

In considering any connection between religion, radicalism and terrorism, at least two issues are at play. One is the relationship between word, image and action: the word as derived from scripture, the image one holds of religious piety, and the subsequent action said to be taken in the name of the religion. The other issue is that the vital relationship between them is political, in the broad sense of it being legitimated, mandated and power-oriented.

In practice, these mutual relationships pertain to perception, interpretation and representation. It is the believer's perception of his faith and of the worldly reality around him, his interpretation of the requirements of his religion acting through him in and on that reality, and the representation he then makes of that action. Individuals within that reality may also perceive, interpret and represent the believer's thoughts and actions accordingly.

This session asks how real a nexus between religion, radicalism and terrorism can be. This turns on how the politics of word, image and action is perceived, interpreted and represented; not just by the faithful, but also by others in a heterogeneous worldly reality. Problems arise when what is for one party legitimate perception, interpretation and representation is for another party misperception, misinterpretation and misrepresentation. This happens as much among believers of the same professed faith as between believers and non-believers.

For the purpose of this paper at least, “religion” is taken to mean an organised system of belief pertaining to both worldly and otherworldly pursuits; “radicalism” is when unmitigated values and principles of a belief system are taken selectively to logical, essentialist ends; and “terrorism” is lethal violence directed against innocents, whether deliberately or indiscriminately, to make a political point.

Whither A Nexus?

Current discourse on linkage between belief systems and indiscriminate political violence, real or presumed, refers typically to militant political Islam. However, this framework begins to make sense only in the broader context of a considered nexus between religion, radicalism and terrorism, real or attributed. There are essentially two reasons for this contextualisation.

One, the historical record shows that no particular religion is immune to radicalism, or is necessarily inclined towards or be exclusively prone to terrorism. Between religions, even the notion of relative susceptibility to violent radicalism or terrorism is suspect. Where Islam today may sometimes seem to display a nexus beyond legitimate self-defence, it is only in the present time and given certain minority (mis)interpretations of the faith by some of its politicised adherents, and certain (mis)representations of their acts by others.

Two, there is nothing in the legitimate teaching or established practice of any religion that couples it with radicalism or terrorism. But if militant Islam again looks like

fitting the bill, it does so only in the present time and historical space. Political militancy tends to compound religious arguments to blur distinctions and magnify prejudices.

To investigate any nexus between religion and terrorism, however “radical” or not the adherents of the faith, it is necessary to distinguish between the political and religious dimensions. Where a nexus appears to exist, political and religious concerns tend to have been mixed or merged. When that happens, both the religious piety and presumptions about its radicalism or terroristic expressions need to be re-examined.

The whole question of a “nexus” requires closer scrutiny if firm conclusions are to be drawn. Four sequential phases of events are key in forming this nexus, whether real, alleged or assigned.

The first is consequential: **realities** as they occur are taken as a given or a result of past actions. These are the daily events on the ground, with pre-existing issues, as they impinge on the private lives of individuals. As a result, they are also open to different interpretations relative to the experiences, interests and proclivities of each party.

The second phase is that of **portrayal**, i.e. how these realities are represented or misrepresented. For example, a straight, “secular” portrayal will see a natural disaster or major health threat as a great tragedy requiring assistance. But susceptibility to a religiously inclined perspective may allow for the situation to be framed as divine retribution, or as political sabotage legitimating religiously inspired retaliation.

The third phase involves **perceived realities**, such as they are or have become, or at least as they may be readily understood by the believer. This level of realities differs from the first in having been modulated by intermediaries, such as charismatic leaders, as in the second phase from which it flows. This modulation thus implies all the opportunity and propensity for distortion that can occur.

The fourth phase concerns realities as they are **espoused**. To the religious adherent, the militant actions taken in their realm are often presented as defensive actions, either as an armed resistance or an armed struggle in the furtherance of a divine or other legitimate cause. In being so motivated, believers are typically ready for self-sacrifice in the violence they might foment against others.

When this happens, empathy and support tend to develop between separate struggles by brethren of the faith. A degree of support and cooperation may also develop between different groups engaged in different struggles, so long as they are deemed as aimed against an established authority or dominant status quo.

This can bring together different groups struggling for disparate religious and political causes from different ethnicities and geographical locations. In these cases, what helps to sustain a sense of camaraderie between them is technical innovation in their modus operandi. The suicide bombing as pioneered by Tamil militants in Sri Lanka and adopted by Iraqi militants fighting the US occupation might seem to be an example, except that both groups were engaged in political rather than religious struggles.

The four sequential phases would need to apply for a nexus to exist between religion and radicalism, and between radicalism and terrorism. Where these phases are absent, the claim of there being a nexus is doubtful and at most requires further investigation. A constant priority has to be distinguishing between the supposedly religious and the “merely” political or other struggles of the groups in question. Two examples illustrate the frequently distorted identities of “Muslim terrorist groups”: Abu Sayyaf and al-Qaeda.

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) began as a criminal extortion and kidnap-for-ransom gang in the southern Philippines, and they largely retain that identity despite religiously informed portrayals by others and some of their members. There have been reports of their being akin to a “CIA lost command” or formed by a previous Philippine administration, possibly to discredit the Moro nationalist struggle in Mindanao through terrorist activity and recreate a need for a continued US military presence in South-East Asia.

After gaining independence from the United States in 1946, the Philippine populace rejected the renewal of 44 years of US military presence in 1991. In the same year, the ASG was co-founded by undercover Philippine police agent Edwin Angeles. This move was claimed to be a split from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), although a split had already occurred with the formation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) earlier in 1981.

To this day any difference in religious belief or practice between the ASG and the MNLF or the MILF remains unclear, while the two Moro groups differ with the ASG on its embarrassing banditry: violent methods for criminal ends. The ASG presence in Mindanao did lead to the continued presence of US military personnel as “advisers” in the Philippines. There were later reports that these US forces had participated in combat operations beyond the role of advisers, which was prohibited. Nonetheless, this was on nothing like the scale of their previous presence, as Philippine society remained opposed to their return in previous form.

Osama bin-Laden’s al-Qaeda has used religious or religious-sounding language in its rhetoric, but its aims of removing US military occupation abroad, ending Israeli occupation of Arab lands and removing the present Saudi government establishment are political rather than religious. International Muslim opinion further says al-Qaeda’s violent methods against innocents are unIslamic. Osama and his co-leaders are not Islamic scholars. To what extent, if any, is al-Qaeda Islamic or even religious?

Although groups like Abu Sayyaf and al-Qaeda are terroristic because they clearly engage in terrorist acts, their Islamic credentials are in doubt. Both may claim to be fighting for some (vague) Islamic cause, which may help rally the support of at least some individuals in the Muslim world. The ASG might also have received some early funding from al-Qaeda, as has been alleged.

However, none of that legitimates the claim of either group to being Islamic or religious. Agreeing with their claims and treating their “struggle” as an Islamist one only bolsters their cause, such as it is, by agreeing with their terms of engagement,

quite against the interests of the majority of Muslims. It would also constitute an unfounded and unjustifiable supposition.

Radicalism, Terrorism, Muslims and Others

Given the need to prove an activist group's terrorist credentials as well as its religious standing before supposing that a nexus exists, the lack of evidence for the group's religiosity is astounding. Members of groups like al-Qaeda and the ASG may be Muslims as individuals, whatever the quality of their personal piety, but the Islamic and religious identity of these groups is neither proven nor apparent.

The absence of the necessary evidence to establish a widely supposed nexus is at least as telling as the FBI's admission that it had seen no evidence of Osama bin Laden's involvement in the September 11 attacks. In short, no nexus has ever been proven. And since nothing suggests any evidence of a nexus is forthcoming, even after all this time, it might be said that the absence of a nexus is practically proven.

However, it may still take time for logic and evidence to repudiate fully the established notion that radical religious groups tend towards terrorism as groups. Mainstream media in particular regurgitates commonly held beliefs while elevating them to universal truths. This happens even when evidence exists to refute these beliefs. Media presumptions, (mis)perceptions and (mis)representations abound.

A case in point concerns the supposed susceptibility of believers to the normative quality of subjects in the humanities, including religion, for adherents with higher

education. The physical sciences have a certainty not open to interpretation, and are said to have some degree of immunity from deviationist misinterpretation. The problem, however, was that events proved the opposite.

The number of terrorists in September 11, for example, who had a higher education had undergone training in physical sciences rather than the humanities, including religion. Upon reflection, it has come to be said that if only more radical believers had had an education in the humanities, including religion, things might have been very different.

Now consider how religion in general has fared in relation to radicalism and terrorism. For a more representative result, and given the limits of time and space, we will consider the major religions within the monotheistic Abrahamesque tradition: Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

It is widely acknowledged that Islam has currently reached its worst impasse internationally in relation to radicalism and terrorism. The causes may be many and complex, but it is generally recognised that Islam has had a “better press” in the past. The question of a supposed Islamic “golden age” is beside the point, since that is not necessary to establish that Islam’s image, reputation and achievements had been more evident in history.

Yet regardless of how intractable Islam’s current predicament may be, or how convoluted the problems facing Muslims today, the situation is still transient and the difficulties temporary. Periods of fortune and misfortune come and go throughout

history. The same applies for all belief systems, be they scientific theories, political ideologies or faith-based systems.

Christianity has also had its share of positives and negatives. Its high point of international adventurism came with the Crusades. Yet even with these supposedly heroic exploits came the unspeakable horrors of untold crimes and war crimes. Not only were foreign lands invaded and destroyed, populations were butchered and local people raped and abused.

Consider the original, first Crusade in the 11th century as Christianity's test case: as several Christian chroniclers documented it, the Crusaders even practised cannibalism on the people they fought in Ma'arra (Ma'arat al-Numan), Syria. Although local Christians had also been persecuted, the chief targets of these "Christian soldiers" were Muslims and Jews. The Muslims in Ma'arra ("Saracens") were killed and eaten, with adults boiled in pots and children roasted over open fires.

Although some aspects of these accounts by chroniclers might have been disputed, that cannibalism had been practised is not in doubt. Elsewhere, church-sanctioned pogroms and assorted persecutions, as well as the Inquisition, have happened alongside missionaries accompanying state-sponsored colonial forays. Although these missions had been sold on the premise of bringing "civilisation" to "savages", they often employed violence on a scale which the natives were unfamiliar with.

Christianity today is considerably different, at least nominally so. However, resistance fighters in places like Iraq and Afghanistan are not the only ones to refer to invading

US forces as “Crusaders”. President George W. Bush also referred to the controversial US “war on terror” as a Crusade, even as he launched the invasions and tried to sell them to a wider public. The US-led invasions, which have destroyed more land and killed more people than any other religiously inclined conflict unleashed by Muslims, might also be displaying the kind of nexus between religion and terrorism.

Judaism itself fares little or no better. The massacres of civilians by Israel in more recent times stretch from Deir Yassin to Sabra and Shatilla to Jenin to Gaza and beyond. It might have been possible to identify these atrocities with the political entity of Zionism, rather than the religion of Judaism, except that Israel as the “Jewish state” insists it is the very manifestation of Judaism the religion.

There might still be an argument that a distinction remains between Zionism and Judaism, to allow for criticism of the excesses of one and the exemption of the other. Yet the Zionist Jewish leaders of Israel again insist on equating Zionism with Judaism, while dismissing any criticism as “anti-Semitic.” Given how the state of Israel had been established through the terrorist acts of groups like Irgun and the Stern Gang reveals something of their understanding of their religion. For Israel to continue its violent methods against civilians while invoking Judaism also displays something of the nexus between religion and terrorism, if such a nexus exists between any religion and terrorist acts.

It is likely that the various terrorist acts had never been sanctioned by these religions. However, this is often not how some of these religious adherents see it, while they insist on their authority to speak on their religion and deny non-believers such

authority. Overall, a baseline principle that applies is that where a nexus between religion and terrorism is presumed, that presumption applies to all religions.

A sense of equivalence thus applies, except that unlike Islam, Christianity and Judaism have a central sanctioning authority for their faith. That central authority has traditionally been the church in Christianity, or the state in earlier times before the separation of powers, and the state of Israel for Judaism in the “modern Zionist school.” Since Islam has no central authority, terrorist acts committed in its name can only be committed by the individual Muslims concerned, not by Islam, contrary to the rhetorical claims of the radical militants.

Whether Islam would be in the same situation as the other religions if it had a central authority is a hypothetical point. The answer is therefore unknown, if not also unknowable. However, what seems obvious enough is that the Islamophobia that has developed around political Islam is exaggerated, although aspects of militant Muslims’ political radicalism are not to be underestimated.

It is therefore crucial to distinguish between the political and the religious, if any, aspects of radicalism that tends towards terrorist activity. This is especially so when public knowledge and policy norms habitually assume the political and the religious to be indistinguishable.

One critical way forward is to discontinue such fuzzy assumptions. Groups sporting religious slogans while harbouring a political agenda should be treated politically rather than as religious entities. Pretending to be religious gives them a cloak of

respectability and an extended constituency. The solutions are nearly always political, sometimes military, hardly ever military alone, and never religious.

Factors Inducing Militancy, Terrorism

However much or often religion is invoked in efforts to justify terrorist acts, there is still no religious cause that can appreciably or demonstrably induce terrorism. The Palestinian cause, which lies at the heart of so much Israeli-Arab conflict and which concerns so many Muslims, is still a nationalist cause rather than a religious one.

Granted, there are frequent attempts to use religion for political and various worldly agendas, but these resemble xenophobia in cultivating an “us and them” mindset. In both getting a better grasp of the situation and to help develop solutions, it is necessary to transcend religious readings of political acts along with the religious rhetoric that clouds analysis. This would not only help develop a better understanding of the situation, but also avoid playing into the hands of militants.

In all the regions where radical political Islam is deemed a security challenge, worldly problems impinge visibly on society. The more serious the problems, the stronger the response from political Islam, and vice-versa in a seamless feedback loop. The issues range across political, economic, social, gender and other spheres.

Politically, there are frequent problems with a lack of accountability, adaptability and administrative competence, apart from corruption and crime. These are often summed

up as governance issues common to developing regions. The problems are not unique to Muslim societies, but where they are also prevalent in other places they are not seen and acted upon through a religious filter.

In many Muslim-majority countries today, change continues to be a challenge as does official responses to change. Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia come to mind, among many others. These challenges apply in secular and faith-based environments, whether Muslim or not.

However, given the prescriptive norms and strictures of many Muslim societies today, the problems become highlighted. Then when sharia law is seen as a solution by some and an impediment to progress by others, the problems appear more acute. The situation is similar in Christian societies in the past, which have had a “head start” of several centuries. It appears that faith-based societies take time to settle into more mainstream outlooks with less overtly rebellious elements, underscoring the universality of faiths in their host societies.

Economically, poverty remains an outstanding issue if only one among several. It is debatable how much if at all poverty contributes to radicalisation, since it is said that many militant leaders are far from insolvent. However, it seems more evident that poverty breeds a personal discontent and social desperation against the existing order, making for pools of prospective recruits to militancy. Conversely, if individuals and their families had a better sense of their stake in the existing order, they would be less likely to be enticed to sacrifice themselves for abstract causes.

The common experience of the developing world is that the lack of development to fulfil basic needs and aspirations is an ingredient for political volatility. When development has been promised but not delivered, particularly when corruption is seen as a contributing factor, political turmoil is practically guaranteed. Where such political disgruntlement festers, parts of the population may become vulnerable to the promise of apocalyptic movements. While in the past this took the form of radical leftism to redistribute wealth, today it is more the appeal of political Islam.

Socially, the issues include gender relations, the position of Islamic law provisions, and the status of non-Muslims in Muslim-majority societies. Challenges can usually be found in issues like religious conversion, property inheritance and various expressions of religious piety. While all this may appear to be unique to Muslim societies, many of the issues are universal albeit with different implications elsewhere.

The violence that has developed in South-East Asia – in Aceh, Mindanao and the southern Thai provinces – well bear this out. In all these cases, social, economic and political grievances had been allowed to develop while needs were not met. Corruption and abuse compounded incompetence while governance deteriorated, until the state felt it could respond only by force of arms.

That was a watershed moment that triggered more unrest. By then, opportunities to reconcile, accommodate and pacify had slipped away. When all this happens, forceful responses from distant officials tends only to worsen the situation – again a common development in both religiously informed and secular societies.

Conditions and Determinants

Before assessing the type and extent of a nexus between religion and terrorism, it is important to determine whether a nexus is even possible. Since the problem is terrorism rather than radicalism as such, an investigation need only establish linkage between religion and terrorism, whatever the position of religious radicalism in the equation. Although some factors are common to the different religions in such considerations, several issues differ between them in deciding on the matter. It is useful to examine the conditions and determinants that apply, both in making for a nexus and in discounting its possibility.

Since there is no central sanctioning authority in Islam, a nexus can exist whether or not (either):

- (a) there is a majority of Muslims endorsing the actualisation of a nexus; or
- (b) leaders of the radical group are Islamic scholars, whatever their orientation.

However, a nexus can exist between Islam and terrorism only if both:

- (a) the means of delivering specified goals by the radical group, i.e. terrorist acts, are unequivocally prescribed by core scripture (Koran or Hadith); and
- (b) the ends sought by use of the means are similarly prescribed by the same core scripture. (Otherwise, all else is subjective and personal interpretation.)

Given the foregoing, the goals of the ASG (establishing a cross-border Muslim caliphate in South-East Asia) and al-Qaeda (mentioned earlier) may exclude the prospect of a nexus. There may be Muslim terrorists, but not Islamic terrorism.