

Religion as a Legitimizing Instrument of Political Violence

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the geopolitical interpretation of religion in international relations. This dimension has historically related religion to politics and politics among nations. More specifically we will analyze the use of religion as a legitimizing instrument of political violence, with special focus on the violence emanating from Islamic extremism and terrorism. History of humanity is full of cases when violence has been used for religious purposes, independently from the label accompanying the violence, sometimes as terrorism and other times as organized social violence, or state violence later on. Also, geopolitics has always been an indivisible part of religious violence, not only in ancient times, but also more lately, during medieval or modern times. This paper will use history in order to study today's religious fundamentalism, concentrating in one of the more destabilizing factors of global geopolitics: at the religious Islamic extremism. We will use a number of case studies to illustrate our arguments, such as the cases of Iran, United States, Israel, India, and so on. This study will combine empirical analyses with theoretical one. We aim to articulate that religious violence for political purposes and with a clear strategic objective is not found only in today's Islam, but it has been historically seen in nearly all other religions of the world.

Keywords: geopolitics, war, religious fundamentalism, Islamic extremism, political violence, Holy War, religious terrorism

1. Introduction

Human history has witnessed abundant cases when violence has been used for religious purposes, regardless of the label or the language used to describe it as terrorist violence, organized social violence or state violence. Geopolitical interests have been a permanent feature associated with religious violence, accompanying religious justifications for terrorism, not only in the ancient times, but also during medieval or modern periods. This paper will go on using historical arguments, mainly of modern times, to elaborate and analyze religious fundamentalism of the last two decades following the end of the Cold War. It is built around the belief that religious Islamic extremism constitutes today one of the most destabilizing agents of global geopolitics.

In his seminal work on the relation between religion and terrorism David Rapoport (1984: 659) has argued that it took a whole century for the vigorous reappearance of religious justifications for political violence during the '70s or at the beginning of the '80s. There have been a large number of conflicts during history paved with religious interests. The most distinguished among them are the Medieval Crusades, frequently prompting historians to classify them between the bloodiest wars of all times. Especially during medieval times, religiously motivated wars aimed directly at eliminating rival religious groups. On the other hand, this list can be even longer when the debate is focused on the connection between religiously motivated violence and political violence or religious discrimination of a specific group (Hoffman, 2006: 81-130).

History has also shown that religious discrimination of a social minority group has frequently induced it to use terrorist violence in order to protect its threatened religious beliefs. This has been a constant feature of medieval times, accelerated during the late 19th and the beginning of 20th century, when a number of nationalist movements of nearly all continents, in an effort to build their national identities, used religion (Christianity as well as Islam) as an inalienable part of their self-determination and self-definition. During the colonial times of European Powers, cross has always been part of the flag, mixing geopolitically religion and politics, especially with regard to colonial rule narrative. In these cases the religious argument has successfully managed to protect the status quo and the opportunities to practice religious beliefs. This has been attained using political violence and terror against majority religious supporters in the respective empires or states. On some occasions, this sort of terrorist violence to guarantee the right to self-determination for a minority, has induced separatism and inspired the foundation of new states, thus bearing a clear geopolitical dimension (Rapoport, 1984: f. 659). We can thus observe the first indications of the correlation between religion and political violence, transforming religion into a geopolitical instrument of the state.

2. Religion as a Legitimizing Instrument of Political Violence

From a historical point of view, a number of terrorist groups have shown clear indications of close legitimizing and geopolitical relations with religion. These historical evidences have intensified especially in the late 20th century and during the first one and a half decade of the 21st century. The 20th century has witnessed the raising of large anti-colonialist and nationalist movements that have widely used religion in order to promote their political interest. Among the most prominent examples were: the Hebrew terrorist organizations operating in the Palestinian territory before Israel declared independence; the National Liberation Front in Algeria (NLF) that used Islamic extremism to legitimate its political and power objectives; Irish Republican Army (IRA) that used Catholicism as a propaganda or ideological instrument for its struggle; the protestant paramilitary groups, founded as a counterbalance to IRA; the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine; or other organizations with a clear Islamic nature, such as Hamas, Hezbollah and Al Qaeda.

On other cases terrorist violence has been used to put the predominant religion on dominant position towards the rest of the population. Thus it is possible to observe that terrorist violence has been historically used in both above-mentioned ways, where specific groups have violently sought to impose the so-called "religious purity", not only through legislative measures, but also through force. At this point we must take into consideration that legislations are mere reflections of dominant cultural and religious virtues of a nation.

Such a situation has been noticed when the form of government was drastically changed through violence and use of terror as geopolitical instrument as in the case of Iranian Revolution of 1979 that produced the new theocratic state regime, totally dependent on religious standards. The Islamic revolution of 1979 caused a series of geopolitical and geostrategic shifts in the broader Middle East, re-setting not only Iranian priorities towards its neighbors, especially with Iraq and Israel, but also towards United States and its western allies in a historically critical moment of the Cold War. The new geopolitical architecture of the Middle East reflects mostly the new role of religion in the foreign policy of the countries of the region.

Extreme religious attitudes can be found in many religious doctrines throughout history, while the term "religious fundamentalism" has been often used and misused to identify various actors as terrorist. But the first issue with the term "religious fundamentalism" is that it can be used to denominate a vast number of nations of the world when they are completely dedicated to their religious beliefs, when they avoid sins and apply virtues according to their religious values. In other words, as religious fundamentalists can classify all those that literally interpret the holy writings.

But there does exist a great difference between religious fundamentalism and using violence to impose religious and political values on a society, because fundamentalism (or radicalism) does not necessarily lead to terrorism. So, for example, dissidents trying to protect their religion from state oppression can resort to violence for self-defense. The case of rebellion in the Warsaw Ghetto on 1943 is emblematic in this regard: none of the individuals involved in that historical uprising of the Polish-Hebrew community against the deportation plan in the German camps, can be labeled as terrorists.

Religious fundamentalism during the modern times has appeared in nearly all religions, as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and so on. So, for example, United States history is full of cases of evangelical fundamentalists that have made a radical interpretation of their religious doctrine. In any case, not all of them have shown tendencies to use violence and terrorist acts for political reasons. So, the extremist violence has been employed in the United States by terrorist organizations such as Ku-Klux-Klan, undertaking acts of violence against the Afro-American population of the Southern American states. Terrorism as a form of political violence, with clear geopolitical features, has been observed inside Judaism as well. So for example during the period when Palestinian territory was under British colonial rule Jewish terrorist groups used terrorism as an instrument of their battle for the foundation of a Jewish state, associating the control of the geographical space in the region with the biblical Kingdom of Israel (in the Ancient Judea), adding to religion a clear geopolitical dimension. It can be argued though that it was a movement that incorporated two elements: religious extremism and national liberation war. To this day, there are some political parties in Israel, whose objective is integrating religious ideas in the legal and governmental system, to the very extreme idea of re-founding Israel as a theocratic state, based on Hebraic religious practices.

These extremist movements have violently opposed to the secular nature and the western way of life chosen by the vast majority of Israeli society. Their member consider themselves the Chosen People of God, appointed by Him to implements His will (as they chose to understand it) (Rapoport, 1998: 104). This specific viewpoint enables them to legitimate a vast range of extreme acts, even the use of terror to achieve their objectives, as long as they "coincide with God's guidelines" (Hanauer, 1995: 245-70; Hoffman, 2006: 98). Furthermore, extremist Jewish groups have undertaken terrorist acts even against their own Israeli leadership, as was the case with the killing of Israeli Prime-Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 1995, after he signed an agreement with the Palestinians where concessions were made. Such a dimension of interlacement of religion, geopolitics and territorial disputes with deep historical roots, has hampered and de-legitimated

any contemporary attempt to find a viable and long-term solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Recently there can be observed an increasing number of scholars gathered around the assumption that Muslim religion displays a major tendency to connect religion with politics compared to other religions. But such an affinity is not an exclusive privilege of Islam. Zionism understood simultaneously as an ideology and political project, can be also labeled "political Judaism". Zionists were responsible for the establishment of settlements of European Jews in Palestine, founding the state of Israel and defining the political identity of Israeli Jews. Jewish extremists have historically constituted the core of the political movement of the Jewish community in the occupied territories of Palestine, denying Palestinians their land rights and historically refusing any compromise (Lustick, 1988: 50-3). Thus, this kind of extremism has incorporated clear geopolitical elements, seen not only in the context of Israeli attitude towards settlements in the occupied territories, but also in the framework of Israeli foreign policy towards the Arab and non-Arab states of the region, as well as towards United States and other Western or European powers (Hanauer, 1995: 245-70).

On the other hand, extremist violence has also constantly appeared amongst different groups of Muslim community. Divisions between the Shiite and Sunni Muslim communities –not object of an in depth exploration of this paper due to their deep and complicated historical roots– have frequently produced violent acts, only during the last century, but also during the 21st century, as evidenced by the last decade's numerous cases of religious violence in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and elsewhere (Laqueur, 2005: 184). A large number of scholars have indicated that the higher number of victims from extremist Islamic violence have occurred within Muslim communities throughout the world. This is testified by empirical evidence on the number and religious affinity of victims from the terrorist acts of the last decades (Lutz & Lutz, 2008: 71-2).

Beside the mass-media role as an accelerator an important role to this regard have also played the geopolitical interests of Western and Middle East states in their endeavor to find a new actor/threat in the international arena to justify their importance in the framework of a globalization discourse pushing for the argument that state's functions are shrinking. This is how the concept of "Jihad" or "Holy War" can be best understood. It has been used (and misused) by various Islamic leaders or the western governments, scholars and media actors, mainly trying to legitimize their policies towards Middle East. For the purposes of this paper it is now the case to clarify the meaning of "*Holy War*" and "*Jihad*", frequently used by various authors to imply a typology of war. This conception of Jihad as a type of war has obscured the real meaning of this word for the Muslims. "Jihad" can be accurately translated as "effort", an "attempt" or a "struggle", but not with the literally meaning of "war" as defined by the literature of international relations. First, it refers to the internal battle of any Muslim individual to fulfill the ideals of Islam as way of life. Second, it refers to the effort to improve the religious conditions of the Muslim community. Third, it concerns the attempt to convert –non-violently– the non-Muslim communities and to disseminate God's word to non-believers. The second and third dimensions of "Jihad" display clear elements of connection between religion and geopolitics, because the effort to improve one's community life and religious situation includes the geo-cultural dimension of foreign policy. While the attempt to convert "others" to Muslims brings on another geopolitical element: the spread of Islamic doctrine to a larger number of countries, followed by the increasing influence of Muslim states on other regions, as one of the two instruments at their disposal for geopolitical use, oil being the other one. But especially in the case of the third objective there are those who use Koran selectively as a justification for extreme violence.

Another phenomenon observed by an accurate empirical overview of terrorist activities and organizations is that the very term "Jihad" is now frequently making its appearance on the names of terrorist organizations. They use it mainly to imply "A Holy War against the infidels", aiming to legitimize violence as the sole instrument of achieving their goals. Thus, even though the term "Jihad" bears many meanings, terrorist organizations of the last few decades have exclusively used it to imply "Holy War". Nearly all scholars of international security and terrorism agree with the idea that the last years have manifested the intensification of appeals by Muslim clerics summoning Holy War against non-Muslims (frequently denominated "infidels"), considering this an essential practice of Islam. On any case scholars agree and empirical evidence of discourse analysis have shown that the majority of Islam theologians doesn't accept or justify any form of violence or any justification of it, either within Muslims or against other religious communities, such as Christians or Jews.

3. Suicide Attacks as an Instrument of Political Violence

The strategic instrumentalization of suicide attacks constitutes another important component of the relation between religion and geopolitics. This component bears clear historical and political denotations. Suicide attacks for political purposes can be found throughout history in many cultures, societies, armies and wars, where individual sacrifices have been mystified and honored, instead of being merely considered as suicides. At the same time a lot of cultures glorify

suicide attacks even from dissident soldiers. In this empirically interesting context we can explore the case of Russian anarchists at the late 19th century and during the first decades of the 20th century. Russian anarchists were conscious about the death they were headed to, but eager and willing to prove that their attacks had a political not criminal nature. History has also shown that frequently self sacrifices are mystified in heroism, as with the case of Japanese militants who sacrificed themselves in attacks against western interests and officials when the country was giving up to foreign conquerors. In Rumania during the 1930s, members of the fascist group Iron Guardians undertook suicide attacks against those nominated as enemies, including political leaders of the opposition.

They gave birth to some death squadrons pledged to perform suicide missions regardless of the sacrifices needed. But today examples of suicide attacks are not necessarily limited to religious groups (Lutz & Lutz, 2008: 71-2). If we perform an empirical analysis of the abovementioned argument, it is possible to notice that during the two decades of 1980-2000, more than half of suicide attacks allover the world have been undertaken by the nationalist rebels in Sri Lanka (see *Table 1*).

Table 1: The Number of suicide attacks, 1980-2003

Group (type)	Location	Number of Attacks	
		1980-2000	2001-2003
Tigers of Tamil (ethnic)	Sri Lanka/India	168	6
Hizbullah (religious)	Lebanon, Kuwait, Argentine	52	0
Hamas (religious)	Israel	22	39
Kurdish Communist Party (ethnic/ideological)	Turkey	15	0
Palestinian Islamic Jihad (religious)	Israel	8	22
Al Qaeda (religious)	East Africa, US, Europe	2	17
Egyptian Islamic Jihad (religious)	Croatia	1	0
The Islamic Group (religious)	Pakistan	1	0
Barbar Khalsa International (ethnic/religious)	India	1	0
Islamic Army Group (religious)	Algeria	1	0
Chechens Groups (nationalist/religious)	Russia	4	15
The Palestinian Liberation Front (nationalist)	Israel	0	6
Al Fatah (nationalist)	Izrael	0	27
Kashmir (nationalist/religious)	Kashmir and India	1	4
Ira1 (different groups – mainly religious)	Iraq	0	20

Source: i) For data during the period 1980-2000 see Radu, M. *Terrorism After the Cold War*, Orbis”, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 257-87. ii) For data during the period 2000-3 see Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, New York: Random House, 2005.

As Robert Pape (2005: 61) has argued, terrorism professed through suicide attacks has increased because various terrorist groups have seen it deliver concrete results from a geopolitical and strategic viewpoint, proving one of the less costly tactics ever used by terrorist and/or guerilla groups. During the last two decades suicide attacks became increasingly part of the strategy employed by Palestinian nationalist and religious groups against Israel. Suicide was considered a far better strategic instrument to deal with Israel's state violence, escalated especially during and after the 2000 decade.

The examples of religious connection with politics and, therefore, the state, abound on other civilizations as well. So, Hindu nationalism in India has always carried a political tincture, to the point that scholars can now use the term political Hinduism as long as in his name mosques and holy places were destroyed, while thousands of Muslims have been killed, as testified by the case of Gujarat Massacre on 2002. The extremist violence of 2002 consisted of a series of violent acts starting with the burning of a train with Muslim Hindu, killing 58 pilgrims (BBC News, 22/02/2011). It was followed by violent episodes and riots between Hindu and Muslim communities of the Indian state of Gujarat, culminating with 790 Muslims killed, 254 Hindu and 223 more reported missing. The riots left behind destroyed 536 objects of religious worship, 241 of them were mosques (BBC News, 13/05/2005). The nature of these events remains still a highly disputed political issue with important geopolitical fallouts for the country's relations not only with its neighbors but also with the great powers (NYT, 04/02/2011). A lot of scholars have defined these events as genocide carried out with the full participation and cooperation of the Indian state (Brass, 2003).

This allows us to make a geopolitical interpretation of Hinduism too. Even inside Hinduism it is possible to observe

extremist religious views, accompanied by the use of violence not only for religious purposes but also for political ones. The indications run back to time almost a century ago, during the 1920s, when paramilitary groups, such as the Organization of National Patriotism, were used for clear political purposes. This organization has become famous especially for the execution of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. Also a considerable number of groups and Hindu political parties have set as their political objective the integration in the national legislation of Hindu religious practices, arguing that the Hindu community constitutes the largest part of India's population. The Hinduist Bharatiya Janata Party, promoting the Hindu practices and traditions, has become the largest religious and nationalist movement of the contemporary world. While this party relaxed the use of Hindu issues during the 1998 electoral campaign, it never offered true guarantees for religious harmony with other minorities. They continue to believe that other religions ought to be re-absorbed inside the Hindu community (Brass, 2003, 212-5).

These efforts are similar to those employed by the Muslim organizations in the struggle to establish the Sharia law as the cornerstone of national legislation, or to those employed by religious extremist groups inside United States to incorporate the Christian religious principles directly into the national legislation and/or the law of specific states of the American federation (Hoffman, 2006: 76-7). But the efforts to promote the Hindu religion with any possible mean have gone further than simply stimulating religious practices into national legislation. They have used violence against Christian minorities and different missionaries attempting to convert Hindus. There should also be taken into consideration the efforts to re-occupy the holy places over which other religions have built mosques or worship places. The most extremist Hindu groups have undertaken violent efforts to destroy these mosques and churches with a remarkable strategic efficacy, impelling the Hindu population of the region to identify with the most extremist political views of the religious leadership.

It can be observed a number of cases when the pressures of religious extremists may generate violence, as with the conflict and use of violent terrorist acts between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia. Due to internal migration an increasing number of Muslims was pouring into the region of Sulawes, overwhelmingly dominated by Christians (Coppel, 2006). Confronted with the threat from an increasing number of Muslim emigrants, Christian communities began to attack Muslims in an effort of ethnic cleaning through terrorist violence. The reaction of Muslim community escalated the situation, giving birth to a religious internal conflict in Indonesia with a large number of victims, massacres and terrorist attacks (Singh, 2004: 47-68; Hasan 2006). In another case, in Sri Lanka, political Buddhism played a crucial role in the definition of Sri-Lanka's national identity. It is closely linked to the chauvinism of Sinhala's political parties and Hindu Tamils, inspiring from 1983 a civil war that still goes on today.

From the abovementioned cases and examples it is clear that terrorist violence for political and/or geopolitical purposes has been used by extremist groups within a large number of religious communities and/or countries. These religious extremists share some common features well beyond using violence and religious doctrines. Many extremist movements and groups have appeared as a result of drastic changes within their societies. On the other hand, globalization and the changing economic and social conditions it emanates have given birth to tensions within societies, prompting their people to pay greater attention to religion in order to guarantee mental and psychological support in a dynamic and ever-changing world (Juergensmeyer, 1996).

In this sense the politicization of religion becomes a form of reaction towards modernity, using religion as a geopolitical vision. In order to confront with the threats and dangers brought by changes, individuals and different social groups embrace religious values more and more, while violence is only one of the methods used to deal with the forces that religious communities see as causes of such a change, not welcomed at all.

In virtually all religious doctrines is widely present the perception that change also includes threats. They almost unanimously refer to a past time when religion played a greater role in human societies and to an era when religious belief values dominating a specific community determined what to allow and to forbid for its members. (Juergensmeyer, 1997: 16-23). On most cases, the previous times become known as "Golden Ages" (or, at least, as an era better than the actual one), while the wider society never benefited from the changes occurred. Such groups have gone even further, defining nationality in religious terms, instead of using ethno-geographical determinants. Within such a context, it seems that terrorists consider themselves soldiers equipped with a Holy Spirit (Rapoport, 1984: 655-70).

As for the Muslim world, clear examples of such endeavors can be found at the struggles against "secular humanism" dominating the West and the attempts to transform the Islamic Law (Sharia) in the cornerstone of the legislation for most Muslim countries. For many Muslims, the western ideas and ideals, including Marxism, seems to reflect a different type of secular humanism, born to weaken the moral and religious values of the Muslim societies.

On the other hand, if a look inside another religious doctrine shows that many Jewish extremist groups believe in the existence of a Divine Call to recreate a Jewish state within the borders that defined the Kingdom of Israel during the ancient era of the Old Testament, accompanied on many cases by attempts to closely connect Israel's laws with the

religious norms of Orthodox Judaism (Hoffman, 2006: 82-90). In the case of Hindu groups there can be observed an attempt to limit foreign influences, represented especially by Islamic and Christian religious doctrines, and an attempt to purify the country through making Hinduism a state's official religion or incorporating Hinduist traditions into public law.

Many scholars have argued that religion-based terrorist groups that use violence as an instrument to achieve their strategic and geopolitical objectives aim in most cases to increase the number of victims from their attacks, especially when the population is composed overwhelmingly by non-believers. An empirical analysis of the terrorist attacks that inflicted more than 25 victims during the 1980-2000, came to the conclusion that over half of them were undertaken by religiously motivated groups. (Quillen, 2002: 279-92). Since 2001 has increased the number major attacks with a greater number of victims. This coincides with the increased number of terror campaigns by various religiously motivated terrorist groups. The increased number of terrorist attacks by these groups is associated with the disquietude that they are now more inclined to use chemical, radiological and biological weapons to achieve their strategic objectives (Pape, 2005: 61-5).

4. Conclusions

Based on their public discourse the religiously motivated terrorist groups find legitimacy for their actions, of a strong geopolitical objective, in the religious argument according to which they are only subject to a higher divine law, whose application is binding for them. The infidels are outside the boundaries of the protected religious community, thus they are considered potential sources of alienation from God. The members of these groups consider themselves engaged in a struggle between good and evil, where every foreigner embodies evil (Juergensmeyer, 1997: 24). Also religiously motivated terrorists are less likely to target a neutral audience. For this reason, it has become more difficult to limit their actions, compared to other groups that use terrorist violence as strategic instrument. If religious terrorists consider God to be the audience of their actions, they might be less interested for public reactions to an increased number of victims (Hoffman, 1995: 271-84). On the other hand, one of the most important objectives of religiously motivated terrorist groups has been the purification of their society, achieved according to them exclusively through the use of violence that makes the objective clearer. The idea of purification is vindicated by foreign influences –mostly western. This makes it necessary to rebuild the moral foundations of society (Crelsten, 2000: 170-96). These ideas might cause actions that aim to maximize the number of casualty and victims among civilians as part of this purification process, as was the case with the Aum Shinrikyo religious sect in Japan. Aum Shinrikyo (meaning "*Supreme Belief*") is a Japanese terrorist organization, organized as a religious sect, which has undertaken a series of terrorist acts throughout Japan, culminating with the 1995 attack on the Tokyo metro station using sarin gas as chemical weapon (Lutz & Lutz, 2008: 89-91). Such apocalyptic viewpoints might demand a massive number of casualties and victims, not a selective one. Even though some terrorist groups with clear religious motivations have undertaken acts that produced massive number of victims among the civilian population, not all these attacks are carried out by religious extremists. On the other hand, the case of Aum Shinrikyo is less clear. Its origin is partly consequence of modernity, but the violent behavior it has shown throughout the years was limited geographically within the same cultural space. The violence between the Sikh and Hindu religious communities is difficult to fit within this analytical model of religious conflicts we are attempting to build in the last part of this paper, the model of cultural clashes, mainly because between there are strong ties these two religious communities – classifying the violence as a form of conflict within the same civilizational pattern. Thus, we can assess that the religiously motivated terrorist violence can mostly happen within different geographical and cultural spaces.

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