

Reassessing the Islam-Terrorism Nexus: Political Instrumentalization, Structural Drivers, and the Philippine Case

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Abstract: *This study critically reassesses the alleged doctrinal link between Islam and terrorism by integrating theological analysis, structural-political theory, and empirical trends from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), with focused examination of the Philippine case. Drawing on classical Islamic jurisprudence, cross-national terrorism research, and conflict analysis of Mindanao, the study evaluates whether terrorism is inherently rooted in Islamic doctrine. The findings demonstrate that mainstream Islamic legal traditions prohibit violence against non-combatants and that terrorism correlates more strongly with structural conditions such as political exclusion, civil conflict, and institutional fragility than with religious identity. Evidence from Mindanao further illustrates that historical marginalization and governance dynamics better explain extremist mobilization than theological causation. The study concludes that terrorism is best conceptualized as a strategic form of political violence that may employ religious rhetoric but is not doctrinally determined.*

Keywords: Islam-terrorism nexus, structural conflict, Global Terrorism Database (GTD), radicalization, Islamophobia

1. Introduction

Terrorism has emerged as a pivotal issue in modern global security dialogues. Public and political discourses often link acts of terrorism to religious extremism, especially in relation to Islamist militancy. Despite extensive academic research complicating this assumption, public debate and some policy frameworks continue to treat Islamist violence as evidence of theological causation rather than political instrumentalization (Cavanaugh, 2009; Gunning & Jackson, 2011). This article inquires: To what extent does empirical and theological evidence support the claim that Islam is inherently linked to terrorism? It contends that linking Islam with terrorism constitutes a categorical fallacy.

In modern security discussions, Islam is often depicted as intrinsically associated with terrorism, a viewpoint that has sparked considerable academic discourse concerning the political, social, and structural origins of violent extremism. Terrorism is most effectively characterized as a strategic manifestation of political violence (Hoffman, 2006). Although extremist individuals may utilize religious rhetoric, religion generally serves as an identity resource and legitimizing framework rather than a doctrinal impetus for violence (Juergensmeyer 2017; McCauley & Moskalenko 2017), indicating that the motivations for terrorism are often rooted in political and social grievances rather than purely religious beliefs. This study utilizes a narrative analytical framework that incorporates theological analysis, secondary databases on terrorism, and literature on violence in Mindanao.

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) provides data to contextualize violence trends, while Islamic jurisprudential literature and political conflict studies are examined to determine if terrorism is doctrinally grounded in Islam. Addressing the structural and political roots of violent extremism remains essential for developing more effective and balanced counterterrorism policies, as these roots often contribute to the perpetuation of violence and can inform

strategies that not only mitigate immediate threats but also promote long-term stability and peace. Nevertheless, numerous scholars contend that these assumptions overly simplify the intricate causes of militant violence. Structural factors, including political marginalization, conflict environments, and socio-economic grievances, frequently exert a greater influence on the formation of militant movements than theological doctrine, as they create conditions that foster discontent and mobilization among affected populations.

2. Terrorism as a Political Tool

Mainstream terrorism research says that terrorism is the planned use or threat of violence against non-combatants for political reasons (Hoffman, 2006; Schmid, 2013). This term is ideologically neutral and applies to nationalist, leftist, right-wing, ethno-separatist, and religiously framed groups. Rapoport's (2004) "wave theory" contextualizes modern religiously motivated terrorism within a larger historical progression of political violence. The "religious wave" that began in the late 20th century includes people from many different religious backgrounds. This demonstrates that religious framing extends beyond Islam. Religious discourse can sanctify political discord by contextualizing terrestrial issues within a cosmic framework (Juergensmeyer, 2017), which can lead to the manipulation of religious narratives to justify political agendas and mobilize followers. Nonetheless, sacralization does not create doctrinal necessity. Instead, it shows how identity is used strategically in larger political fights (Fox, 2018), illustrating that the manipulation of religious identity can serve to mobilize support for political agendas, which may lead to increased instances of political violence. So, terrorism should be looked at differently than theology.

In addition to theological interpretations, scholars of political violence increasingly point out the importance of structural and socio-political factors in influencing militant mobilization. Studies on terrorism indicate that grievances

stemming from governance failures, social marginalization, and geopolitical conflicts frequently offer more compelling explanations for radicalization than solely religious motivations. Research on terrorist networks indicates that numerous militant organizations arise from social connections and political contexts rather than only from ideological mandates (Marc Sageman, 2004). This viewpoint asserts that the perceived connection between Islam and terrorism is more accurately seen because of political narratives and security discourses, rather than an intrinsic characteristic of Islamic theology.

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach combining narrative literature review and secondary data sources to reassess the commonly asserted link between Islam and terrorism.

3. Islamic Law and Civilian Protection

A key assertion in Islamic terrorist rhetoric is that Islamic doctrine endorses indiscriminate violence. Classical Islamic jurisprudence does not support this argument. Significant Sunni and Shia legal traditions have traditionally governed military conflict with ethical limitations. Juristic literature delineates the parameters of lawful warfare and categorically forbids the killing of non-combatants (Abou El Fadl, 2005). The safeguarding of innocent life is a fundamental tenet in Islamic legal and moral philosophy. Extremist interpretations signify selective and de-contextualized readings that deviate from the prevailing jurisprudential consensus (Hafez & Mullins, 2015), often misrepresenting the core principles of Islamic teachings that emphasize peace and justice. Although violent groups may assert Islamic sanction, verbal invocation does not confer theological authority, as mainstream Islamic scholars and texts emphasize the sanctity of life and the prohibition of violence against innocents. Consequently, theological evidence fails to validate the assertion that terrorism is inherent to Islam.

4. Structural Factors Influencing Terrorism

If terrorism is not predominantly motivated by religious doctrine, what factors contribute to its emergence? Empirical research consistently finds structural-political circumstances as major predictors: Political oppression, weakness of the state, situations of civil strife, unfair governance, and intervention from outside—cross-national studies demonstrate that terrorism is concentrated in areas undergoing civil conflict and characterized by fragile institutions, rather than in communities mostly defined by religious affiliation (Findley & Young, 2012; Piazza, 2009). Research indicates that poverty alone cannot consistently predict terrorism (Krueger & Malečková, 2003). Political marginalization and institutional instability appear to have a more significant correlation with severe mobilization (Kalyvas, 2006). Religion may facilitate collaboration among individuals; nevertheless, the underlying motivations are predominantly political and structural, as evidenced by the fact that many terrorist groups often use religious rhetoric to further political goals and mobilize support.

5. Trends from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

The Global Terrorism Database (START, 2023) offers long-term information on terrorist attacks around the world. There are a few patterns that are important: Politically unstable and conflict-affected areas are the most common locations for terrorist violence. Many countries that experience a high number of incidents are Muslim-majority states currently facing civil conflict. In these situations, the civilian victims are often Muslims.

These results make it harder to tell stories that paint Islam as naturally violent. If Islam were inherently violent, it would be improbable for Muslim civilians to represent a significant percentage of worldwide terrorism casualties. The GTD favors structural-conflict theories over religious determinism (Findley & Young, 2012).

To enhance methodological rigor, the analysis integrates incident-level data from the Global Terrorism Database with qualitative conflict scholarship and regional case studies, facilitating the identification of persistent structural patterns in militant mobilization across various analytical levels (LaFree & Dugan, 2007; Findley & Young, 2012; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

5.1 Methodological Clarification

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach combining a narrative literature review and secondary data analysis. The research examines academic literature on terrorism studies, political violence, and Islamic jurisprudence to evaluate the theoretical foundations of the Islam–terrorism nexus. Key scholarly works addressing religious violence, radicalization processes, and political instrumentalization of religion were systematically reviewed to identify dominant explanations for militant mobilization.

In addition to scholarly literature, the study references publicly available datasets such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to contextualize empirical patterns of terrorism. The Philippine case, particularly the historical conflict in Mindanao, is used as an illustrative example to examine how structural factors—such as political marginalization, economic inequality, and regional conflict dynamics—may contribute to militant activity. This qualitative analytical framework allows the study to assess whether terrorism attributed to Islamic groups reflects theological doctrine or broader political and structural conditions. The Philippine instance exemplifies the application of multi-level radicalization dynamics, facilitating the integration of various empirical data under a unified analytical framework (Findley & Young, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2019; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

5.2 Data Reliability and Reporting Bias

This research includes incident-level data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) managed by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START 2023). The GTD constitutes one of the most extensive open-source datasets of global terrorist

occurrences. The database primarily relies on publicly available media reports and secondary documentation. The dataset may exhibit reporting bias, underreporting in distant or conflict-affected regions, and inconsistency in event classification across different areas and timeframes (LaFree & Dugan, 2007; Schmid, 2013; START, 2023). The inherent difficulties in interpreting the findings lead to the use of GTD data mostly for identifying broad factual trends rather than establishing precise causal linkages, which is particularly evident in the context of the Philippine case, where political exclusion in Mindanao complicates the analysis of violence and conflict dynamics.

6. The Philippine Case: Mindanao and Political Exclusion

The Philippines exemplifies a relevant empirical case. Mindanao has seen insurgency from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and later extremist groups (Abuza, 2003; McKenna, 1998). The origins of warfare include colonial acquisition of Moro areas, land dispossession, exclusion from political processes, responses by militarized regimes, and disparities in socioeconomic status. Both transnational terrorist groups and local clan and government issues precipitated the 2017 Marawi siege (Lara & Schoofs, 2013). The 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro and the creation of BARMM show how political compromise helped lower tensions. The scenario in the Philippines illustrates that extremist groups typically emerge as a reaction to political isolation, governance failures, and political exclusion.

Current academic discourse in terrorism studies emphasizes the necessity of differentiating between religious rhetoric and the tactical employment of religion by militant groups. Entities functioning in war zones often articulate their political aims using religious rhetoric to galvanize support and validate their activities. This rhetorical style does not necessarily indicate that the underlying intentions are theological, as militant groups may use religious language primarily to mobilize support for their political objectives rather than to promote religious beliefs. Religion frequently serves as a symbolic resource for articulating political grievances and identity conflicts within larger conflict contexts (Richard Jackson, 2016).

7. Religion as a Source of Identity

Social movement theory posits that a common identity enhances collective action by reinforcing group cohesion and mobilization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Religion can offer symbolic resources, ethical narratives, and assertions of moral legitimacy that individuals may utilize in political conflicts. Extremist organizations may utilize religious rhetoric to validate authority, enlist adherents, articulate political grievances, and ethically rationalize violence. The instrumental utilization of religion for mobilization does not inherently suggest that violence is doctrinally prescribed or fundamentally embedded in religious belief (Cavanaugh, 2009). Religious narratives serve as interpretive frameworks that articulate and mobilize existing political disputes and social grievances.

8. Implications for Policy

If we perceive terrorism as theologically determined, our responses concentrate on monitoring and suspicion based on identity. If terrorism is viewed as politically motivated violence arising from societal structures, then solutions should focus on the following aspects: Revisions to governmental operations encompass political structures that facilitate inclusive conflict resolution and foster economic and societal progress, such as implementing policies that promote dialogue among diverse groups and investing in community development initiatives. Engagement in the community. The experience in the Philippines indicates that negotiated political inclusion may be more effective in diminishing rebel mobilization than solely militaristic strategies, as it addresses underlying grievances and promotes stability through dialogue and cooperation among various political factions.

The study's findings indicate that counterterrorism measures ought to transcend simplistic religious interpretations and focus on the systemic factors that foster violent extremism. Policymakers and researchers need to recognize that issues like political exclusion, economic inequality, and ongoing regional conflicts often have a bigger impact on the rise of militant groups than religious beliefs. Future study should investigate localized conflict dynamics, especially in areas like Mindanao, to formulate more sophisticated strategies for peacebuilding and counter-radicalization.

9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the presumed doctrinal linkage between Islam and terrorism lacks theological and empirical support. Classical Islamic jurisprudence explicitly restricts violence against non-combatants, while cross-national evidence indicates that terrorism correlates more strongly with structural conditions such as civil conflict, political exclusion, and institutional fragility than with religious affiliation. The Philippine case further illustrates that governance dynamics and historical marginalization provide more compelling explanations for extremist mobilization than religious causation. Terrorism should therefore be understood as a strategic form of political violence that may appropriate religious symbolism but is not inherently rooted in Islamic doctrine. Analytical precision in distinguishing religion from political violence remains essential for both scholarly integrity and effective policy design. These findings indicate that enduring counter-terrorism strategies should prioritize the resolution of structural grievances, the enhancement of inclusive governance, and the promotion of conflict-sensitive development, rather than solely attributing political violence to religious doctrine (Findley & Young, 2012; Kruglanski et al., 2019; Schmid, 2013). Scholars in critical terrorism studies have highlighted the necessity of analyzing political settings and structural constraints instead of attributing violence exclusively to religious belief systems (Jackson, 2016).

Future study may investigate how local governance changes, inclusive political institutions, and community-based peacebuilding programs can mitigate the structural factors that facilitate extremist recruitment.

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