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Recently, there has been renewed interest in the sharp rise of terrorist attacks throughout the world being carried by terrorist groups that connect themselves with religion. This phenomenon brought into surface the question whether religious extremism could lead to terrorism or not. More specifically, the aspect that terrorism is connected with Islam has attracted a large following in the West.

Going back to the 1990s and mass casualties of Al Qaeda and most importantly the 9/11 attacks in 2001, it is obvious that this period was the beginning of a great reaction of the western world with the "War on Terrorism" that the United States and its allies started in the aftermath of the attacks.

However, the American government and the other western powers have been criticized by some scholars and experts that the "War on Terrorism" changed over time to a "War against Islam". George Bush in his speech after the attacks claimed that "Americans are asking: Who attacked our country? The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as al Qaeda. They are the same murderers indicted for bombing American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, and responsible for bombing the USS Cole.

Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world - and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere." According to this speech, "radical beliefs" are being the main purpose of Al Qaeda and its allies; however there are scholars that believe that behind the cover of religion, the main aims are political, social and economical.

First of all, it is important to give some definitions in order to understand better the meaning of "religious terrorism" and "religious extremism". As Juergensmeyer (2003) explains, religious terrorism is the one "for which religion provided the motivation, the justification, the organization, and the world view". More specifically, religious terrorism is the type of terrorism that is connected with religion in order to justify its atrocity and recruit more fighters in the name of God. This type of terrorism has been characterized as the "fourth wave of terrorism",

where lethality is higher and the aim is to target the materialistic western world that is opposed to the religious one. Although religious violence is not a new phenomenon and can be found even in the ancient world (for example the Zealots), so far, however, there has been little in depth discussion about it. However, because of the rise of transnational and international terrorism and more specifically the Islamic fundamentalism that leads to terrorist attacks in the West and the East during the last decades, more and more scholars are trying to understand further the relation between those two. Religious extremism is the extreme expression (sometimes with a violent way) of a religious ideology that an ordinary religious person would not express.

Religious extremism and fundamentalism create the path that leads to terrorism. More specifically, fundamentalism's characteristic is the radical ideology which is connected to religion most of the times; while the term has also a political character and motivates to the return to an old and pure way of life. Of course, not all fundamentalists are violent or terrorists, but as we are going to analyze when fundamentalism and religious radicalization find the appropriate ground terrorism can be born.

At this point, we should mention the ideologies that are connected with Islam and motivate the modern "jihad". First of all, salafism is an ideology that opposes the modern culture of Islam and incites Muslims to return to an old period of time when the true Islam was severe. Salafism was a peaceful political and religious movement at first but some events changed the peaceful nature of the movement into a violent one. It is of high importance to mention the words of Emanuilov and Yashlavsky "…jihad was associated with anti-colonial struggle and national liberation movement"; that proves that jihad did not mean a war against the infidels based on religion, but, a war against occupation, based on political reasons.

Salafism was spread rapidly during the years and led to the creation of groups (e.g. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) that affected the global Islamism and gave birth to radical ideas that were including violence and were the inspiration for many terrorist organizations. Specifically, Sayyid Qutb one of the instigators of Osama Bin Laden was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and his ideas of jihad not only against the West but also against the Muslim governments that have been affected by the Western models (such as Turkey with Ataturk), were the motivational force for the creation of Al Qaeda.

All these, have as a result the modern aspect of jihad that terrorists use in order to target not only the unbelievers as those who are not Muslims, but also the unbelievers as those who do

not embrace the real Islam. Examples are the terrorist attacks in Muslim countries in order to force the populations to follow the terrorists' way of life.

But, the question that emerges is whether Islam as a religion is violent. It is widely known that religious terrorists that attack populations (most of the times the attacks are suicide missions), act in order to feel close to God and sacrifice their selves in the name of Allah. Therefore, in all the recent attacks in Europe, America, Israel but also Muslim countries such as Turkey, Syria, etc., terrorists before blast their selves shout "Allahu Akbar" which means God is great. It is believed that after that they will go to heaven (what Muslims call "Jannah") where they will be awarded for what they did on earth. The "jihad" or the "holy war" as some mention, is for them a war against the infidels; those who do not embrace the religion of the true Islam.

However, jihad has a lot of meanings. More specifically, there are two nations of jihad; one violent and one non- violent. The jihad could mean the war against the evil in one hand, which means the struggle against those who have humiliated and threatened the Muslims throughout the world and in the other hand the desire for a good and moral life. During the time, Muslim jurists and others who had the power to influence the populations of Muslims translated the jihad in a way that embraces the war against the far enemy (the West) and motivated people to riot in order to create the "dar al Islam" (the land of Islam) which would include all Muslim nations in one. Additionally, terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State in order to extenuate their actions used the meaning of jihad as an excuse in order to fight against the Western power.

The attacks of Al Qaeda against the United States were not a religious matter but a general abhorrence against the West and the opinion of Osama Bin Laden that an attack on United States' territory could force to leave the American troops from the Arab territories and the "holy land" of Israel. Bin Laden, one of the most hated people in the West, is an example of the use of religion in order to motivate Muslims to a "holy war" against the great enemy (the United States). Born and raised in a strict religious environment in Saudi Arabia and educated by some of the "fathers of Jihad" (Sayyid Qutb), Bin Laden lived the Six Days War between Israel and Arab countries, the occupation in Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, the Iranian Revolution and the American invasion in Saudi Arabia.

These events and most specifically the last one led Bin Laden in extremism and radicalization and made him the most wanted terrorist in the United States and the whole western world. Of course, this does not mean that Laden's actions are justified but it is a way to show that sometimes religion extremism is a product of incidents connected to politics. However,

Hoffman (2006) claims that Al Qaeda's main purpose is not politics but religion and that in the 1990s religious terrorism is being increased more than ever. But, it should be mentioned again that although religion can be sometimes the motivation or the fire for an attack, the main reasons are others.

So, what is really important to be underlined is that Islam is as peaceful as other religions; such as Christianity and Judaism. Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda and its branches all over the world do not represent the real religion of Islam. They are radicals that use the name of Islam in order to fight their enemies. At this point, it is important to mention some arguments. It is well known that women in Saudi Arabia and other hard line Muslim societies have minor role and they are restricted in their lifestyle.

However, Islam is a religion that protects women and considers them as valuable and precious members of the society. But, one characteristic argument that shows how radical groups "violate" religion is the way that ISIS uses women within its territory. It is known that the jihadists of the Islamic State use women for sexual slavery and organized rape. Human Rights Watch has recorded hundreds of examples of Muslim women or women of other religions (e.g. Yezidi women in Iraq) who have been rapped and sold to ISIS fighters (2015).

When ISIS occupies a new territory, the females who used to live there are being carried to slavery houses in Syria or Iraq and are being used for sexual satisfaction or marriage. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the fact that suicide attacks are the main weapon for terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Al Qaeda. Although suicide is forbidden in Islam, the terrorist organizations separate suicide from martyrdom. More specifically, according to Zawahiri a Muslim cannot kill himself because of psychological problems but dying in the name of God is not a sin, it is martyrdom and will lead the martyr to Heaven.

Of course, the psychological factor is also very important when it comes to radicalization. It is crucial to think deeply what are the main reasons that could force someone to be radicalized and what is the way until someone can be fully radicalized. There are those who insist that people who get involved with terrorism are coming from a poor background with no education and they are a tool in the hands of the system.

However, according to researches after the 9/11 attacks it was proved that a great percentage of terrorists in the Middle East are coming from wealthy families and they have an education background. If then, poverty or lack of education are not (most of the times) the reason to terrorism what is it? There are many scholars that insist that people who are getting involved in

religious violence are mentally unstable. For example, a great number of academics have stated that most women in terrorist communities are emotionally or mentally disabled.

More specifically, although Al Qaeda has proven during its history that female members are not welcome in their group they recruit women- who according to research are mentally disabled- as suicide bombers. The debate about mentally disabled female terrorists has gained fresh prominence with many arguing that these women are as stable as men with no psychological problems. At this point we are coming again to the conclusion that, sometimes radicalization that could lead to terrorism is a result of the counterterrorist tactics that the governments have adopted. To make this clear it is useful to mention that the "War on Terrorism" by the United States and the policies that the West was and is still using against Islamist terrorism have the opposite results.

A person passes through some stages in order to be radicalized. These stages include the acquaintance with the organization, when he is trying to find more about the organization and its purposes; nowadays people use the social media such as Facebook and Twitter for this aim and of course it is easier to learn more about the ideology if there is a way to meet other people who have the same ideology (e.g. family members, friends etc.).

Previous research has established that a great number of foreign female jihadists travelled to Islamic State's territory and embraced the holy war while they were recruited through the Internet. Women are trying to recruit other women from Europe and the USA through the social media and persuade them that the only meaningful life is the one in Shaam (Syria). Then there is a period of time that the person is trying to assimilate this ideology in his life by accomplishing some steps (e.g. dresscode, music etc) until his final radicalization.

In some cases and in areas where the anti- Western feeling is strong, getting involved in terrorism transfuses respect and status in the community. Dying in the name of God and in order to kill as more enemies as possible is encouriging for religious terrorists and especially those who commit suicide bombings. Of course, the personal experiences of people who have seen a family member or someone close to them dying or being tortured by the enemy make them being more likely to join radical organizations and become terrorists.

There are scholars, who mention that religious extremism is a serious cause of terrorism. Their argument is that the globalization and the socioeconomic evolution can threaten the characteristics of some groups throughout the world that have been characterized of strict rules and governance based on their religion (e.g. Islam). As a result of this cultural crisis (or "identity

crisis"), these groups react and are led by extremism. The argument of Munroe and Moghaddem does not prove that the difference in religions or the orders of God and the Islamic tradition are the reasons why terrorists attack.

To be more specific, as has already been mentioned the reasons seem to be political and socioeconomic. Globalization and the improvement of technology lead to a world with similar behaviors where different cultures are hard to survive. This social change brought into surface the turn to extremism that has its purpose to "destroy" the current world and rebuilt it. Hence, it is not the religion itself that brings violence but the historical changes that affect the relationship between religious and secular world. This is the reason why the distinction between religious and secular terrorism is difficult and most of the terrorist groups that have been labeled as religious (e.g. Al Qaeda, Hamas etc.) are also secular.

What are the characteristics of religious terrorist groups? First and foremost, Islamic terrorism's goal is the creation of a nation for all Muslims, an Islamic State. In contrast, secular terrorists' goal is to change the current political status quo. But, the religious goals of the Islamic terrorism tend to be utopian. Although ISIS has managed to gain some territories in Syria and Iraq and create a so-called Caliphate, its power has already been reduced and some of these territories have been liberated. Furthermore, those long term goals do not hamper the accomplishment of short term goals that could have some political features.

An example could be Hamas; an organization that has been characterized as terrorist from the West and it is based in Palestine. Hamas is a religious motivated terrorist group but has also a secular character and although it is an Islamist movement, it is also a political player that is acting against Israel and its policy. In addition, secular terrorist groups such as the Irish Republic Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland and Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany had some characteristics of religion focused terrorist groups; for example the IRA has also a religious inspiration if one considers that they were Catholics and RAF was using symbolic violence which is a characteristic of the religious terrorist groups.

Also, although Al Qaeda is a terrorist group that claims that its attacks have a symbolic character in order to fight the West, the organization has used strategic violence during its attacks. More specifically, the 9/11 attacks and their accomplishment was the result of a plan that was under carefully consideration and preparation for years by Bin Laden and few of his partners. Secondly, religion focused groups are acting under the guidance of the God that will reward them or punish them in the afterlife. The "fourth wave" of terrorism or the "new terrorism" that religion is one of its main characteristics, has been mentioned as more violent

against the infidels with more victims that do not belong in the political elite but are whole populations.

This type of violence is said that it is inspired by God and it is characterized by the lack of morality and extremism. James Veitch (2002) has remarked, "When religion empowers political terrorism then the terrorism apparently has no limits and acknowledges no boundaries." For religious terrorists the idea of sacrificing in the name of God gives them the sparking to "cause as much destruction as possible". As a counterargument, we should mention that Hamas and Hezbollah that have been characterized as religious terrorist groups have used less lethality than other secular groups, such as PKK in Turkey.

Because of the close relationship between Islam and politics, it is very difficult to discern the religious terrorist groups and the secular ones. Islam is a religion that has also a political aspect, so terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State not only have characteristics of the secular terrorist groups of the "old terrorism" but also aim to political goals in their agenda.

The political aspect of Islam can make the debate about religion and terrorism even more complicated. The separation of state and religion is a phenomenon that is opposed to Islam and the eastern cultures. Religion has the first role in the Muslim states and affects all the aspects of everyday life which is totally different to what happens in the West. Hardcore Muslims (not all of them are terrorists) tend to object to the separation of State and Quran because in that way they believe that the society will degenerate.

Many politicians, scholars, experts of terrorism and international affairs especially in the West wondered if the freedom of religion could lead to terrorism and whether it is possible or not to sacrifice some of our freedoms in order to ensure our security. This idea is complicated and would bring more violence in the global system. More specifically, maybe the real freedom of religion and the respect of human rights could be the solution to the problem. It is quite obvious that the war and the violence against the populations of the Arab world bring more violence.

By demonizing certain societies and especially Muslim and therefore legitimate their actions in their territories, liberal governments have achieved the increase of terrorism in Europe and all over the world. In order to understand this further, we should attach importance to the fact that Islamist religious terrorism (there are also extremist groups in other religions but Islam is the one that has taken more significance in our days), is first and foremost a political movement. The characteristics of the so called religious terrorist groups could also be characteristics of secular terrorism.

The increase of lethality is not a phenomenon that is connected with religion but is the outcome of the counterterrorist tactics that the governments are using in the modern world. More specifically, the increase of technology and the use of experts in counterterrorism lead terrorists to the increase of violence in order to achieve more lethality and better results. In addition, it is important to mention that these characteristics do not befit to all religious terrorist groups.

For example, the atrocities that the Al Qaeda in Iraq (today is the so called ISIS) has committed, were against the ideology of Osama Bin Laden and core Al Qaeda because Al Zarqawi was extremely violent against Shiites Muslims. This led to the hostile relations between ISIS and Al Qaeda even though both of them are Islamist terrorist organizations. Furthermore, the separation between religious and political targets is wrong if someone takes into consideration that the biggest aim of Al Qaeda was the creation of a Caliphate and not the attacks in the West as it is going to be mentioned.

The Arabic and Muslim world is an area with a geopolitical significance not only for the West but also for the East. The oil wells and the plethora of resources render these countries desired from their competitors. The Western occupation and especially the American one, has created an anti- western feeling and more specifically hostility against the West and its culture. As Goodwin mentions, religious terrorism is nothing more than an ideology which indicates that the enmity against the West is not because of the difference of the religion but because of the civilian support with any means for the enemy government.

Of course, if terrorists achieve their political aims then they could also achieve their religious goals; the creation of a state that the Islamic law (Shariah) will be implemented. In order to create this Caliphate, terrorists should first oust the foreign powers from their land and destroy Israel which shows the short term goals of the organizations such as Al Qaeda. In general, therefore, seems that religion alone is not a cause of terrorism but in coordination with some other factors religion could be a useful weapon in the hands of terrorists in order to enhance their capabilities, recruit more "fighters" and legitimate their actions.

Of course this does not mean that Muslims as a society cannot harmonize with the evolution of the world. But, the main problem is the "sudden contact between different cultures". This contact has as a result the loss of the regular harmonization and can lead to a general detestation of the "foreign" that threatens their culture's characteristics. To conclude with, the debate about religious extremism and terrorism shows the difficulties that appear when we are talking about terrorism and the opinion that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter".

The turn to religion extremism for some is the way to show their indignation for the current world while for others is the proof that religion and politics create a dangerous path. The importance of this debate is to understand that no religion itself focuses on targeting innocent people in the name of God; this is an opinion that humans are making in order to hit their targets and desires.

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