

Ideology and the rise of terror

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Militant ‘Islamic’ movements are organisations born out of particular configurations of geopolitics and superpower interventions. Beginning as resistance movements and later moving on by aiming to create new states, their strategies have been ideological and violent with scant regard for human rights

The first two weeks of 2015 have not helped moderate Muslims anywhere in the world. Between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Syria) [ISIS/ISIL and now IS], the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Boko Haram and the renegade gunmen claiming allegiance to the al-Qaeda in Yemen that shot the cartoonists of [*Charlie Hebdo*](#), the world seems to have exploded in a frenzy of Islamic ideology-fuelled killing. Reactions to Islamic radicals conducting acts of terror have been varied. Between the Moroccan-born Mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, rudely telling Muslims to get out of his country, the thousands of people in Germany marching in an anti-Islam demonstration, anchor Jeanine Pirro on Fox News saying “we need to kill them” and Rupert Murdoch tweeting about holding Muslims collectively responsible for terrorism, common Muslims everywhere are being forced to apologise and take responsibility for the dangerous actions of less than one per cent of the world’s total Muslim population.

Insurgents as global terrorists

People that believe such things seem to have missed some key pieces of information pertaining to the rise of some of these movements. In this piece, I will attempt to historicise the rise of some militant “Islamic” movements so that in our public debate we may have balance and some context. This is important because the rationalisations that are coming our way use Islam as the driving force behind all recent acts of terror. I believe that we need to shift this debate onto more logical terrain, i.e., we need to understand the conditions which beget certain types of insurgent and terrorist organisations. I assert here that Islamic ideology alone is not the driving force behind these

organisations. Islamic ideology is merely the fabric in which an articulation of inequality, marginalisation, and alienation is embedded or stitched. Islamic ideology is deployed to get new recruits to particular terrorist groups. Think of such ideology as an advertising strategy or a marketing campaign to get people to adhere to the political causes being championed by these groups at the barrel of a gun.

“With the left discredited in societies with strong ethnic and religious sentiments, the fallback ideology of rebellion is mostly religion-based.”

Let's start with the usual suspect, the Taliban. Raised by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, the Taliban went on to capture power in Afghanistan after its western handlers left and the Cold War ended. What followed in Afghanistan was brutal fighting between several Taliban leaders; some of whom under Mullah Omar were able to consolidate a new Afghan state. Common Afghans

suffered during this period of civil war and deal brokering. Osama bin Laden, initially a Taliban recruit, floated al-Qaeda, which, after 9/11, was forced into a partnership with the Taliban in a resistance against the American invasion of Afghanistan. The war with the U.S. destroyed whatever state the Taliban had created and fragmented both organisations — the Taliban and al-Qaeda — leading to different splinters of the same groups in West Asia and South Asia, each practising deadlier violence to distinguish itself from its competitors.

Similarly, [IS](#) was once known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led by the Jordanian terrorist Al Zarqawi, who was killed in 2006 in a targeted attack by the U.S. Air Force. In 2003, AQI began fighting the American occupation of Iraq. Later it merged with other small resistance groups and turned into the Mujahideen Shura Council, before emerging as the ISIS under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Again, IS also emerged as a reaction to western intervention in West Asia and gradually broadened its scope to Syria during the protests against President Bashar al-Assad.

Boko Haram (western education is forbidden) arose in Nigeria in the mid-1990s as a moderate Islamic group in the aftermath of the Biafran War, which left two million people dead between 1967-1970 following the brutal suppression of the people of Biafra by the Nigerian government, supported by prominent western countries and oil companies. Boko Haram started as a movement that criticised the corrupt, oil-wealthy government of Nigeria and became a provider for the poor undertaking state-like welfare functions in northeast Nigeria. As Boko Haram receded into the jungles of northeast Nigeria, successive governments repeatedly ignored the growing radical and militant nature of the group.

The place of Islam

The Taliban, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda and IS are organisations born out of particular configurations of geopolitics and superpower interventions and invasions. They started as resistance movements that were aimed at creating more ideal states and opposed foreign invasions, bad governance and despotic regimes. These groups are trying to create new states. This is why their strategies have been ideological and extremely violent with scant regard for human rights; for state formation is a messy, bloody affair. Just think of Europe between 900 and 1900 AD.

So what about Islam? I suggest here that Islam is the only commonly known ideology and script in these regions in which an articulation of resistance can be embedded, which common folk can understand, practise and stand by. Islam gives these movements legitimacy. It gives them a discourse and it attracts money. It is their USP. The movements are not initially motivated by Islam but by bad and corrupt governments, unequal power relations between countries, invasions by foreign powers and global income inequalities made persistent by the current global economic regime where the metaphorical one per cent has captured half of the world's wealth. Let us not for one moment forget that most Muslims live in democratic countries like India, Malaysia and Indonesia and practise their religions peacefully and within the bounds of law. Let us also not forget

that there are strong overlaps between Muslim countries with terrorist groups aspiring to statehood and where there has been a prolonged war with at least one great power. Similarly, the Algerians who killed 12 people in France last week lived on the margins of French society and were immigrants from a country which had been virtually socially, economically and politically destroyed by France, which many historians agree was always the worst country to get colonised by. One million Algerians died to overthrow French colonialism. This was followed by a postcolonial regime (the FLN state) that willingly killed over 1,00,000 of its own people in order to safeguard its oil interests backed by western powers.

Neo-mercantilism and terror

Let me be clear that historicising these groups does not mean that one condones their actions. None of these groups can find ethical support because indiscriminate violence used by IS, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, the Taliban and their hydra-headed babies has snatched away the human rights of thousands of people. However, we absolutely must understand the current rise of religious extremism as what it really is — the only readily available response in a shrinking political discourse that can challenge, or even attempts to challenge, the current world system. The left is popularly discredited and doesn't find purchase in societies with strong ethnic and religious sentiments, so the fallback ideology of rebellion is mostly religion-based.

If we want to make sense of terrorism we need to launch a strong challenge to the current economic system that breeds and perpetuates global inequality and encourages a neo-mercantilism of sorts where western nations have encouraged and backed despots to preserve economic interests, and have undertaken military invasions to cement control over economic and natural resources.

But we must not, under any circumstance, demand that Muslims all over the world take collective responsibility for the actions of a fraction. In doing so terrorism unwittingly wins, because the whole point about terrorism is to fracture communities, destroy social capital and scare people into changing how they relate to each other. The need of the hour is to think carefully and hard about the factors and variables that have led to the formation of anti-state groups, treat each case as unique and not indulge in religion blaming. Terrorism and insurgency are businesses motivated by greed and grievance as Collier and Hoeffler told us many years ago. Islam, like any other ideology like Maoism (China and India), Marxism (USSR) or Catholicism (Northern Ireland) is the glue that holds the plot together.

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