التحالف الإسلامي العسكري لمحاربة الإرهاب

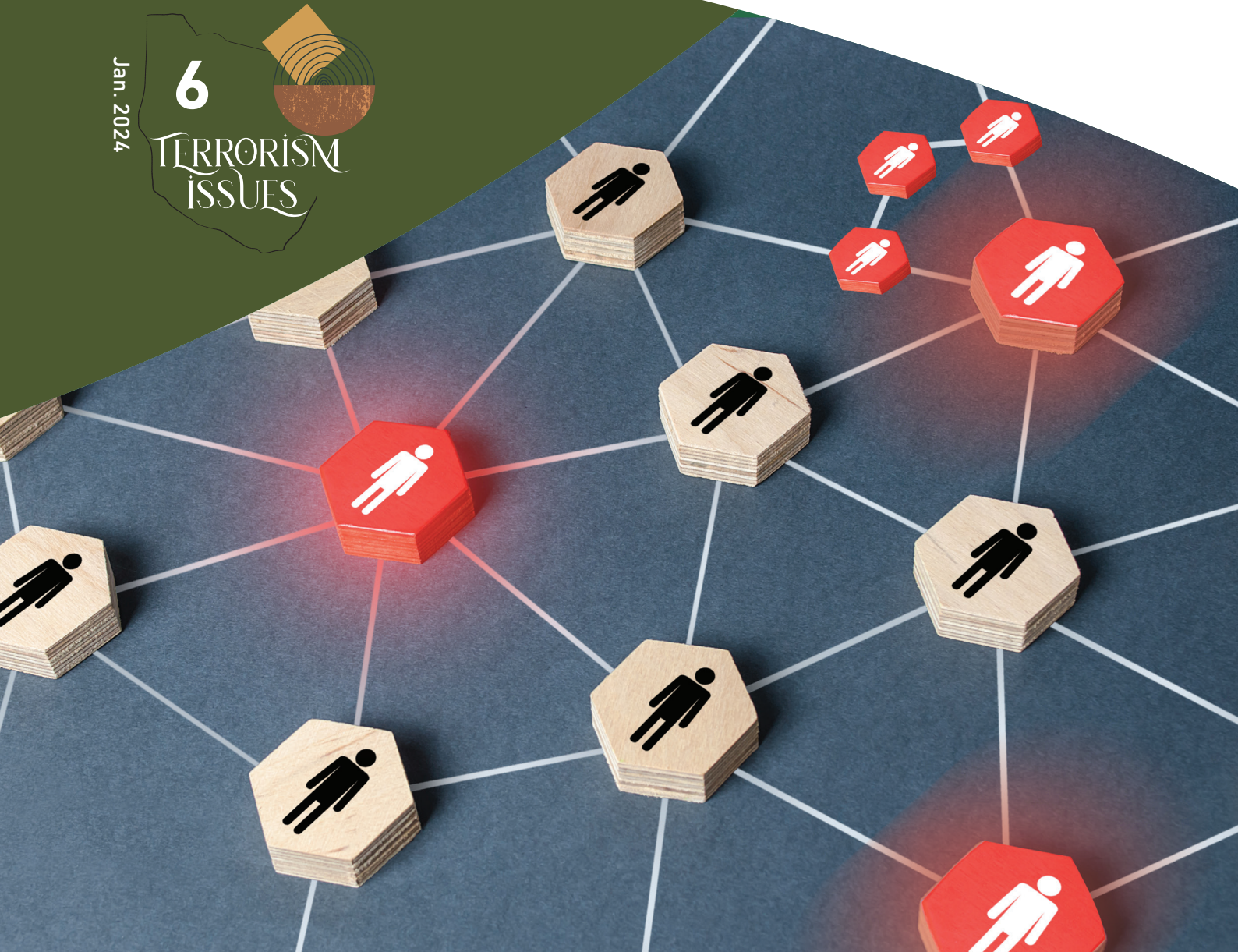**ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION**

SLEEPER CELLS..
TERRIFYING WEAPONS

DR. MANSOUR BIN SAEED AL-QARNI
A RESEARCHER INTERESTED IN ISSUES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM, REHABILITATION AND INTEGRATION

Jan. 2024

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TERRORISM ISSUES

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A monthly publication issued by the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition

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Sleeper cells pose an imminent danger to the target community. As fitnah is worse than killing, as Allah Almighty says in the Holy Quran: ("and fitnah is worse than killing") (Surah Al-Baqarah, verse: 191). Thus, sleeper cells may play some of the roles of fitnah on religion and soul, and even may affect the five necessities of Islam. As a result, they stand as the most dangerous means for killing and destruction once awakened from their static state and act to carry out terrorist actions. These cells are created as an alternative to terrorist actions carried out by the parent organization. Until the zero hour comes to act, they exercise deception, hiding and camouflage. Once they turn to movement and action, they engage in indiscriminate violent targeting. Therefore, such cells are far more deadlier than other forms of combat actions. For this reason, violent extremist organizations and some hostile states find in these cells an appropriate means to cause painful harm and damage to target states and societies.

The phenomenon of sleeper cells has become one of the major new forms of security threats that pose a danger to the security of states, and to the rights and freedoms of individuals given that such cells are more flexible to act on behalf of their parent organization. Not only that, but also they can cross the border within which a given terrorist organization exist, or targeted by violent extremist organizations. This makes such cells more dangerous and effective; given the scale of their targets that makes no distinction between civilian, military, young, old, peaceful and combatant or non-combatant targets. In fact, they rather target everything around them deliberately, and without any religious, moral or human restraint or remorse. That is why such cells constitute a major challenge for law enforcement and security agencies.

The threat posed by sleeper cells is no less than the danger of mobile terrorist cells tasked with performing military and terrorist action. In fact, these sleeper cells serve as a major and effective alternative to those mobile cells and to the active elements of violent extremist groups. Thus, when these organizations or their military wings face crackdowns or disruption by security agencies in the target communities, they resort to sleeper cells, based on the nature of the emerging situation, and according to the philosophy of each terrorist organization. Therefore, through such cells, these organizations remain alive, active, upsetting, and continue to disturb the international community, especially targeted communities.

This becomes clear when such terrorist organizations get struck, when their leaders assassinated, their influence fades away,

or when they are weakened and defeated. This gives rise to the strategy of sleeper cells, which, in certain situations, turn into terrorist cells; that is, they become active and influential forces on the ground, based on the directives of the leadership of the parent organization. Thus, they serve as the alternative means to boost the morale of all members, supporters and followers of the violent extremist organization, on the one hand, and to cause confusion, trauma, and frustration to their opponents, and bring them back to square one, on the other hand. This is after the security agencies enjoyed their triumph over the terrorist organization by conducting a deadly strike or killing some of their important leaders.

Based on the foregoing, we find it crucial to stress the threat of secretive cells. The members of these cells live normally among people in a particular society, and it is difficult to figure out their numbers and equipment. They often appear socially acceptable and keep a low profile. As a result, it is hard, if not impossible, to identify or detect the elements of these cells, or even to suspect them. In this way, they lead a normal life in public and move all over the society. They most likely hide beneath a social cover that keep them away from any suspicion. However, once awakened, they will open internal fronts in the society. Even worse and more seriously, the development of modern technologies has greatly contributed to the difficulty of detecting these cells, and the methods of their attraction, recruitment, training, and communication with their parent organizations with which they are affiliated.

Philosophical Approach

Research on the role and position of clandestine or sleeper cells as part of violent extremism strategies is a thorny and complex process in terms of concept, and in light of the type and characteristics of those cells, as well as their formation and the nature of their activities. Such complexity has also resulted from the clandestine nature of their actions, which are not consistent with public order or the age-old social contract and which deviate from the laws and social controls. These terrorist activities also contradict human nature, which is always aimed at leading a normal life. Thus, from a security perspective, these organizations pose a serious threat to social security in its broadest sense due to the state of destabilization that they may instigate and the consequent social disturbance that may fully or partially affect the institutions of the targeted state.

Despite the fact that clandestine subversive and terrorist acts have an age-old history, secret cells started to exercise their activities after World War II and with the emergence of the Cold War. However, at this stage, they performed an intelligence function and were adopted by the parties to that war. The focus then was on collecting information that reveals the enemy's directions in all areas of development in society. However, the focus remained on the military field: how it developed and to what extent it posed a risk. This often led to the so-called arms race. Then, in a remarkable development, some of these cells were assigned some violent tasks, such as sabotage work, especially in enemy camps, in addition to intelligence and information collection activities.

The tasks assigned to secret cells expanded later, and they started to pose a threat to societies. Rather, they became an industry that was used to harm groups and countries, and, at a certain stage, they represented a tool of pressure to achieve political or economic gains. However, their most prominent role was embodied in terrorist action, as they served as a means of terrorist action by violent extremist organizations, or as an alternative to their traditional methods. Therefore,

secret cells were an important tool for the Al-Qaeda organization, which expanded the use of this type of terrorist group in terms of the number and elements of cells, as well as in the targeted geographical areas. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also made use of this type of terrorist organization, but introduced little modifications in the number of cell members. ISIS found it sufficient to recruit one element or individual in each cell, and did not introduce any structural changes to the formation of the organization, but gave it more freedom in targeting and execution.

Secret cells, as explained earlier, are among the most dangerous tools of terrorist organizations due to several factors. Most importantly, their members lead a normal social life, like other members of society, without any indication or suspicion of their real affiliation. Accordingly, they cannot be detected or discovered. In addition, should a cell be discovered, it would be hard to detect other cells due to the different nature of the formation of each cell, as well as the different nature of recruitment and training methods which have been made easier by modern technologies. Such recruitment and training often take place remotely, and in closed rooms in their homes out of sight.

All these factors have enabled the members of secret and sleeper cells to hide and disguise themselves while moving and exercising activities in service of the tasks for which they were recruited. For this reason, they are sometimes called vigilant, not sleeper, cells because they are attentive and precautious, always in the wait for the signal to carry out the tasks assigned to them. These cells thus do not hesitate to perform the most severe terrorist acts without being prevented by a religious, moral or humanitarian deterrent. They can be described as people with dead minds stripped of conscience and citizenship values and moving in one direction set for them by the ideological leaders of their terrorist organizations (Al-Kash, 2009).

Violent extremist organizations nowadays, and perhaps in the future, mainly employ a strategy of effective

alternatives to organized military action, especially after many of them, particularly *Al-Qaeda* and ISIS, have suffered security crackdowns and military defeats. Alternatives will certainly be numerous and varied, and every day, new and updated strategies will emerge. However, the strategy of sleeper cells and lone wolves is currently the most prominent at the present time, and will perhaps remain so for quite some time. This is because this strategy makes it possible to achieve violent extremist goals with minimal human and material losses for those organizations. It also allows these organizations to recruit, train and issue orders to their members from a distance, in light of the development of modern technologies which enabled the international community with its various alliances to cripple their military and organizational capabilities, and enhanced security control in the countries targeted by those organizations or by some of them.

Concept of Sleeper Cells

These cells carry several names, including sleeper cells, inactive cells, dormant cells, sleeping cells, intoxicated cells, soft cells, vigilant cells, terrorist cells, alert cells, …etc). We believe that there is no problem with these names, since in the end they all express this terrorist approach.

Sleeper cells are small groups of individuals, each of which includes not more than ten members, and may consist of a single individual, even though in rare cases, they may exceed this number. These cells are created by terrorist organizations, and are trained to carry out whatever task required of them by the leadership of the parent organization. They remain in a state of dormancy, but are always ready to be used as terrorist cells in performing certain operations, or as alternatives to these organizations in case the noose tightens on them. Sometimes, they are used to divert security efforts and attention from these organizations, and in other cases to take revenge on a specific figure, security institution, or political direction.

Though a new term that has entered the world of secret wars, sleeper cells are distinguished from other terrorist groups by several features. It is quite hard to identify their numbers and armament. They also endeavor to open internal fronts, and to facilitate the progress of the organization with which they collaborate. Oftentimes, they do not have an organizational structure that restricts their terrorist freedom. In addition, if a cell is discovered, it will not lead to detection of the remaining cells, as they are distributed within vital institutions and positions and each cell is entrusted with a particular mission, which makes them more deadly and dangerous than military forces (Hudna, 2017).

Accordingly, the *Free Dictionary* defines sleeper cells as "A group that lives in society, and carries out no activities until it receives an order or decides to take another action. This sleeper cell is associated with secret operations, such as espionage and terrorism" (European Center for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2021).

Mahdi (2010) defines sleeper cells as "cells or groups that work in secret, and are used by the organizations to which they are affiliated or to whom they owe intellectual, dogmatic or ideological allegiance, to carry out specific tasks within the society in which they live".

Based on these foregoing assumptions, a sleeper cell can be defined as a limited group of individuals, which is formed in a clandestine manner, assimilate into society, and work quietly, after being qualified in thought and behavior to carry out many tasks, as planned by the organizational leadership. This cell must comply with the orders of the organizational leadership in carrying out the tasks entrusted to it, which vary according to the goals that the parent organization seeks to achieve, and which range between collecting information and carrying out violent actions, including murder and assassination. Therefore, these cells always work incognito and with great caution.

Conceptual Synonymy as a Problem

We have already referred to several concepts or terms that are considered as synonymous to or descriptive of sleeper cells. Some of these terms and concepts are already synonymous, but others are not. However, a few of these concepts actually intersect vis-à-vis a number of mechanisms, techniques and consequences. Some terms (e.g. terrorist cells, lone wolves, crocodile cells, walking fish, advocates and supporters) differ from sleeper cells in tasks and practice. **Following is an account of these differences.**

1. Terrorist Cells

(Terrorist or mobile), as opposed to (sleeper or static), cells are both of a paramount importance to violent extremist organizations. These cells are viewed as among the most important pillars of terrorist action. For this reason, these organizations are keen to adopt these cells and undertake their formation and training, using scientific and practical methods. Therefore, these cells are formed of a specific number of individuals of

both sexes, at the level of a single cell (mixed) or at the level of a group of cells (non-mixed). These cells are organizationally and ideologically linked to a specific organization, and each type of them is entrusted to carry out particular tasks.

Considering the great similarity between these cells, which sometimes reaches the point of being identical in many situations, we can detect an overlap between the two concepts. Each concept expresses the other, and both are two sides of the same coin, based on the random or interrelated philosophy adopted by the terrorist organizations, such as ISIS. This conceptual interrelation is common in the media, political and research literature, given that the terrorist action is eventually achieved apart from the type of organization or philosophy. In addition, the leaders of violent extremist organizations do not give much concern or attention to the names, nor care to differentiate between terms, as much as they care about the results, regardless of the names and titles. Likewise, some of the arrested elements do not realize such differences. Once one of these elements admits his membership in an extremist organization, he also reveals his membership in a terrorist cell. It does not make a difference for him to be a member of a mobile or sleeper cell. He only perceives that he is affiliated to a specific organization and implements the instructions he receives from his *emir* or commander.

There are attempts, however, to distinguish between the two concepts, given the temporal nature of each type, and given that sleeper cells represent an alternative while mobile cells are part of terrorist or military action. This type of classification was perhaps part of the philosophy of *al-Qaeda*, as the organization used to establish specialized cells in many organizational situations based on the nature of the tasks assigned to each type of cell. One mainly believes in this approach, although it is rarely discussed in terms of specialization or differentiation, at least according to the nature of science and accurate knowledge of the nature of this terrorist activity. Based on this understanding, **following is an account of some differences between the two types of cells:**

1. Sleeper cells are often formed as alternatives to terrorist acts carried out by violent extremist organizations. They remain in a state of inactivity and dormancy and do not engage in any activity until they receive instructions from the leadership of the organization to which they are affiliated. Terrorist cells, on the other hand, are part of the terrorist action or a means used by violent extremist organizations.

Although sleeper cells in reality serve as alternatives to terrorist action if the terrorist situation so requires, they perform a number of subsequent tasks. Terrorist cells, in contrast, fit within the context of the terrorist action at the present time, and the leader or *emir* of the organization assigns the implementation of the tasks to the elements of the terrorist cell.

2. The degree of secrecy, concealment, and natural daily coexistence that distinguishes the elements of sleeper cells is higher than that of the elements of terrorist cells, even at the level of each single cell, but this does not apply to terrorist cells in most cases, at least before perpetrating the terrorist act.

3. The number of elements or members of sleeper cells is mostly small, and may not exceed five members, while in terrorist cells, the number of members of each cell may exceed 50 members.

4. Sleeper cells mostly remain in a state of dormancy and inactivity for periods that may be prolonged, sometimes extending to several years, without engaging in any activity until they receive instructions from the leadership of the organization to which they belong. Terrorist cells, on the other hand, implement their violent and terrorist actions as soon as their requirements are completed in terms of training, planning and identification of targets.

It is important to note that sleeper cells, despite the above-mentioned differences, are in most situations a potential project ready to turn into mobile cells, namely terrorist cells. Therefore, they represent an important alternative to terrorist cells, alongside the parent terrorist organization, and serve as an alternative to their traditional violent actions. They might also serve as one of their tools to be used at a certain time and place, either as an evolution of their violent actions, or with the aim of distracting and diverting the attention of security forces.

2. Lone Wolves

Lone wolves are sometimes called jihadi wolves, individual jihadists, or open jihadists. The Firil Center for Studies (FCFS) in Berlin, Germany, defines lone wolves as a security term used to refer to individuals who carry out killing operations without belonging to a specific organization or party, and who have not been commissioned by any entity or for whom a precise or prior plan was set. Their main drive or motive is the ideas and beliefs they were influenced by, and which took root in their minds as a result of a feeling of frustration, hatred, or anger against a country, race, sect, nationality, or even a human race (Al-Azhar Observatory, 2020).

Based on the foregoing, and in the context of defining lone wolves, it is clear that sleeper cells and lone wolves are not identical. Nor does one of them represent the other on the ground, especially in terms of work and activity, although they both believe in and adopt the ideas of the organization that they belong to, support, or sympathize with, and hold on to its beliefs. **There are also other differences as follows:**

1. In terms of numbers, it is noticed that lone wolves mostly consist of one person, who himself becomes responsible for preparation, planning and implementation, whereas sleeper cells comprise more than one element, each of whom has specific tasks to perform.

2. Lone wolves may essentially be elements of terrorist cells, but as a result of certain circumstances, they opted for individual operations based on individual initiatives. However, they maintain the ideas of the groups to which they belong, without having organizational ties with them. Sleeper cells, on the other hand, are mainly formed to perform tasks that are determined by the organizational leadership of a violent extremist group, are associated with this group, and adhere to its orders.

3. The lone wolf tactic is based on carrying out attacks individually without orders from the leaders of the violent extremist organizations, or their representatives. They often do not get any external assistance. Sleeper cells, in contrast, do not carry out any tasks assigned to them without orders from the leadership of the associated organizations and mainly get assistance from their organizational leadership.

4. Lone wolves are often formed as a reaction to the success of security forces in defeating terrorist cells or terrorist military organizations, and as a solution to adapt to the clampdown imposed by law-enforcement agencies and the impossibility of continuing collective action and due to security crackdowns on hierarchical organizational work.

5. In terms of terrorist training, qualification and experience, lone wolves are less efficient, as they rely on personal efforts in these processes.

Formation of Sleeper Cells

First of all, we should stress the fact that the formation of sleeper cells does not always take into account the structure of the parent organization to which they belong, nor its secret and overt administrative and organizational complexities. However, it is the organizational leadership that sets the appropriate form for the sleeper cell or cells, or delegates this power to the leader or *emir* of the cell, who in turn forms the cell, and determines its elements, the nature of its tasks, and the method of training, in line with the general orientation of the parent organization.

A sleeper cell consists of several elements, but each element mostly has a specific task, including the task of leadership or *emirship*, the competence to issue *fatwas*, information gathering, the task of supply, including securing terrorist tools, and then the task of implementation, including the category of suicide bombers. Worthy of note is that because of the small number of a single cell, it is possible to assign more than one task to one element.

Although sleeper cells are not always subject to a hierarchical structure that forms in violent extremist organizations, this does not negate their reference and affiliation to the parent organization or group, with which they are ideologically associated in the first place, and administratively by receiving higher orders from the organizational leadership. However, such subordination does not restrict their freedom of movement or selection of terrorist targets. Nor does it prevent them from being free to form, distribute roles and tasks among their elements, and train each element in the tasks assigned to it.

This structural orientation makes it difficult for security forces to pursue these cells. Therefore, law-enforcement agencies often exert a great intelligence effort to collect a huge amount of misleading information in many cases, particularly after the occurrence of certain terrorist actions, and "records" of terrorist activity to form a clear picture of the entire organization. However, the picture that emerges indicates that terrorist organizations are formed at the operational level as cellular networks (autonomous networks that are independent from one another in the conduct of terrorist activities) rather than as a hierarchy (Carley, 2003).

I. Forms of Cells

There are many forms or types of sleeper cells. Whether they form at the level of a single cell in which tasks are distributed among cell elements according to the nature of the task assigned to it, or at the level of a group of cells that are formed by one leader or *emir*, each cell does not know the elements of the other cells, nor the nature of the tasks assigned to each cell. This difference is determined according to the strategy of each violent extremist organization, and also on the basis of the situation of the organization on the ground in terms of

strength and weakness, as well as the goals and targets that these organizations designate and seek to achieve. **These forms include, among others, the following types:** Task-based cells: Depending on the nature of tasks, each cell is assigned specific tasks that its leader is committed to adhere to, as directed by the organizational leadership. In other cases, the *emir* of the cell is left to *decide* on its formation, in line with the directions of the parent organization. Such leader is given freedom to choose the cell formation method and the number of its elements, distribute functional roles for each cell element, and determine their tasks. These cells, however, are more likely to be ideally formed according to the nature of the tasks as follows: information gathering cells, monitoring and exploration cells, training cells, propaganda cells, cells for manufacturing terrorist tools, financing cells, and execution cells).

6. Hierarchy-based cells: Depending on the nature of the organizational structure, some or all violent extremist organizations resort to a changing strategy in the formation of sleeper cells. They rely on the organizational structure in the formation process, through which they aim at well-organized work that is subject to strict administrative and organizational rules, leading to perfect implementation of the tasks assigned to sleeper cells, without full or partial exposure of these cells, and thus achieving the required goals. This type of cell is thus formed according to the strategy of organized sleeper cells, clustered sleeper cells, or independent sleeper cells.

7. Target-based cells: Upon creating sleeper cells, some violent extremist organizations resort to a kind of specialization in the nature of cell work, namely according to the type and nature of the targets of the terrorist action, once the organizational leadership issues a relevant order. This is intended to ensure that the efforts of sleeper cells are not diverted and that the tasks assigned to them vis-à-vis specific targets are perfectly executed. Target-based specialized cells include security cells, assembly cells, oil cells, transportation cells, places of worship cells, tourism cells, jamming and confusion cells, and training cells.

II. Working Mechanism of Sleeper Cells

The leaders of violent extremist organizations pursue several working mechanisms, and assign the leaders of sleeper cells to adopt them, and to obligate cell members not to deviate from them upon carrying out the tasks assigned to them, unless the leader of the organization or the *emir* of the cell issues an order to change or depart from said mechanism and adopt another one. On the other hand, some violent extremist organizations leave a space of freedom and powers for the cell leader to draw up the mechanism that he deems appropriate, depending on the requirements and circumstances of the terrorist situation. In all cases, however, the implementation mechanisms for each cell are consistent with the nature of the tasks and the role for which each cell was formed. Despite the varied forms of sleeper cells, the working mechanism of each cell after its formation is usually **as follows:**

The *emir* or leader, who is primarily responsible for the elements of the cell, and to whom obedience is a must, often without discussion, based on the principle of listening and obedience, receives higher orders, and obligates his cell members to implement them.

8. The expert or technician undertakes the task of preparing the supplies for carrying out the missions assigned to the cell, such as collecting information, training, or making tools for the terrorist act.

9. The purchasing and supply officer is in charge of securing all requirements for carrying out the tasks assigned to the cell.

10. The investigation and inspection officer ensures that the members of the cell are safe from the eyes of the law enforcement agencies.

In each cell, these responsibilities are exercised by each member according to his role, and in line with the processes of social assimilation, disguise, and cover-up and secrecy, such as commercial or functional work and the like. It is equally important to note that this is not a fixed rule; that is, the nature of the terrorist action and that of the targets, the dimensions of time and space, and freedom of leadership are factors that decide on the appropriate mechanism.

Sleeper Cells ... a Frightening Weapon to Countries

Violent extremist organizations are frequently subject to security crackdowns, at the level of their leaders, their members, their terrorist cells, and also their infrastructure. However, we cannot rest assured as to the elimination of their danger, as they often resort to alternative strategies. Perhaps the best current alternative is the so-called sleeper cells, which was a distinguishing mark of ISIS in particular. Although this terrorist organization was exposed to many security

and military strikes, and many of its leaders and *emirs* were assassinated, it still poses an irritating threat in many Arab, Islamic and Western societies. The strategy of sleeper cells for ISIS and other violent extremist organizations that currently exist or are expected to emerge in the future will, in their perception, be an ideal option and an acceptable alternative due to the positive results they accomplish, and this is why these cells are expected to remain alive.

Our emphasis on the threat posed by sleeper cells stems not only from the nature of their structure, secrecy, and assimilation into society, but also because they are an appropriate alternative to official organizational terrorist action. Violent extremist organizations have resorted to this option and will continue to adopt it as a severe and distressful strategy against targeted countries and societies, or rather as a means to demolish their security walls, which, if weakened or demolished in whole or in part, will give such organizations the chance to show their ugly face as an official organization with a functional hierarchy, and to declare themselves as the appropriate alternative in managing community affairs. Hence, these cells pose a terrifying risk to society. Available data assert that there are several factors that give these organizations the ability to survive and to renew their strength in different colors, together with the results that they can achieve with the lowest costs and risks, least of which is spreading fear and panic in the target community.

Reasons for the Persistent Risk of Sleeper Cells

Our emphasis that the strategy of sleeper cells is an alternative and strategic option for violent extremist organizations, as perceived by those organizations, especially ISIS, is based on several grounds and reasons for their survival and continuation, **including the following:**

1. Distorted and confusing religious ideological sources, which allow deviant ideologies to survive, and which are inherited by people with poor understanding and malicious intentions, who submerge themselves into these ideologies and exploit them to attract and mislead ignorant and simple-minded people.

2. Political interests, which push some countries to create violent extremist groups or to infiltrate and support existing ones, in order to achieve their political and economic interests.

3. Social problems that provide an attractive environment for violent extremism, or represent a source of human support for its organizations.

4. Claims that the presence of foreign forces in some Islamic countries is a kind of new colonialism aimed at plundering the resources of these countries and depriving their people of such wealth.

5. Influencing the religious and cultural identity of Islamic societies, through the soft power imposed by Western countries via the means of modern technology, with the aim of weakening the power of Islam.

6. The Palestinian cause, which has frequently been used by extremist groups to attract and recruit young people.

7. Some leaders of violent extremist groups have achieved economic and moral gains on the ground, and they will not be willing to give up such gains easily, but will exercise all types and methods of violence to maintain them.

8. The difficult or turbulent security conditions in some Islamic countries, e.g. political or economic unrest, serve as ideal environments for the growth and development of violent extremist organizations.

9. Means of modern technology have made things easier for violent extremist groups, in terms of recruitment, training, financial and logistical support, as well as the dissemination of their extremist propaganda, beliefs, and ideologies.

All these factors and others predict that violent extremism, and its various methods, is likely to survive. Once it shrinks, declines, or wanes in a certain time or place, it soon dawns and rises again in another time or place. Thus, violent extremism will continue to pose a threat through its various means. It may not be possible to predict its violent behaviors, especially in light of the sleeper cell strategy, nor its violent developments and innovations that some organizations (ISIS is a model) surprise their opponents or security agencies with. Not less importantly is the endeavor of existing extremist groups to regain their breath after the blows they have suffered, taking advantage of some social, economic and health conditions.

Reasons for Fear of Sleeper Cells

Violent extremism induces a societal terror. In fact, one of the goals it seeks is to spread fear and panic among the members of the target community. Therefore, ISIS adopted this strategic approach, in what was known as psychological trauma (beheading and burning alive) with the aim of spreading terror, panic and fear, not at the

level of individuals, but at the level of society as a whole, including governments. Although this strategy results in terrorizing the target community, nothing increases the sense of risk more than sleeper cells. These cells instill a permanent feeling of fear inside the target, be it an individual or a whole community. More seriously, fear and risk may resurface when the targeted individual finds himself in situations that are similar to those where a terrorist action occurred, or once he sees a person or persons whose features or external appearance look like terrorist elements. Therefore, a feeling of fear and apprehension permeates the society, especially with regard to commercial and non-commercial complexes, or institutions, that could be targeted by sleeper cells once they are awakened or activated by their organizational leadership.

This terror often prompts the international community to respond to any terrorist action occurring in any geographical area. Therefore, "One statement from the youngest terrorist in the farthest place in the world threatening to strike a European or American facility or city, could cause panic among the security agencies and others, so that they rush security reinforcements and measures that may disrupt or distort the normal way of life, and lead to huge efforts and costs. On the other hand, resorting to counter-threats and to advanced military means and weapons does not affect terrorists as much as it harms peaceful civilians. It increases the enthusiasm of these terrorists and drive some people to sympathize with them only because they embrace their limited sectarian perceptions" (Youssef, 2018-2019).

Based on the foregoing, it can be said that sleeper cells, as one arm of violent extremist organizations, serve as a terrifying weapon for the international community, **for a number of reasons, including:**

1. **Reliance on ideology:** The elements of violent extremism sleeper cells, just like the remaining members of violent extremist organizations, embrace an extremist ideology, regardless of their motives and reasons. This ideology is like food for the soul or fuel that gives them momentum, dynamism and continuity.

2. **Violent transformation:** The primary mission of sleeper cells, by nature, is to be an alternative to the strategy of terrorist violence, or to contribute to achieving its goals, or even some of the goals of violent extremist groups. That is, sleeper cells are created to achieve predetermined goals, including their primary mission as an important alternative to military action.

3. **Indiscriminate violence:** Once sleeper cells are awakened by the leadership of violent extremist organizations, they, by nature, carry out their violent attacks by targeting anything and everything (so-called intended randomness).

4. **Camouflage and disguise**: The world of sleeper cells is a hidden, invisible one. Absolute secrecy and concealment are among the major features of this industry, and are the focus of intensive training so that they become part of the personality of the cell member. The next stage is represented by the functional cover-up which these elements assume as a lifestyle in front of the public, and through which they pursue their real activity for which they were created in terms of planning, training and information.

5. **Control of time and space:** Sleeper cells, as a strategy of violent extremist organizations, have the upper hand in their activities, starting with the choice of their elements, through the selection of target countries or communities, places or institutions, persons or personalities. Likewise, it is these cells that often determine the appropriate time, or, strictly speaking, the exact hour and minute that represents the zero hour for implementation.

6. **Transcontinental range:** Violent extremist organizations consider the international arena as a legitimate theater for their terrorist activities. This means that no country can be immune from their terrorist threats, and therefore there is a strong likelihood that violent extremist organizations would move between countries, especially when the security and social grip is tightened on them in a particular country or society, or when they are struck by military force.

7. **Mercurial approach:** In addition to their ability to hide and camouflage, as we discussed earlier, the elements of sleeper cells can move between countries and societies under multiple names, or they infiltrate into the ranks of displaced persons and immigrants, then these elements dissolve or assimilate into society, or work in multiple professions not to arouse suspicion in their situation.

8. **Cyberthreat:** Sleeper cells are assigned numerous and varied tasks according to the goals set by the parent organization. One of these tasks is cyberterrorism. Sleeper cells engage in cyberterrorism, which is primarily a task of terrorist

cells. Therefore, sleeper cells are created and are trained and qualified scientifically and practically in the fields of technology, computers and modern means of communication, as well as in software, both in constructive and destructive terms.

9. **Young age groups:** Young people are always a target not only for leaders of violent extremist organizations, but also for criminal gangs of all kinds. They are also an appropriate and favorable category for many warlords and sectarian militias. These young people are targeted for many criminal purposes, including trafficking in persons, sexploitation, employment in the sale and distribution of drugs and contraband, forced recruitment in military and violent actions. They are also easier to persuade to engage in suicide operations, and are used in transportation operations both in terms of providing information and acting as tools since they are less likely to be suspicious.

10. **Element of surprise:** When sleeper cells are formed, they are trained and qualified to use all tools that enable them to succeed and to achieve their goals. Perhaps one of the most important of these tools is the element of surprise, which necessarily gives rise to many positive reactions to the parent organization and its followers, advocates and supporters, in return for negative reactions to the targeted society and to the existing political authority and its security agencies.

11. **Continuity:** If a cell is discovered or its members are arrested, we cannot rest assured that the danger has passed. It may slow down sometimes, but the nature of the sleeper cell industry and the nature of its tasks and the goals it seeks to achieve, gives rise to believing that other sleeper cells are likely to be born, or that work is under way in creating and training another cell or more, even if the parent organization remains inactive for a long time.

Security challenges: There are many security challenges and difficulties confronting law enforcement, information, and counter-terrorism agencies. These agencies are exposed to embarrassing and confusing situations that sometimes push them to tension and to make some mistakes which are later invested by violent extremist organizations and which lead to negative results at the social level. What makes matters worse and more stressful for these agencies is that the expected results to ward off or eliminate the threat of sleeper cells are mostly poor, and not commensurate with the great and costly efforts exerted by those security agencies. This could be considered a natural result of the complexity and accuracy with which sleeper cells are created, the absolute secrecy they apply in their movements, and the professional methods of concealment and camouflage, which the average person, who does not work in the security field, may not realize. **Following is an account of these major security challenges:**

- **Ideology:** This refers to the ideologies embraced by the elements of sleeper cells and instilled into their minds by the leadership of the parent organization, using psychological ways that simultaneously capture their minds and hearts.

- **Engineered settings:** These are suitable environments for the cultivation of sleeper cells, in light of the ability of some violent extremist organizations to create a societal awareness that believes in their extremist ideology, and to promote such ideologies emotionally and psychologically in captivating ways.

- **Absolute secrecy:** In terms of formation and operation, sleeper cells are by nature characterized by secrecy in all stages, starting from the careful selection of their members, who must be above suspicion and beyond infiltration.

- **Large numbers:** The number of sleeper cells affiliated with a particular organization most likely amounts to hundreds, or even thousands in some organizations, as is the case with ISIS in the areas in which the organization grew and thrived, or in other areas where the organization assigned these cells to stay, as in some foreign countries.

- **Assimilation into society:** One major feature of sleeper cells is the ability of its elements to assimilate into society, exercise social activities, and naturally interact with all components and segments of society, in addition to their functions in many social institutions, and their practice of business without drawing attention or raising doubt and suspicion.

- **Desire for revenge:** For violent extremist organizations, the desire for revenge is one of the most important fuels for their continuity. This is why these organizations are always keen to raise awareness of the importance of revenge among their members, supporters, and sympathizers.

- **Decentralization:** Organizational leaders most likely delegate the process of forming sleeper cells to their

elements, or to persons nominated for this mission and trusted by those leaders. There is flexibility in the formation of cells, the number of their elements, and the tasks assigned to them, as well as in training, concealment methods, choice of legitimate cover-up, financial expenses, and even the tools to be used in the terrorist act.

- **Professionalism:** Violent extremist organizations are known for their professional methods which enable them to invent or create violent means and techniques, and gives them the ability to outpace and surprise their opponents. This professionalism serves as an indication of the level of development reached by these organizations and the advancement of their scientific, practical and technical levels.

- **Organizational capacity:** This refers to the ability of violent extremist organizations to attract and recruit followers, and garner sympathy, as well as their ability to employ the means and methods used to do so, and in more than one field, most notably the ideological field, which represents the magnetic force that attracts youth intellectually and physically to violent extremist organizations, either directly as effective elements in the terrorist act, or indirectly through sympathy and support.

- **Organizational experiences:** Elements of violent extremist organizations, including sleeping cells, are characterized by expertise, persistence and strong will. Many of these elements engage in combat operations in areas of fighting and conflict. Indeed, many elements of these organizations who directly get involved in the so-called "jihad" turn into sleeper cell elements, and are marked by being qualified in terms of psychology, skills and knowledge. They even have the professional skills to work underground and turn into a striking force if the leadership issues directives to them.

- **Poor information cooperation:** Integration between world countries pertaining to information and security is a major element in combating violent extremism organizations and neutralizing their danger. Further, international cooperation is the spearhead in combating terrorism, bearing in mind that violent extremism is a transnational problem as its leaders and theorists believe that all international arenas are open for them to carry out their activities whenever they have the opportunity or if their goals so require.

Organizational fragmentation: Some violent extremist organizations are exposed to security blows. For example, *Al-Qaeda* and ISIS *organizations* both have been subject to military and security strikes carried out by the International Coalition against ISIS in the geographical areas where its elements were deployed. The military, administrative, financial and media infrastructure of the two organizations was destroyed and some of their leaders and warlords were assassinated. Such losses suffered by these organizations necessarily lead to the dispersal of their elements, either by hiding underground, or by infiltrating into neighboring countries, or into other countries where they can find a suitable environment for the potential exercise of their violent extremist activity. The leaders of the organization plan such solutions in advance, or leave them to the current leadership in charge to decide on.

- **Social incubators:** Some environments are suitable for the growth and spread of violent extremism, especially with regard to forming sleeper cells. Environments suffering from hard living conditions, marginalization, or poor social development experience a decline in the sense of belonging and loyalty to the homeland, driven by injustice and oppression in light of the bad social life that the members of these organizations live in, as compared to the comfortable and luxurious life of other people.

- **Suicide operations:** Sleeper cells practice alternative violent actions, whether due to the nature of their work or to the tasks assigned to them by their organizational leadership. These cells move from a state of inaction to a mobile state by carrying out violent operations against pre-planned targets. Since alternative operations are numerous and varied, and their options are open as per their goals, a major and dangerous alternative option is to resort to suicide missions that cause fear and anxiety.

In conclusion, as all indications confirm, the status quo of sleeper cells, which foretells their future, predicts a future rife with violent actions to be carried out by these cells. It will be very difficult for violent extremist organizations, specifically ISIS, to abandon their terrorist strategy. Even if they have suffered a kind of defeat or relapse, these organizations consider it a warrior's rest and a chance to take back their breath. It is also an opportunity to re-evaluate and search for the reasons that led to such failures, and then to seek for alternatives that could encourage the resumption of terrorist action. We can confirm such data through accurate and careful

reading of the directions and aspirations of these organizations, as well as the interests of some countries that achieve many political and economic interests out of these terrorist groups. More seriously, ideology represents the lifeblood of these organizations, and the fuel that enables them to continue operating. The period of dormancy for these organizations may be an appropriate time for creating, forming, training and qualifying sleeper cells, and for recruiting more elements suitable for this type of terrorist action. Once circumstances are ripe for their emergence, these cells will wake up and strike their painful and terrifying blow.

In confirmation of the foregoing, a study published by the European Center for Combating Terrorism has revealed that it is extremely difficult and complex fight and disrupt the threat of sleeper cells, as well as terrorist cells, in European countries . this process requires a great security and intelligence effort, especially because the ideological influence of the organization has not faded away yet, and because many European youth are still affected by extremist ideology. These cells may at any time turn into terrorist cells that cannot be predicted or stopped. The study pointed out that the published European intelligence reports indicate that ISIS was defeated on the ground, but the risk posed by the organization still remains, and has not been eliminated yet. Despite the effectiveness of the strict procedures and measures taken by several European countries, there are still doubts about the tendencies and preparations to organize specific and lightning attacks inspired by the organization's ideology (Al-Emari, 2021).

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