



# **WHY TERRORISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS UNENDING? UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC POLITICAL CULTURE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE REGION**

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## **Abstract**

This study contends that terrorism remains a substantial global challenge, with a particular stronghold in the Middle East. Effectively tackling this issue demands a comprehensive grasp of the region's political culture and the intricate role of religion, specifically Islam, in the recruitment and radicalization of individuals. Given that Islam exerts significant influence in the Middle East, it can either be leveraged to promote peace or exploited to rationalize acts of terrorism. This paper delves into potential strategies aimed at eradicating terrorism, which encompass the advancement of peace, redressal of grievances, and the cultivation of economic development and democracy within the Middle East. According to this study, several strategic avenues can be pursued to mitigate the looming threat of terrorism. These include the promotion of moderate interpretations of Islam, redressing fundamental grievances pervasive in the region, resolving the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and harnessing international cooperation to effectively combat terrorism. By comprehending the intricate political culture of the Middle East and proactively addressing the underlying causes of terrorism, a sustainable state of peace and stability can be attained.

## **Keywords**

Terrorism, Islam, Political Culture, Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Salafism/Wahhabism, The Quran

## **Introduction**

War and terrorism are distinct forms of violence used to resolve conflicts. Violence is a primitive method of conflict resolution that provides a sense of control, gratification, and power to the initiator. The definition of terrorism lacks consensus, but in academia, it is described as a military tactic employed by a small group of individuals to question or destabilize an existing political system (Kelleher, Ann. et., 2006. P. 213). It can also be seen as a belligerent activity or tactic used in conflicts between various entities, from rival clans to rival nations, falling under the umbrella of war (Carr & Caleb, 2007). Therefore, terrorism can be understood as a politically motivated act of violence that targets symbols to convey a powerful message from a weaker adversary to an enemy.

Terrorists throughout history have consistently claimed to fight for just causes and represent oppressed individuals whose grievances are ignored. They view their armed struggle as legitimate and fair, believing in the righteousness of their cause and that they are at war with oppressive and corrupt forces. They consider their operations as acts of war and justified. To determine the legal status of terrorism, the International Humanitarian Law defines permissible behavior during a state of war between belligerents. According to Article 48 of the 1977 Geneva Conventions Protocol one, each party must "ensure respect for and protection of the civilian population and civilian objects, distinguishing between the civilian population and combatants, as well as civilian objects and military objectives, and directing their operations solely against military objectives" (IHL Data Base: Article 48, Customary IHL, 2022). Consequently, although terrorism is considered an act of war between opposing parties, it is deemed illegal under international law due to its targeting of innocent civilians to create chaos and fear.

It is crucial to recognize that the phenomenon of terrorism is highly complex, and its causes cannot be attributed to a single factor. However, recent information on terrorist activities reveals the continued presence of numerous terrorist groups operating in the Middle East, claiming to be Muslims. This raises the question of why this phenomenon exists and what its roots are, as well as what can be done to eradicate it entirely. Moreover, while

the formation of opposition groups is a normal occurrence, the primary concern lies in understanding how these groups become radicalized and engage in terrorist acts.

To comprehend Middle Eastern terrorism, it is essential to consider its proper context rather than relying only on a Western perception of violence and unrest to analyze the causes and potential solutions to this phenomenon. Consequently, the behavior of individuals willing to die for their cause cannot be modified solely through the use of force. It is naive to believe that terrorist organizations can be eradicated through force and military action; such tactics may only work temporarily at the cost of significant resources. This approach fails to eliminate their motivation and instead strengthens their resolve. Consequently, combating terrorism necessitates recognizing its primary roots and diffusing it from its original source of motivation.

Understanding the political culture of the Middle East is of utmost importance, as lacking an understanding of the terrorist mindset makes it exceedingly difficult to combat an unknown terrorist mind.

Numerous independent research groups have found that religion can be a contributing factor intertwined with political and social grievances, motivating terrorists to commit acts of violence (Hoffman, Bruce, 2006). Islam, with its values and worldview, has significantly influenced the political culture of the Middle East. While most Muslims adhere to peaceful interpretations of their holy book, the Quran, terrorist organizations can selectively interpret certain verses in the Quran to justify their violent actions. In addition, it is important to realize that any terrorist organization represents several grievances that are, to some extent, shared with a larger group of people in their society. Psychological studies on political terrorism suggest that these actions and behaviors are influenced by feelings of hopelessness and rage in Middle Eastern countries (Hudson, et al., 1999).

### **Islam and Middle Eastern Terrorism: A Historical perspective**

The Middle East, often referred to as the "cradle of civilization." It has been a hub of significant challenges and rapid transformations due to its location between Europe, Asia, and Africa. These changes have brought about complexities, including the emergence of terrorism in various forms. With over 90 percent of the population in most Middle Eastern countries being Muslim, understanding the phenomenon of terrorism requires exploring its connection to political Islam. It is crucial to recognize that Islam is a comprehensive and multifaceted faith that can be interpreted and practiced differently by various groups to serve their objectives. This flexibility makes it susceptible to exploitation by violent groups as a motivational force. However, most Muslims worldwide reject terrorism and violence, adhering to a moderate interpretation of their faith. While mainstream Islamic teachings condemn terrorist acts, extremist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda claim to be the true followers of Islam.

Although terrorism has existed in the Middle East in different forms throughout history, its modern manifestation gained momentum after World War Two, during the British Mandate over Palestine. At that time, several Jewish armed groups were active in the region, advocating for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine to provide refuge for Jews persecuted by the Nazis in Germany. In 1947, the Irgun, a right-wing Zionist underground organization led by Menahem Begin, bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, resulting in the death of 91 British soldiers. Following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Begin became a political opposition leader and eventually the prime minister of Israel in 1977. After the formation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, the Middle East witnessed numerous terrorist activities targeting Israel and later the United States due to its unwavering support for Israel which were conducted through PLO affiliated groups. In the 1960s and 1970s, Palestinian guerrillas, known as Fida'iyin, carried out numerous acts of violence against innocent civilians in their pursuit of recognition for Palestinian nationalism, which was driven by a secular ideology rather than religious motives. However, the emergence of terrorism using religion as its justification and in the name of "Jihad" (holy war) is a more recent phenomenon that began in the 1980s after the Islamic revolution in Iran. This marked the exploitation of Islamic teachings for waging terrorist wars.

### **Islamic Political Culture and Different Sects in Islam**

The concept of political culture has been considered significant by ancient civilizations and is still widely used in modern literature under various terms such as national character, tradition, and ideological orientation (Don Martindale, 1967). According to John Kincaid (1982), "Creeks believed that ... regimes are products of character, chance, and circumstances" (p. 200). Political scientist Gabriel Almond (1956) was the first to introduce the concept of political culture, stating that "every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations constitutes political actions" (p. 396). These collective orientations constitute each society's political culture. The orientations can be cognitive (knowledge of the system), affective (feeling toward the system), and evaluative (opinion and judgment) about the political system (Talcott Parson and Edward Shills, 1954).

It is important to note that the core Islamic values serve as the foundation for all Muslim sects, regardless of their diversity in beliefs and their perception of the role of religion in politics.

Islam encompasses not only the spiritual aspects of life but also the worldly aspects of human existence. The Quran (Moslem's holy book), contains specific instructions, known as "Ahkam" or "orders," that Muslims are obligated to

follow as part of Islamic Jurisprudence. These rules, collectively known as Shariah, can be interpreted differently by different groups, and extremists may manipulate these interpretations to justify their actions as Allah's (God's) mandate. This multi-faceted interpretation of Islamic teachings has historically led to divisions and conflicts within the Muslim community. In the contemporary Islamic world, there are approximately seventy-two different sects representing Islam. Among them, eleven major schools have been recognized, including Sunni (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and the more recent Salafi), Shi'i (Ja'fari, Zaydi, Ismaeli), Ibadi, Thahiri, Ash'ari, and Tasawwuf. These sects have different orientations towards the understanding of Islam, and their interpretations have significant implications for their political practices. For example, the Sufi sect (Tasawwuf) rejects the concept of physical war and perceives jihad (holy war) as a spiritual act against human desires. On the other hand, the Salafi sect, which is the foundation of the Wahhabi sect holds a more rigid interpretation. They consider other Islamic sects outside of Islam and equal to non-believers.

The roots of Salafi Islam can be traced back to the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence and the works of Ibn Taymiyyah, a 14th-century Islamic scholar who emphasized purifying Islam from innovations. The Salafi movement emerged from the Hanbali sect during the 19th and early 20th centuries, advocating for the emulation of the first three generations of Muslims. They adhere strictly to the literal interpretation of the Quranic Ahkam and the Hadith (the collection of sayings, actions, and approvals of the founder of the religion), opposing any changes or innovations to Islamic practices. Over time, the movement became more fundamentalist in nature. One of the most well-known Salafi groups is the Wahhabi sect, which originated in Saudi Arabia and played a significant role in the establishment of the Saudi Arabian government in 1935. It can be argued that this ideology dominates Saudi Arabia and the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region. According to the 9/11 report (2004), 15 of the 19 hijackers involved in the attack on the United States were citizens of Saudi Arabia, two were from the United Arab Emirates, one was from Egypt, and one was from Lebanon (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, 2004, P.147).

Demonstrating how Islamic teachings can be distorted and exploited by extremists and terrorists is unfortunately not a complex task. Osama bin Laden, the founder and former leader of Al-Qaeda, and a follower of the Wahabi Faith, provided justifications for his attacks on the United States. His grievances against the United States included its support for Israel, which he viewed as an illegitimate and oppressive state that was occupying Muslim land and committing atrocities against Palestinians. He also criticized the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the U.S. support for authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world. Bin Laden used Quranic verses to justify violent action against the United States. He believed that Islam was the only true religion and that it must be defended against unbelievers and corrupt cultures. He argued that the United States, Israel, and the West were corrupting forces that promoted decadence, immorality, and materialism, which undermined Islamic values as emphasized in the Quran. Bin Laden saw them as a threat to Islam and the Muslim world and called for violent jihad against them. Although many Quranic verses, teach patience, perseverance, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and reconciliation and forgiveness, there are verses in the Quran that can be easily misinterpreted and abused by terrorists and extremists to justify their behavior.

Contradictory messages can be received from the Quran on the same issues. For example, the Quran mentions that "Whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the earth - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely." (Quran 5:32). It also commands Moslems "Not to kill anyone which Allah has forbidden, except for a just cause. It also says "Do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden, except by right" (Quran 17:33), and adds, "Do not take a life which Allah has made sacred except in the course of justice." (Quran 6:151).

Concerning those who are the enemies of Moslems, it commands that, "if the enemy is inclined towards peace, make peace with them." (Qur'an 8:61). These verses clearly emphasize the peaceful resolution of conflicts and sanctity of life and importance of protecting innocent lives. On the other hand, there are verses in the Quran that can be easily abused by terrorists and extremists to convince themselves and others that their target population has caused "corruption on Earth" and unjustly has treated the Moslems, and should receive punishment. Considering the Moslem enemies who actively opposed them and intend to harm them, Allah Ordains, "Seize them and kill them wherever you find them and take not from among them any ally or helper." (Quran 4:89). Also, for those who try to corrupt the Moslems community, Allah has severe punishment: "Those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and go about the earth spreading mischief -indeed their recompense is that they either be done to death, or be crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from the opposite sides or be banished from the land." (Quran 5:33). It warns that, "Whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger (Mohammad) – then indeed, for him is the fire of Hell; they will abide therein forever." (72:23).

Unfortunately, the Islamic extremists and terrorists interpret the Quranic verse to serve their needs. Islamic scholars emphasize that to understand Quranic verses, the researchers have to take into consideration the context that the verse is revealed to Mahammad. Those verses were presented at different times to make decisions about particular circumstances.

## **How an Islamic Mind will Transform into a Terrorist Mind**

We need to realize that there is a cultural, social, political, religious, and psychological predisposition that turns ordinary people into a terrorist entity, and there is no sheer accident for the development of this phenomenon. The motives of every terrorist attack are to inject feelings of fear, helplessness, and/or hopelessness into a target population, to influence decision making and/or change behavior, especially those concerning government or state policies (Bin Bullare, B. M. I., Teoh Jia Long, & Hajah Siti Rafidah Binti Haji Md Said, 2020). For terrorist groups, their extremist ideologies are not the most attractive, but their collective action and group identity. Their goal is not to 'do something' but to 'be someone', underscoring that radicalization may be as much about meaning-making as it is about achieving political or social change. Any social group movement that has experienced inequality, injustice, or oppression is at risk of being a terrorist organization if given the necessary resources and a favorable environment. Hence, advocating for equality (e.g., equal rights, equal opportunity, equal justice) is a very urgent requirement to prevent the formation of terrorism (Bin Bullare, B. M. I., Teoh Jia Long, & Hajah Siti Rafidah Binti Haji Md Said, 2020).

More importantly, due to the political culture of the Middle East, the perception of unfair treatment of Muslims in the Middle East, especially the Palestinians by Israel and her U.S. and Western supporters, makes the Middle Eastern men prone to be taken advantage of by terrorist organizations. One of the key principles emphasized in Islam is the concept of 'justice and fairness' towards all people, regardless of their faith, the Quran emphasizes that, "O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness" (Quran 5:8). In addition, Islam teaches that Muslims should fight against those who attack or oppress them, "and fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors" (Quran 2:190). That is exactly where the Islamic terrorists can use religion to advance their cause.

Those who commit terrorism represent an alternative view of reality, which includes a perception that divides the world into black-and-white and believes in the absolute righteousness of the group that they represent. Terrorists see themselves as freedom fighters and their acts as fighting the forces of darkness and evil. The extremist groups indulge themselves in a culture that helps them demonize others and develop the concept of "us versus them" (Staub, 1992).

Beyond the religious element present in anti-American feelings is the sense of nationalism, which is a powerful force contributing to the frustration of Muslim youth towards the United States. This is because during the early 20th century, nationalist orientations have been cultivated and nourished by the secular and semi-secular leaders in the Middle East to sway the youth from their religious tendencies. This effort has been effective to some extent in developing a nationalistic feeling in Muslim youth. This policy, however, has not been able to replace their religious identity but has created a mixture of religious and nationalist pride in them. Therefore, we can see how these two odd feelings have played an important role in mobilizing the followers of Osama Bin Laden to oppose the existence of American soldiers in the Islamic Holy land (Saudi Arabia) and fighting with the forces of Soviet communists in Afghanistan.

While no known comparisons have been made between terrorists and non-terrorists on levels of fundamentalism, empirical evidence does suggest that religious fundamentalism is highly related to out-group animosity. This relationship, combined with the presented data suggesting that Muslims hold more fundamentalist beliefs, may help explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist (Wright, 2016, p.22).

According to Wright (2016), followers of Islam do, on average, hold more fundamentalist beliefs than do believers from other religious groups. This increased fundamentalism may create more susceptibility to the calls for action from extremist Islamist clerics, helping to explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist. This finding also implies that fundamentalist beliefs may be targeted by the religious elite to reduce susceptibility to calls to Jihad (Wright, 2016, p.26).

## **How to End Terrorism in the Middle East**

Due to the political culture of the Middle East, terrorist groups exploit Islam as a recruiting tool. They present a distorted interpretation of Qur'anic verses to claim legitimacy. Therefore, it is important for moderate Islamic authorities to present the other side of Islam that promotes patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and peace. Additionally, the United States and other Western democracies should engage with religious authorities in the Middle East and address some of their fundamental grievances. However, it is important to note that bonding with Middle Eastern leaders (governments) does not imply legitimacy and genuineness in the eyes of Middle Easterners, as their leaders are often perceived as illegitimate. Meanwhile, the U.S. should strive to promote economic development, human rights, and democracy in the Middle East. Resolving the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict should also be a top priority for any U.S. administration. A fair and just decision regarding the rights of both Jewish and Palestinian peoples is crucial. Unfortunately, President Trump's one-sided view and shortsightedness did not resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; instead, it exacerbated it by ignoring the Palestinian

issues. Such decisions provide extremists with a rallying point and justification for their violent actions against Israel and its supporters. They can also be used as a propaganda tool to recruit new members and gain support. To further address terrorism, it is important to utilize resources and organizations dedicated to counterterrorism efforts. The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee, the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Brookings Institution, and the Council on Foreign Relations are valuable sources of information and expertise in this field.

### **Conclusion**

The terrorist networks share common agendas with the societies they represent. In other words, a terrorist's agenda partially aligns with the general public, and within that public there are moderate religious forces and reasonable minds that can be reached. This approach disarms terrorists ideologically by addressing some of the underlying issues that contribute to the rise of further terrorist organizations. What Western societies aspire to achieve cannot be accomplished through war and violence, but rather through peaceful means. There is a need for a better understanding of Middle Eastern terrorism and the utilization of knowledge and experience from nations that have lived in the region for thousands of years.

The major lesson learned from the free world's confrontation with the Soviet Union and the U.S.'s experience in Vietnam over several decades ago is that ideological wars cannot be won through military might. The main challenge in dealing with the Middle East is that countries, particularly the U.S., that fight terrorism lack unbiased data gathering methods to understand the root causes of terrorism. Unfortunately, valuable resources have been concentrated on combating the manifestations or consequences of terrorism rather than identifying and exploring its main causes. As a result, intelligence can be misleading because the fact-gathering process focuses on identifying the enemy before the facts reveal the roots of terrorism.

There is no need to burden the economy with the creation of new organizations to combat terrorism. Instead, existing relevant organizations can be restructured to provide the same services. The United States must recognize that terrorism cannot be defeated by military force alone; it needs to focus on winning the hearts and minds of the people whom terrorists claim to represent. Those who commit acts of terror have deep-seated grievances that have been ignored for a long time. The animosity towards the U.S. and Israel is a result of miscommunication, misunderstanding, negligence, or deliberate acts. All these factors should be analyzed, and decisions should be made accordingly. The policy of using overwhelming and massive force against terrorists is irrational and ineffective in the long run. While it may lead to short-term victories, it is akin to keeping a fire under the ashes, waiting for the right moment to reignite and grow stronger.

As the leader of the free world, the U.S. needs to serve as a role model in respecting human rights, justice, openness, fairness, and caring for the poor and helpless. It should side with the powerless and act as an impartial mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts. The U.S. image in the Middle East is often portrayed as unfair, biased, dishonest, and decadent. Generalizing about certain groups, religions, and ideologies is a sign of flawed reasoning and, ultimately, will fail to yield positive results. Indiscriminate actions against terrorist organizations antagonize moderate Muslims who disapprove of the actions taken by radicals. They share the same frustrations regarding many issues in the Middle East but do not agree with the extremists on the methods of resolving these issues. This is the reason they don't openly express their anti-radical feelings in the Muslim world against terrorist activities, as they fear their protests may be perceived as approval of U.S. policies in the region.

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