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Analytical Article

Why are Terrorist Organizations Increasingly Relying on Economic Jihad?

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The economic factor has emerged as a pivotal determinant that shapes the strategies and operations of violent and terrorist organizations. In fact, it is arguably the most vital factor that enables these organizations to sustain their existence, as it facilitates the recruitment of new fighters who are lured by the prospect of financial gain. Moreover, these organizations require economic resources to execute their terrorist operations. Consequently, the pursuit of funding and

the establishment of thriving economies have become the foremost preoccupation of active violent and terrorist organizations across the globe, including the region.

In recent decades, the economic factor has evolved within the activities of violent and terrorist organizations, moving beyond the pursuit of financial gain to serve a more strategic purpose. It has become a weapon that these organizations seek to wield against their adversaries as part of a strategy known as

“economic jihad.” This shift in focus on the economic factor gained momentum following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the resulting changes in operational strategies for violent organizations. As such, it has become increasingly important to understand the concept of economic jihad as a primary operational pattern for terrorist organizations in recent years, encompassing their strategies, manifestations, and objectives, which have led to a growing reliance on this approach.

The economic jihad Concept

Al-Qaeda and its prominent leaders and ideologues were at the forefront of establishing the concept of economic jihad as part of their “revenge or punishment” strategy, adopted by the organization as it reached out to several regions and countries, targeting the “far enemy” represented by the United States and its interests and presence in these countries. The concept was introduced in a prominent extremist book entitled *The Ruling on Targeting Oil*

Interests and the Rules of Economic Jihad by Abdul Aziz Rashid Al-Anzi, the media minister of Al-Qaeda who was arrested in Riyadh in 2005 and executed by Saudi authorities in 2006.

According to Al-Anzi, whose book became a sort of Bible text to different branches of Al-Qaeda and other organizations stemming from it: “targeting the economic interests of those known as enemies is more heinous and odious than destroying their armies”. He emphasizes that “targeting economic interests, especially those of the USA, would put pressure on them and force them to stop engaging in counter-terrorism operations”.

In November 2008 (a couple of months following the world financial crisis), Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the second-in-command of Al-Qaeda at the time, released a video calling for targeting the economic interests of countries involved in the global campaign against Al-Qaeda, emphasizing the central role of the economy in destabilizing the West. Later in January 2009, Al-Qaeda’s

historic leader, Osama bin Laden, raised the same point in an audio recording, questioning whether economic weakness would force the US to stop financing its campaign against terrorism.

In general, the term economic jihad has been increasingly used by non-state armed actors in the Arab region, targeting entities opposing these organizations, be they Western and international entities or Arab states, their leaders, and political systems. However, the use and meaning of this concept varied depending on the promoting organization. For example, Iran and some affiliated organizations and individuals have used the term to refer to the necessity of confronting economic campaigns and blockades imposed on them.

The Secretary-General of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, called for economic jihad on several occasions, urging the creation of mechanisms to circumvent the sanctions imposed on the party and provide financial support to it. Similarly, investigations into the Turkish-Iranian gold trader Reza Zarrab, who

testified in 2017 before US prosecutors in a criminal trial for supporting Iran's shadow economy, indicated that former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called on Zarab to support Iran through economic jihad.

The term economic jihad was used by Al-Qaeda and later by IS to refer to a strategy of "targeting the economic interests of the enemy", whether the near enemy represented by political systems in the Arab region or the far enemy represented by Western countries, particularly the US.

Based on this, it can be said that economic jihad is a term that refers to a strategy adopted by non-state armed actors, aimed at dealing with economic restrictions imposed on these organizations, as well as targeting the economic interests of the entities that fall within the enemy's framework. This strategy is deeply rooted in the mindset and ideology of these organizations, and involves adopting a set of operations that intersect with organized crime to build strong economies that contribute to implementing these organizations' agendas.

Patterns of economic jihad

Given the literature on extremist and violent organizations, including the prominent writers and philosophers of Al-Qaeda, as well as their operational approach, it is found that the essence of economic jihad revolves around a set of objectives that begin with targeting entities that fall within the "enemy" framework for these organizations, and culminate in the practice of some terrorist activities that aim to obtain funds.

In light of this, some of the main patterns of economic jihad can be identified as follows:

1- Targeting economic interests: Targeting the economic interests of entities that fall within the concept of the "near or far enemy" is a key pattern and manifestation of economic jihad for violent and terrorist organizations. This is part of the "jihad of revenge" approach adopted by these organizations in the stages of "disempowerment". It is worth noting that these organizations tend to use the term "jihad or the spear of revenge" in the linguistic sense, which refers to the use of force and weapons to harass enemies. This pattern primarily aims to inflict harm and spread terror among the opposing entities, causing them the greatest possible losses, and conveying messages of strength of these organizations.

The jihadist ideologue known as Abu Qatada al-Filistini, who began his career in Tablighi Jamaat or propagation party in Jordan before founding the Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jamaa organization, was the first to introduce the concept of "jihad of revenge" in his book *Jihad and Diligence*. In this book, he emphasized that "jihad of revenge is the station that precedes empowerment" and that "the priority of terrorist organizations is to employ all their power tools to harass their enemies."

Targeting the economic interests of countries is one of the main manifestations of economic jihad, given the damage that countries suffer because of the terrorist attacks, either on the economic level or the political and media level. The September 11 attacks in 2001 were a clear expression of this pattern, as they primarily

targeted the World Trade Center site in Manhattan, New York, or the “heart of the world economy”, a clear indication of the concept and objectives of economic jihad.

Likewise, IS has focused on the concept of economic jihad as part of its operational approach. Its former spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, clearly expressed this approach in an audio message in October 2020 when he called for “targeting Westerners in Saudi Arabia as well as oil pipelines, factories, and facilities”.

Yet, observers of IS’ operational activities find that this approach was adopted before direct incitement to it. For example, on 29 October 2019, Abdelhak Khiame, the director of the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations of the General Directorate for National Security in Morocco, revealed that a terrorist cell loyal to IS that was arrested and dismantled was planning to “target sensitive economic facilities in the country that could harm the Kingdom’s economic interests and infrastructure.” Additionally, in December 2019, IS targeted the Homs refinery in the city of Homs in Syria

, as well as the gas plant in the southern region of the central area and the Rayyan gas station in the Badia in the east of the province. This led to the shutdown of several production units in the three locations.

Since the military defeat of IS in Iraq in 2019, however, the organization has adopted a strategy of targeting the economic interests of the Iraqi state, especially oil wells and electricity towers, particularly in the provinces of Salahaddin, Kirkuk, and Nineveh, where remnants of the organization are present.

A glimpse into the state of the organization in Africa, it is found that Mozambique has suffered greatly from IS’ adoption of the economic jihad strategy. In 2020 and 2021, the organization carried out repeated attacks on the coastal region in the northeastern part of Mozambique against a natural gas production project in the region, which led to the suspension of work in the project for months. In addition, in October 2022, IS elements attacked the Montepuez ruby mine in the northeast of the country and set it on fire. This mine is one of the largest in the world for mining rubies,

and is managed by Gemrock Mining Company, which operates as a subcontractor for the Indian company Diacolour International. Following the attack, work at the mine was suspended for “security reasons.”

2- Attempts to Control Economic Sectors: As part of its economic jihad strategy, IS sought to control important economic sectors during periods of “empowerment” when it controlled large areas of Syrian and Iraqi territory. This approach was particularly evident in Syria, where since mid-2013, the organization was able to seize control of energy production areas, especially in the city of Deir ez-Zor. In this city, IS controlled the Al-Omar oil field, located 15 kilometers east of the town of Al-Busayrah in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor, as well as the Al-Tanak oil field, second in size only to Al-Omar field, and is located in the eastern Badiya Al-Shaitat in the countryside of Deir ez-Zor. Additionally, IS controlled the Al-Ward, Al-Theim, Al-Jafrah, and Kunico oil fields, as well as the T2 plant, located on the route of the Iraqi-Syrian oil pipeline. The organization was also able to control all the oil fields in Al-

Hasakah province. However, with the military defeat of IS in 2017, its control over these important economic sectors came to an end, and all the oil fields in these areas became subject to the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by the US.

3- Crimes for Money: The recent years has witnessed a noticeable increase in the patterns of relationships between terrorist groups and organized crime groups. Some terrorist organizations have resorted to collaboration with criminal groups and elements in certain areas where they seek to achieve certain gains. This change has not stopped at the boundaries of cooperation between the two parties, but has extended to include the influence of organized crime groups on terrorist organizations and the latter's attempts to replicate their operational approach, especially in terms of carrying out operations that target achieving economic gains for the organization, and justifying this in light of the principle that "necessities permit the prohibited". This pattern is clearly evident in hostage-taking operations and demanding ransom for their release, with IS being the most

prominent example of this operational pattern.

However, it is noteworthy that IS' strategy in this regard underwent a significant change during periods of "disempowerment" after the demise of its alleged caliphate and military defeat in Iraq and Syria. During periods of "empowerment", kidnapping operations were aimed at spreading terror and demonstrating the organization's strength by killing hostages. This was evident in many cases, the most prominent of which was the burning of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh in a cage in February 2015. Afterward, the organization displayed photos of other Jordanian pilots with their names and the words "wanted dead" written on them. Additionally, the organization offered a financial reward of 100 golden dinars to anyone who killed what the organization referred to as "crusader pilots", indicating that kidnapping operations at that time were primarily aimed at terrorizing people.

Yet, this strategy changed following the collapse and military defeat of IS in Syria and Iraq, and the resulting

financial and economic crisis it faced. Kidnapping operations became focused on obtaining money, and some international reports indicated that IS cells are practicing terrorism against Syrian citizens in some Syrian areas, where the organization's members do not just kidnap citizens and demand ransom, but they also kill the hostages and send videos of their bodies to their families. In 2020, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented more than 510 cases of kidnapping, including children and women, where almost 200 of these cases occurred in areas controlled by the Syrian regime. In early 2021, the organization kidnapped three brothers who worked in the field of cargo transportation in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Messages were sent to their families indicating that if a ransom of \$5,000 was not paid, their sons' heads would be cut off. The families sent the ransom, and the young men were released, only to find themselves in the province of Idlib.

The situation in Iraq is more or less the same. Iraqi civilians, especially those in Kirkuk, Anbar, Nineveh, Diyala, and Salah al-Din, have

found themselves surrounded by numerous traps set by IS. The organization carries out terrorist attacks at night and kidnaps people who it considers to be collaborators with security forces, calling them “apostates”. However, it accepts money in exchange for their release, and the amounts demanded by IS from the families of the kidnapped range from \$10,000 to \$70,000. Families usually end up paying these amounts to secure the release of their loved ones. In some cases, the organization executes some of the kidnapped individuals, even after receiving the demanded amount of money.

Multiple Objectives

A thorough look at the concept of economic jihad and its multiple patterns reveals that this strategy mainly targets achieving a number of objectives as follows:

1- Adapting to the state of Decline: In light of the current state of terrorism, it is found that IS is the terrorist organization that relies most on the economic jihad strategy. This trend can be

understood in the context of the major defeats suffered by the organization, which began with the collapse of its alleged state in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in 2019. Since then, the organization has begun adopting new combat tactics and strategies, including the economic jihad, with the aim of reviving its terrorist activities and maintaining its presence. Some circles describe this as “primitive terrorism,” indicating the use of tactics based on sniping, explosive devices, and guerrilla warfare, rather than the concept of “managing savagery”, which involves actual control of a geographical area to establish the project adopted by the organization. Additionally, the organization has adopted “cheap jihad” in reference to low-cost, high-impact terrorist operations.

2- Providing Financial and Economic Resources: The economic factor is a key determinant of the intensity and nature of the activities of terrorist and violent extremist organizations. There is a direct relationship between the size of the economies of these organizations and their ability to carry out terrorist activities. In this context, adopting the strategy of economic jihad is

an approach that primarily aims to provide financial and economic resources for violent extremist organizations. This is particularly important given the growing trend of international and regional anti-terrorism strategies to dry up the funding sources and economies of these organizations, which has put significant pressure on their activities. As a result, these organizations have been looking for alternative sources of funding.

3- Weakening the Adversary's Power: The operational activities that fall under the economic jihad strategy are characterized by being low-cost. They are likely carried out through the use of explosive devices, which these organizations have become increasingly capable of manufacturing and developing. These operations also achieve a number of objectives that serve their overall strategies, including weakening the power of their adversaries. These operations target important economic interests and facilities, which could have negative repercussions on the economies of these countries, especially if these facilities are disrupted. Additionally,

these operations send political messages indicating instability and insecurity in the region, which often deters many foreign investment circles from investing in these countries.

In conclusion, it could be said that there is a noticeable trend among violent extremist organizations, especially IS, towards relying on the economic jihad strategy as a means of adapting to the changes that have accompanied the effectiveness of regional and global counter-terrorism efforts in recent years. This situation, in turn, increases the need for security agencies in the region and the world at large to develop approaches to deal with this dangerous operational strategy. These approaches should aim to limit the financial resources of these organizations and protect economic interests and facilities from such operations.