Between Messengers and Monsters: The Contending Narratives of Islamic Religion and Terrorism in a Precarious World

Mike Omilusi[1] and Ajibola O. Peter Adu[2]
[1]Department of Political Science,
Ekiti State University, Nigeria
[2]Department of General Studies,
Federal Polytechnic, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract. Terrorism is one of the most complex phenomena of the contemporary world. It has been observed that throughout the world, there is a close relationship between religious fundamentalism and violence. Since 1989, the increasing willingness of religious extremists to strike targets outside immediate country or regional areas underscores the global nature of contemporary terrorism. The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, are representative of this trend. Many Islamist terrorists, often called jihadist terrorists, view themselves as following Muhammad's example. The beliefs of the jihadi activists and their sympathizers follow the teachings of militant Salafi ideologues whose leaders put forth an ideology that prioritizes violent resistance in order to defend the community of believers from outside oppression. This theoretically-driven article interrogates the nexus between religion and terrorism with a particular focus on Islamic suicide terrorism which has occurred in different countries, communities, cultures and under very diverse political circumstances.

Key Words: Terrorism, Religion, Islam, Monsters, Messengers

Introduction and Background Context

Terrorism is not new to the world. Throughout the ages, it has manifested in many forms most notably from ethno-political and left and right wing terrorism as the predominant source of political violence of the 20th century to its current politico-religious variety spearheaded by groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS (Gunaratna, 2016). The disintegration of post-Cold War states, and the Cold War legacy of a world awash in advanced conventional weapons and know-how, has assisted the proliferation of terrorism worldwide. With the increasing ease of transnational transportation and communication, the continued willingness of states such as Iran and Iraq to provide support, and dehumanizing ideologies that enable mass casualty attacks, the lethal potential of terrorist violence has reached new heights (Moore, n.d). Religion, according to Pape (n.d), is rarely the root cause of most suicide terrorist attacks, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective. However, if religion is more than just belief, and plays a more powerful role in sculpting, defining, and maintaining self-identity, we have more to consider in discussing the nexus of religion, politics, and violence (Frye, 2015).

It is argued that suicide terrorism is a multifactorial phenomenon that cannot easily be explained away as an outcome of Islamic religiosity. According to Kassim (2008), a multidisciplinary approach to understanding root causes will help in the articulation, formulation, and execution of rational policies aimed at curbing the use of suicide terrorism as a strategy by militarily weak political national movements. If terrorism has many faces, so does counter terrorism. This seemingly simple statement provides a deep insight into the complex socio political nature of terrorist violence and suggests the range of means employed by the state to gain or retain loyalty of the population. Ideology remains the key vector of terrorism, yet the state can effectively employ the same ideals as a counter terrorism tool to use extreme human emotions such as fear, retribution and vengeance to convert terrorists into violent

nationalists. These tactics can be as bloody and vengeful as the militants' activities and are used primarily to sustain state power (TRAC, n.d).

Some academicians mistakenly minimize the role of ideology as a key factor in inspiring the violence and terrorism carried out by non-state extremist groups, not just in the case of jihadist terrorism but also in other such cases (Bale, 2014). Religious identities, ideologies, and organizations are held to generate or transform political conflicts in ways that other identities, ideologies, and organizations do not. Religious conflict and violence - religious nationalism, religious civil wars, or religious terrorism, for example – have a logic or causal texture of their own that sets them apart from other forms of conflict and violence (Brubaker, 2015:2). It is a truism that Islamic radicalism has gained a lot of popularity over the course of the last couple years. Increasingly terrorism has been performed for a televised audience around the world. What is unusual about contemporary acts of terrorism, according to Juergensmeyer (2009), is that the vision of religious war is not confined to history and symbols but is a contemporary reality. Politics have become religionised as struggles in the real world become baptized with the absolutism of religious fervour.

Violence can be physical or emotional, and the factors that lead people to commit violent acts can be numerous (Frye, 2015). Some studies that tried to explain the motivations of suicide attacks have tended to focus on the attacker's psychopathology, poverty and lack of education, or individual motives, such as religious indoctrination, especially Islamic fundamentalism (Hassan, 2004). Many explanations of radicalisation and Islamic terrorism found in the literature were rooted in socio-psychological accounts which emphasised the primacy of grievances and discontent, usually by implicit reference to frustration-aggression or humiliation-revenge mechanisms. In one rather obvious sense, all motivations for violent extremism can be thought of as constituting grievances, but the literature demonstrates that they can carry powerful effects (Christmann, 2012). With regards to religious violence, it is something quite visceral and potent, as it is community driven and sanctified. Violence in the name of religion always relates to power and is often exercised in an effort to reset the order of things. In this regard it is always political (Frye, 2015).

Despite Islamic teachings against suicide and killing innocent people in battle, terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, or "ISIS," have used a political form of Islam known as "Islamism" to justify an unholy war of terrorism (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2017). Though the non-Islamic etiologies of this phenomenon include political causes (the Israeli-Arab conflict); cultural causes (rebellion against Western cultural colonialism); and social causes (alienation, poverty) (Bar, 2004), it is necessary to problematise the causal link between religion and violence explicitly invoked by the discourse of radical Islam, in particular the popular conviction that the terror it propagates is utterly indiscriminate (Holmes, 2016). While politicians have often discredited their political rivals by calling or classifying them as terrorists and their struggles as terrorism, terrorists on the other hand have always tried to justify their acts and deeds by calling and categorizing them as jihad. A peep into the lingering global terrorism, with its attendant religious colouration, will provide more explanation on these propositions.

Global Terrorism and the Religious Colouration: A Conceptual Analysis

When it comes to terrorism, we almost always, two antagonistic poles of interpretation: if a pole is an act qualified as terrorist, the other may be regarded as a heroic gesture. In this interpretation, or cultural factors related to the type of civilization, the values shared by a given society have a very large role. But they are not always decisive, but rather a relation of forces which in the end decide whether an act or another (Magureanu, 2003 cited in Stibli, 2010:2). Terrorism has multiple faces and may be hiding under the name of a religion, philosophy, politics, or any other name. Terrorism is a way of life. It may be a part of the history of human

civilization and culture. Defining terrorism is most important in order not to be changeable between "terrorism" and "the warrior of freedom" (Kinsley, 2001). Two common elements are usually found in contemporary definitions: (1) that terrorism involves aggression against non-combatants and (2) that the terrorist action in itself is not expected by its perpetrator to accomplish a political goal but instead to influence a target audience and change that audience's behaviour in a way that will serve the interests of the terrorist (Badey, 1998; Laqueur, 1999).

In general, two schools of thought explaining the phenomenon of modern terrorism have emerged out of the collection of academic work within the discipline – the "psychological-sociological" school of thought and the "political-rational" school of thought. Both schools maintain that terrorism seeks to achieve political goals by instilling fear and anxiety among the target population, but each stresses a different aspect of the explanation (Ganor, 2009). Three interlocking trends have significantly changed the nature and degree of the threat: the globalization of commerce, travel, and information transfer, which puts economic disparities and ideological competition in sharp relief and facilitates cooperative aggression by far-flung but like-minded conspirators; the ascent of religious fundamentalism as an aggrieved competitor with the market-economic, democratic, and secular trends of modernity; and the privatization of weapons of mass destruction, putting the potential of macro-terrorist acts into the hands of small groups or even individuals (Hoffman, 1998; Laqueur, 1999; Enders & Sandler 2000 cited Victoroff, 2005:3).

Among the hundreds of definitions of terrorism that have been accepted throughout the years, some contain conceptual and phrasing problems (Hoffman, 2004:3). Many researchers note that the only certainty regarding terrorism is the pejorative manner in which the word is generally used and associated (Hoffman, 2006:23; Horgan, 2005:1 cited in Ganor, 2009). As such, when scholars, politicians, or activists describe and analyse the activities of alleged terrorist organizations, they very often use alternative terms that bear more positive connotations, such as guerrilla or underground movements, revolutionaries, militias, militants, commando groups, national liberation movements, etc. (Hoffman, 2006:28).

Terrorism is the use of violence or the threat of violence by non-state actors to achieve political and/ or ideological ends. It is usually directed at the general population and is intended to cause fear (International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, 2015). In a report for the Danish Ministry of Justice, Michael Taarnby (2003 cited in Weinstein et al., 2009) suggested that terrorists fit into two distinct categories based on their motivations. There is one group that is idealistically motivated and another that is personally motivated. Taarnby found that the two groups are distinct in their drives based on five motivational parameters. The religious, social, cultural, political, and psychological parameters are used to indicate how suicide terrorists are motivated differently to achieve the same end result (Weinstein et al., 2009). Kinsley (2001) asks some fundamental questions pertaining to the concept of terrorism while also trying to provide an answer:

So can terrorism be defined as certain gruesome practices that are unacceptable no matter what the cause? Are tactics aimed at civilian non-combatants rather than professional soldiers? Are strategies literally designed to create terror—fear, panic, despair—as their primary purpose? All these notions are carted out regularly, but none does the trick. All, in fact, are doubly inadequate: They leave out people you wish to include, and they include people you don't think deserve the label "terrorist" (possibly because you are supporting them financially or supplying them with weapons).

The public has received mixed messages regarding the causes of terrorism. Information from media and political leaders is laced with political agenda and inconsistency. While these messages are intended to aid the public in understanding the current predicament, the conflicting information leads to confusion and chaos (Weinstein et al., 2009). To some

scholars, Islamic extremism is a product of Western imperialism. As a consequence of the imperialist actions, Leech (2016) contends that lslamic extremists in the form of the Taliban and al-Qaeda emerged as powerful forces with the latter feeding off the growing disenchantment among Muslims angry at Western militarism in the Islamic world, Western backing for corrupt governments in the Middle East, and US support for Israel and its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. Leech argues that while there are many factors involved (bring Islamic fundamentalism to the forefront of global politics), undoubtedly one of the primary causes is Western imperialism. Western intervention in the Middle East over the past century to secure access to the region's oil reserves established a perfect environment in which Islamic fundamentalists could exploit growing anti-Western sentiment throughout the Islamic world with some establishing violent extremist groups. The most recent consequence of this process is the terrorist group known as the Islamic State, which emerged out of the chaos caused by the US invasion of Iraq.

In the Third World, these massive and rapid changes and dislocations are occurring in the context of domination and exploitation by foreign imperialists—and this is associated with "local" ruling classes which are economically and politically dependent on and subordinate to imperialism, and are broadly seen as the corrupt agents of an alien power, who also promote the "decadent culture of the West" (Avakian, 2007). This, in the short run, can strengthen the hand of fundamentalist religious forces and leaders who frame opposition to the "corruption" and "Western decadence" of the local ruling classes, and the imperialists to which they are beholden, in terms of returning to, and enforcing with a vengeance, traditional relations, customs, ideas and values which themselves are rooted in the past and embody extreme forms of exploitation and oppression (Avakian, 2007).

It is established that religion can define reality, constitute communities, nurture powerful emotions, generate commitment, re-socialise and reorganize the self, radically devalue the existing order, impose obligations, offer rewards and sanctions, furnish justifications, and intensify threats and dangers. It links cognitive definitions of ultimate reality with structures of feeling and obligation. In so doing it can authorize, legitimate, enable, and even require violent action in the face of urgent threats, profanations of sacred symbols, and extreme otherhood (Brubaker, 2015). As attacks against Muslims have risen, many have been labeled something other than terrorism. For Muslim victims, this seemed to confirm suspicions that society sees them as potential threats more readily than as fellow citizens to be protected (Fisher, 2017).

Religious terrorists are very different from secular terrorists in the fact that their faith is the primary inspiration for legitimizing attacks which results in a very different worldview than that of a secular terrorist. The belief that the terror attacks they operate are in support of the divine impact both the political demands they make and the level of violence that they inflict. In fact, past scholars have found that religious terrorists fight harder, longer, and cause more devastation than secular terrorists (Saiya & Scime, 2015). One clear underpinning is that "religion has provided them the metaphor of a cosmic war, an image of a spiritual struggle that every religion contains within its repository of symbols, seen as the fight between good and evil" (Juergensmeyer, 2004 cited in Weeden, 2004). The distinction between good and evil has always been an underlying ideology of religion, especially for Islamic militants (Weeden, 2004). According to the Quran, God has already predetermined that Islam is the one true religion destined to rule the world, so it is up to the followers of Muhammad to bring that about or die trying (Ali, 1993 cited in Dobrot, 2007). This obligation creates an enormous pool of potential radical followers from within the umma, especially when they truly believe that God is on their side (Dobrot, 2007).

In his comparative study of cases of religious terrorism around the world, Juergensmeyer (2004) found a strikingly familiar pattern. In all of the cases, concepts of cosmic war are accompanied by strong claims of moral justification and an enduring absolutism that

transforms worldly struggles into sacred battles. It is not so much that religion has become politicized, but that politics have become religionised. Religion does provide a potent assemblage of moral, ideological, and organizational resources that can, in certain contexts, inform, legitimate, or sustain violent conflict, just as they can inform, legitimate, or sustain the most admirable forms of moral and political engagement. The analytical challenge, for students of conflict and violence, is to specify the conditions and contexts in which particular religious practices, discourses, fields, organizations, and structures of sentiment can contribute to the production, reproduction, and transformation of political conflict and violence (Brubaker, 2015). Although religion is not a single, simple factor that causes terrorist violence, religious elements can often feature in their belief systems. This emphasis on religiosity can benefit in their recruitment tactics to appeal to those in areas with a religiously oppressed minority. Membership in a terrorist group fulfills certain emotional needs of an individual, while also providing an outlet for the emotions that can be prevalent in those oppressed by their nation's government (Rogers 2007 cited in Miller, 2016).

Where Islam is the dominant religion—in the Middle East but also countries such as Indonesia—this is manifested in the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. In much of Latin America, where Christianity, particularly in the form of Catholicism, has been the dominant religion, the growth of fundamentalism is marked by a situation where significant numbers of people, in particular poor people, who have come to feel that the Catholic Church has failed them, are being drawn into various forms of Protestant fundamentalism, such as Pentecostalism, which combines forms of religious fanaticism with a rhetoric that claims to speak in the name of the poor and oppressed. In parts of Africa as well, particularly among masses crowded into the shantytown slums, Christian fundamentalism, including Pentecostalism, has been a growing phenomenon, at the same time as Islamic fundamentalism has been growing in other parts of Africa (Avakian, 2007).

Islamic Terrorist Movements: Messengers of Death on the Prowl?

Religion is a set of beliefs, values, and social norms, which allows a person to identify and be identified as belonging to an organized group (Wald and Smidt, 1993). While attachment to one's own group does not necessarily translate to hostility towards other groups (Allport, 1954), threat often does motivate in-group bias, and sets up a tendency to discriminate against others (Stephan and Stephan, 2001). Extremists have become more dangerous than terrorists even as terrorism has escalated across the world (Al-Rashed, 2016). As pointed out by RAND's Bruce Hoffman (See Moore, n.d), in 1980 two out of 64 groups were categorized as largely religious in motivation; in 1995 almost half of the identified groups, 26 out of 56, were classified as religiously motivated; the majority of these espoused Islam as their guiding force. Who exactly are terrorists? Are they rebels with (or without) a cause?; Monsters with an unquenchable thirst for blood?; Mindless robots out on a killing spree or are they just Allah's messengers fighting for the greater good?

Throughout written history, there are accounts of individuals who have targeted the death or maiming of civilians to achieve political means (Bloom, 2005). October 23, 1985, proved to be a historical watershed in the modern usage of suicide terrorism. It was on this day that suicide car bomb attacks carried out by Hezbollah led to the death of 241 American soldiers and 58 French troops in the city of Beirut. The attacks compelled the French and American militaries to abandon their operations in Lebanon. More importantly, the attacks encouraged terrorist groups from Hamas to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (Tamil Tigers) to al-Qaeda to adopt this method of attack (Pape, 2005). With the emergence and the growing clout of Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), the terrorist threat confronting the international community has undergone a profound and dangerous transformation. At the same time Al Qaeda is still in the game – a bit diminished but lethal (Gunaratna, 2016). The Muslim

Brotherhood believes that Islam should be "given hegemony over all matters of life." Toward that end, the Brotherhood seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate, or kingdom — first spanning all of the present-day Muslim world, and eventually the entire globe. The organization further aspires to dismantle all non-Islamic governments wherever they currently exist, and to make Islamic Law (Shari'a) the sole basis of jurisprudence everywhere on earth (https://canarymission.org/organizations/mb/).

One of the most consistent findings in the research is that involvement in violent radicalisation is a group phenomenon, with social relationships and networks playing a key role in pathways to participation (Christmann, 2012). Some scholars argue that when competing with other religious movements and secular institutions in order to protect and sharpen religious identity, fundamentalist movements tend to commit violent and intolerant acts (Alam, 2008). This is especially the case in third world countries, where post-colonial secular political institutions and modern technology (particularly the electronic media), are believed to challenge conventional morality, which encourages some people to reaffirm religious ideals. Often, religion is the most visible and evocative vehicle of protest, and not only of political protest, but also of morality, dignity, and group identity (Lawrence, 1989).

Before 2000, it was nationalist separatist terrorist organisations such as the IRA and Chechen rebels who were behind the most attacks. The number of incidents from nationalist separatist groups has remained relatively stable in the years since while religious extremism has grown. The prevalence of Islamist groups in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria is the main driver behind these trends (Arnett, 2014). With the numerous terrorist cells or groups scattered all over and operating in some regions of the world, this essay briefly profiles some of the most dangerous groups ever brought into existence:

▪ *The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*

It takes a special kind of terrorist organization to force the world's most powerful and professional military into action halfway around the globe. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, ISIS or simply the Islamic State) is exactly this type of organization: strong enough to rout several divisions of a national army, and rich enough to sustain their operations at an impressive pace (DePetris, 2014). First appearing under the name ISIL in April 2013, the group launched an offensive in early 2014 that drove Iraqi government forces out of key western cities, while in Syria it fought both government forces and rebel factions in the Syrian Civil War. In June 2014, after making significant territorial gains in Iraq, the group proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate led by the leader of ISIL, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2017). The group traces its lineage to the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi aligned his militant group, Jama'at al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad, with al-Qaeda, making it al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) (Laub, 2016). ISIS admits fighters from around the world and motivates them to relocate to "al-Sham" which means heaven on earth and is believed to have nearly 80,000 fighters within its ranks in Syria and Iraq. The group believes in an apocalyptic vision where they will bring in paradise by capturing certain territories in the region (Diamond, 2017).

▪ **Kataib Hezbollah**

Kata'ib Hizballah is a radical Shia Islamist group with an anti-Western establishment and jihadist ideology that has conducted attacks against Iraqi, U.S, and Coalition targets in Iraq. Kata'ib Hizballah has ideological ties to Lebanese Hizballah and gained notoriety in 2007 with attacks on U.S. and Coalition forces designed to undermine the establishment of a democratic, viable Iraqi state (http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/kataib-hizballah.htm). Elements of the group were responsible for the kidnapping and detention of U.S. and other Western hostages in Lebanon. The group also attacked the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992 and is a suspect in the 1994 bombing of the Israeli cultural center in Buenos Aires. Operating in the Bekaa Valley, the southern suburbs of Beirut, and southern Lebanon, it has

established cells in Europe, Africa, South America, North America, and Asia (Moore, n.d). It receives substantial amounts of financial, training, weapons, explosives, political, diplomatic, and organizational aid from Iran and Syria (Moore, n.d). Some of the terrorist activities which have been credited to this group include the hostage crisis in Lebanon from 1982 to 1992, the bombings of the Lebanese US Embassy in 1983, the attack in 1994 of the Israeli Embassy in London, and many others (Diamond, 2017). The group was particularly known for its use of deadly roadside bombs and improvised rocket-assisted mortars (IRAMs) against coalition forces.

▪ **Haqqani Network**

The Haqqani network is an Islamist insurgent group fighting in Afghanistan. The Haqqani network, which has the backing of elements within the Pakistani security establishment, is one of Afghanistan's most experienced and sophisticated insurgent organizations (TRAC, n.d). The Haqqani Network operates in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in northern Pakistan, and in southeastern Afghanistan in the Khost, Paktia and Paktika, and North Waziristan region (Kendall, 2010:3). The group's organizational headquarters is reportedly in a town in the FATA called Miram Shah, where it operates base camps in order to facilitate activities such as weapons acquisitions, logistical planning, and military strategy formulation (Gopal, Mahsud, & Fishman, 2010).

▪ **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force**

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is tasked with preserving the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ideals of the 1979 revolution. The IRGC combines traditional military roles with a relentless focus on supposed domestic enemies. The IRGC is Iran's primary instrument for exporting the ideology of the Islamic Revolution worldwide. It is rigidly loyal to Iran's clerical elite. The IRGC is Iran's main link to its terrorist proxies, which the regime uses to boost Iran's global influence (Counter Extremism Project, n.d). The Council on Foreign Relations describe the IRGC and Quds Force as Iran's "primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad". According to a 2010 Pentagon report, the Quds Force "maintains operational capabilities around the world," and "it is well established in the Middle East and North Africa and recent years have witnessed an increased presence in Latin America, particularly Venezuela" (Counter Extremism Project, n.d).

▪ **Boko Haram**

The group, *Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad*, known as Boko Haram, is an extremist Islamic group in Nigeria that has engaged in guerrilla warfare across the north of Nigeria since 2002 (TRAC, n.d). Boko Haram's campaign of violence has shattered lives, spread fear, displaced millions and destroyed the social order across northeastern Nigeria. Boko Haram's violent interpretation of Islam traces to the teachings of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf preached that western education was sinful. Tension between Nigerian authorities and the group escalated into deadly violence in 2009, when police cracked down on Yusuf's followers and executed Yusuf in the street (VOA, 2017). Boko Haram remains a major terror threat throughout Africa's Lake Chad region, which includes Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. In the past six years, al-Shabaab and Boko Haram accumulated a combined body count far higher than that of ISIS and al-Qaida combined, according to ACLED and the African Center for Strategic Studies. Between 2010 and 2016, the two terror groups racked up more than 47,000 fatalities while ISIS, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, and other al-Qaida linked groups totaled 9,236 (Liautaud, 2017).

▪ **Al Qaeda**

Founded by Abdullah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden, as well as other militants, the Al-Qaeda is a Wahhabi organization whose objective is to unite all the Muslims around the world in a global jihad and a harsh interpretation of Sharia law. The al-Qaeda played a role in the US embassy bombings in 1998, the September 11 attacks, and the Bali bombings in 2002

(Diamond, 2017). Al Qaeda was founded in 1988 to consolidate the international network he established during the Afghan war. Its goals were the advancement of Islamic revolutions throughout the Muslim world and repelling foreign intervention in the Middle East. Al Qaeda (Arabic for "the base") is a complex international Islamist terrorist network made up of regional affiliate organizations and clandestine cells with varying degrees of communication with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the group's ideological and operational leaders (ADL, n.d). Al-Qaeda began as a logistical network to support Muslims fighting against the Soviet Union during the Afghan War; members were recruited throughout the Islamic world. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the organization dispersed but continued to oppose what its leaders considered corrupt Islamic regimes and foreign (i.e., U.S.) presence in Islamic lands. Al-Qaeda merged with a number of other militant Islamist organizations, including Egypt's Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Group, and on several occasions its leaders declared holy war against the United States (Encyclopædia Britannica).

▪ **Al-Shabaab**

Somalia's al-Shabaab was the deadliest terrorist organization in Africa in 2016. The Somali terror group killed 4,281 people in 2016, with a high concentration of attacks taking place in the capital Mogadishu, according to new data compiled by Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, and first reported by Quartz. Boko Haram killed 3,499 (Liautaud, 2017). Since its formation in 2006, al-Shabaab has carried out more than 360 attacks in Somalia. The terror group's resiliency has proved an obstacle for the country's new president and worsened its numerous humanitarian issues. Recently, the U.S. military signaled a push toward greater counterterrorism action against al-Shabaab in Somalia, including authorizing unilateral action for ground operations and the use of airstrikes. In April, the U.S. deployed dozens of troops to assist the Somali government's national army in its fight against the Islamist extremist group (Liautaud, 2017).

From the foregoing, it is virtually impossible to deny the fact that terrorists, whether they are fanatics or patriots, have given rise to an untold amount of death, suffering, and horror wherever and whenever they show up. Their activities range from suicide bombings to genocides, toppling of governments, air raids and a whole lot more. Terrorists all over the world have butchered millions all in the name of patriotism, religion, or for the so-called 'glory' of their fatherland (Diamond, 2017). The growth and regional migration of Muslims, combined with the ongoing impact of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) and other extremist groups that commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, have brought Muslims and the Islamic faith to the forefront of the political debate in many countries (Lipka, 2017). As noted by Chapman (2007):

The concept of the umma (the Islamic nation or people who accept the core beliefs of Islam) creates a strong sense of solidarity among Muslims worldwide, so that they generally feel that an attack on one group of Muslims is an attack on the whole House of Islam. Their thinking about politics is guided by a number of basic concepts which are closely related. Since God has given his law (shari'a) to show how individuals and communities should order their lives, the ideal situation for every Muslim to live in is an Islamic state, where there should be no separation between religion and state.

It is observable that terrorists who carry out murderous acts routinely cite Islam as their justification; that the Koran is full of brutal content; and that polls have repeatedly shown alarmingly violent beliefs and attitudes in significant minorities of Muslims around the world (Rowe, 2015). However, if terrorism involves committing crimes against humanity with physical and mental torture of army personals as well as civilians, destruction of public and private property and infrastructure to inject fear and harassment among the masses, it is argued that Jihad, which aims only at the establishment of an Islamic order according to Allah's

commandment (Latif and Munir, 2014:74) cannot be moral impetus to such deadly activities. If these perpetrators act on Islamic injunctions, as they often do, and seek to violently enthrone an Islam-governed society, then they cannot be messengers of Allah but monsters. In all this however, one cannot overlook the imprints of the West particularly in the formation of these deadly groups.

In his submission, Vltchek (2015) avers that Muslim radical groups created and injected into various Muslim countries by the West included al-Qaeda, but also, more recently, ISIS (also known as ISIL). ISIS is an extremist army that was born in the 'refugee camps' on the Syrian/Turkish and Syrian/Jordanian borders, and which was financed by NATO and the West to fight the Syrian (secular) government of Bashar al-Assad (Vltchek, 2015). Such radical implants have been serving several purposes. The West uses them as proxies in the wars it is fighting against its enemies – the countries that are still standing in the way to the Empire's complete domination of the world. Then, somewhere down the road, after these extremist armies 'get totally out of control', they could serve as scarecrows and as justification for the 'The War On Terror', or, like after ISIS took Mosul, as an excuse for the re-engagement of Western troops in Iraq (Vltchek, 2015).

Muslims, Islam and Islamism: The Interconnectedness

Although Muslims maintain that there is one divinely revealed and mandated Islam, there are many Muslim interpretations of Islam. There are two major branches of opinion about political and religious leadership after the death of Muhammad: Sunnis (85 percent of the World's Muslims) and Shi'is (15%). There are diverse school of theology, law and mystical tradition that includes many Sufi orders or brotherhoods. Islam represents a basic unity of beliefs within rich cultural diversity. Islam practices itself in different ways within a vast array of cultures that extend from North Africa to Southeast Asia, as well as Europe and America (Esposito, 2002 cited in Praja, 2007).

Islam is the religion of more than 80 percent of the people in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Islamic empires controlled these areas for more than a thousand years, up until the fall of the last great Islamic empire- the Ottoman Empire- which collapsed after World War I (The Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2017). There were 1.8 billion Muslims in the world as of 2015 – roughly 24 percent of the global population – according to a Pew Research Center estimate. But while Islam is currently the world's second-largest religion (after Christianity), it is the fastest-growing major religion. Indeed, if current demographic trends continue, the number of Muslims is expected to exceed the number of Christians by the end of this century. Although many countries in the Middle East- North Africa region, where the religion originated in the seventh century, are heavily Muslim, the region is home to only about 20 percent of the world's Muslims. A majority of the Muslims globally (62%) live in the Asia-Pacific region, including large populations in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran and Turkey (Lipka, 2015).

Islam is an entirely holistic faith tightly governing the life of adherents. In contrast with predating Abrahamic faiths, Islam recognised no direct intermediary between Man and God. There is no Christ, Buddha or Judea. Mohammed is the prophet, but he is not worshiped the same as Jesus Christ (Herrington, 2015:73-74). The word Islam derives from two Arabic words, taslim (submission) and salam (peace). Those who follow Islam referred to themselves as Muslims. Theoretically, there is total peace amongst these persons who literally submit entirely to God. In practice, this has proved difficult to achieve with sectarian violence occurring throughout history and to the present day (Herrington, 2015:75). Like all faiths, Islam has developed divisions, sects, and school of thought over various issues. Islamic law provides one of the clearest and most important examples of diversities of opinion. While many law

schools existed, only a few endured and were recognized as authoritative (Praja, 2007). In his book, Federspiel (2007) posits that:

> Islam is recognized as the religion that has been practiced by large numbers of people since the seventh century A.D. It was established by a religious and political figure named Muhammad, who lived, preached, and undertook to deliver a message he understood as a command from God to create a community of believers. That religion went on to become an identifying characteristic for a civilization that extended from the Iberian Peninsula in the west to the borders of India in the ninth and tenth centuries; and its creed, tenets, ceremonies, beliefs, and practices were given an orthodox framework by numerous scholars, rulers, and religious activists. By the fifteenth century it had split into two sizeable communities, the Sunnis and the Shi'ahs. It had also established jurisprudential schools and a number of mystical orders that crisscrossed the various regions where the followers of Islam lived and worked. Islam throughout its history has been a religion, a way of life, and a definer of culture and civilization. A Muslim is an adherent of Islam who identifies with the religion and lives in general accordance with the values and tenets both of the religion and of the civilization that has emerged to represent Islam.

The central holy book in Islam is the Koran (also Quran, meaning "recitation"). According to Miller (2015), there is no single thing called "Islam" captured once and for all time in the Koran. "Islam" is a lived religion as much as it is a body of theology; the meaning of Islamic theology and Koranic passages change across time and culture as it is interpreted and lived by different people in different times and places. The Koran documents God's words purportedly being spoken and delivered through Muhammad. These "revelations" that came through the prophet were originally orally recited and then codified in a more complete form following the prophet's death (Hallowell, 2012). The book has 115 chapters, which are called "surahs." Like Biblical chapters, these surahs contain between three and 286 verses each. Similar to many Christians who believe that the Bible is the direct and perfect word of God, so do Muslims view the Koran as the literal word of Allah (but, again, only the Arabic version). While the Koran is the only official Islamic holy book when it comes to exploring life matters, adherents also look to the hadith, a record of Muhammad's traditions and sayings. The hadith is the basis for religious law and moral guidance and, though it comes second to the Koran, it is extremely important in Muslim societies (Hallowell, 2012).

Like any religious group, Lipka (2015) explains that the religious beliefs and practices of Muslims vary depending on many factors, including where in the world they live. But Muslims around the world are almost universally united by a belief in one God and the Prophet Muhammad, and the practice of certain religious rituals, such as fasting during Ramadan, is widespread. In other areas, however, there is less unity. For instance, a Pew Research Center survey of Muslims in 39 countries asked Muslims whether they want sharia law, a legal code based on the Quran and other Islamic scripture, to be the official law of the land in their country. Responses on this question vary widely. Nearly all Muslims in Afghanistan (99%) and most in Iraq (91%) and Pakistan (84%) support sharia law as official law. But in some other countries, especially in Eastern Europe and Central Asia – including Turkey (12%), Kazakhstan (10%) and Azerbaijan (8%) – relatively few favour the implementation of sharia law (Lipka, 2015).

Islamists- advocates or supporters of a political movement that favours reordering government and society in accordance with laws prescribed by Islam, see Islam as a complete religio-political system. Since Islam has always been seen as a complete way of life, Islam should be self-sufficient, relying on resources within its own tradition to renew itself (Chapman, 2007). Islamists may form political parties to advance their agenda, and some of these parties may even have extreme views of reform within society. The Constitutional Rights Foundation (2017) however, contends that "only a small minority of Islamists turn to terrorism in order to

gain power". Although their goals may differ, Islamist groups generally want to set up states based on Islamic fundamentalism, or literal interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith (ibid). While Muslims can benefit from advances in science, technology and medicine, they do not need any of the ideologies developed in the West and do not need to incorporate elements of Western law into traditional Islamic law. Thus, while some aspects of modernity can be embraced, whatever is inconsistent with Islam must be firmly rejected (Chapman, 2007). Perhaps, this may have fuelled their conviction in forceful rejection of the "foreign ideologies" to the concept and practice of Islam and thus the embrace of combative variant of Jihad, thereby constituting themselves as monsters to the world rather than as messengers of peace and justice. This next section establishes this submission by interrogating the nexus between Islamist terrorism and its seeming justification in Jihad.

Islamist Terrorism and the Jihad Argument: Martyrdom or Murder?

Historically, condemning any religion, Islam or otherwise, has been strictly taboo within academia, politics and mainstream media. Consequently, it has been difficult to establish any kind of popular narrative in which the blame for terrorism carried out by Muslims, is levelled squarely at the Islamic faith. Despite compelling evidence that suggests volunteers for suicide bombing invariably hold deeply religious beliefs and frequently claim to be acting in accordance with their faith, politicians invariably denounce terrorists as warped and misguiding rather than as fundamentalist Muslims (Herrington, 2015:73-74). Muslim tradition, while it recognises the merits of the martyr who dies in combat, does not prize those who strike out in pursuit of their own deaths, because doing so interferes with God's will. So, why, for the past 20 years, have terrorists regularly chosen to die? What does it say about contemporary Islamic radicalism? And what does it say about our societies today?

Modern international Islamist terrorism is a natural offshoot of twentieth-century Islamic fundamentalism. The "Islamic Movement" emerged in the Arab world and British-ruled India as a response to the dismal state of Muslim society in those countries: social injustice, rejection of traditional mores, acceptance of foreign domination and culture (Bar, 2004). It perceives the malaise of modern Muslim societies as having strayed from the "straight path" (as-sirat al-mustaqim) and the solution to all ills in a return to the original mores of Islam. The problems addressed may be social or political: inequality, corruption, and oppression (Bar, 2004).

Despite the fact that various local terrorist groups have operated in the international arena in the past decade, there is growing recognition by scholars and the intelligence community that the current international terrorist threat does not come from organizations motivated by nationalist grievances or separatist goals (such as the IRA, ETA, Fatah, LTTE, PKK, and others) (Ganor, 2009). Instead, the main threat is that of radical Islamic terrorism primarily aimed at promoting a radical religious world view. Such groups are motivated by what they perceive as a divine command, making them potentially more dangerous than groups motivated by other causes (Ganor, 2009). Isolated quotes from the Qur'an remain central to the narrative of militant Islamism. It has been embraced and extensively utilised by the Al-Qaeda leadership as well. Thus, militant Islamist ideologues and propagandists seek to supplement their message with references to the Holy Book of Islam, framing the narrative in a religious setting and adding perceived religious purpose and legitimacy to the prescribed campaign of jihadist militancy (Holbrook, 2010).

Muslims themselves have disagreed throughout their history about the meaning of the term jihad. In the Qur'an (or Koran), it is normally found in the sense of fighting in the path of God; this was used to describe warfare against the enemies of the early Muslim community (ummah). In the hadith, the second most authoritative source of the shari'a (Islamic law), jihad is used to mean armed action, and most Islamic theologians and jurists in the classical period (the first three centuries) of Muslim history understood this obligation to be in a military sense

Bernard Lewis, 1998 cited in Knapp, 2003). To comprehend jihad as a modern form of warfare, it is first important to understand how it is broken up. Mandaville (2007 cited in Adamson, 2011) argues that "classical scholars divided the world into two primary 'zones': dar al-islam [دار الإ سلام] (the domain of Islam) and dar al-harb [دار ال حرب] (the domain of war)." Militants use these terms to encourage jihad in order to protect their holy lands. The first term, dar al-islam, refers to the land which is regulated by Muslim rulers and therefore, where Islamic laws are implemented (ibid). Osama bin Laden argued that it is permissible to use force to defend dar al-islam if it is attacked. The second term, dar al-harb, refers to the lands that are not ruled by Muslims. These defensive jihadi tactics have evolved over time. Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda's jihad can be coined as a defensive jihad. This can be categorized as "an Islamic military reaction triggered by an attack by non-Muslims on the Islamic faith, on Muslims, on Muslim territory, or on all three (Scheuer, 2004 cited in Adamson, 2011). In common phrase of Islamic teachings, Jihad has two impressions, one a broader one (every effort that is undertaken for the supremacy of Islam) and the other of narrow one (an armed struggle or 'Qitaal' or the same purpose) (Latif & Munir, 2014:73).

Jihadism is a variant of Islamism. It is the effort to impose Islamist goals—however defined—by force. Jihadists have found or invented theological justifications to attack their enemies, mostly fellow Muslims, for their impiety or disloyalty to the jihadist cause, leading to the rise of jihadist terrorist and insurgent groups and, occasionally, jihadist governments (including the Taliban and the Iranian regime) and quasi-governmental entities (like the Islamic State and some organizations within Pakistan and Saudi Arabia) (Miller, 2015). It is estimated that seventy-eight percent of all the suicide terrorist incidents perpetrated between 1968 and 2004, for instance, have occurred in the years following 9/11. And, the dominant force behind this trend is religion- specifically groups and individuals identifying themselves as Islamic (Hoffman, 2006).

Put differently, while terrorism -even in the form of suicide attacks - is not an Islamic phenomenon by definition, it cannot be ignored that the lion's share of terrorist acts and the most devastating of them in recent years have been perpetrated in the name of Islam. This fact has sparked a fundamental debate both in the West and within the Muslim world regarding the link between these acts and the teachings of Islam (Bar, 2004). Indeed, of the 35 terrorist organizations currently employing suicide tactics, 86 percent (31 of 35) are Islamic. These movements, moreover, have been responsible for 81 percent of all suicide attacks since 9/11 (The RAND Terrorism Incident Database).

The Quran systematizes this use and relates it to other aspects of the Sharia through its discourse on revivalism. Based on the Quranic principle of jihad, terrorists emphasize the Quran's tenets on violence and revivalism in their religious interpretations and present it as a legitimate premise for the use of excessive aggression. According to jihad, Muslims can interpret and determine the extent of their Islamic practices individually as long as these are directed toward ensuring the will of God in an Islamic community (Venkatraman, 2007). Lewis (2001) affirms that one of the basic tasks bequeathed to Muslims by the Prophet was jihad. This word, which literally means "striving," was usually cited in the Koranic phrase "striving in the path of God" and was interpreted to mean armed struggle for the defense or advancement of Muslim power. In principle, the world was divided into two houses: the House of Islam, in which a Muslim government ruled and Muslim law prevailed, and the House of War, the rest of the world, still inhabited and, more important, ruled by infidels. Between the two, there was to be a perpetual state of war until the entire world either embraced Islam or submitted to the rule of the Muslim state. As stated by Miller (2015):

> Jihadists use Islamic rhetoric, symbols, and concepts in the construction of their ideology. They endlessly debate fine intricacies of Islamic theology. They direct their arguments at Muslim audiences and seek new recruits from among Muslims.

They invoke the Koran, quote the hadiths of Muhammad, and find bases for their beliefs in the jurisprudence of Islamic law. They claim to be Muslims—indeed, the only true Muslims—and they explicitly claim that their religion motivates, inspires, and even commands them to commit their horrific acts of violence

The nature of jihad- its scope and means- has evolved since the days of the Prophet, often reflecting political realities. During the Prophet's days, jihad was a call to put everything a person could into the service of Islam, and that included use of force in self-defense (Bansal, 2009). In popular interpretations, both Muslim and otherwise, Jihad is often translated as the duty to engage in Holy War against infidels with no holds barred. This idea has nothing to do with the original concept of Jihad as described in the Quran (Palazzi 2002). For Taarnby (2003:13), Jihad has different connotations in different contexts. It refers to an external struggle against the enemies of Islam as well as an internal struggle to purify oneself spiritually.

It is clear that radical groups that operate openly and terrorist groups that work underground continually abuse and manipulate the doctrines of "jihad" for achieving their ends. Worse still, they manipulate the doctrines to justify the act of suicide bombings, which in the end have victimized a good number of innocent people, including Muslims (Azra, 2015). As argued by some scholars, it is this physical or combative jihad, which receives so much criticism. Because of the sheer ignorance of this type of jihad, Islam is regarded as terror, and Muslims are regarded as terrorists. Islam is often seen as an "extremist" or "terrorist" religion. However, despite Koranic injunctions to the contrary, some radical Islamic thinkers have justified the killing of civilians, and of other Muslims, in the name of jihad (The Economist, 2004).

It is however, argued that the Islamic faith is accustomed to detractors who seek to problematise its relationship with terrorism (Rojas, 2013). The distinguished work of a prominent figure in the *religious ideology* school of thought, Michael Bonner, has carved a path for the constant flow of scholarly literature that merges suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism (Bonner 2006:2). In defending Islam and the Muslim community, western leaders routinely suggest violence targeting innocent civilians stems from a distorted interpretation of religious doctrine. They allege that terrorists selectively cite the Quran and Sunnah out of context (Herrington, 2015:74). In other words, radical and terrorist leaders take only certain verses that fit their own purposes and ignore the others. Perhaps, this justifies the submission by The Economist (2004) that terrorists have embraced suicide attacks mainly for their advantages in this world, rather than their rewards in the next.

Scholars like Grimland and his colleagues highlight the fact that Muslims consider themselves to be servants of Allah, the provider and creator who determines the lifespan of his creations; thus, a Muslim is not free to end their life whenever they want and the consequences of such acts are dire. Conversely, they note that if a Muslim puts themselves into the role of a shahid, or martyr, they are promised life after death in paradise with 70 of his dearest relatives and close friends and 72 virgins (Grimland et al. 2006 cited in Mariscal, 2017). These academics have concluded that this promise of the afterlife which the Quran and the Hadiths teach is what many terrorist organizations strive for, and thus they engage in acts of jihad via their strict interpretation of their holy books and take it to a whole new level. (Hafez 2010, cited in Mariscal, 2017). At the same time, it is important to understand that there appears to be a split within Islamic teachings between the radicalized jihadist interpretation (extremists within the Salafi camp), the hardliner Salafi interpretation, which is also fundamentalist but not necessarily violent, and the traditional, peaceful Islamic interpretation (Mariscal, 2017).

Herrington (2015:37) posits that the absence of suicide terrorism amongst followers of other religions may stem from the absence of justification by their leaders. If the Pope, he explains further, in his weekly address told the world's Catholics they were obliged to pursue martyrdom against anyone burning Churches in Nigeria, then at least a minority would carry

out his instructions. Catholics in Africa are willing to die from Aids because Pope Benedict the XVI objects to contraception. If eulogised by the Catholic Church, would they not be equally enthusiastic to commit suicide in pursuit of religious martyrdom? (Herrington, 2015:37). This notion can also be aided by ignorance among religious faithful across the globe. A report, published by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (2006), suggests that "religious ignorance among young European Muslims and their insufficient command of Arabic, lead to a relatively simple, often non-coherent ideology which justifies the use of violence against people with different ideas." The result is a "'cut-and-past' version of Islam" which is rehashed into a "revolutionary pamphlet" of global jihad (ibid).

For Roy (2017) however, violent radicalisation is not the consequence of religious radicalisation, even if it often takes the same paths and borrows the same paradigms. Religious fundamentalism exists, of course, and it poses considerable societal problems, because it rejects values based on individual choice and personal freedom. But it does not necessarily lead to political violence. The objection that radicals are motivated by the "suffering" experienced by Muslims who were formerly colonised, or victims of racism or any other sort of discrimination, US bombardments, drones, Orientalism, and so on, would imply that the revolt is primarily led by victims. But the relationship between radicals and victims, according to Roy (2017) is more imaginary than real:

> Those who perpetrate attacks in Europe are not inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, Libya or Afghanistan. They are not necessarily the poorest, the most humiliated or the least integrated. The fact that 25% of jihadis are converts shows that the link between radicals and their "people" is also a largely imaginary construct. Revolutionaries almost never come from the suffering classes. In their identification with the proletariat, the "masses" and the colonised, there is a choice based on something other than their objective situation. Very few terrorists or jihadis advertise their own life stories

In the final analysis, there is no doubt that terrorism is a heinous crime against humanity without any justification no matter who is involved in it (Munir and Latif, 2014:78). For Abdulrahman Al-Rashed (2016), extremists have exhausted the justifications they have used over the years to support terrorists. In the beginning, violence was justified because of the American bases in Saudi Arabia. Then they used Afghanistan to defend Al-Qaeda and Taliban. Then they moved on to defending Saddam Hussein in Iraq despite his Baathist regime. After the Americans exited Iraq, those justifying terrorism started using the excuse that Muslims are being persecuted in the West. All this while, they ignored acts of terrorism targeting Muslims in Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Morocco.

Conclusion

It is submitted in this article that the growth and regional migration of Muslims, combined with the on-going impact of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) and other extremist groups that commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, have brought Muslims and the Islamic faith to the forefront of the political debate in many countries. Terrorists and fanatics seem to have hijacked the religion of Islam, and consequent media attention, for their own selfish and evil goals. Hence, the world opinion tends towards viewing Islam as a violent religion. Shariatmadari (2017) however, opines that some aspects of Islamic teaching do indeed justify some kinds of violence and that it has this in common with Christianity, Judaism and other world faiths. The Qur'an and the hadith, the sources of Islam, did not get rewritten in the last few decades but they were taken up and used by certain political actors to justify horrific violence (Shariatmadari, 2017). Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda followers may not represent Islam, and their statements and actions directly contradict basic Islamic principles and teachings, only that they do arise from within Muslim civilization, just as Hitler and the

Nazis arose from within Christian civilization (Lewis, 2001). If some misguided individuals/groups misuse the concept of Jihad as a way for attaining personal or extremist agenda (Munir and Latif, 2014:77), then Islamic religious authorities should, as a matter of necessity everywhere around the world speak "clear words on the demarcation of peaceful Islam and terrorism in the name of Islam" (Angela Merkel cited in Independent, February 19, 2017) because "Islam itself is not the source of terrorism and it is critical to include Muslim countries in the fight against Islamist terror" (ibid).

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