# Radical Islam and Collective Violence: The Case of Islamic Radical Organizations in the age of Terror

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to answer the Western misconception about Islam and radicalism. It explores and contrasts the world major religions and philosophies. The central goal was to explore the claim that Islamic identities and beliefs promote violence. With this in mind, the researcher used three frames of analysis namely organizational analysis theory (political power vacuum), Islamic analysis and leadership influence (charismatic quality of a leader). This approach allowed the researcher to objectively explore and analyze the central arguments in a way that allows the researcher to critique and or challenge the Western myth about Islam.
**Keywords:** Religious wars, Islamic organizations, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, Al Shabaab, Terrorism, and coexistence

## INTRODUCTION

Human beings throughout history have practiced religious beliefs and traditions. Within this religious practice, mankind has experienced some forms of religious collective hostilities. However, of the world major religions, there are traditions that preach tolerance, peace, fairness, justice and human compassion. Whether people are talking of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, each religion or philosophy has experienced some forms of violence through its history. However, since September 11th 2001, Islam has been branded as a violent religion that promotes violence. In this paper, researcher goal was to explore the claims that Islamic identities and beliefs promote radical violence which is expressed in the form of terrorism. This assumption was examined in the context of the world major religions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Before September 11th 2001, there was less talk about radical Islam at least on the main street. However, the aftermath of that day has brought Islam in the forefront of public discourse in which Islam has been branded as a religion or a faith that encourages violence. In order for people to understand more about religious collective violence, it fits to look into human religious history. In the Bible, there are references to violence. For instance, Joshua attack on Jericho Walls, Christians Conquest or crusades in Europe that resulted into death of thousands of innocent people, and even in the recently, there have been some forms of collective violence carried out by Christians against Muslims in the Balkan region during the Yugoslavia civil war [5]. Or in Northern Ireland where Catholics and Protestants murdered themselves in a cold bloody civil war resulting into mass murder, displacement of women and children and total destruction of different forms of lives just because of religious and political disagreements. Religious and political differences in Northern Ireland for example could be viewed as an example in which young Catholics and Protestants became radicalized and got involved in a collective violence against each other [8].

Moreover, the crusade war of 11th - 13th is a direct example of how Christians got involved in a wider opened war against Islam. In the years following the beginning of the 11th century, Roman Pope Urban II commissioned or rather sanctioned Christians to retake the Holy Land back from Muslims after they conquered it. In a matter of a century, Christians engaged in three violent crusades against Muslims in the name of securing a right place for Christianity.

Push forward to the fifteen century, there were other major wars in which Christians acted violently. In 1562, Catholics in France fought against Huguenots, England fought a war with Spain over the killing of the Queen of Scots and most notably, the whole Europe experienced an ugly destruction during the Thirty Years War which started as a conflict between Calvinists, Catholics and Protestants [11]. Yet, Christianity did not get branded as a radical religion the way Islam has been branded following the aftermath of September 11th, 2001.

Regarding Judaism, people don't have to look back into 12th or 13th century history to find evident of radical aspects of Judaism. Just recently in the 1947 before Israel became an independent state, group of

radical Jews the Zionists organized an Apartheid-like practices and even carried out violence against Palestinians women and children in the Palestinian territories in which innocent people died in the hands of radical Zionists just because Palestinians women and children stood in the way of attaining a perfect Jewish state [2]. This Jewish radicalism continues to this very day in the forms of political oppression in which successive Jewish governments continue to organize different forms of aggressions and violent against Palestinians in Gaza Strips and the West Bank territories.

Furthermore, through human history, Hinduism and Buddhism on the other hand have experienced some of their own infidelities. In India and Pakistan for example, there have been well documented instances of violence in which Muslims and Hindus have killed themselves because of religious differences and beliefs particularly in the disputed area of Kashmir. In this disputed Kashmir area, each faith has organized some forms of collective violence against each other which has resulted into the growth of radical fanatics whose goal have been the destruction of each other religion. Even in Buddhism, which some people credited with the consolidation of nonviolence as an alternative form of conflict resolution has some of its shortcomings. In place like Sri Lanka and India, there have been incidences in which radical believers assassinated some monks that they don't like or in some cases, some monks have targeted or organized the killing of other monks just because of religious power greed or philosophical differences [5].

Not that I am defending Islam. Islam itself is no exception to violence. There are historical references to violence in which Muslims have conducted or organized collective violence against others. For instance, the historical sectarian violence between Shia Muslims, Sunnis Muslims and Kurds has been a prime example of how Islam has divided its followers to fight against each other. Not only that, there have been examples of internal violence in which Muslims has carried out physical and political violence against their own Muslims brothers for instance, the killing of Egyptian's President Sadat, Pakistani' President Ali Bhutto, brutal oppression of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan during the 1970s, Seizure of Mecca city in Saudi Arabia by radical Muslims and even the 1979 Iranian's revolution in which Ayatollah Khomeini followers violently fought the Khomeini opponents, Saddam oppression of Shiites and Kurds in Iraq; the past and the current Syrian's internal civil war are few examples of collective violence involving Islam and the list goes on [6].

Therefore, when Western critics of Islam chastise Islam as violent religion, they point to both historical facts and contemporary radical groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, Taliban, Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab and most recently Islamic State (IS) both which people in the West have branded as radical Islamic organizations that promote hate and violence. In this analysis, I purposely omitted discussing Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) because it is relative new and I would like to exclusively explore it as a single case study in the near future.

**Analysis**

Having named these Islamic organizations, the question becomes, is Islam more prone to violence than any other major world's religion? And if so, what causes these Islamic organizations to embrace radical militancy against the West and other religions? Examining these two questions would help people understand if Islam promotes more violence than other religions as well as why these Islamic organizations seemed to act violently against the people of other faiths or within its self. Thus, in order to understand these individual organizations, it is necessary to examine each organization individually as follows:

Regarding Hezbollah, it owed it origin to religious and social renaissance in Lebanon. The origin of this Islamic reawakening started in the 1980 when groups of clerics raised the need to consolidate the core principles of Islam concerning the lives of Muslims in Lebanon [9]. It primary goals were to guide Muslim's faith in Lebanon during the time when Lebanon was experiencing political turmoil, provides community services like education, healthcare, and sense of communal belonging in the absent of the central authority. All these goals were aimed at alleviating standard of living for many Lebanese who suffered both internal and external oppression. In essence, Hezbollah was started as, *"a movement of the oppressed by the oppressed."* However, when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah was forced to choose between accepting Israel occupation or protecting Lebanon sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Because of Israel aggression and it occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah leadership started to propagate hate of the Jews and launched barrages of terror attacks against Israel and those that it believed to support the Jewish state occupation of their country. The result of course has been the bombing of U.S. embassy in Beirut and U.S. military barrack in which hundreds of people perished [3]. Given the power disparity between the mighty Israel Defense Forces (IDFs) and ill-equipped Hezbollah militants, Hezbollah chose violent acts like bombing and use of Improvised Explosive Devices commonly known as IEDs as a mechanism to neutralize military strength of Israel army forces.

Consequentially, Hezbollah affinity for regional terrorism was a combination of several factors of which some are directly linked to Israel invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as well as Israel general policies and attitudes toward Muslims in the region [3]. Before Israel started to meddle in Lebanese political affairs, Hezbollah was only concerned with internal social and political affairs. However, Israelis occupation of Southern Lebanon bolstered Hezbollah resolve and gave its followers reason to preach and practice violence against Israel.

As a result, Hezbollah started to organize the youth to carry out series of terrorist activities in the Israelis territories as well as against western interests inside Lebanon. Ever since, the Hezbollah violence against Israel has been encouraged by Israel continues meddling in the Lebanese affairs. In reality, Israel has become an agent that provides incentive for Hezbollah to engage in terrorist activities. For instance, the 2006 Israel war with Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon was a typical example of how Israel fueled Hezbollah thirst for violence.

The result of course has been the death of hundreds of innocent women and children as well as general destruction of homes. The magnitude of destruction caused by the Israel Defense Forces became an opportunity that Hezbollah used as a recruiting message indicting Israel for terrorizing Lebanese civilians. Moreover, this gave Hezbollah a platform to argue to the Lebanese people that the only way to deal with Israelis' violence and aggression was standing with Hezbollah to punish Israelis for initiating violence.

Viewing Israelis-Palestinian conflict situation more analytically provides people with several explanations that potentially culminated into current state of violence that many people in the West exclusively blamed on Islamic radicalism. First, because Hezbollah owed it foundation to Iranian Revolutionary Guards, there is no denying that Hezbollah doesn't have a radical agenda. It shares the same theocratic agenda with Iran which is one of its main financiers. However, despite its initial desire to create an Islamic Lebanese government, there was no initial plan to meddle in the regional affairs. Violence became an option when Israel invaded Lebanon provoking Hezbollah to respond to Israel continuous violation of Lebanese sovereignty.

First, within this interactive context people could easily understand the origin of Hezbollah violence and terrorism toward Israel. It is reasonable to believe that Israel actions did encouraged Hezbollah to gravitate toward violence as a mechanism to neutralize an external aggression.

Second, to better understand Hezbollah and its terrorism connection, people need to separate it from Islam. It is a gravely mistake to generalize that Islam is a violent religion without understanding individual radical organizations. In respect to Hezbollah, its initial vision was the creation of a resistance movement in Lebanon with a goal to restore Lebanon as a key player in the Islamic world. This vision sounds radical, but did not call for the destruction of Israel [9]. Of course, distinction has to be made, Hezbollah charter calls for the destruction of the enemy of Allah. However, this doesn't mean that Israel was a presumptuous enemy of Lebanon or Allah. It became Lebanon's enemy after Israel attacked and killed innocent women and children on several occasions during incursions in Beirut and Southern Lebanon. Looking at the Hezbollah conflict with Israel this way helps people separate facts from personal biases and or Zionistic resentment about Islam which this researcher believes as a better way to contextualize as well as analyzing the nature of Hezbollah violence against the Jewish people.

Third, people have to understand that Hezbollah has almost achieved a political party status within the Lebanese politics. It has political aspiration and interest inside the Lebanon political landscape and this has been evident in the way the Lebanese government treats Hezbollah. Sometimes, Lebanese political situation dictates how Hezbollah respond to the government. In the past, the Lebanese government has acted violently against Hezbollah which explained instances in which Hezbollah unleashed more violence against the Lebanese government. Moreover, religious argument alone does not explain Hezbollah political rise in Lebanon. In an essence, Hezbollah's political and social popularity can be understood through Lebanese political system analysis as opposed to solely analyze Hezbollah using Islamic realms of analysis.

With respect to Hamas, it started as a social organization to provide basic social services to communities in Gaza strip and the West Bank areas where human suffering was unbearable. Ideally, Hamas started as a charity organization inspired by desire to alleviate people anxieties, sufferings in a way that renewed hope and aspirations for people who have lost hope [10]. Since Hamas emerged as a social organization, it has tried to bridge poverty gap by feeding the hungry, train teachers, doctors, farmers, brought youth together through sports and religious gatherings. Moreover, it acts as a source of micro finance for lots of people who otherwise would have not have means of raising capitals to start businesses.

The real problem referencing to violence started with the 1947 Jewish expulsion of the Arabs in Palestine, a prelude to make room for a future Jewish state [4]. This followed by 1967 war in which Israel

conquered Gaza and West bank territories and annexed them to Israel till Israel withdrew from territories in 2005. It's a continued Jewish aggression that prompted the first Intifada in 1987. Thus, Hamas linked its violent actions to Israel oppression and aggression in the Palestinian's territories.

Although Hamas holds anti-Israel view, it has become pragmatic over time. For instance, Hamas has recently accepted or showed willingness for the two states solution. It also shows willingness to accept the possibility of recognizing a Jewish state as long as Israel abandon occupation of the Arabs land in Palestine and relinquishing violence against Palestinians [4]. Such spirit of Hamas to recognize the existence of a Jewish state and accept two states solution is sign of a party that is willing to work for peace except there is no equal partner to hold its hand on the other side. The point is, Hamas tried to extend it hand to Israel but it seems Israel is not willing to reciprocate it.

Moreover, the 2006 Hamas election victory that brought it to power is a premonition that Hamas as an organization is not all about violence as West would want people to believe. Instead, it shows that Hamas is well organized both socially and politically to an extent of winning political elections. In the case of sporadic violence that happened since Hamas took power in the Gaza Strip area (Suicide bombers, Improvised Explosive Devices), one could argue that there are reasons why Hamas use such strategies. In the eyes of Palestinians, Hamas and those who embrace its charter perceive situation as a just struggle against a powerful Jewish state that occupies their lands and oppresses them in their own land.

On the other hand, Hamas success in the Gaza Strip areas is not because it is an Islamic radical organization as some people would want people to believe. Much of the Hamas successes happened because of it social programs to the war affected victims in the region. Its ability to provide basic stuff like food, medical care and builds schools for children are what attracted people to it. This is not a radical agenda by any measure, and those who are quick to brand Hamas as a terrorist organization don't portray the whole picture of Hamas. In the Gaza Strip area for example, Hamas runs an orphanage center that houses about 1,000 children who are victims of Israel-Palestinian war, and operates a clinic that provides cheap medical care to some refugees at a discounted price and that is not a work of a terrorist but rather of a charity organization [7].

These few examples among others showed that Hamas is like any other social organization in the world. Its violent path as mentioned above revolves around Israel continued occupation of the Palestinian

lands. It is this aggression that Hamas reciprocates toward the Jewish people. Moreover, given the power imbalance which favors Israel leaves Hamas with no better choices. The situation becomes a matter of a survival. Either it embraces terrorism or faces the threat of elimination by Israel. Therefore, this forces Hamas to use violence as a strategy to stay viable in the face of elimination. In other words, as long as Israel continues in its current path, it is unfortunate fact; Hamas would likely get more violent.

Thus, if people are to talk of how to stop this violence, they should not look to Islam as the sole source of Hamas violence. Instead, they need to examine Israel-Palestinian conflict in a more holistic manner. First, there is a need for people in the West to examine Israel actions regarding how it treats Arabs and Palestinians in the region. This would include making sure Israel plays by international rules of wars. This notion of allowing Israel to declare war on civilians' targets and drops bombs any time on nonmilitary targets without international condemnation and or sanction is an act of terrorism in itself. It is this kind of irresponsible action by a sovereign state sanctioned by some nations in the West that provokes groups like Hamas to resort to violence.

Second, Western nations by and large are contributing to the magnitude of violence in the region particularly the United States which stands with Israel irrespective of how gross Israel actions are on the Palestinian people. The Palestinians in this context see themselves as helpless with no strong allies to come to their aid which encourages them to resort to any survival methods imaginable including human bombers and the use of IEDs as mentioned above. Hence, for a peaceful coexistence to return to this region, Western states need to become neutral partners for peace and start to treat both Palestinians and Israelis equally. This could be a good way to start and would likely encourage Hamas and other anti-Israelis groups to abandon violent activities in favor for a peaceful coexistence.

Israel to come to a negotiating table with Hamas. Just being at the same table would be a sign of a mutual partnership and collaboration in finding an equal lasting solution to their problem. Unfortunately, the problem has been that most of the peace accords negotiated and perhaps signed as settlements to the Israelis-Palestinian conflict have been initiated and forced by the West and Israel on the Palestinians with less or without them being consulted. This of course has been the source of resistance and violence among some Palestinians including Hamas followers who felt that they have been ignored or not consulted to provide their input as a part of the settlement.

As it is the case with any other social movement, refusal by the status quo to negotiate or talk with it usually emboldens the social movement to press on using it tactics/strategies to force the status quo to yield to it. This is exactly what is happening in the case of Hamas. It is sticking to violence because it is the only way it knows to bring Israel to the table which has been successful in the past. Therefore, in order to grow seeds for a peaceful cohabitation between Palestinians and Israelis, it is paramount to start at the grass root level both in Palestine and in Israel by talking to average citizens and asking them about what kind of society they wanted to leave behind for their children and grandchildren. Taking this approach would give people some thoughts about how they want to live their lives and more importantly to rethink critically about the role of their current involvement in the conflict. In addition, this would give both Palestinians and Israelis a sense of ownership over the conflict in a way that would enhance them to enter into a constructive dialogue to break the current conflict gridlock which the current approach does not provide.

Fourth, using religion as a dividing force or blaming Muslims is not a way forward. The West needs not be afraid of Islam and it influences around the world particularly in the Middle East, but rather embraces Muslims as peace loving people. This would require people in the West and in Israel particularly to turn away from teaching and preaching their citizens especially children about hating people of Islamic faith. The same approach is true to Muslims and non-Arabs in the Palestinian's territories. There's need to have some understanding about other religions by treating people of those faiths in a way that makes the world's main religions agents to unify humanity. Not only would this bring understanding among people of different faiths, it would likely neutralize common religious myths of violence that many people associate to Islam as well as mischaracterizations of other religions.

Al Qaeda of course falls into a separate category. Since its formation, Al Qaeda has been anti-West especially the United States which Bin Laden viewed as an oppressor of all Muslims around the world. Therefore, it is easy for people to find linkage between radical Islam and terrorism. Thus, when Al Qaeda brought down Twin Towers and Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, it made more sense to blame radical Muslims like Bin Laden for orchestrating violence against the United States. Moreover, in this regard, Islamic radicalism is justifiable in a sense that all the nineteen hijackers were people of Islamic faith who have out rightly declared Jihadist war against the United States and the West in general.

Furthermore, Al Qaeda has declared goals that distinguished it from the other radical violent groups that discussed above. One, it has declared goal of inflicting a damaging attack on the West particularly the United States for oppressing Muslims around the world. Two, it has a declared goal of creating a networks of virtuous Jihadists to oppose what Bin Laden called, *"Zionist-Anglo-Saxon Protestant Coalition"* that he blamed for all Islamic cultural deterioration in the Arabs World. Three, Bin Laden wanted September 11th, 2001 to be a way to get the United States out of it hiding place into the open battlefield where Jihadists would fight it to bankruptcy to an extent that the United State wouldn't be able to financially support the Jewish state against the Arabs and Muslims in the region [1].

In summary, I have presented historical synopsis backgrounds about the world major religions. I have also highlighted the instances where each religion or philosophy has been implicated or involved in a war or act of violence. In addition, I have presented and analyzed three most talked radical Islamic organizations in a way that created a meaningful dialogue about the fate of Islam in the 21st century in respect to claim that Islam promotes violence.

In my analyses, I have advocated that people pause for a moment and stop blaming Islam for violence that infested the Middle East and being manifested regionally or globally in the form of terrorism by organizations like Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah among others. I suggested that to better understand each organization, people need to look at different variables and compare in order to connect the dots in order to come to a reasonable conclusion. I challenged people to do the followings: First, people need to examine factors like leadership of the social organization and the movement's choices because leadership influences the direction and the goal of the social movement. This has been the case in the radical movement discussed above. For instance, Bin Laden's beliefs and his philosophies have helped shaped the mission and goals of Al Qaeda. The same can be said of Hassan Nasrallah, the current leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon. His views and beliefs have influenced most of the Hezbollah followers.

Though charisma is a good quality of leadership in the West, those who possess it can sometimes use it to impose their own goals and visions upon the people they are leading. Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, along with Bin Laden, and Hassan Nasrallah fitted this description of leaders who wielded lots of charismas which have afforded them to draw a lot of people to follow them. Therefore, people should not ignore leadership qualities and their styles because the do matter when it comes to action of the whole organization. Instead, there is a need to put more emphasis to engage in an organizational leadership analysis.

Second, the kind of institutional government which governs the territory under which a social organization operates affects the behavior of the social movement. If the governing institution is forthcoming and allows great deal of freedoms and liberties to its citizens, social organizations that operate in such territories would likely have no reasons to radicalize. Based on these cases analyzed so far, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, Hamas and even Taliban rise to radical militancy were influenced by their respective governments.

In Lebanon, the government during the time of Hezbollah formation was weakened and some would say Lebanon was a failed state. Afghanistan Taliban and Hamas in the Palestinian territories have their rise to radical violence affected by the absent of a central government. In each case, the presumptuous leaders took advantage of power vacuum and used it to promote their radical agenda without sitting government to regulate the limit of their activities. Thus, it makes more sense for people to consider examining institution of governances in each case to understand the dynamics behind each social group scope of violence.

Third, of course an Islamic analysis is another way in which people can understand Muslims behaviors, attitudes, values and norms and how they affect their actions. By this, I am referencing to both historical and contemporary teaching and preaching of the Quran. Examining and understanding historical and current backgrounds about Islam and the Koran could help people to build true knowledge about what Islam and Koran actually says about violence. This can be achieved by placing these variables in the context of institutions and societies in which Muslims live in.

In other words, people need to explore questions like, what kinds of societies and political cultures that these people live in? How do these institutions affect or influence the manner in which Muslims act both in social and political arenas. And more importantly, what does the Koran specifically say about Muslims and non-Muslims relations? Analyzing Islam and the Koran in this context would probably yield some factual data that can help individuals to understand what the Koran and Islam sanctions and which ones it prohibits and eventually establishes some factual base arguments that would help explain the radical attitudes or actions of some Islamic organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas, Al Qaeda and Taliban. The point is whatever one claims are about radical Islam and its relationship to violence, people need to avoid generalization. Instead, people need to look each case or radical Islamic organization individually. Doing so would enable people to learn more about where each radical Islam organization is coming from. Put it differently, this would help people

to learn more about Muslim cultures in a way that would enhance cross-religious/cultural understanding. Finally, this may likely ease negative perception that many people have about Islam—and when they understand and know that there are indeed different factors that cause radical organizations to spring up in the Arabs World, chances are people would likely see Islam in different light. In addition, Muslims on the other hand would likely have a better understanding of non-Muslims if Muslims know and understand that people in the West have respected views of Islam and its teachings.

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