations at home. By 2020, the growing use of biometrics allowed them to gather larger amounts of data on persons of interest. Since radicalization increasingly occurred online on social media and encrypted internet platforms, privacy protection measures were scaled down; law enforcement agencies engaged in expansive surveillance of online communication and interactions among individuals spouting radical religious views.

Despite voicing concern, governments paid less attention to tackling conditions conducive to terrorism and taking systematic preventive steps to address the drivers of violent extremism. While governments were able to clamp down on dissidents enough to prevent the emergence of strong opposition groups, including among automation losers, they found it difficult to anticipate and ward off action by radicalized individuals. Moreover, given the strong focus on returning foreign fighters and religious extremism, populist terrorism represented a blind spot for many governments. They were slow to recognize that escalating socioeconomic grievances could inspire homegrown terrorist attacks and that – unlike before – terrorism did not require the guiding hand of a cohesive group with clear objectives. The existence of fractured online spaces facilitated the radicalization of automation losers without the directed efforts of hierarchical groups.

Overview: Timeline of Events

YEAR	POPULIST TERRORISM
2017-2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The air campaign continues against ISIL and the Al-Nusra front. ISIS retrenches. › Several right-wing populists come to power in Europe and the US. Others lose, angering frustrated supporters. Countries begin closing their borders. › Automated public transportation is piloted in several German cities.
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The first automated McDonald’s opens in Chicago. Protests follow. › Xenophobia is on the rise. A Dutch pro-migration politician is shot.
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Sony releases an affordable 3D printer that uses recycled plastic bottles. › Between 2019 and 2020, major terrorist organizations are decapitated. › Preventing violent extremism (PVE) is abandoned because of the apparent success of the CT campaign.
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The fast food industry becomes fully automated. › Several countries introduce self-driving buses and taxis.
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › An unexploded IED is found inside the McDonald’s headquarters in the US. › The flow of migrants to European countries and the US picks up again.
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Massive demonstrations against high unemployment levels take place. › The British Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is assassinated. › Asylum centers in several European countries are burned down.
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The US primary elections feed anger from automation/globalization losers. Similar currents become visible in several European countries and in Japan. › An unclaimed cyberattack is directed against London’s urban infrastructure. › Law enforcement agencies discover VR games based on successful terrorist attacks in the darknet.
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The first 3D-printed, non-luxury custom car goes into production. Autoworkers’ unions strike. › The Sony headquarters in Japan is attacked by a group of disgruntled ex-employees. › The UN appoints a high-level panel on the future of labor.
2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › A small bomb explodes at the venue of a global labor summit. › Terrorists attempt to assassinate the CEOs of leading car companies, using self-printed guns.
2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › A passenger-carrying drone is flown into Boston Dynamics, a Google-owned company specializing in robotics. › Later that year, an unmanned drone is used in an unclaimed attack against a crowded mall during the holiday season in Madrid. Copycat attacks occur around the world. › Governments implement increasingly restrictive security measures. Demonstrations by privacy advocates are dismantled.
2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › The smart homes of politicians and CEOs of major technology companies are hacked, and their data leaked. Targeted assassination attempts follow. › The UN Security Council passes a resolution on this new form of terrorism.

Opportunities, Threats, and Major Insights

Actors, Opportunities, and Threats for Scenario A

The Fergana Valley has an important strategic position, making this a region of interest to a number of different actors. Its emergence as a new hotspot for transnational terrorism brings with it a number of potential threats but also opportunities for key players, some of which are outlined here.²⁰

CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS: The Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz governments will initially see the migration of takfiris to the Fergana Valley as an opportunity to clamp down on the (already restricted) rights of civil society, even calling on international partners for support. The government clampdown will result in less, not greater, stability, exacerbating local frustrations and providing organizations like the IMU propaganda material that they will use to promote their own – anti-government – cause. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan may initially regard this increase in militant activity as an opportunity to request international support – militarily, financially, and politically – for their

counter-terrorism (CT) efforts. However, in the medium to longer term, terrorism will affect the governing elites negatively; it has the potential to change power structures within the society through the destabilization of the longstanding secular government, and also lends its support to Islamist parties. Terrorism will also hinder foreign economic investments and thus development.

CIVIL SOCIETY: Civil society plays a major role in this scenario. It is they who sympathize with the militants' ideology, a sympathy borne out of a frustration with the status quo. This paves the way for the emergence of a loose network of militant supporters. The spread of this “new” Islamic identity (in contrast to the secularism promoted in the Soviet Union and by the post-USSR government), as a response to social and economic grievances, could provide an opportunity for the Central Asian governments to initiate social reforms and bring about an overhaul of the outdated system. Reintroducing

²⁰ It should be noted that some of the dynamics highlighted below, particularly for the civil society and militant networks, exist in other parts of the world as well. Just as they were driving factors for terrorism in Central Asia, as per this scenario, they can lead to a similar outcome in other parts of the world at the same time.

religion as a focal point of public and private life can encourage social cohesion and – according to the takfiris – “true self-determination.” The major threat, of course, is that rather than cohesion, this model leads to political polarization, embraced by some (largely the younger demographic) and rejected by others; instead of an Islamization of society, pockets of takfiri radicalization emerge. This, in turn, leads to multiple forms of suppression on a number of levels: by the state and governments, on the one hand, through the restriction of individual rights, such as freedom of expression and the right to assemble, in an effort to clamp down on this radicalization; and, on the other hand, also by non-state actors, such as militant groups and local community leaders, who also restrict individual rights and preferences in an effort to impose their own interpretation of a “true” Islamic way of life.

MILITANT NETWORKS: The porous borders leading from Syria and Iraq into the Fergana Valley, the weak governance structures there, as well as the preexisting militant networks in the Valley present a valuable opportunity for members of takfiri organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIL, to disperse into Central Asia as their existence in the Middle East becomes precarious. The existing political alliances in Central Asia (former Soviet elite governments espousing secular Islam) can also be smoothly worked into the takfiris’ ideological narrative, an important pillar of which states that the current political structures suppress true Islam. The weak socioeconomic situation means that there are widespread social grievances, in particular in rural areas, where employment opportunities are scarce, with those affected more susceptible to radicalization based on a “liberating” ideology. Widespread corruption and crime networks further allow for the easy sourcing of weapons. For a group like the IMU, the changing dynamics and developments in the region provide an opportunity to present itself as the vanguard for “true Islam” in the region; the IMU can therefore become an important actor around which other groups and militants can rally, while enhancing its own relevance to the global takfiri movements.

The widespread secular Islamic societal structures of most Central Asian countries, a major legacy of the Soviet Union, may present a challenge to takfiri ideology (i.e., as to whether radical ideologies will find sufficient fertile ground). Central Asia’s geopolitical and geographical importance may also pose a challenge to the militants. In particular, Russia and China could become the biggest challenge to these militant networks if a direct threat is posed to Moscow or Beijing.

REGIONAL SUPERPOWERS AND EXTRA-REGIONAL POWERS: Central Asia is of political, economic, and strategic interest to major global powers, particularly Russia and China, individually as well as through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Central Asian countries are also members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE). In addition, Central Asian countries are partner countries to NATO and have close relations with the EU. The UN also maintains a regional hub in Ashgabat (UN Regional Centre for Preventative Diplomacy for Central Asia). All these actors have partly overlapping, partly diverging interests with regard to Central Asia; these interests present opportunities for increased cooperation as well as conflict potential.

China seeks to advance its economic interests in the region. Progress on the One Belt, One Road initiative is of utmost importance to Beijing, and therefore it has an interest in keeping the region secure to protect its gigantic investments. China’s main concern, next to protecting its economic interests, is the potential for the Uighurs to become aligned with the militants in the Fergana Valley and any ensuing spillover into China. The risk of tensions with Russia, which could emerge if the region becomes unstable, is present.

Russia’s primary focus is on protecting and promoting its political interests in the region. Russia is concerned by the presence of Chechen separatists in the region as well as trouble in its own backyard, which affects not only its domes-

tic security but also its global standing. The possibility of the United States returning to the region, under the guise of CT efforts, is not welcomed, nor is too much Chinese influence.

The deterioration of the security situation in Central Asia could provide an opportunity for both Russia and China to exert influence and assert their leadership in their neighborhood. Russia and China may not, however, intervene militarily or adopt a very proactive military approach to developments in the Fergana Valley if the situation remains localized to the Valley or does not spill over into their territories or if their interests in the region are not directly threatened by these elements.

A possible US retrenchment, particularly in overseas military campaigns, as well as an inward-looking Europe, may not provide the best impe-

tus for global cooperation on Central Asia; if the more traditional hotspots, such as the Middle East and Africa, continue to remain volatile and the number of attacks within Europe (home-grown terrorism) continues to rise, these areas will consume much of the Western attention. A possible withdrawal from Afghanistan under the Trump presidency may further reduce Western interest in the region of and surrounding Central Asia.

What is more, what one global player views as an opportunity can also be interpreted by another as a threat. Generally speaking, having a new safe haven for terrorists in the Fergana Valley presents a threat to all major powers, as the probability of a terrorist attack emerging from Fergana – on home soil or at locations of national interest, on national property, or against its citizens – may rise.

Actors, Opportunities, and Threats for Scenario B

The rise of populist terrorism is premised on several pre-existing trends that are already observable today, such as the spread of populism, growing socioeconomic disparities, as well as increasing automation processes and their concomitant labor market disruptions. It entails a number of potential threats and opportunities for key actors, some of which are listed here.

PRIVATE TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES: The mainstreaming of key technologies will generate unprecedented revenues and information for those companies quick enough to harness the power of machine learning and data analytics. This, in turn, will strengthen their role in public governance. To an even greater extent than today, private technology companies will move beyond implementing rules and regulations to setting agendas, delivering essential services, and partaking in public decision-making processes. They will, however, also face increased scrutiny

and risks. Governments and civil societies will take a closer look at the meaning of corporate social responsibility and accountability in the data era. Companies will be judged by their ability to create new jobs to offset automation losses. Moreover, they will grapple with heightened security risks and the misuse of their products by terrorists. To mitigate negative impacts, companies will need to invest more in data and product security, and in the continuous development and implementation of updated regulations and codes of conduct. Given the far-reaching impacts of many technologies on the labor market, culture, and communications, effective public outreach will be paramount.

POLITICIANS: The populist terrorism scenario also presents a mixed bag for politicians across the party spectrum. To rally support prior to elections, many politicians will use the upheaval in the labor market to further exploit

voters' fears of unemployment and bias against migrants. Technological advances and innovative social media tools will allow them to mobilize the public in even larger numbers. But without concrete proposals on how to manage the automation transition, this approach is bound to backfire. While automation losers may be temporarily won over by populist rhetoric, a lack of positive change after the elections will fuel their resentment and, when combined with increased polarization and perceived social impotence, incite violent responses. As noted earlier, politicians will also have a blind spot concerning populist terrorism. For one, their sights are trained on religiously motivated terrorism and the threats posed by returning foreign fighters. In addition, they will find it difficult to recognize a pattern behind the seemingly random attacks, which cannot be attributed to a known terrorist group. Several incidents of populist terrorism will therefore at first be mislabeled as unrelated attacks perpetrated by mentally unstable individuals. Politicians will also need to face the fact that they themselves have become targets of populist terrorists. Many will favor short-term CT measures over long-term prevention efforts, believing that this will ensure high visibility and quick results they can capitalize on while still in office.

REGULATORY BODIES: Technological advances will provide regulatory bodies with an opportunity to enhance cooperation between private companies and governments for a healthy online environment and increased availability of and access to the internet, especially for marginalized populations. At the same time, regulatory bodies will find it difficult to keep up with rapid technological innovations, given the complex bureaucratic nature of their review and decision processes. They may also run the risk of being biased as the technology companies themselves provide experts for many regulatory review panels. Another risk for society is that regulatory bodies, influenced by protectionism, pave the way for increased surveillance and limited online freedom. With populist terrorism on the rise, regulatory bodies will also be expected – reasonably or not – to provide quick fixes in order to avert the misappropriation of dual-use technologies.

MEDIA: The media landscape will be characterized by even stronger polarizations and information disparities regarding the news content of different sources. As mentioned earlier, the rapid increase in like-minded online communities contributes to the radicalization of susceptible individuals. Traditional mass media and social media platforms will struggle with constant accusations of inaccurate reporting, either through fake news or self-censorship driven by political correctness. Their credibility will be further called into question. As a countermeasure, media companies will increasingly use algorithms to check facts and monitor communication in online spaces – with mixed results. Positively, media can play a role in countering populist terrorism by resisting the temptation of populist narratives and reporting on the legitimate grievances of automation losers. They are also well placed to remind their audiences of the importance of upholding the social contract: that those benefiting from automation ensure its gains are shared more equitably.

LABOR UNIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS: To respond to the impacts of technological advances, labor unions and associations will be required to step up their efforts in protecting employees against unemployment and ensuring satisfactory working conditions, especially in sectors with a high number of migrant workers. Under populist, right-wing governments, labor unions and associations may face increased restrictions with respect to work permits for foreigners, for example. They may also find themselves confronted with growing social divisions and competition over job opportunities among employees, including foreigners, marginalized groups, and host community members. By encouraging an inclusive debate about the future of labor early on in the automation era, labor unions and associations can help address grievances and thus reduce the risk of radicalization among automation losers.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: Finally, the emergence of populist terrorism will also be of relevance to international organizations, in particular the United Nations. While the UN's ability to implement operational CT activities

may be limited, it plays an important role in providing the normative and cooperative frameworks for multilateral CT and CVE/PVE efforts.²¹ In our scenario, the United Nations will establish a high-level panel on the future of labor in 2024 to address widespread labor market disruptions and the impact of automation on people's livelihoods and well-being. In doing so, the UN will contribute to discussions on the underlying drivers of populist radicalization. Three years later, the Security Council will adopt a resolution on populist terrorism. This step will not only help raise awareness about this new phenomenon but

also remind UN member states of the importance of aligning their efforts with human rights and international law.

Overall, Scenario B underscores the importance of resisting the lure of populist rhetoric, of planning ahead for automation-induced labor market disruptions, ensuring that no group falls too far behind, and paying attention to potentially new, homegrown threats in seemingly stable societies, particularly as takfiri terrorism morphs into a secondary concern.

Major Insights

In summary, our group drew the following insights regarding the future of transnational terrorism:

- › Business as usual will only lead to more terrorism. Unless significant changes are undertaken to overhaul the existing socioeconomic and political landscapes in the Middle East, Africa, and South, Southeast, and Central Asia (and even parts of the West), these regions will remain vulnerable to the threat of radical violent movements. Given the existing demographic trends, the next decade will see population growth in these regions, but without a more equitable economic system, socioeconomic inequality will only increase with time. Such fault lines, along with geopolitics, and restrictive political systems in certain parts of the world, will contribute to the radicalization of certain sections of the population. As these root causes for terrorism remain unresolved, the growing digitization that brings people together will at the same time deepen existing divides.
- › It is important for policymakers to resist focusing solely on military solutions to address terrorism. Instead, they will need to strike a careful balance between addressing the threat of (transnational) terrorism and ensuring the protection of individuals' rights. The more repressive the state, the more likely violent backlashes will become.
- › In many regions, takfiri terrorism will remain a prominent security challenge, with new terror hotspots emerging over the next decade. As Scenario A highlights, takfiri could remain attractive in regions that are politically vulnerable – afflicted by poor governance, lack of political freedom, a repressive state machinery – and that offer too few socioeconomic opportunities. The situation in Central Asia outlined in Scenario A could be applicable to other parts of the world as well, such as South and Southeast Asia and Africa. Western interest in these new hotspots is likely to remain limited if they do not pose a direct threat to Europe or the US.
- › Other forms of terrorism not motivated by a religious ideology will gain in frequency and severity over the next 10 years, particularly in developed economies in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, as highlighted by Scenario B. The increasing polarization of society, divisive populist narratives, and labor market disruptions are likely to fuel terrorism by disgruntled individuals, op-

21 See: Sebastian von Einsiedel, *Assessing the UN's Efforts to Counter Terrorism*, UNU Occasional Paper 8, (Tokyo: United Nations University (UNU) Centre for Policy Research, 2016).

erating alone or in loose networks. Given the prominent role of takfiri terrorism in policy and public discourses around the world, violent incidents driven by such factors are unlikely to be immediately acknowledged as acts of terrorism; rather, they will likely be labeled as the acts of “mentally disturbed individuals.” It is only gradually, and with an increased frequency of such attacks, that populist terrorism will broaden today’s dominant conceptual framework.

› Certain indicators and trends that exist in different societies today could potentially evolve to provide the right environment for decentralized “takfiri” and/or “populist” terrorism to emerge in the future. It is important for national, regional, and extra-regional policymakers to recognize such early indicators and undertake pre-emptive interventions to prevent the situation from escalating. However, the political will needed to undertake such measures does not currently exist to a sufficient degree.

Scenario- Planning Methodology

The methodology underlying this report is scenario construction, which is a common approach for businesses and governments to strategically counter the challenges presented by complex, uncertain, and hence volatile environments. At the core of the methodology lies the structured development of various possible future scenarios in relation to a given issue. A scenario offers a plausible description of a future situation (composed of consistent parts) and the pathway leading to that situation. It is anchored in possibilities, not probabilities. In order to develop different scenarios addressing our focal question (what could transnational terrorism look like in 2027?), the Global Governance Futures (GGF) working group on transnational terrorism performed four steps. First, we collected and analyzed factors that we thought would influence the future of transnational terrorism. Second, we identified a set of relevant “key uncertainties.” Third, after identifying possible projections and alternatives about the future of the key uncertainties, we constructed two raw scenarios. We began by consistent combinations of projections about the key uncertainties. We then fleshed them out into detailed scenario descriptions. Finally, by comparing similarities and differences between these two scenarios and assessing the opportunities and threats presented by relevant actors, we derived key strategic implications.

Scenario construction is a way of structuring group communication. One of its greatest strengths lies in making use of the array of knowledge and insights from discussants, experts, speakers, and other GGF fellows with whom we interacted throughout the program. This process made it possible to develop robust scenarios based on a targeted and practical analysis and several rounds of critical evaluations. In the process of doing so, we profited from:

- › The interaction between group members who come from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from academia to think tanks and international organizations;
- › The expertise of our discussants, invited experts, and speakers from the five GGF participating countries who shared with us valuable insights into transnational terrorism and provided ample feedback on our descriptions, scenarios, and recommendations;
- › A rigorous review process from the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) and GGF alumni, internal supervision from the GGF team at GPPi, peer-review from the GGF 2027 fellows in other working groups, and feedback from external experts.

Step One: Environment Scanning and Factor Identification

In this first step, we tabulated the most salient social, economic, (geo)political and security developments, as well as technological and environmental shifts that are likely to significantly shape transnational terrorism throughout the

next decade. The list of approximately 50 variables that we collected included factors such as the structure of terrorist actors and groups, technological innovation, counter-terrorism efforts, and population movements (seen in Figure 1).

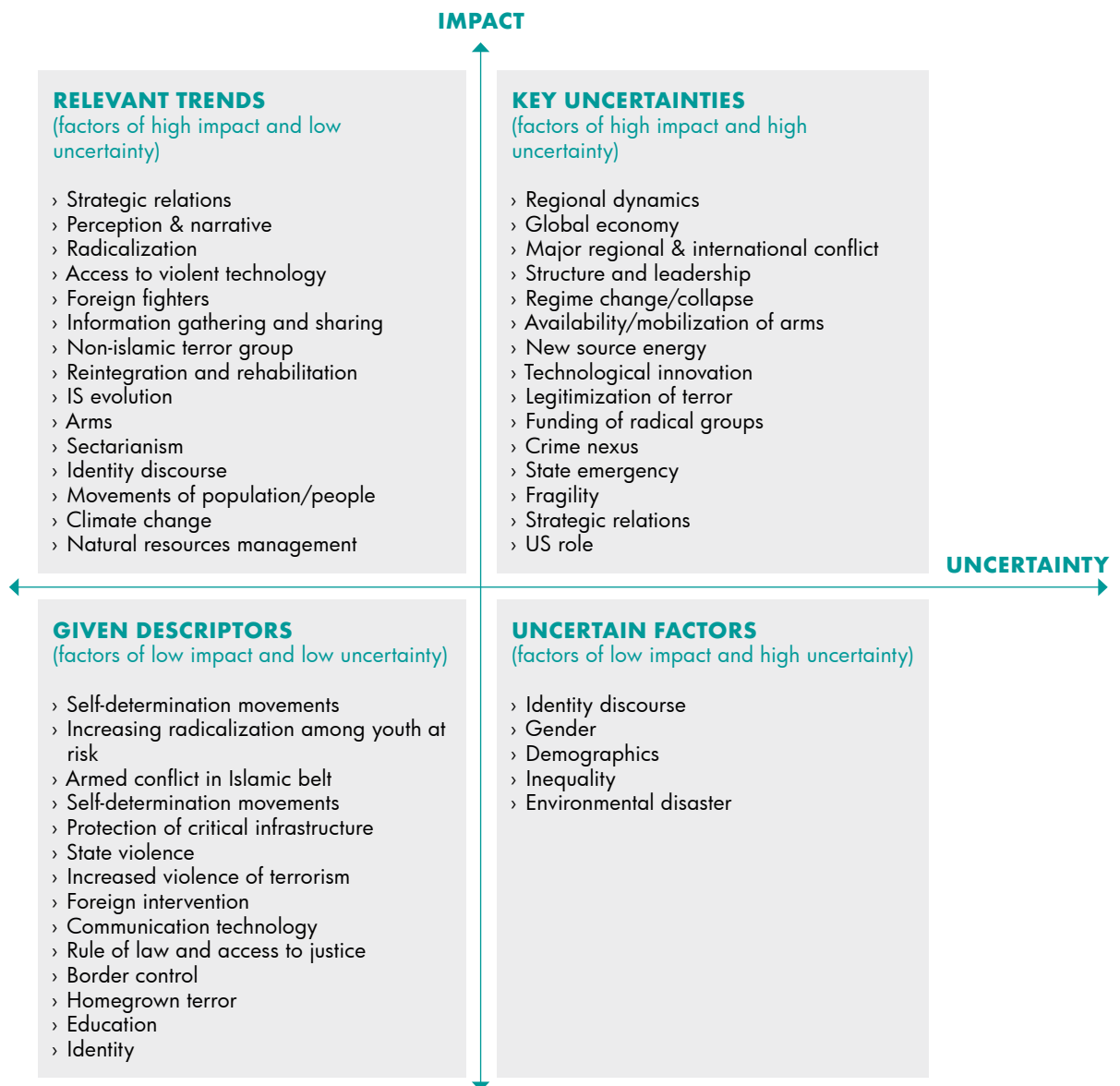


Figure 1: Four Types of Factors that Impact the Future of Transnational Terrorism

Step Two: Factor Assessment and Key Factor Identification

We analyzed these factors in terms of their potential impact and their level of uncertainty in terms of influencing the path of transnational terrorism. According to their locations on the dimensions of impact and uncertainty, we grouped all factors into four categories: relevant trends, key uncertainties, given descriptors, and uncertain factors, as shown in Figure 1. After long and intense discussions, we singled out eight factors

(or combined factors) that stood out and which, by encompassing all other factors, could serve as umbrella terms. These included: international and regional dynamics; global economy; drivers for violent radicalization; perception/narratives; international cooperation; preventing and countering violent extremism (CVE/PVE); technology; and forms and structures of terrorism.

Step Three: Scenario Construction

Taking the eight key factors as our starting point, we created consistent combinations of projections in a structured group discussion using a morphological analysis. Ultimately, we constructed two abstract scenario frameworks: “Central Asia as a New Hotbed for Takfiri Terrorism” and “The Rise of Populist Terrorism.” The combinations of projections, which formed the backbone of the two scenarios, are shown in Table 1. In the two scenarios, some factors took similar trajectories, while others developed in differing or opposing ways. For example, both scenarios envi-

sioned an increase in antagonism or social divides as a driver for radicalization: In Scenario A, we pictured an increasing antagonism between the Central Asian governments and their respective societies due to growing socioeconomic hardship. In Scenario B, automation losers became pitted against those they considered responsible for their plight – be it governments, elites, major corporations, or foreigners. The two scenarios highlight different possibilities that can coexist, working from the same starting point.

	SCENARIO A (CENTRAL ASIA)		SCENARIO B (POPULIST TERRORISM)	
Key uncertainties	Projection A	Projection B	Projection C	Projection D
International & regional dynamics	Regional explosion	Syria conflict is being resolved	New/emerging hotspots	Rising populism
Global economy	Major economic collapse	Labor market disruptions	Increase in price of oil	Economic growth & prosperity
Drivers for violent radicalization	Socioeconomic inequality	Discontent over the impact of automation	Sectarianism	Confidential information leak
Perceptions/narratives	More isolation and antagonistic views	Softening narratives, strengthening commonalities	Continuous status quo	New global enemy
International cooperation	International consensus on legal frame for CT (humanitarian)	International consensus on legal frame for CT (military)	Establishment of a global CT coalition	Status quo (tensions continue)
CVE/PVE	Implementation of CVE/PVE	Roll-out of the concept of CVE/PVE	CVE/PVE is replaced by other concepts	Back to traditional CT means
Technology	Democratization of dual-use technology	Strong surveillance	Cyber terrorism	Improved education through technology
Forms & structures of terrorism	Decentralization & fragmentation of inter-group structure	Regional instability in Afghanistan-Pakistan region	Re-centering of takfiri network	Individual attacks without an overarching hierarchical group

- Projections in green exist both in Scenario A and Scenario B.
- Projections in blue and in green together lead to Scenario A.
- Projections in grey and in green together lead to Scenario B.

Table 1: Key Uncertainties, Projections, and Scenario Construction

Step Four: Identifying Actor-Specific Opportunities and Threats and Deriving Strategic Implications

In this final step, we concentrated on identifying the most pertinent consequences that may arise from different scenarios. Simply put, consequences refer to both opportunities and threats in the eye of the main actors, which may include international or regional organizations, governments, non-government groups, multinational companies, civil societies, or think tanks, among other entities. Some opportunities and threats

are common across scenarios or multiple actors, while others are scenario-dependent, or actor-contingent. After identifying potential windows of opportunity as well as threats, we derived strategic implications across the scenarios that hopefully improve not only our understanding of the future, but also our preparations for potential changes and related challenges in the coming decade.

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