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Are Islamic Militant Groups a Product of Religion?

Hoda Baytiyeh

For centuries, religion has been manipulated and deliberately misused by regimes, followers, and fundamentalist groups as a tool to mobilize the masses and to justify wars. Since the Afghan war (1978–1992) and Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979, however, Muslim societies have witnessed successive waves of populist Islamic militant groups, funded and supported by local donors and foreign regimes. These groups share similar motives and goals, and regardless of where they operate, their use of violence is a common trait. Although proclaiming as their goals the fight against Western hegemony and the establishment of an Islamic state, most such groups have fallen victim to manipulation and exploitation by regional and global players. In reality, the thirst for funding and support has pressured these groups to compromise their moral and religious values, and they are assimilated into regional and global political schemes.

This essay investigates the motives underpinning the rise of Islamic militant groups and their spread to African countries and shows that they have misused religion to justify violence and to gain local and regional support. By exploring how regional political powers have funded and exploited these groups to destabilize neighboring governments for their own political purposes, it will be argued that although the violence committed by Islamic militant groups seems to have a religious dimension, its main objective is to advance the political agendas of regional players. To that extent, the association these groups promote between religion and violence remains unsubstantiated by any conclusive evidence and so warrants further scrutiny.

The rise of new Islamic militant groups in Africa has been fueled by the ongoing political tensions and turmoil in the Middle East. In Africa, these groups have adopted the ideology of earlier Islamic fundamentalists in Arab countries, including the same rigid misinterpretation of doctrine and an unforgiving attitude toward Western culture and democratic values. The increasing number of failed Arab and African states, however,

and the ongoing struggle between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for influence in the Middle East and surrounding regions has prompted both countries to lend support to Islamic militant groups in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. This rivalry has also influenced tensions and conflicts in Bahrain, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Nigeria, as well as broader competition in North and East Africa.

The political rivalry in the Middle East has strengthened connections and collaboration among these groups, regardless of their geographical location. In Africa, this political chaos has helped current Islamic militant groups to grow to become a major threat to peace, sustainable development, and democracy. All of these groups have inflicted human suffering, committing atrocities that have left thousands of people dead and displaced. In Africa, groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) pose a real threat to African political, social and economic security.

Although the rise of Islamic militant groups has a religious dimension in many Middle Eastern and African countries, political and socioeconomic factors remain the predominant drivers. For example, AQIM exploited feelings of marginalization across northern Mali to launch violent activities. In rural areas especially, anger about the central government's failure to address poverty and a lack of education opportunities has driven AQIM's growth. Exploiting these difficult socioeconomic conditions, AQIM stepped in as an employer and benefactor, providing a source of income for neglected rural communities. In the case of Boko Haram, most of the group's followers viewed it as a protest against political marginalization, neglect, and economic deprivation in northern Nigeria. Similarly, political and economic exclusion among the ethnic Acholi helped to launch the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda. But rather than improving these communities' socioeconomic status, the use of violence and the destabilization of governments has brought only destruction, chaos, and misery in the name of religion.

At the heart of these problems is a lack of democracy, including widespread corruption and mismanagement. Islamic militant groups flourish in poor, corrupted countries where they can exploit and recruit frustrated, poorly educated, and unemployed youth. In the latest Corruption Perception Index, 44 of the 57 African countries are classified as corrupt, including six in the global worst ten. The failure of such states to provide their people with protection and support enables extremists to reinforce their hold on marginalized communities. Using money from their sponsors and from

drug smuggling, arms trafficking, and the black market, they provide community social welfare services that ensure local support and control.

The Middle East and Africa provide favorable conditions for the growth of Islamic militant groups because so many states are either failed or failing, unable either to provide for their people's basic needs or to control their sovereign territory. Almost half of the Arab countries are considered failing states, including five of the worst ten failed states in the world. North and East Africa are no better; according to the latest Failed States Index, Kenya is ranked 22nd surrounded by Somalia (ranked second on that index), South Sudan (ranked first), and the Central African Republic (ranked number three). In total, thirteen of the top twenty failed or failing states are African. Most are characterized by a perceived lack of government legitimacy, deep corruption, and topography that defies border security. Additionally, most are either Muslim states or adjacent to Muslim states. The chaos induced by the Arab Spring has created a power vacuum throughout the Maghreb and Sahel regions, with weak governments, open borders, and ungoverned spaces that have significantly facilitated the spread of radical Islamist groups from the Middle East to Africa.

In different parts of the world at different historical periods, all religions have been exploited by rulers or extremist groups to engage people in violent activities for political purposes. For instance, Buddhism is a religion that aims to enlighten life and rejects the infliction of pain on others. Buddhist monks, however, have been known to encourage violence or even to initiate it. In recent decades, for instance, Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka have committed and encouraged violence against local Christians and Tamils. Similarly, while Christian teachings contain messages of love and peace, its tenets have been used to justify violence in some circumstances. As a case in point, the fifteenth-century Spanish Inquisition is considered a form of state terrorism. Hinduism also promotes nonviolence as a virtue, but its followers advocate war in the face of injustice. Judaism's central beliefs implicate a respect for life's sacredness, but like other religions, its texts have been exploited to justify violence. In the 1940s, Zionist militant groups carried out violent attacks against the British and Palestinians, again exploiting religion to justify violence for political gain. In the same way, Islamic texts can be interpreted in different ways to trigger violence. In recent years, Muslim extremists have exaggerated the Western war against Islam to advocate violent retaliation against the West's purported attacks on Islam.

Given its strong influence on the development of individual and group identity, religion has regularly been exploited to mobilize people to

engage in wars and violent activities. The use of religion to manipulate the masses to support and engage in conflict may conceal wider political motives. Islamic militant groups commonly exploit and misuse religion to radicalize youth. It can be argued that in many cases, people join militant groups or engage in conflict for political or economic reasons while religion is just a means of mobilizing them. For instance, while Hezbollah and other Iran-sponsored Shia militant groups have declared that their interest in the Syrian conflict is to protect Shia holy shrines in Damascus, it seems clear that their main purpose is to support the Syrian regime as a crucial strategic ally of Iran. These militant groups manipulate religion to legitimize this military engagement and the mobilization of thousands of young militants, but the hidden political motive is to defend Iranian strategic interests in the region.

The rise of Islamic militant groups in the second half of the twentieth century has become a worldwide phenomenon. While some attribute the emergence of these groups to core Islamic principles, others believe that it can be accounted for by political and economic factors, including Western interventions in Muslim countries, social injustice, and economic stagnation. Any or all of these factors create a perfect environment for Islamic militant groups to operate and grow. Because religion can be exploited as an effective mechanism for inciting blind loyalty, regional and global players sponsored and funded Islamic militant groups, recruiting young people to fight and die in holy wars as a reliable asset for remote achievement of their own political ambitions.

In the last few decades, government agencies have sponsored and funded militant groups to destabilize neighboring countries, to pressure other governments into making concessions, or to retaliate against interference from other states. For instance, Iran created and supported Islamic militant groups in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon to destabilize and weaken these countries' governments. Iran's recent support for the Houthi in Yemen was designed to destabilize Saudi Arabia. In the same way, some African governments have indirectly supported religious and non-religious militant groups in order to maintain their domestic and cross-border influence.

Sometimes, support for a militant group by a neighboring country has led the affected country to sponsor another group to retaliate against the interfering government. For instance, at different points in time, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Eritrea have supported the Sudan People's Liberation Army against Khartoum. In turn, Khartoum has supported the LRA against Uganda, the Oromo Liberation Front against Ethiopia, and the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement against Eritrea. Following the

Ethiopia–Eritrea war (1998–2000), Eritrea supported various anti-Ethiopian Islamic groups in Somalia who were opposed to the Ethiopia-backed Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Eritrea first backed the Council of Islamic Courts and then the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia and the al-Shabaab group. Eritrea views the TFG as an Ethiopian proxy whose control of Somalia would guarantee Ethiopian hegemony in the Horn of Africa and their indefinite rejection of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border Commission's decision. Eritrea would stop meddling in Somalia once Ethiopia returned occupied Eritrean territory; Ethiopia responded by supporting a coalition of Eritrean dissidents against Eritrea. Somalia also plays this game, and this has developed into a deeply unstable region, with devastating consequences, as Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda have all suffered violence as a result of such interference. In general, militant groups have consistently chosen to serve foreign governments and to commit violence in the political interests of regional political players.

The interest of rich and powerful states in the natural resources of undeveloped countries has prompted widespread deployment of the political strategy of "divide and rule." By destabilizing and dividing these countries along religious and ethnic lines, sectarian conflicts allow more powerful countries to interfere, effectively controlling the political situation. These conflicts seem purely religious or ethnic, and the real political incentives are never mentioned or discussed. For instance, the Afghan war against the Soviet Union in the late 1970s destroyed the country, creating internal and ethnic conflicts. It led to the formation of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, creating the appearance of an Islamic war against atheistic communist nonbelievers. The real reason for this war, however, was the U.S. and Saudi Arabian desire to halt the expansion of communist ideology to oil-rich Arab countries. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States has deliberately established, armed, and funded Sunni militant groups in Iraq to push back against Shiite militias created and funded by Iran to reduce Iran's hegemony over oil-rich Iraq.

The United States has a long history of backing violent Islamic groups. During the Cold War era, for instance, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored and supported Islamic extremist groups. In the 1970s, the CIA used the Muslim Brotherhood as a barrier in Egypt, both to thwart Soviet expansion and to prevent the spread of Marxist ideology across the Arab masses. The United States also supported Sarekat Islam against Sukarno in Indonesia and backed the Jamaat-e-Islamia, an Islamic extremist group, against Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan. During the

1980s, the CIA nurtured Al Qaeda, an Islamic militant group responsible for many terrorist attacks. Robin Cook, the former British foreign secretary, told the House of Commons that Al Qaeda's militants were trained by the CIA and funded by the Saudis to defeat the Russians in Afghanistan.

Relationships between global powers and Islamic militant groups, however, have always been unsteady and temporary, depending on whether or not a particular group in a given region serves their interests. Global and regional powers fund these groups for specific objectives and may deliberately allow them to become a serious threat in order to justify military intervention or invasion. While limiting these groups' capabilities, such interventions will rarely kill them off, as they may subsequently be mobilized for other purposes. America has repeatedly used Islamic militant groups as a foreign policy weapon; ISIS is simply the latest of these. As in the case of Al Qaeda, Western and Arab support for ISIS caused it to grow out of control in 2015. The group defied the orders of its sponsors and declared an independent state.

U.S. policy in the Middle East is guided by security priorities and political interests. While the invasion of Iraq partly satisfied Washington's thirst for oil, ongoing airstrikes in Syria and past economic sanctions against Iran are about protecting its allies. The goal is to deprive enemies such as Hezbollah and Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic militant group, of crucial Syrian and Iranian support. As well as being an instrument to destabilize the Syrian government, ISIS was used to pressure regional powers. Much like Al Qaeda, ISIS was created by the United States as an instrument of terror to shift political influence in the region. A secret Pentagon report revealed that the West saw ISIS as a strategic asset in isolating Assad's regime and halting Shia expansion.

In general, then, regional governments have backed Islamist militant groups as a means of pursuing their own agendas. Leaked documents reveal that, in collaboration with the Arab Gulf states and Turkey, the West intentionally sponsored violent Islamist groups to destabilize the Syrian regime. In the hope of expediting the overthrow of Assad's regime, key U.S. regional partners like Turkey facilitated the flow of recruits and logistical support to Islamic militant groups. Although Turkey targeted Al Qaeda throughout 2012, this policy changed as the Syrian civil war heated up. Seeing this as an opportunity to overthrow the regime in Syria and to prevent the emergence of a strong Kurdish group, Turkey deliberately sponsored Islamic militant groups, including Al Qaeda, to influence regime change in Syria and to attack Kurdish forces in Syria.

Qatar has been backing Islamic militant groups to support its own strategic interests in the region, providing funding of more than three billion dollars between 2011 and 2013. The aim is to oust Assad, who has rejected a natural gas pipeline from Qatar through Syria and Turkey to Europe. Experts and groups in Syria admit that Qatari finance has sustained Islamic militant groups. This means that the Syrian conflict may not be a war for liberty and democracy but a conspiracy on the part of global and regional powers. In sponsoring Islamic militant groups and creating ISIS, their main aim was to realize the natural gas pipeline project. When the feasibility of the pipeline faded, Islamic militant groups were deceived by the sponsoring regional players and were left to fight a losing battle against the Assad regime. Qatar also provided billions of dollars to support the Brotherhood-led government in Cairo and was a key supporter of the group's offshoots in Syria and Libya. Qatar's strategy is designed to support diverse regional Islamic militant groups to secure the transport of gas and to strengthen its political position in the region. Other Islamist militant groups supported and funded by Qatar include Hamas, the Taliban, and the Al-Nusra Front.

The Iranian regime has sponsored a range of Sunni and Shia Islamic militant groups who share their hatred of the West. Sponsored Sunni groups include Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the Taliban. Because Iran's approach is more strategic than ideological, it is willing to work with these Sunni militant groups, allowing them to transit Iran and supporting ISIS in Egypt through Hamas as part of a larger strategy to destabilize Egypt. Despite ideological differences, Iran has tried at certain times to leverage and exploit Al Qaeda to serve the Iranian regional agenda. For example, the 9/11 Commission Report referred to evidence suggesting that more than half of the Saudis engaged in that terrorist action traveled into or out of Iran between October 2000 and February 2001.

Iran has used Hamas to deepen the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians by supporting a rejectionist approach to the peace process. For decades, Iran has provided Hamas with funding, weapons, training, technology, and political support. The ongoing cooperation between Hamas and ISIS in Sinai began when the group's branch there was still known by its previous name, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis. Training and technological knowhow received from Iran facilitated cooperation between Hamas and ISIS, and members of Hamas' military wing have helped to train and equip ISIS operatives in Gaza and in Sinai itself. This could, in turn, enable Iran to open a further indirect front against Israel in addition to those of Hamas and Hezbollah. Although Iran has fought strongly against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, where its strategic interests were

threatened, it supported ISIS in Sinai because a weak and destabilized Egypt is of benefit to Iran's pursuit of hegemony in the Middle East.

Iran has also increased its presence in Africa, as well as funding and arming the Houthi separatist group in Yemen and providing training and logistical support to Islamic underground groups in Bahrain. Supporting loyal Shiite Islamic militant groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere has several benefits for Iran. In particular, it gives Iran leverage against regional rivals like Saudi Arabia, strengthens pro-Iran voices in the region, and increases Iran's influence in some Arab capitals. Moreover, the Syrian regime has at various times supported Islamic militant groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad in Lebanon to pressure Israel to submit to Syrian demands and to increase Syrian hegemony over Lebanon. The Iran-backed Hezbollah, who pressured Israel to withdraw from Southern Lebanon in 2000, was used by the Syrians to again pressure Israel to return the occupied Golan Heights.

In summary, it is clear that corruption, the increasing number of failed states, and the Middle East Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran for control of the region are among the main factors facilitating the rise and spread of Islamic militant groups in the Middle East and Africa. It has been argued that although these groups share the aims of fighting against Western hegemony and establishing a state ruled by Islamic law, they quickly fall victim to manipulative regional powers, who support them financially to further their own political objectives. Although conflicts of interest may arise and a group may get out of control or backfire, regional powers have much to gain by investing in these groups to pressure regimes and destabilize governments.

Throughout this process, religion is victimized and manipulated to facilitate recruitment and to justify conflict or violent activities. This exploitation of religion and of people's religious sentiments serves the ambitions of Western capitalists and regional expansionists. For this reason, the violent acts committed by Islamic militant groups should not be reduced to or blamed on religious motives. Instead, blame must be assigned to regional sponsors, especially corrupt autocratic governments that perpetuate the political and social injustices that keep marginalized communities predominantly poor and uneducated.

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