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Islamic Extremism 2.0
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Is Islamic terrorism different from other religious terrorism?

Short Paper 1

Fundamentally, Islamic terrorism falls into the same category as other forms of

religious terrorism. However, the distinction between the two is crucial to better understand

the reasons why Islamic terrorism became so widespread in recent decades. Its core

characteristics do not show much difference from terror acts committed for instance by Jews

in the ancient Roman Empire, the radical Christian groups in the United States or the gas

attack by Aum Shinrikyo. Although in most cases both the motives and the means of the

organizations are similar, there is a distinct difference in why the movements were created,

that lies in the history of the Middle East.

The religious terrorist groups reside to the same set of tools. Both Muslim, Christian

and other groups are usually limited by the same constraints such as small unit size, stronger

opponent, and illegality. These factors force them to adapt a similar set of available tactics

involving symbolic killings to psychologically impact large populations (Merari 227). The

brutality of the terrorist acts could be a meaningful difference. However, there are countless

examples of non-muslim groups committing terrifying acts like the Anti-balaka massacring

Muslims in the Central African Republic, or the gas attacks in Tokyo. In short, a terrorist

group does not have to be Muslim in order to commit crimes on the worst end of the scale.

The motive of many religious struggles emerge from a long lasting political conflict

and use religion to support their movement. Since the 15th century the Middle East has been

in constant decline, torn apart by internal conflicts and by colonial powers. The economic strain created frustration among the population, the inability of the elite to successfully step up against Western powers and Israel alienated many from the current ruling power, which made them look for alternatives. Islamic terrorist groups claim to fight for a new, more just system, which found popular support among a large share of the population who has been radicalized by new schools of thought in Islam that place violence in the core of their teachings. This story is not so unique, as for instance the Jews faced similar issues during the rule of the Roman Empire, and fought with nearly the same motives as the contemporary Arabs. "For the religious terrorist, violence is first and foremost a sacramental act or divine duty" regardless whether he is a Christian, Muslim or part of another sect (Hoffman 88). However, this does not explain why Islamic terrorism became so potent.

The never seen before strength of the Islamic extremism comes from the usage of modern technologies and the fact that radical Islam reaches further than other radical religious groups thanks to becoming accepted in a few regions of the Arab world. Modern technology made terrorism more effective and allowed groups to easier recruit new members. The fact that they can draw members from a pool of 1.6 billion people for a group of a couple dozen people ensures the survival and spread of Islamic terrorist organizations. The sensation of mass media amplifies the psychological effects of every terrorist attack making it a more desirable form to express demands. Modern technology has never been available for widespread struggles before and most other religious movements proved short lived compared to the fight that has been on for more than 50 years at different points of the Arab world. Another potential reason might be that while there are violent Christian groups, Christianity and Buddhism generally promote peace. While in Islam many schools of thought emerged that interpret Islam by putting emphasis on the success of violent periods and aim to

bring back the glory of the past and the caliphate as we mentioned in class. However, I cannot say objectively whether this is true or not.

Fundamentally, Islamic terrorism is not much different from other forms. It's the troublesome history of the Middle East, and the potential widespread support for violence that turned the region into a breeding ground for terrorists. However, the fact that it is the first widespread religious struggle in age of modern technology, provides it with tools that greatly support its spread.

Works cited:

Hoffman, Bruce. Inside Terrorism (2). New York, US: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Ariel Merari (1993) Terrorism as a strategy of insurgency, Terrorism and Political Violence, 5:4, 213-251, DOI: 10.1080/09546559308427227