

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

17.586 Warlords, Terrorists, and Militias: Theorizing on Violent Non-State Actors
Spring 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

Religious Terrorism Memo

Introduction

The readings on religious terrorism cover several angles of analysis: delineating religious terrorism from other forms of terrorism, comparative case studies, and analyses of text advocating religious terrorism. The historical nature of many of these studies is enlightening, exhausting, and yet leaves questions to be answered. The cross-national, amorphous nature of religious terrorist organizations makes it difficult to analyze it from other, more rigorous angles.

Hoffman, “Inside Terrorism” Ch. 4

Hoffman focuses his chapter on creating a distinction between political and religious terrorism. He acknowledges that many terrorist organizations may include religious ideology in their nationalist or separatist agendas, but true religious terrorists constitute a different type of threat. The spread of religious terrorism is a product of the 1990s and, according to Hoffman, is inherently more violent than other forms of terrorism. In his words, violence is a “sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative,” making the magnitude of destruction that much greater (Hoffman, pg 94). Secondly, the audience that religious terrorists are directed towards are different from that of other terrorists’: whereas political terrorists may seek the audience of current and potential sympathizers, “religious terrorists are at once activists and constituents engaged in what they regard as total war” (Hoffman, pg 95). He conducts studies on terrorists under three different religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

In his conclusion, Hoffman warns that because of the distinct nature of religious terrorism, defending against it and fighting the spread of it is difficult. His assessment of the containment of religious terrorism is, without a doubt, almost prophetic in light of today’s “war on terror” that the US and its allies are fighting around the world.

Juergensmeyer, “Terror in the Mind of God,” Ch 1, 7-11

From his case studies, Juergensmeyer finds several characteristics of religious terrorism that make it distinct from other forms of terrorism. The selections from Mark Juergensmeyer’s book on religious terrorism bring to light the symbolic nature of religious violence; in some instances, in fact, oftentimes the symbolic target and/or date of an attack overshadow the strategic importance of the attack. Religious terrorists target a specific building or place not because of the magnitude of destruction that may take place, but to highlight the “vulnerability of government power” (Juergensmeyer, pg 135). For example, the World Trade Center attacks of September 11th took thousands of lives and destroyed a symbol of American economic power, but in reality businesses were up and running again in days, and the American economy did not crumble. The idea of a “cosmic war”—a struggle in which the reasoning, end point, and final result extends beyond individual human experience— is also a theme for religious terrorism. A cosmic war involves the struggle between good and evil, religion and secularism, and oftentimes the goals of religious terrorists are not measurable. Religious terrorism also exploits the religious ideas of sacrifice and martyrdom in order to justify their actions. Religious terrorists often characterize themselves as “warriors” with goals that are intangible and unreachable. However intangible and symbolic their fights are, however, religious terrorists have

Juergensmeyer’s analysis of religious terrorism contributes a great deal to the literature on this topic. I personally felt slightly more confused by the end, however; while I understand

the symbolic nature of religious terrorism sets it apart from other forms of terrorism, his explanations tended to get lost in the discussion.

David Rapoport, “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions”

David Rapoport’s 1984 case study on religious terrorism examines historic terrorist organizations from three different religions: Hindu (the Thugs), Islam (the Assassins), and Judaism (the Zealots-Sicarii). Rapoport contests the notion that the difference between religious and other forms of terrorists is its scale; instead, he holds that there is a distinctive nature surrounding religious terrorism that is not duplicated in other types of terrorists. While I agree with his assertion that terrorism does not *need* modern technology, it is clear today (25 years after this was written) that terrorist organizations like al Qaeda have utilized modern technology to strengthen and widen its network of operations.

Paul Berman, “The Philosopher of Islamic Terror”

Paul Berman provides an in-depth critique of the “father” of Salafi Islam, Sayyid Qutb. Despite his hyperbole at times, his analysis is very useful in understanding the historical and political roots of al Qaeda. I found most useful his observation that the successful strategy in the “war on terror” is not through military invasions and government overthrows: when the US asserts its power in this way, it only adds fuel to the fire. The only way to fight a war that is essentially a war of ideas (fundamentalist Islam and Western secularism) is with ideas.

Marc Sageman, “The Origins of Jihad” & “The Evolution of Jihad”

Chapter 1, “The Origins of the Jihad,” provides an excellent overview of the creation of Salafi Islamic fundamentalism. While at times one can get lost by the myriad personalities discussed in this section, several key factors are quite clear: Salafi Islam has its roots in Egypt, which were first recorded by Sayeed Qutb; it did not originally focus on the activities of non-Muslims, nor did it base its teachings on hatred for the West either (although this was a message it preached); it focused on the return to a simpler form of Islam that Qutb and his followers felt had been lost as a result of Muslim governments’ tendency toward fomenting nationalism and secularism, rather than Islam.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan plays a vital role in the evolution of Salafi jihad: US training and funding (indirectly, of course) of the Afghans and mujahideen resulted in the Soviet withdrawal; this withdrawal fueled the Salafi’s growth and organization into al Qaeda. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, and the eventual alliance between Gulf Arab states and the United States, rather than other Muslim countries, against Iraq led to the selection of a new enemy against whom al Qaeda mobilized: the United States. While the mujahideen who fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets and al Qaeda are ultimately traced to each other, the actual fighters in these two groups are not the same. Sageman points out that the US was supporting the Afghan fighters, which indirectly resulted in the arming and training of non-Afghan Arabs.

When one combines the views of Rapoport and Juergensmeyer, one saying that terrorists don’t need modern technology, and the other holding that religious terrorism is focused on amorphous goals that often result in greater destruction and death than political terrorism, it appears that religious terrorists (in my opinion) have capitalized more than political terrorists on the use of modern technology in their everyday operations.

Raphael Israeli, “A Manual of Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorism”

Through analysis of a widely circulated cleric’s text on the necessity for suicide bombing for Palestinians, Israeli clarifies the justifications provided to Muslims. Inherently, the justification for suicide bombing, even for a nationalist terrorist organization like Hamas, has its roots in Islam. He finds that proponents of suicide bombing approach the “sell” in the following way: acknowledge the value of human life, then place the value of worshipping Allah above it. He identifies three “levels of necessity”: unnecessary when they are on equal footing with their opponent, desirable when they are slightly disadvantaged to the opponent, and necessary when “perilous danger threatens the community.” The first two “levels” seem fairly straightforward: by assessing the power of the opponent, the organization can determine whether or not to use suicide terrorism. The third and “imperative” level’s lacks this strict definition- deciding when a community is in “peril” is subjective, and so in theory all terrorists would employ suicide terrorism if they subscribed to the cleric’s views. Israeli also points out that the cleric essentially ignores centuries’ worth of Shari’a law evolution, in addition to misconstruing the facts.

Questions to be answered:

How do you draw distinctions between religious terrorism and terrorism in which religion is one of several roots?

Is the use of symbols actually specific to religious terrorism, or are they just more effective in exploiting them?

In my own research, I am studying the impact of electoral reform on Islamist political parties in Turkey and Jordan. I found it quite interesting that the place where the jihadist movement flourished was Egypt- where government was organized around nationalism. In other Muslim states, like Jordan, Islamist political parties are permitted (relatively speaking) to participate in politics, and there have been virtually no Islamist terrorist organizations to come out of that country. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood actually created a distinct party, the Islamic Action Front, to participate in elections. Is it the case that by including extremists in the political process, they are forced to moderate?

If Egypt had been less strict about political organization, is it possible that EIJ and al Qaeda might never have formed? By permitting Islam to be discussed in politics, would this have moderated and thus resulted in an Islamic political party rather than an Islamic terrorist organization?