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Terrorism's Uneven Relationship with Religion

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Abstract

Since the September 11, 2001 attack, religious extremism and terrorism has been the forefront of news media and a political loophole of discussion. The aim of this paper is to decipher how complex the relationship of religion is with terrorism, if at all there is a signifying element in terrorist organization's decision making. The paper will also try to answer if religion is truly a modus operandi for terrorist organizations existing now. Taking in consideration two cases: lone wolf attacks and terrorist organization's planned attacks through qualitative research and case study analysis—the paper concludes that the ideologies that these individuals and groups are built on are usually a perverted view of what is written in the religion's scriptures. The paper proposes that religion does not influence terrorism but is used as a tool for recruitment, justification, and political ends. Also, it is crucial for the media and the government to ensure proper depictions of terrorism.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Religion, Media, Counterterrorism, Government*

1. Introduction

Religious belief is usually synonymously used for other components that may have played an equal role in terrorism, such as faith, beliefs, culture, identity, etc., but each of their meanings are easily distinguishable (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015). The notion of religion within terrorism has only been a recent development in the long evolution of terrorism that was constructed by the West (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015). However, religion is not static and can be seen as a subjective configuration by individuals. According to Rapoport (2004), he explained that there are four waves of modern terrorism and the fourth wave is "religious". Rapoport (2004) explains his concept of wave being a cycle of activity within a period—the cycle having time frames of expansion and contraction. He further adds in his argument that religion signifies very differently in terrorism now because it supplies justification and organization principles for a state (Rapoport, 2004). The aim of this paper is to decipher how complex the relationship of religion is with terrorism, if at all there is a signifying element in terrorist organization's decision making. The paper will also try to answer if religion is truly a modus operandi for terrorist organizations existing now. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section will investigate the academic analysis of religion, terrorism, and religious

terrorism, both from an individualistic and group perspective. It will also inquire into why and how religion is a cause of violent extremism and terrorism. The second section will explore case studies of various "religious" terrorism and decipher the true causation of the attacks. Finally, the third section will see the role of the media in "religious" terrorism and its operations.

1.1. Academia on Religious Terrorism

Since the September 11, 2001 attack, religious extremism and terrorism has been the forefront of news media and a political loophole of discussion. The issues have been securitized in most states, especially in the West. War on Terror became a controversial yet popular policy with an overwhelming number of casualties and some successes. However, before understanding how much religion has affected terrorism in the 21ˢᵗ century, it is important to consider how most scholars perceive terrorism and what religion means to most communities. Most commonly, religion is apprehended as a system of beliefs and values that are associated with an institution and subjects itself to an all-knowing deity who embodies factors of absolute truth (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015). However, this understanding of religion fails to capture the cultural aspects of religion in many parts of the world and religions that do not follow one singular deity. Terrorism's definition, on the other hand, rarely has a consensus. However, authors have tried to be more definitive about what religious terrorism may be. For example, Martin (2003) explained religious terrorism as a political violence motivated by a divine power who has sanctioned and commanded such a terrorist violence.

Martin's definition, however, creates more questions than answers. Does then every religion with a single deity promote violence? Can individuals who are religious, in most cases, predicted to join a violent force given their religion "commanded and sanctioned violence"? Answers to these questions are, to an extent, provided by Ayla Schbley in his 2003 study. He found strong statistical relationship between criteria of psychotic and oppositional personality disorder, tendency for martyrdom to terrorist acts, psychotic depression, and self-immolation (Schbley, 2003). His study also found that there was a connection between household incomes, employability to violent acts (Schbley, 2003). The question remains if religion has any influence on terrorism at all. Holbrook and Holgan (2019) came with their own understanding that religious ideologies are fluid but it is not something that "does or does not" happen to an individual. They further claimed that it depends on the substantive environment the individual is a participant to understand if the individual leans towards violence (Holbrook and Holgan, 2019). Crenshaw (1988) wrote that not every individual exposed to the culture takes up arms. Borum (2011) explained that not all individuals having radical beliefs will become a terrorist. This shows a clear picture within the academia that the influence of religion on terrorism may be lower than what's shown. However, the picture is quite exaggerated within the public through media influence, especially regarding Islamic terrorism. Gill (2018) spoke of how this misinterpretation has caused confusion within the population to consider issues of politics, ethnicity, culture, etc., as "religiously inspired violence".

The reasons why an individual would be violently radicalized and involve themselves in terrorist organizations is inconclusive (Navarro-Granados *et al.*, 2020). Many scholars have identified several reasons such as poverty of resources (O'Neill, 2002a in Newman, 2006); individuals living in states who lack a legitimacy and control over their economy may be more prone to be radicalized (O'Neill, 2002b in Newman, 2006); demographic factors that influence background conditions (Newman, 2006); globalization (Haynes, 2019) and urbanization (Massey, 1996 in Newman, 2006); human rights abuse (Hassan, 2001); and clash of values (Newman, 2006). Newman (2006) explains his claim that these clashes of values does not necessarily have to be cultural or religious. Ajami (2001) further adds to this that religion does not create a terrorist; the creation happens due to the country's struggle to reconcile with modernity. Most academic scholars intend to portray terrorism as an outcome of multiple variables, rather than a predominant religious influence. The next section will examine case studies to understand further about religious influence in terrorism.

As Rapoport (2004) said that Islam was at in the heart of the religious wave, the paper would mostly discuss cases that are self-proclaimed Islamist groups. This is to understand and debunk the claims of religion influencing the groups' agenda and motivation.

2. Case Study: Lone Wolf Attacks

Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel was a 31-year-old French-Tunisian truck driver living in France with his family (Beaumont and Fischer, 2016). He had shot 84 people, including 10 children in Nice, France (Beaumont and Fischer, 2016). His first conviction was in March 2016 but both French and Tunisian officials had no records of him having any terrorist links, with little interest in religion which was confirmed by his neighbors (Beaumont and Fischer, 2016). He had started reading up on extremist Islamic content a few days before the attacks (Holbrook and Holgan, 2019). A similar case happened when in June 2017, Darren Osbourne had attacked Muslims in north London after reading far-right content online for four weeks before the attack (Holbrook and Holgan, 2019). In both these cases, extremist inclinations were not something that was ingrown for a prolonged period. Such cases are explained by Borum (2011) in his paper where he listed out many reasons from Norwegian Institute of International Affairs as to why an individual might become a terrorist—out of the many reasons listed, one was extremist ideologies which Borum argues to be more political or personal in nature. Borum (2011) also adds that the experience of discrimination because of religion or ethnicity could develop violent thoughts against the "perpetrator". Borum and Fein (2016) argued further that even those who are involved in acts of terror under the banner of a "global" cause or ideology may not be ideologically driven. McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) adds that there are other paths to radicalization than ideologies, such as, personal grievances. This is further to add that even if religion is shown to be at the forefront of many terrorist operations in the 21st century, it may not be a major or only influence behind their goals or attacks.

Regardless of the lack of evidence of religious influence in operations, there have been controversial efforts taken by many governments to prevent terror attacks. Intelligence and security agencies have tried to create a profile of terrorists, as well. One such example would be of the New York Police Department (NYPD) who created a "Jihadi-Salafi Ideology" that leads to an "Attack" (Patel, 2011). It tries to create identifiable signatures for each stage of the radicalization which causes more problems than solutions (Patel, 2011). These identifiable signatures or acts can be found in any measure in normal American Muslims as well (Patel, 2011). These signatures lead to unnecessary searches of Muslims on the streets, especially male Muslims (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011).

Influence of religion on individuals to act on their extremist desires are minimal. The prejudice against them remains within all spreads of security and government. The lack of initiative to find the deep-rooted causes of why an individual may join a terrorist organization or become a lone-wolf attacker is the reason behind a rising number of lone-wolf attacks.

3. Case Study: Terrorist Organizations

Many terrorist groups do not conform to present international order and try to build an alternative order which consists of their laws, norms, and values (Haynes, 2019). For example, the attack on Hotel Taj in 2008 by terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaida. Their reasoning for their attacks was to wage war on the enemies of Islam, which lists as the West, Shias, and un-Islamic Muslim rulers (Haynes, 2019). However, their motivation was not religious; their attacks are mostly to create a global media spectacle, an advertisement (Haynes, 2019). According to multiple scholars (Roy, 2006; Richardson, 2006; Abrahms, 2008 in Hoflinger, 2021), terrorist groups have an organized motive of defending Islam against the West but it is unclear how stable or consistent these objectives are. In most cases, terrorist operations are a combination of personal motivation and strategic decisions (Hoflinger, 2021).

Most individuals pursuing interests in terrorist organizations come from a sense of building self-identities due to the isolating factor that they deal with in their community. More of this was explained in Social Identity Theory which notes that the need to belong is prevalently high in individuals involved in these organizations (Smith, 2008). Terrorist organizations profit from this behavior and most of the recruitment takes place under similar circumstances. Smith (2008) also mentioned Freudian Theory of Group Psychology where the "Life" and "Death" Instincts are activated and hence, they find a common ground within groups. It has also been noted by scholars that most people who are provoked to join these groups in terms of religion are those who have little to no knowledge of the religion itself and are mostly

shown of the presumed persecution of fellow believers which aggravates them (Hoflinger, 2021). The members of these groups have little to no knowledge of the organization's political or religious agendas as well (Abrahms, 2008 in Hoflinger, 2021). Most individuals in such organizations are promised a glorious paradise if they perish while in action (Hoffman, 1993). These ideas have, however, been refuted by scholars of having other meanings and may contradict the ideologies of these organizations vastly. Schmid (2015) notes that, the appeal of ISIS has little to do with the religion but is more of a reflection of young Muslims revolting and a sense of belonging for new converts. Therefore, researches on terrorist organizations show a clear distinction between what is said to be the reason behind the operations (in this case: religion) and what is.

4. Media's Role in Religious Terrorism

The constant and vast media coverage of terrorist groups after 9/11 gave a rise to sympathizers of such terrorist organizations (Moghadam, 2009 in Hoflinger, 2021). It is difficult to ignore how the media has portrayed the motivation of terrorist organizations to be and what is. When media outlets like *The Atlantic* headlines that "ISIS is a religious group" (Wood, 2015), it gives more legitimacy to these groups and delegitimizes an entire religion and its pillars of faith. The negative stereotype of Muslims in the media and the constant coverage of how a terrorist might "look like" is counterproductive as it does not offer any help in preventing terrorism, it only isolates the Muslim population (Schmid, 2015).

It is undeniable that the media tries to create awareness against the dangers of terrorism and being involved in its activities but it also gives a large amount of publicity to these groups (Yusof *et al.*, 2013). Researchers have shown cases of mass hysteria and panic regarding terrorism and the Muslim population occurring due to the constant portrayal in the news (Sikorski *et al.*, 2018). The bigger problem in these media portrayals of terrorist groups is that during attacks, the media over-dramatizes the threats which contributes to a moral confusion for people who are led to forget the victims by romanticizing the terrorist (Yusof *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the mass understanding of the population regarding "religion-led" terrorism is distorted and it leads to a larger social chaos.

5. Conclusion

The debate if religion influences or associates itself with terrorism can only be refuted by a reminder that terrorism does not have a religion. Most individuals and groups are motivated by other variables and factors while a façade of religion is shown to the world. The problematic depiction of religion being a reason for terrorism causes misunderstanding and misinterpretation. For example, there have been scholars, such as Gill (2018) who give the responsibility to religious leaders to explain "violent parts" of the scripture in a peaceful manner. There are various problems with this statement as this implies that it is the duty of religion to control terrorism to a certain extent. It is impossible to understand how one perceives religious scriptures and how the individual acts upon them.

The paper would like to conclude by taking countless researches into account that religion is an instrument rather than a causation for terrorist attacks and violent extremism in this age. The causes of terrorism and what influences it is more complex than the presumed religious motivation (Hoflinger, 2021). It is not to deny that religion plays a crucial instrument in terrorism but one has to remember that religion is merely an instrument used to legitimize many actions, such as jihadism (Schmid, 2015). The duty of scholars is to rethink and reassess terrorism. The paper does not entirely refute the wave theory but it does question if it is the accurate way to approach these terrorist groups. The ideologies that these individuals and groups are built on are usually a perverted view of what is written in the religion's scriptures. They have been debunked by experts and scholars but there is a lack of portrayal of these researches on large social and contemporary media platforms. It is crucial for the media and the government to ensure proper depictions of terrorism and if religion affects it. Terrorism should not be politicized for a state's political benefits which defies the purpose of it as a highly securitized issue.

To draw up the final argument, the paper would like to propose that religion does not influence terrorism but is used as a tool for recruitment, justification, and political ends.

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