

Artificial Intelligence and Terrorist Groups in the Middle East: A Strategic Analysis of Capabilities and Security Implications from the Perspective of Offensive Realism

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the paragraph beginning “From this perspective, the relationship between terrorism and artificial intelligence is not merely a technical or technological issue,” the manuscript introduces the concept of AI as a “force multiplier,” but the concept remains theoretically underdeveloped. The authors should provide a clear definition of a force multiplier and explain the causal mechanism through which AI converts limited organizational resources into enhanced terrorist influence. It would be useful to distinguish between increases in capability, efficiency, reach, resilience, and strategic effect, because these are not synonymous. A terrorist organization may, for example, produce propaganda more efficiently without necessarily acquiring greater strategic power. The manuscript should therefore specify the conditions under which technological efficiency can legitimately be interpreted as an increase in power or strategic influence.

The paragraph discussing the Middle Eastern context—“The persistence of armed conflicts, the presence of armed non-state groups, weak or fragile governance structures in some countries...”—provides a broad contextual justification but remains overly aggregate. The Middle East is treated as a relatively homogeneous security environment despite substantial differences among conflict theaters, levels of state capacity, digital infrastructure, terrorist organizational presence, and counterterrorism capacity. The authors should either delimit the geographical and political meaning of “Middle East” in this study or explicitly acknowledge intra-regional variation. Ideally, the analysis should identify specific subregional environments or illustrative cases, such as Iraq-Syria, Yemen, the Levant, or other relevant settings, to demonstrate how structural conditions may mediate the relationship between AI accessibility and terrorist capability.

In the paragraph stating that “The experience of groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda has demonstrated that cyberspace can become an arena for the reproduction of transnational networks,” the empirical basis of the argument requires greater specificity. ISIS and al-Qaeda differ significantly in organizational structure, territorial experience, media strategy, network architecture, and technological adaptation. The manuscript should avoid treating them as interchangeable examples and should briefly explain what concrete historical evidence from each organization supports the stated claim. Moreover, because the article concerns AI rather than digital media generally, the authors should clearly distinguish historical evidence of Internet and social-media use from documented evidence of AI-enabled practices. This would strengthen the article’s effort to avoid technological overstatement.

The paragraph on “strategic ambiguity and uncertainty” needs sharper theoretical differentiation. The manuscript currently places synthetic content, identity falsification, misleading information, automated digital activities, attribution problems, and uncertainty regarding capabilities within a single conceptual category. However, strategic ambiguity, informational uncertainty, attribution uncertainty, deception, and uncertainty about intentions are analytically distinct phenomena. The authors should specify which type of uncertainty is relevant to offensive realism and how AI intensifies it. For instance, attribution uncertainty concerns identifying the actor responsible for an operation, whereas uncertainty about intentions concerns interpreting future strategic behavior. Collapsing these dimensions may overstate the theoretical correspondence between AI-enabled deception and Mearsheimer’s assumption that states cannot know others’ intentions with certainty.

In the paragraph beginning “At the same time, examining the relationship between artificial intelligence and terrorism requires conceptual and methodological caution,” the distinction among “documented applications,” “potential capacity,” and “possible future scenarios” is one of the strongest methodological ideas in the manuscript. However, this distinction should not remain merely declarative. The authors should establish explicit evidentiary criteria for assigning evidence to each category. For example, “documented application” might require verified organizational use supported by primary evidence or multiple credible independent sources; “potential capability” might refer to technically available tools for which terrorist use has not been verified; and “future threat” might refer to plausible but prospective scenarios. This classification should then be systematically applied in the findings section.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

The paragraph beginning “The strategic significance of this transformation can also be examined in terms of changes in the sources and forms of power” represents an important theoretical transition but currently stretches the concept of power without sufficient conceptual discipline. The manuscript should differentiate among resources of power, capabilities, influence, effects, and outcomes. The ability to generate narratives or process information does not automatically constitute power unless it produces meaningful changes in another actor’s behavior, preferences, options, or costs. The authors should therefore specify whether “cognitive power” and “informational power” are treated as independent forms of power, enabling resources, or mechanisms through which strategic influence is exercised. This clarification would improve compatibility with the realist framework employed later.

In the paragraph beginning “Under such conditions, offensive realism can provide an important framework for analyzing part of this transformation,” the theoretical discussion accurately summarizes several assumptions associated with Mearsheimer, but the justification for selecting offensive realism rather than alternative frameworks remains insufficient. The authors should explain why offensive realism offers greater analytical leverage than, for example, asymmetric conflict theory, strategic adaptation, organizational resilience, securitization theory, or theories of technological diffusion. Because offensive realism is explicitly designed to explain great-power behavior under international anarchy, the article needs a stronger methodological argument for transferring selected concepts from a systemic theory of state behavior to the analysis of terrorist organizations.

The manuscript commendably acknowledges in the paragraph beginning “Nevertheless, applying offensive realism to the analysis of terrorist groups entails an important theoretical limitation” that offensive realism is state-centric. However, the proposed solution—using selected concepts such as survival, power, competition, self-help, and uncertainty as an “analytical lens”—requires more rigorous specification. The authors should identify which components of offensive realism are retained, which are deliberately excluded, and why. For example, anarchy and self-help may have different meanings for terrorist groups embedded within domestic, transnational, and regional security structures than they do for sovereign states. Without such specification, there is a risk of conceptual stretching, whereby generic ideas such as survival and competition are labeled “offensive realist” despite being common to multiple theoretical traditions.

The paragraph introducing “asymmetric balancing” requires substantial conceptual revision. The sentence “Asymmetric balancing in the present study does not imply material parity between terrorist groups and states” is useful, but the term is not adequately grounded in established strategic studies literature. The manuscript appears to use “asymmetric balancing” to describe a weaker actor’s use of low-cost technological tools to compensate selectively for material inferiority. The authors should define this concept explicitly, distinguish it from asymmetric warfare, soft balancing, indirect balancing, capability substitution, and cost-imposition strategies, and justify its compatibility with offensive realism. Otherwise, the concept risks becoming an article-specific label rather than a theoretically transferable construct.

In the paragraph stating that AI may alter “certain relationships among cost, speed, and influence capacity between state and non-state actors,” the manuscript approaches a potentially valuable causal argument but does not develop it. The authors should consider formalizing this as a cost-effectiveness mechanism: AI may lower the marginal cost of content production, audience targeting, translation, data processing, or automated interaction while potentially increasing the defensive costs imposed on states. This mechanism could become a central contribution of the article if systematically developed. The analysis should distinguish between reduced costs to terrorist actors and increased costs to governments, because these two processes have different implications for asymmetric competition.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.