

The many facets to extremism in the Islamic world

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“Islamic extremism is not monolithic.” In this file photo, people gather around a Church after a bomb blast in Potiskum, Nigeria.

To imagine that there is a single, religious rationale to the terror that is rocking the Islamic world is to miss its complex underbelly.

For well over a decade, many so-called experts have focussed their searchlights on the religious stimuli for the extremism and the accompanying tumult that have roiled much of the Islamic world. The phenomena were interpreted either as a ‘crusade against Christianity’ or a ‘Jihad against the idolaters’, or a ‘war against irreligious rulers’, or a ‘religious duty against apostates’. The use of such evocative terms was convenient. To the perpetrators, it was an attractive war-cry to rally the faithful and convert them into the mujahids (holy warriors) imparting them with a deeper sense of mission and invoking the glorious history of Islamic conquests. It also lent religious authenticity to the cause and burnished the personal charisma of the leaders. To those on other side of the divide, it helped demonise the opponents by labelling them as medieval anarchists or fanatics.

To the so-called experts, the religious lexicon was a godsend. Just when the Cold War ended, Islamic extremism provided them an unending supply of esoteric glossary, both ill-understood and prone to subjectivity. Soon, there was a prolific industry spinning seemingly erudite theories on the subject, suitably peppered with Islamic jargon.

This search for a Universal Theory of Islamic Extremism is, however, misdirected, as the deaths and mayhem pile up from Paris to Bali. The reality, as always, is more complex and far more prosaic. Without denying the role of religion, there may be other drivers too, at play singly or in concert, that have impacted the rise of Islamic extremism.

Ethnicity

Sociological divisions such as tribes and castes often predate organised religions, including Islam, the last of the major religions. In some corners of the contemporary Islamic world, the hold of ethnicity on populations is often comparable to that of religion. It is not an either-or situation, with religion often infused with long-prevalent tribal customs and forming a complex mosaic of values and practices that provide identity and cohesion to social groups.

For instance, Boko Haram's main catchment area is the Kanuri tribe in north-eastern Nigeria, as well as the three neighbouring countries of Niger, Cameroon and Chad. The area of operations of Boko Haram is predominantly Sunni Muslim, but the tightly-knit operational core comprises mainly of Kanuris, who hark back to their golden pre-colonial era. The Kanuris were a proud civilisation till the early 20th century, who gained riches and power with their control of trans-African land trade routes.

The Boko Haram leadership, including its supremo Abubakar Shekhau, has tried to widen its reach by using the Hausa language – the regional lingua franca – without any spectacular results so far. Hausa co-religionists remain sceptical about the Boko Haram. Thus, while experts may pontificate about the implications of Shekhau declaring allegiance to the Daesh Caliphate, the ground reality is predicated on Kanuri tribalism.

Similarly, although reams have been written on the phoenix-like rise of the Daula Islamiya fi Iraq wa Sham (the Islamic State in Iraq and Lavant, better known by its Arabic acronym Daesh) and a grand multinational coalition is struggling to contain it, its tribal linkages are rarely mentioned.

Daesh has leveraged the Shammar network, believed to be the largest and most powerful tribe of the West Asia. The Shammar are based in Hail in northern Saudi Arabia but with followers and sub-tribes in Iraq, Jordan, Syria and even Turkey. At its peak, the Shammar and their cohorts ruled much of the Arabian Peninsula and southern Iraq. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was a Shammar from his mother's side. While Shammars can be found on both sides of the Daesh conflict, many Gulf Arabs allegedly bankrolling the organisation are believed to be linked to the Shammar. For instance, the perpetrators of the two bombings of the Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia last month were from Hail.

Political misgovernment

Islamic tumult can often be traced back to governance issues. Despite a nominal democracy, many of these countries have essentially been dictatorships backed by either armed forces, or by a dominant tribe or clique. The system has usually lacked participation and plurality, and is marked by maladministration, endemic corruption and repression. These factors, coupled with dire economic conditions, have created a combustible combination.

In the Maghreb countries of North Africa such as Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, this phenomenon came to be called Hogra or the impunity that the ruling class enjoyed, and was deeply resented by the rest. Once this discontent was breached, the Hogra class tried to repress it with force. The resultant political dynamics was exploited by the religious groups, which were often the only organised opposition with a degree of legitimacy. Once in power, these religious groups or their hurriedly organised political avatars frequently proved either clueless or inept in running the country and quickly lost their Messianic appeal. Their failure provided an opportunity to the more hardline Islamists. In reality, religious extremists played a highly opportunistic role, but their contribution was played up by both sides of the divide.

Power vacuum

The perceived lack of a strong central authority, in countries such as Somalia after Siad Barre or Libya after Muammar Qaddafi, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal, was seen as an open invitation for motley groups to fill the political void. Most of the times, they have created a rogue fief using Islamism as a flag of convenience — for instance, Somali pirates with Al-Shabaab. Subsequently, however, the tail has often wagged the dog.

Tactical opacity

The stated agenda and tactics of many of these groups seem bizarre. Daesh and Boko Haram, for instance, have declared themselves Islamic Caliphates, a catch-all phrase. At its peak, Boko Haram spoke of Islamising all of Nigeria, Africa's most populous country. Both groups frequently indulge in brutal beheadings, kidnapping of women, burning prisoners in cages, etc. The behaviour appears more like 'shock and awe' tactics to impress supporters and intimidate opponents, and bears scant resemblance to any strand of Islam. At this stage, their conduct looks like badly-enacted psychological warfare rather than any drive towards puritanical Islam.

Geopolitical outreach

This factor is perhaps the easiest to understand. A foreign sponsor uses Islam as a Trojan horse for an exercise in expansionism. Pakistan's long-standing backing for the Mujahidin and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and for motley militant groups in Kashmir is an obvious example of this strategy. During the Iran-Iraq war, both sides used Islam to justify their cause. Even non-Muslim powers have not been averse to using Islam as justification. During World War I, the U.K. initiated a call for jihad against Ottoman Turkey by Sharif Hussein of the Holy Makkah. The CIA openly funded the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Red Army. In such cases, the precise mix between religious and secular motives is often calibrated, depending on the targeted audience.

It is, clear, therefore, that Islamic extremism is not monolithic. During the long Cold War, the West often painted the Comintern in similar simplistic and exaggerated terms, making various errors of judgement in the process. Islamic extremism is a serious threat with an impact well beyond its direct theatre of operations. However, ignoring the nuances of the various stimuli that fuel it would only amount to repeating history, with similar outcomes.

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