

Islam and Islamic Terrorism

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of the relationship between the religion of Islam and the individuals that commit or campaign for acts of terrorism in the name Islam. Furthermore, this paper examines research that seeks to prove that Islam itself is not a violent religion and that the individuals that the global community recognizes as terrorists are motivated by factors that stand alone from their religious dogmas. Such factors that are addressed in this paper include politics, socioeconomics, and the human psyche. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology has been reviewed for the purpose of this paper, as statistical analysis has been conducted to define certain correlations, such as the link between terrorism and economics, while other research focuses on behavioral and societal influences. This paper will conclude with a recommendation that the global community must resist the urge to label Islam as a religion prone to terror and violence and a call for more psychoanalytical research to be conducted in an effort to counter further radicalization.

Keywords: Islam, Islamic terrorism, radicalization, politics, socioeconomics, psychology

Islam and Islamic Terrorism

There are few things in today's modern world that can strike fear into the hearts of many and conjure up images of death and destruction in the way that Islamic terrorism is capable of doing. It seems as though no sovereignty is out of reach for this particular brand of terrorism, no culture or society invulnerable to its dire influence. Indeed, the topic of Islamic terrorism has its own menacing presence in our daily news alerts and the current events at large, whether it is the threat of attack, the aftermath of attack, or the mention of a nation struggling to eradicate the existence of terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The seemingly endless military operations, gruesome stories of beheadings and torture, and constant threats to everyday peace have continued to tire an already weary global populace. And among all of the calamity and uncertainty, public dialogue seems to invariably swerve from the discussion of terrorism itself to a much larger perceived enemy, the religion of Islam and the Muslim community. There are many people that seem to blame Islam's teachings and guiding principles as the root of the terrorism and radicalization problem. Such sentiment is preached or insinuated on a regular basis by certain news pundits, fringe talk show and radio hosts, and even political leaders. It is a dangerous assertion to make and one that primarily stems from an ignorance of Islam. Whether the radicalization process takes place in our own backyard or half a world away, there are common factors at play in such cases that extend beyond the religion with which an individual identifies. While many around the globe exclusively fault Islam for the creation and spread of terrorist organizations, the facts show that the radicalization process which leads to violent extremism is influenced by a number of internal and external factors.

Islamic Terrorism

The argument presented within this paper does not intend to downplay the severity of the problem with terrorism that exists in today's world. On the contrary, it is crucial to acknowledge this problem and to understand it so that more may be gained in the efforts to combat it through government and military action. Part of this understanding comes through the examination of the key Islamic terrorist organizations that impact the global community.

Al-Qaeda

According to the Encyclopædia Britannica online (n.d.), the terrorist organization known as al-Qaeda was formed by Osama bin Laden and other associates in the latter part of the 1980's. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan initially gave rise to this group, as Muslim forces were in the process of combating Soviet forces. Bin Laden and other Muslim leaders were eager to give aid to their Muslim brothers engaged in war, but once the war was over the organization continued to exist and grow, eventually forming a stronghold in Afghanistan in association with the militant group known as the Taliban. Over the following years, bin Laden and al-Qaeda allied themselves with various other extremist groups, jointly declaring a Holy War on the United States and Western culture.

Years of intense rhetoric and sinister plotting culminated with the September 11 attacks on the United States that saw the deaths of 2,977 innocent civilians and first responders (UMD, 2017) by means of hijacked aircraft. At target on that day in 2001 were the twin towers that helped to make up the World Trade Center in New York, NY, the Pentagon in Arlington, VA, and ultimately another important site in Washington, DC, most likely the White House or the United States Capitol. The last target was never struck due to the heroic efforts of passengers and crew on United Airlines Flight 93 (Encyclopædia Britannica online, n.d.); the hijackers were

overtaken and the plane was crashed in a rural field outside of Shanksville, PA. These attacks drew a swift and mighty military response from the United States, resulting in the invasion of Afghanistan and a controversial war intended to disrupt the forces of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), was formed during the United States-led war in Iraq beginning in 2003 (Encyclopædia Britannica online, n.d.). Considered by many to be the current face of Islamic terrorism across the globe, ISIL is a descendant of al-Qaeda and shares many of the same ideologies and contempt for the Western world, especially the United States. One of the organization's foremost goals is to disrupt Western influence and power in an effort to create a caliphate under the direction of extreme Islamic law. With aspirations of a worldwide caliphate, ISIL has previously taken advantage of unrest in the Middle East, such as that in Syria, in attempts to expand their brand of terror and hardline interpretation of Islam.

Though the United States and its allies have had many successes combating ISIL and taking back cities that were once overrun, ISIL is still a threat to peace and Western culture. Though the organization has been reeling in recent years, its message is still reaching those that are willing to listen via the dissemination of propaganda via social media and the dark web (Encyclopædia Britannica online, n.d.). The United States has unfortunately become all too familiar with declarations of allegiance to ISIL by those who perpetrate terrorist attacks on American soil.

Major Attacks in the United States

While the September 11 attacks have been by far the most destructive and catastrophic, smaller-scale attacks continue to take American lives and threaten the way the citizens of the United States go about their daily lives. For instance, on April 15, 2013 two brothers of Chechen ethnicity named Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev used two improvised explosive devices (IED) made from pressure cookers in the commission of a bombing during the running of the Boston Marathon (Encyclopædia Britannica online, n.d.). The attack killed three bystanders and injured over 300 others that were spectating or were otherwise involved with the marathon (UMD, 2017). Though both young men had lived in the United States for a significant portion of their lives, it did not stop the radicalization process. This process began with the older brother, Tamerlan Tsarnaev. It is believed that Tamerlan Tsarnaev was committed to radicalization following a trip to the Russian province of Dagestan. Upon his return, Tamerlan influenced younger brother Dzhokhar to join the cause. Though neither brother pledged allegiance to any specific terrorist organization, they viewed a substantial amount of online propaganda from various extremist groups.

Another horrible attack on American soil with ties to Islamic terrorism is the Orlando shooting of 2016. Perpetrator Omar Mateen, a United States citizen born in New York, opened fire on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, FL, killing 49 people and wounding many others (UMD, 2017). Mateen was of Afghan descent and had previously boasted about ties to terrorist organizations al-Qaeda and Hezbollah and had been questioned and investigated by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (Encyclopædia Britannica online, n.d.). Though Mateen did make a pledge of allegiance to ISIL while on the phone with authorities, no distinct connections could be made by investigators following the aftermath.

Islam

In the same manner in which it is necessary to understand Islamic terrorist organizations when considering the argument presented in this paper, it is also necessary to gain an understanding of the religion of Islam itself. It is no secret that many people around the world associate the religion with the terrorist organizations that carry out heinous acts of violence and destruction under the shield of Islam, but it is then fair to question if such individuals truly have, or wish to have, an understanding of the religion or if they are just driven by fear and ignorance. Many Muslim leaders condemn these terrorist groups and their attacks, but this does not seem to satisfy the masses. If non-Muslims would take the time to get to know Islam and genuine members of the Muslim community, they may find that the association between Islam and Islamic terrorist organizations is a lot more unstable than they once thought.

History and Principles of Islam

The religion of Islam stems from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in 7th century Arabia and centers on the believer surrendering him or herself to Allah, the one true God recognized by Muslims (Encyclopædia Britannica online, n.d.). This will of Allah is expressed through the Qur'an, a written set of scriptures akin to Christianity's Bible or Judaism's Torah. There are five pillars of Islam that every Muslim strives to adhere to. These five pillars include the profession of faith, ritual prayer, alms tax, fasting during Ramadan, and at least one pilgrimage to Mecca. Within the teachings of the Qur'an there is a controversial term known as jihad. This term is often associated with extremists and terrorist organizations and can be open to interpretation, leading to the controversy. The term itself is separated in the Qur'an into two categories: greater jihad and lesser jihad. Greater jihad refers to internal struggles and an individual's battle with his or her own inner base impulses. Lesser jihad refers to external struggles against perceived enemies of Islam. It is the concept of lesser jihad where the

controversy truly comes into play, as many extremists and fundamentalists view this as a call to violent arms against such enemies of Islam, in particular Western culture. This interpretation is denounced by many in the Muslim world, with claims that lesser jihad should not be viewed as a means for the expansion of Islam but rather the preservation of Islam.

Rejection of Violence

Muslim scholars, such as Dr. Mohammad Ibrahim Miqdad at the Islamic University in Gaza, have taken it upon themselves to spread that word that Islam does not tolerate or abet the violent actions and philosophies of Islamic terrorist organizations. According to Miqdad (2015), Islam is much like any other religion, such as Christianity and Judaism, in the sense that at its core it is based on principles such as “justice, tolerance, values, and ethics (p. 33). Miqdad states that in the Qur’an, the Prophet Mohammad preaches about the good in all people, not just Muslims. Furthermore, it was the Prophet Mohammad’s belief that all people “come from the same spirit, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion” (p. 33). It is in this spirit of commonality among mankind that Islam preaches tolerance of non-Muslims and denounces any violence that would be carried out in the name of Islam.

In addition to an outright denouncement of violence against those that are different, Miqdad (2015) states that Islam realizes that mankind should be judged based on good deeds tolerance regardless of what dogma one chooses to practices. Verse 62 of Surat Al-Baqarah, the longest chapter in the Qur’an, states that “indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians...will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve” (p. 33). As such, Miqdad argues that it is entirely contradictory for those that see Islam as a purveyor of murder and violence rather than one of peace and tolerance.

In regards to the concept of lesser jihad, Miqdad does not see much room for interpretation among the Qur'an's teachings. The Qur'an, according to Miqdad (2015), states that war is only justified in matters of self-defense and that any means of extremism is forbidden. In fact, it was the Prophet Mohammad who distinctly gave an order against any murder of women, infants, children, and the elderly or those that choose not to engage when the time does come for war. This is an element of Islam that extremists and terrorist organizations clearly do not recognize.

Another scholar, M. Cherif Bassiouni, echoes Miqdad's message that Islam is a religion that does not tolerate the actions of extremists. Bassiouni (2015) states that not only are acts of violence such as the attack and murder of those who do not wish to engage, women, children, and the elderly abhorred by Islam, but they are directly labeled as criminal under sharia and Islamic law. A suicide bombing also falls into this category of forbidden actions, a method that is frequently used by terrorists not only in attacks against Western culture but in attacks against other Muslims. According to Bassiouni, there is no room for interpretation on such matters and absolutely no justification found within the Qur'an. Those that commit such violence are therefore in direct conflict with the true principles and teachings of Islam. Bassiouni stresses the difference of attacks conducted in the name of Islam versus attacks that are actually permitted by Islam.

Causes of Radicalization

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, there are a number of internal and external factors that can influence the radicalization process and further the agendas of the terrorist

organizations that plague the world. The factors that were researched for this paper fall into three categories: politics, socioeconomics, and psychology.

Politics

It is not surprising to suggest that the political climate of a nation can directly influence the very fabric of that nation. Political unrest and instability affects countries all over the world as nations in Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, and even North America struggle with partisan conflict that at times threatens the very peace and prosperity that many take for granted. Unfortunately, the Middle East is rife with such unrest and has been for centuries in some form or another. As was previously mentioned, the terrorist organization al-Qaeda came into existence in response to outside powers attempting to invade Afghanistan. This is but one example of how politics can play a part in the creation and growth of terrorism and terrorist organizations. A closer look at research aimed at this correlation can give a better perspective at how such a connection exists.

Professor Bridget Coggins conducted such research with a focus on a total of 153 countries across the globe and the connection between state weakness and failure and the occurrence of terrorism (Coggins, 2015). Coggins sought to find out if such weakened nations were inherently predisposed to terrorism and, if not, at what point states were weakened enough to become susceptible to terrorism. Coggins theorized that terrorism is a cause of many factors that branch from state failure and as such set quantitative methods to measure several different aspects of state failure in relation to terrorism. Coggins's method included measurement of infant mortality rates, gross domestic product (GDP), and the human development index (HDI). Quantitative method was also used to measure human insecurity, state incapacity, and political

collapse. In addition, terror events occurring during this time period were coded to be labeled as domestic, international, or both according to location, perpetrator, and target.

The importance of studying state failure, as noted by Coggins (2015), came about after the realization that failed states can have a substantial and lasting international impact, such as elements related to terrorism. It is this realization that has led to the global assertion that failed states are a natural harbor for terrorist organizations, with corrupt enterprises such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms dealing providing viable means of finance to such organizations without the threat of state interference. The burden on governments of failed states becomes so overwhelming that terrorist organizations are able to take hold and thrive in the midst of the chaos and instability.

The research conducted by Coggins aimed to define the extent of this reality between failed states and terrorism. Whereas other research focuses on motivations at the individual or group levels, Coggins took a look at “permissive causes at the country level” (Coggins, 2015, p. 456). Ultimately, Coggins discovered that states do not naturally provide conditions that are hospitable to terrorism, therefore leading to the conclusion that weakened states are not necessarily predisposed to terrorism. However, the data did reveal that nations which have experienced political collapse are indeed prone to terrorism when compared to nations dealing with issues such as human insecurity. Three major aspects of state failure that can lead to terrorism include government’s failure to provide infrastructure and other services, a government’s failure to provide stable and reliable public institutions, and ambiguous authority caused by political collapse.

Giandomenico Picco conducted research that introduced the concepts of tactical terrorism and strategic terrorism. As defined by Picco (2004), tactical terrorism involves political objectives that are “well known and unchangeable and are pursued by groups with a place and a stake in their own countries” (p. 71). On the opposite side of the spectrum of terrorism, strategic terrorism involves “perpetual confrontation with the enemy being anyone who is different” (Picco, 2004, p. 71). With strategic terrorism, political objectives are subject to change based on the confrontation at hand, as it is the confrontation itself that defines the objectives. Strategic terrorism is a form of terrorism first seen on a large scale through the actions and objectives of al-Qaeda. Those that are different are almost literally defined as those that do not share the beliefs and objectives of the terrorist organization, whether or not they are Muslim.

Picco went on to provide examples of each type of terrorism, having noted that organizations such as Hezbollah of Southern Lebanon operate on the basis of tactical terrorism, as “they are supported by and responsible for a civilian constituency that is much larger than the number of its operatives and militants” (Picco, 2004, p. 73). Such organizations even have political representation at times in their respective nations and have engaged in negotiations with other countries and concerned parties. Strategic terrorism, on the other hand, seeks to divide and conquer and has little interest in negotiations if the opposition is viewed as different. It was al-Qaeda that gave rise to this idea and the “us against them” mentality, with “them” being anyone who was not a part of al-Qaeda and with diversity seen as a threat. This new strategy saw al-Qaeda taking on countries such as the United States, Russia, China, and India.

One primary difference between tactical and strategic terrorism, as posed by Picco (2004), is the fact that strategic terrorism cannot exist without a defined enemy. The perpetual war that such organizations seek is central to their primary objective of pitting the world against

itself. Additionally, the organizations that operate under the concept of strategic terrorism seek to gain sympathy for themselves and their cause, a key component of their recruiting strategy. The groups tend to present themselves as just and righteous, fighting an everlasting battle against the giant evils of the world. This David versus Goliath approach has a strong appeal in the recruitment process and unfortunately has gained such groups many new sympathizers and followers over the past few years. As suggested by Picco, however, one way to combat this type of terrorism is to immerse those willing to teach the benefits of diversity and human rights into the parts of the world that are susceptible to strategic terrorism.

Socioeconomics

Research conducted by Shahzad, Zakaria, Rehman, Ahmed, and Fida (2016) focused on the economic climate and relation to terrorism in the nation of Pakistan for a period of time before and after the September 11 attacks in the United States. Shahzad et al. (2016) sought to define a connection between foreign direct investment (FDI), economic growth, and the development and sustainability of terrorism using Pakistani economic statistics generated between 1988 and 2001 and between 2002 and 2010. Defined by the authors, “terrorism is an act of violence with intention to disrupt normal course of life to achieve political and economic gains” (Shahzad et al., 2016, p. 180). The authors noted that review of empirical literature shows that adverse economic conditions are a leading cause of terrorism and that terrorist organizations typically develop in countries that are at a disadvantage in terms of income.

Shahzad et al. (2016) uncovered an interesting truth through their research: the fact that acts of terrorism themselves can lead to lower FDI based on the perceived high risk of the country is counterbalanced by evidence indicating higher FDI can lead to a decrease in acts of

terrorism. It is an unfortunate cycle that could correct itself if other nations were willing to invest in countries that are experiencing problems with terrorism. The risk is often seen as too great as the concern exists that any money that is invested into such nations will ultimately benefit the terrorist organizations. This reality is exacerbated by the fact that nations struggling with terrorism are more inclined to spend their resources on methods of combating terrorism instead of methods of growth that would entice further investing.

Ultimately, the data reviewed by Shahzad et al. (2016) indicated that terrorism does indeed have a negative impact on FDI and economic growth and that a lack of FDI and economic growth can in turn lead to a heightened risk for the development of terrorism. The authors suggested that Pakistan, and nations in similar circumstances, take it upon themselves to eradicate terrorism and the factors that can lead to terrorism, such as “poverty, illiteracy, and income inequality” (Shahzad et al., 2016, p. 193). Such a strategy can have an obvious positive impact in the battle against terrorism and can also boost the perception of the country among the other nations of the world, paving the way for more FDI.

Work conducted by Daniel Meierrieks, as contributed to the larger work by Caruso and Locatelli (2014), focused on the economic determinants of terrorism through review of academic literature. Meierrieks’s findings suggested that economic motivations have played and continue to play a large role in the formation and perpetuation of terrorist organizations. There also appears to be a strong correlation with terrorist activity and the global economy, as Meierrieks highlighted data from the 1990s showing a drop in the global economy and a rise in global terrorism.

The line of thinking behind economics as a cause for emergence of terrorism centers on the idea that the would-be terrorist views violence as a viable means to achieve financial gain. Along this vein, Meierrieks introduced a controversial concept entitled rational-choice theory that builds upon the correlation between terrorists and economics (Caruso & Locatelli, 2014). Rational-choice theory states that individuals participating in terrorist groups are in actuality acting rationally based on economic opportunity and their attempt to maximize their own worth. This theory tends to discount the more psychology-based theories by suggesting that the perpetrators are acting based on financial necessity rather than a contrived ideology (Caruso & Locatelli, 2014).

Psychology

The third and final category of factors examines empirical evidence that suggests the presence of psychological influence when considering the emergence of radicalization and terrorism. Work conducted by Garcia Coll and Marks (2017) aimed to supplement previously recorded research on the psychological element of terrorism by focusing on developmental and sociocultural perspectives. One critical finding from their research was the fact that most individuals who participate in terrorist activity are young males. This is especially true in nations such as the United States, where lone wolf and similar style attacks are often perpetrated by young males in their early twenties with a history of feeling like an outsider in American culture and a difficulty with assimilation.

Garcia Coll and Marks (2017) postulate that many terrorist organizations target young males in the recruitment process, both at home and abroad, as such individuals are still forming self-identities and are vulnerable to radical influence. According to the authors, many

perpetrators of terrorist attacks experience familial discord, whether it's in the form of parental loss, radicalization by family members, or feelings of alienation. Studies have shown that average adolescents are prone to experience feelings of social isolation, shaming, fear, anger, and helplessness. These adolescent tendencies play hand-in-hand with the humiliation and vulnerability that leads to radicalization. There is also a natural need for young adults to feel like they belong, another facet that terrorist organizations take advantage of when recruiting.

David Lotto (2017) examined the mindset of the terrorist through a theory once posed by Heinz Kohut. Kohut's theory is threefold, involving the concepts of narcissistic injury, narcissistic rage, and the desire for revenge. Lotto suggested that throughout the history of Western civilization, Western powers have repeatedly humiliated the Muslim community, thus leading to a Muslim focus on the lesser jihad, or combating the perceived enemy to Islam. Such humiliation is the driving force behind the idea of narcissistic injury, and in Lotto's opinion a major root cause of terrorism in general. Those that experience such injury are then likely to experience rage and a burning need to seek revenge; the way to fix such pain is to unleash a humiliation on those who have humiliated you in the first place. Such a cycle of shame, humiliation, rage, and aggression is seen throughout psychology.

Lotto (2017) focused on certain historical events that have seen Christians humiliate Muslims. These events include the Crusades, the defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the so-called peace missions in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Lotto called for a break of this narcissistic cycle by suggesting that the West no longer glamorize its victories over the terrorist organizations that it is perpetually battling. By doing so, the West is taking away the need for the Muslims that have been radicalized to seek revenge for the humiliation that they've endured.

Kiran Sarma's research recognized the psychological factors at play with radicalization and encouraged the use of risk assessments as a means of preventing radicalization from occurring in the first place. Sarma (2017) touted the use of the Individual Vulnerable People (IVP) system. This is an assessment system that is utilized in the United Kingdom (UK) which uses empirical evidence to present a list of red-flags for extremism. Such red flags include "membership of nonviolent radical groups, contact with known extremists, advanced military training, overseas combat experience...cultural and/or religious isolation, isolation from family, risk-taking behaviors, isolated peer group, hate rhetoric, and political activism" (Sarma, 2017, p. 281). Sarma concluded that though many obstacles exist when it comes to assessment and evaluation of individuals at risk for radicalization, more psychologists should get in the game and contribute their expertise to fine-tuning such measures, as it is crucial in the battle to combat radicalization.

Islamophobia

One major and dire consequence of the unwarranted and negative association between Islam and Islamic terrorism is the rise of Islamophobia. There seems to be an inherent fear of Islam and professed Muslims, a fear that can be exacerbated by our political leaders when words are not chosen carefully. President Trump, for instance, has bandied the term "radical Islamic terrorism" whereas his predecessors George W. Bush and Barack Obama were wary to do so due to the negative connotation it created with the religion of Islam (Sprusanky, 2017). Such terminology can fracture an already fragile relationship between Islam and the rest of the world when such a blatant connection is made between the religion and acts of terror. According to Kishi (2017) with the Pew Research Center, attacks on Muslims in 2016 significantly surpassed

2015 figures, jumping from 91 to 127. 2016 attacks even surpassed the modern peak of 93 reached in 2001, a number that was primarily motivated by the 9/11 attacks.

Conclusion

It's fairly obvious to see why many are quick to associate Islam with terrorism, but it is also fairly obvious to see why such a connection is unfair and dangerous. There are over a billion peace-loving Muslims that want nothing to do with the violence and hatred that is born from radicalization. The religion itself is what many scholars and experts consider to be one that touts the good in all people, even those that are non-Muslim. For those that do not practice Islam, it should be our duty to know our neighbors better, to truly understand the principles and culture that guide our Muslim brothers and sisters. When such an understanding is created, it goes a long way towards combating the evil that does really exist in this world.

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