

Sacred Violence:
A Study on the Extent Religion Plays in the Violence of Al Qaeda

Abstract:

Religious violence has been a powerful force throughout human history. Yet, it is often difficult to quantify what extent actual religiosity plays in causing violence. Violence rarely happens in a vacuum, and there are almost always a number of other political, economic, and social factors at play. This paper will attempt to discuss some of the way's religion may or may not directly cause violence, and then analyze this concept in the context of Al-Qaeda. I will utilize Scott Appleby's continuum of Strong Religion vs Weak Religion in order to operationalize the to what extent variable. Each side of the continuum will consist of arguments from existing literature on the impact religion has on violence. Then I will conduct a comparative case study between Al-Qaeda and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Front. For each group I will analyze and compare their goals and objectives, manifestos and statements, and finally specific terror attacks and target selection. As a result of this study, the extent religion plays in the violence of Al-Qaeda will be clearly demonstrated as either more akin to Strong Religion or Weak Religion.

By: Kevin Caggiano

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Professor Krause

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1. Introduction:

The capacity to do violence on one another is an unfortunate fact of the human condition. Since the dawn of humanity, violence has been constant and plentiful. The reasons behind such acts vary greatly, and include practically any subject that could foment disagreement. However, this paper will focus on one of the most popular motives for violence, and especially organized violence – religion.

Religion has proven to be one of the most powerful guiding forces of human behavior and interaction. Billions of people have considered themselves members of a number of different religious groups over time. Each religion has its own unique set of teachings, beliefs, and moral systems that subsequently inform their followers on how they should act and go about their daily lives. As a result, religion holds a position of immense personal and societal significance. This notion, in combination with an extremely widespread nature, makes violence and religion practically inseparable¹.

Religious violence comes in all shapes and sizes, and throughout history we have seen its application in everything from massive inter-civilizational wars, to small-town witch trials. However, over the past three decades, we have seen a renewed wave of religious violence in the form of religious terrorism. Brought to the mainstream by the events of September 11th and the subsequent Global War on Terror, religious terrorism has become a topic of extensive scholarly and political study. Specifically, Al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks, has drawn international attention on not only their physical organization, but the greater concept of Islamic terrorism.

¹ Porterfield, *The Power of Religion*.

As with any act of violence, it is important to carefully analyze every single motivating factor that went into committing such an act. This notion is even more relevant when discussing religious violence. Religious violence has a number of unique complexities that need to be understood to get the full picture. Most notably, religion is exceedingly intertwined with other political, economic, and social aspects of life. This has been the case for practically all of history. Furthermore, us Westerners (who abide by the secular non-secular divide) need to realize that many societies in the world still operate in this very way. So, when looking at an act of religious violence, you need carefully examine not only the religious aspect, but the other political, social, and economic factors at play. To determine what extent religion plays in violence, you must spend a good deal of time analyzing everything but religion.

This paper will do exactly that for Al-Qaeda. I will determine what extent Islam plays in their terrible history of violence. The study will begin with an analysis of the existing theories on religious violence. I will detail several key arguments that debate the extent religion plays in violence and terrorism. Next, I will build off these notions, and conduct a comparative case study between AQ and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Front (DHKP-C) in Turkey. This case study will prove extremely beneficial in determining the extent that Islam plays in AQ's violence. The DHKP-C differs from AQ as they are a non-religious terror organization. I will analyze and compare three key aspects of each group: goals and objectives, manifestos and statements, attacks and target selection. Finally, I will conclude by summarizing my findings, and show how they are relevant both to the general understanding of AQ, as well as the overall concept of religious violence.

2. How Religious is Religious Violence?

The question of what extent religion plays in violence is an extremely difficult one to answer. First and foremost, what do we mean by “extent”. Unfortunately, in matters of sociology and political science, it is somewhat difficult to operationalize this variable. Religiosity would be no exception. In order to gauge religious involvement and motivation in violence, I will group religion into two categories. It is either a significant driver of violence, or a minimal driver of violence. Scott Appleby has come up with system that attempts to delineate religious violence amongst these categories². He system works as a continuum, with one end known as Strong Religion arguing that religion is a significant driver of violence. On the opposite end lies Weak Religion, which is characterized by the argument that religion is not a significant driver of violence. I will use this framework to further explore the extent that religion plays in violence.

2.1 Strong Religion:

The argument behind Strong Religion first begins on a macro-level. In one of the more consequential works of political science, Samuel Huntington in *Clash of Civilizations* surmised a new theory that pitted one civilization against another³. The Cold War had ended, subsequently closing the chapter on political and economic conflict. He argues that now conflict and violence would come about from cultural, social, and religious differences. He divided the world into nine “civilizations”, four of them being strictly defined by religious affinity. Each of these civilizations share a common identity that has been formed over centuries of development. For many of the civilizations, religion is one of, if not the most fundamental way of establishing this identity. Huntington makes this assertion by analyzing the sacred and significant importance religion has had both historically, and now increasingly in the present. This same notion can be

² Appleby, “Religious Violence.”

³ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”

applied to every civilization regardless of namesake, as religion is such an important and widespread characteristic in defining an identity no matter where you are in the world.

According to Huntington, the immense differences in these strong identities mean that conflict is all but unavoidable. He says that inherently, an “us vs them” relationship is established, and when the difference between us and them is of holy proportions, this relationship will almost always end in violence⁴. With religion being one of the most important factors in the creation of these identities, it plays a very significant role in the resulting violence.

Huntington established a broad view of Strong Religion where religious violence comes from powerful civilizational differences. However, a more in depth and theological explanation must be offered. Mark Juergensmeyer provides great insight into this side of the argument. In his most important work, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Juergensmeyer provides a detailed analysis of the important religious elements that directly drive religious violence⁵. One of his main points of discussion, is how religion transforms issues from a mere human perspective to a much higher “cosmic level”. In non-religious violence and conflict, the motivations are only as powerful as you make them. However, once you bring religion into the equation and elevate an issue to the cosmic level, the significance becomes akin to the infiniteness that exists in religion. Violence on the cosmic level does not occur in order to take land or resources. It is carried out in the divine battle between good and evil, and right and wrong. One side is deemed worthy and the only right position, while the other side is demonized without remorse. This notion is the embodiment of the “us versus them” relationship that Huntington discussed. It is easy to justify violence when it is done in the name of God or religion. Juergensmeyer describes it as violence becoming

⁴ Huntington.

⁵ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.

“sacralized”⁶. This is a very dangerous concept, and it personifies the argument of religion directly driving violence.

Furthermore, there are several other elements that significantly drive religious violence. One argument is that of religion as a resource. Both Matthew Rowley, and Rodney Stark argue that this idea is a substantial cause of religious violence. In his chronicling of motivations behind religious violence, Rowley lists monotheism as a driving factor⁷. Stark offers a detailed explanation of this theory. In *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, Stark makes the comparison of monotheistic belief to resource scarcity⁸. By nature of the term, monotheism means belief in only one God. This certainly introduces a bit of a dilemma, as each religion has their own unique conceptions about God. This includes differences in origin, number, power, extent etc. This creates a supply issue, as different religion compete over which God is the true mono in monotheism. With something as important as the nature of God, this notion is a significant driver of violence. Finally, Appleby introduces another argument categorized as Strong Religion. That is violence targeted at the impure, heretic, or the infidel⁹. Religion is a great tool for experiencing community, common identity, and purpose. However, it also creates a large degree of exclusivity. There is an ingroup and an outgroup. The difference between these groups could simply come from adherence, or as with most religions, the difference can come from a defined line found in teachings or literature which establishes who is true and who is untrue. Furthermore, this idea applies not only to members of other religions, but also to members within a religion. When you consider how important religious beliefs are, the

⁶ Juergensmeyer.

⁷ Rowley, “What Causes Religious Violence?”

⁸ STARK, “God’s Wrath.”

⁹ Appleby, “Religious Violence.”

characterization of someone or a group as an infidel or heretic can be a significant motivation to do violence upon them.

2.2 Weak Religion:

The other side of Appleby's continuum is that of Weak Religion. There are two main arguments for this position. First, William Cavanaugh presents a consequential argument that attacks the very nature of religious violence. In *Religious Violence as Modern Myth*, he addresses the most complicated problem that occurs when determining the extent of violence caused by religion¹⁰. That is determining what counts as religion. By the nature of the argument, you simply cannot say religion caused violence without having an understanding for what counts as religion. Yet, that is nearly impossible to do. Cavanaugh states:

“There is no once-and-for-all definition of religion or the secular. The religious/secular divide is a modern Western construction that arose as an adjunct to the rise of the modern state and the triumph of civil over ecclesiastical authorities in early modern Europe”¹¹

With no definition, it is extremely difficult to separate religious motivations from other economic, political, or social drivers. For example, if a religious group built a school, there is no effective way to separate the role religion played in the motivation behind its construction.

Aside from the problems found in Cavanaugh's definitional argument, the other Weak Religion argument goes into deeper analysis on the impact of secular issues on religious violence. In *The Nation-State and Violence*, Anthony Giddens shows how almost all characterizations of religious violence occur in situations with many motivating factors¹². Religious violence rarely, if ever, takes place completely in a vacuum. There can be an unlimited

¹⁰ Cavanaugh, ““Religious Violence as Modern Myth.””

¹¹ Cavanaugh.

¹² *The Nation-State and Violence*.

number of other factors that play a role in causing violence. Making the argument that religion is a significant driver of violence can be a shortsighted approach that does not take into account other political, economic, or social factors. For example, Appleby states that religious violence often occurs amongst “true believers as well as bureaucratic functionaries, armed militias, ideological fellow travelers, displaced youth, and bandwagon-jumpers”¹³. It is very difficult to first establish who is who, and then subsequently determine how much of an influence religion had on their decisions. Furthermore, as Scott Hibbard puts it, “ostensibly secular state actors seek to co-opt the ideas and activists associated with religious fundamentalisms”¹⁴. This is a common trend as the power that religion holds in influencing human behavior is an appetizing form of manipulation. In addition, religion can be tied to a number of other conflict motivators that are more significant drivers of violence. Peter van der Veer shows how nationalism can cause large amounts of violence, while having elements of religious involvement¹⁵. The movement can be religious in nature, but the more important drivers of violence come from nationalistic factors. Yet another example would be ethnoreligious conflict. David Little states that ethnic grievances and conflicts can be “religiously shaded” in order to justify violence. The main driver of the violence would be ethnicity, with religion serving a more minimal role¹⁶. The number of other contributing factors are quite endless, and I believe these examples are suitable enough to demonstrate that religion can have a minor role in many forms of violence, often being co-opted, manipulated, or misconstrued.

¹³ Appleby, “Religious Violence.”

¹⁴ Hibbard, *Religious Politics and Secular States*.

¹⁵ *Religious Nationalism*.

¹⁶ Little, “Religion, Conflict and Peace.”

It is important to consider what Appleby stated on how Strong Religion and Weak Religion are just two diametric ends of a sliding continuum¹⁷. I expect AQ to fall somewhere in the middle, albeit certainly more to one side than the other. My case study analysis will look into the extent religion plays in AQ, by seeing if the various comparative criteria are more inclined to Strong Religion or Weak Religion, pushing the group in general to either end of the continuum.

3.Terror, Violence, and its Motivations: A Case Study on AQ and the DHKP-C:

When determining what extent religion plays in AQ's violence, I needed to examine the violence of another group and compare and contrast the motivating factors, specific uses of violence, and strategic ends. However, since religion is my independent variable in this study, I needed to make a comparison with a non-religious group. That is why I selected the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C). To gauge religion's involvement in AQ's violence, I will analyze and subsequently compare the three following characteristics of each group: 1) Goals and Objectives 2) Manifestos and Statements 3) Attacks and Target Selection.

3.1 Al-Qaeda:

Al-Qaeda (AQ) was formally created in 1989 following the conclusion of the Soviet-Afghan war. The group was led by the infamous Usama Bin Laden (UBL) who gained fame and respect for his role in Afghanistan. UBL transformed the concepts of the Jihad in Afghanistan, into a global Sunni Islamist movement. Many fighters in the Mujahedeen rallied behind his cause, and AQ quickly evolved into a powerful organization. They became operational in 1990, growing significantly in size over the next decade. They are directly responsible for hundreds of terror attacks throughout the world. Over 40 countries have officially designated AQ as a

¹⁷ Appleby, "Religious Violence."

terrorist organization. After UBL's death in 2011, Ayman al Zawahiri took over as leader of the group¹⁸.

3.2 Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front:

The founding of the DHKP-C is somewhat complicated. They began as the Revolutionary Youth Federation, which then splintered into the Turkish People's Liberation Party-Front, then splintered again into the Devrimci Yol, until finally undergoing one last evolution into the DHKP-C in 1978. Their founder and initial leader was Dursun Karatas. The DHKP-C consists of two main elements, a political party, and a military wing. The group defines themselves as Marxist-Leninist, and are involved in an armed campaign to overthrow the Turkish Government. They espouse anti-US and anti-NATO sentiments. The DHKP-C began its campaign of terror in 1990, carrying out over 100 attacks to date. They have been officially designated as a terror organization by Turkey, the US, Japan, the UK, and the European Union¹⁹.

3.3 Goals and Objectives:

The main overarching goal of AQ is the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate under Sharia law²⁰. To do so, they hoped to accomplish several important tasks in two phases. In the initial phase, AQ planned to target the "far enemy"²¹. The largest impediment standing in the way of establishing the Caliphate was the presence of foreign countries in the Middle East. UBL believed that these countries, specifically the US, were propping up apostate governments in the Arab world, and pillaging the resources of the region. AQ wanted to liberate the holy lands of places like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Israel from the corrupting influences of the "alliance of

¹⁸ "Al-Qaeda."

¹⁹ AYDEMIR, "FOUNDATION OF THE TERRORIST ORGANIZATION REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE'S PARTY-FRONT (DHKP-C) AND ITS DESTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES."

²⁰ "Al-Qaeda."

²¹ Tinnes, "Bibliography."

Christians, Jews, and their Agents”²². To do so, AQ would engage in an extended campaign of terror and violence against these countries both within the region and abroad. The goal was to wage a war of attrition, that would eventually result in the withdrawal of foreign countries from the Middle East. Once these foreign powers were weakened, and removed from the region, AQ could begin its second phase, targeting the “near enemy”²³. Without the protection and influence of foreign countries, the corrupt and heretic governments of the Middle East would be extremely vulnerable. AQ wanted to exploit this vulnerability, and topple these governments via terror and organized military action. AQ would fill the resulting power vacuum, establishing new governments that adhered to their Salafi interpretation of government rule and law. In time, these new governments would merge, forming a greater Islamic Caliphate under a common rule.

The main goal of DHKP-C is to help enable a communist revolution in Turkey²⁴. The DHKP-C believed that the democratic process was both too slow, and all-together most likely incapable of establishing a government in Turkey that had communist views and policies. Rather what may take generations to establish via non-violent methods, could theoretically be achieved in only a short time with terrorism and violence. This sentiment can be seen in a popular anthem of the group:

“Take your weapon against imperialism, we workers, peasants, youth, army are ready to die for revolution, we are powerful revolutionaries, one day we will definitely win.

Workers and peasants will seize the power hand-in-hand with blood.”²⁵

²² “Al Qaeda.”

²³ Farrall, “Revisiting Al-Qaida’s Foundation and Early History.”

²⁴ AYDEMİR, “FOUNDATION OF THE TERRORIST ORGANIZATION REVOLUTIONARY PEOPLE’S PARTY-FRONT (DHKP-C) AND ITS DESTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES.”

²⁵ AYDEMİR.

The DHKP-C wanted to light the match that would set fire a widespread and popular communist uprising. Furthermore, the DHKP-C wanted to rid Turkey of the US and NATO presence in the country²⁶. They saw the US and NATO as direct methods of foreign imperialism in the country, that needed to be removed before the revolution. Moreover, the DHKP-C feared that the US or NATO would intervene to prevent the revolution from occurring, as they had done a number of times throughout the 20th century. Finally, the DHKP-C needed to gain importance and position among the number of left-wing groups that existed in the country²⁷. In order to get the revolution that they wanted; the DHKP-C needed to be at the top of the hierarchy of competing groups.

It is quite clear that the goals and objectives of AQ belong on the Strong Religion side of Appleby's continuum. UBL saw the world in the same way that Huntington did, as a civilizational clash between the West and Islam. He stated that "after the end of the Cold War, America escalated its campaign against the Muslim world in its entirety, aiming to get rid of Islam itself"²⁸. It was the epitome of an us vs them dilemma between two opposing identities. In the eyes of AQ, only one side could be right. Furthermore, the goals of AQ demonstrate both Juergensmeyer's argument of cosmic war, and Appleby's reference to the religiously impure. The nature of a global Islamic Caliphate elevates the situation to one of cosmic proportion. It is not the will of UBL to establish the caliphate, but the will of God. In order to accomplish this AQ needed to rid the Middle East of the apostates and infidels among them. This included the Arab governments like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. As well as the infidel occupiers such as the US and Israel. However, as mentioned by Gidden, it needs to be determined that these religious goals and objectives were significant drivers of violence. They may seem primarily

²⁶ "Terrorist Groups | National Counterterrorism Center."

²⁷ Teymur, "A Conceptual Map for Understanding the Terrorist Recruitment Process: Observation and Analysis of DHKP/C, PKK, and Turkish Hezbollah Terrorist Organizations."

²⁸ Varisco, "Messages to the World."

religious in nature, but they have a number of economic, social, and political factors. The DHKP-C comparison provides some insight on this. Their goals and objectives were complex and multi-variable. For example, communism is not only political, but has significant economic and social implications. Yet, DHKP-C's main goal is political regime change. The other economic and social factors certainly play a role in their violence, but you can characterize the political motivation as being the primary driver of violence. The same notion applies to AQ. Since their main goals and motivations were significantly religious, you can make the assertion that they had significant role in causing violence.

3.4 Manifestos and Statements:

AQ is notorious for their public statements, manifestos, and post attack press releases. The most famous of these is UBL's *Letter to the Americans*²⁹. This letter was circulated widely in 2002. It provides justification for the 9/11 attacks, an in-depth insight into AQ and their ideology, and why they are waging jihad. UBL begins his letter by proposing two questions that he intends to answer. 1) Why we are fighting and opposing you? 2) What we are calling for you to do, and what do we want³⁰? In the answer to the first question, UBL provides a detailed list of reasonings for attacking the US. Some of these reasonings include: economic and military support for Israel, attacks in Somalia and Lebanon, the stealing of oil and natural resources, the corruption of Arab governments, and the imprisonment of the umma. In his answer of the second question, UBL says AQ wants two things. First, they are calling all infidels to Islam. He states that Islam is:

“The religion of the Unification of God; of freedom from associating partners with Him, and rejection of this; of complete love of Him, the Exalted; of complete submission to

²⁹ Varisco. The full text of UBL's *Letter to the Americans* is available in Appendix A

³⁰ Varisco.

His Laws; and of the discarding of all the opinions, orders, theories and religions which contradict with the religion”³¹

If the US wants AQ to stop attacking and fighting them, they must convert to Islam and embrace its teachings, history, and laws. Next, UBL is calling for the Americans to “stop your oppression, lies, immorality and debauchery”³². He lists a number of examples of these behaviors such as, gambling, homosexuality, prostitution, drug and alcohol use, usury, and laws contrary to Sharia. According to UBL, all of these grievances are more than enough reason to do violence against the US and their people. He ends the letter with a cautionary warning for America:

“If the Americans do not respond, then their fate will be that of the Soviets who fled from Afghanistan to deal with their military defeat, political breakup, ideological downfall, and economic bankruptcy”³³.

The DHKP-C has a number of manifestos and publications describing their struggle and use of violence. I will admit, I did experience some difficulty finding sources that were both in English and also not from Turkish government sources. Yet, I was still able to find the official program of the DHKP-C that was published in one of their political newspapers³⁴. This publication went into great detail listing all the reasonings and demands behind their revolution. It began with a declaration of the main goal of the DHKP-C:

“Our party's world view is Marxism-Leninism, and we are fighting to this end. The ultimate aim of the DHKP is the creation of a society without exploitation and without

³¹ Varisco.

³² Varisco.

³³ Varisco.

³⁴ Kenville, “A STUDY OF TURKEY’S REVOLUTIONARY LEFT AND ITS IMPACT ON UNITED STATES INTERESTS, 1968-199.” The full text is available in Appendix B

classes. Our immediate aim, however, is to establish the revolutionary power of the people - the power of all the people's forces that are against oligarchy and imperialism”³⁵. It then provides an explanation of why the DHKP-C has decided to use violence as opposed to peaceful strategies. They describe using the concept of “Politicized Military Strategy of War” to engage in sustained guerilla warfare in both the urban and rural parts of the country³⁶. The publication then lists the demands for changing or modifying practically every aspect of life in the country. Topics range from systemic political changes, to how to Turkey’s beaches should be properly utilized. The publication is extremely in depth and political, and filled with violent intentions.

Yet again, the literature related to Al-Qaeda is filled with rhetoric and theological reasoning that suggests religion is a significant driver of violence. For example, at the very beginning of his letter, UBL cites an important passage from the Quran:

“Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged-God has the power to help them [believers] victory.'

The believers fight for God's cause, while those who reject faith fight for an unjust cause. Fight for the allies of Satan”³⁷

This verse serves as the theological basis for all of AQ’s actions. It brings the violence to the cosmic level as indicated by Juergensmeyer. God has provided the necessary permission to do violence, so subsequently no violence is off limits. In addition, the us vs them dynamic discussed by Huntington is further strengthened by UBL’s letter. Those fighting in the name of God and Islam are members of the “in-group” and anyone that opposes them are “allies of Satan”. AQ’s

³⁵ Kenville.

³⁶ Kenville.

³⁷ Varisco, “Messages to the World.”

version of how to live is true and approved by God, while the US is defined by immorality and debauchery. Furthermore, the arguments of Appleby and Stark are evident in this letter. Those who do not align with AQ's interpretation of Islam are deemed apostates, heretics, and non-believers, and subject to violence as dictated by scripture and common understanding. UBL states that Islam is the only correct religion, and that the other monotheistic faiths like Christianity and Judaism are flawed and untrue. So AQ, as directed by God, carries out "jihad in the way of God so that God's Word and religion reign supreme"³⁸. This literature certainly points to the fact that AQ largely leans to the side of Strong Religion. However, the Weak Religion arguments need to be addressed as well. Cavanaugh's belief that any religious violence is discounted by the lack of a definition for religion does not really hold here. UBL firmly states what his interpretation of Islam is, and subsequently why it actually theologically justifies the use of violence. Critics would say that AQ's Islam is not true religion. Many Islamic scholars would be inclined to agree³⁹. Yet that does not really matter in the situation for AQ. They are a group with a shared belief on what they think is Islam. Regardless of who is "correct" AQ here is using conventional elements of Islam, like the Quran and Hadith's, to justify their interpretation and use of violence. Although Cavanaugh's argument seems to fail here, Hibbard's may have some standing. His idea that some secular actors may be utilizing and manipulating religion to foment secular violence could definitely be true in the case of AQ. The caliphate could be a means of attaining political and economic power. Unfortunately, this argument is extremely hard to prove. It would require talking to, and receiving truthful answers from AQ's top leadership. Even though it seems evident that Strong Religion is at play in this example of AQ's statement, it is important to analyze and compare the motivating factors behind DHKP-C's violence. It needs

³⁸ Varisco.

³⁹ Mohammad, "The Doctrine of Jihad."

to be established the political factors are a primary driver of violence for the group. The DHKP-C uses consequential works from their ideology to motivate and justify their violence. For example, they base much of their doctrine on Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*⁴⁰. In this work, Marx directly advocates for violent revolution. He states that the ends of the communist's "can only be attained by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions"⁴¹. This sentiment is the fundamental base for the DHKP-C's belief of a revolution using political violence. Just as AQ uses theological rationales found in the Quran and Hadiths as direct reasoning and justification for their violence, it can be demonstrated that the DHKP-C does the same with secular sources driving their use of political violence.

3.5 Attacks and Target Selection:

On April 7th 2006 three members of AQ entered the Buratha mosque in Baghdad⁴². The three males were dressed as women, concealing suicide vests underneath the traditional Islamic robe worn by women. As they reached the security checkpoint of the mosque, two of the bombers detonated their vests. The third bomber denoted his vest outside in the line of people waiting to enter the mosque. In total 80 people were killed, and another 158 people were wounded. AQ selected this mosque as their target for two primary reasons⁴³. First, it was an important place of worship for Shia in Baghdad. Next, the office of Sheikh Jalaluddin al-Saghir, a member of the Iraqi Parliament, was located in the mosque.

On July 1st, 2015 a member of the DHKP-C walked into a police station in Istanbul and detonated a suicide vest⁴⁴. The bomber had approached two police officers claiming to be a

⁴⁰ Teymur, "A CONCEPTUAL MAP FOR UNDERSTANDING THE TERRORIST RECRUITMENT PROCESS: OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS OF DHKP/C, PKK, AND TURKISH HEZBOLLAH TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS."

⁴¹ Haggerty, "Marx and Violent Revolution."

⁴² Agencies, "70 Killed in Iraq Mosque Attack."

⁴³ "At Least 79 Killed In Mosque Attack."

⁴⁴ Welle (www.dw.com), "Turkish Leftist DHKP-C Claims Suicide Bomb Attack in Istanbul | DW | 07.01.2015."

tourist who had lost her wallet. Aside from the bomber, one police officer was killed, and another was seriously injured. In a statement, the DHKP-C said that the attack was meant to “bring to account” of President Erdogan’s ruling regime. The police station was targeted due to their association with the ruling government, and their role of eliminating political dissent.

AQ’s suicide attack on the Buratha mosque demonstrates the argument of Strong Religion. Juergensmeyer’s notion of cosmic war applies to the nature of this attack. Suicide bombings are inherently the most ultimate form of dedication to a belief or idea. Furthermore, Islam actually prohibits suicide, naming it one of the greatest sins a Muslim could commit. Yet, AQ’s cosmic conflict is utilized as justification for these attacks. According to UBL, who cites several passages of the Quran on martyrdom, God permits, and subsequently forgives this sin when the martyr gives their life to protect their religion⁴⁵. In addition, this attack proves the argument of Appleby on targeting the impure, heretics, and infidels. One of the primary reasons for selecting this target was that it was a Shia mosque. AQ considers the Shia as a mortal enemy, and one of the pivotal reasons for the corruption and malfeasance of the “near enemy”. This same sentiment applies to al-Saghir, who they had hoped to assassinate. He was both Shia, and a member of the US connected Iraqi Government. It is extremely evident that the sectarian nature of this attack was motivated by religion. The same connection can be between the DHKP-C’s attack and their motivating political factors. Like AQ, they adopted suicide bombing as an effective way of demonstrating their intentions and resolve to their enemies and the overall population. The DHKP-C spokesperson called the attack an immense “act of sacrifice” that brings the coming revolution closer⁴⁶. Just as AQ carried out their attack due to significant religious motivations, the DHKP-C carried out their bombing for significant political reasons.

⁴⁵ Tosini, “Al-Qaeda’s Strategic Gamble.”

⁴⁶ Welle (www.dw.com), “Turkish Leftist DHKP-C Claims Suicide Bomb Attack in Istanbul | DW | 07.01.2015.”

They selected a government target that would have implications for the Turkish Government as a whole. The police are one of the most important agents of the government, and they are one of the primary entities standing in the way of the communist revolution. This hurdle cannot be surpassed without significant political violence done against them.

4. Conclusion:

Violence and religion are two very complex topics that appear together time and time again. It is important to understand both issues, and see how they play into one another. When establishing what extent religion plays in violence, you must take into account the full picture simply beyond the mere presence of religion. Violence is never as black and white as it seems. In terms of organized violence, a number of other political, economic and social factors are certainly almost always at play.

Operationalizing religion's extent in causing violence is a very difficult task. Appleby's continuum of Strong Religion and Weak Religion is one way to attempt to overcome this difficulty. The existing scholarship predominantly leans either one way or the other. However, this system is far from perfect. There is a reason why it is a general continuum, rather than providing absolute determinations. Religious violence can fall anywhere on the scale, and often some actions of the same group can be change between Strong and Weak religion depending on the specific context and application. Nevertheless, I believe it is an effective way of judging what role religion plays in violence, and the associated scholarship with each argument is well regarded and consistent.

For Al Qaeda, this study clearly demonstrates that the group most often demonstrates Strong Religion sentiments. If I had to place Appleby's continuum on a scale of 1-10, with Strong Religion being 10 and Weak Religion being 1, I would give AQ a score of about 7. The

evidence I have shown would back up this claim. Islam is a significant driver of AQ's violence. They exhibit strong tendencies of being engaged in a cosmic war. From UBL's letter, to the overall goal of establishing a global caliphate, AQ believes they are in the divine struggle between good and evil. Furthermore, they see their violence as a part of a civilizational conflict. They are the holy fighters of Islam battling the corrupting and untrue Western civilization. In addition, AQ carries out violence against anyone they deem as an infidel, apostate, or heretic. This includes the West, Arab governments, and "untrue" Muslims like the Shia. These judgments come from Islamic scripture like the Quran and the Hadiths. The claims that would argue that AQ falls more on the side of Weak Religion do not have merit. AQ has a definition, albeit in their own interpretation, of Islam and Sharia. Religion's involvement in their violence is indisputable. Moreover, the separation of religious factors from other political, economic, and social issues was clearly established. The comparison with the DHKP-C showed the logic behind the extent that a primary motivating factor plays in violence. For them, politics served as the main factor behind their violence. Even though they had economic and social aims, the political goal of establishing a communist government had a far greater impact on their violence. The same notion applied to AQ.

This study has a number of greater implications. It adds conversation to the ongoing debate on how religion impacts violence and terrorism. It is especially important today, as all types of religious violence are on the rise across the globe. Huntington may be right in his assertion on civilizational conflict. He did correctly predict the coming conflict in the Middle East. It is important to continue to study this complex subject. AQ is still a threat, and many believe they are on the rise once again. It is critical that we as a nation have a full understanding of their motivations and what drives their violence and hatred.

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