Contending Explanations for Islamic Radicalist Violence

Darcy Bender

*From the secular, Western perspective, acts of terror committed in the name of Islam are very difficult to understand. Explanations for these acts concentrate almost exclusively on economic, social, and political factors. This article critiques the various approaches used to explain the origins of Islamic terrorism, arguing that the religious context is a necessary component of analysis. The author addresses the ambiguous nature of religious terror in an attempt to distinguish the phenomenon from secular-political terrorism.*

**Introduction**

Islamic fundamentalism, variously referred to as Islamic neo-fundamentalism, Islamic revivalism, Islamic resurgence, and Islamic reassertion, is being debated and discussed in academic, policy-oriented, and media circles alike, in an effort to provide some explanation for acts of violence committed by Islamic militants or Islamic radical movements. The 1979 Iranian Revolution aroused some interest in Islamic fundamentalism in the United States, but was generally considered to be a specifically Shi’ite phenomenon resulting from a unique combination of factors. Islamic radicalism and its adherents precipitated more attention by hostage-taking and dramatic acts of terror targeting U.S. forces stationed in Lebanon in 1983. The series of suicide bombing attacks led to intensified study on the phenomenon of religious terrorism. Currently, the threat of Islamic fundamentalist rule replacing secular governments in the Middle East and northern Africa, by means of either the electoral process or revolution, alarms many...
Islamic Radicalist Violence

Western security analysts, who connect such movements with support for international terrorism and perceive Islamic fundamentalism as inherently anti-Western and thus threatening to U.S. interests.

Various explanations have been advanced to explain or interpret acts of terror associated with Islamic radicalism. Political, economic, and social factors are seemingly persuasive explanations, as revolution is unquestionably an increased likelihood in times of sociopolitical or economic change. But this perspective alone ignores the religious component that enables radical fundamentalists to commit and condone extreme acts of violence. As precipitators of Islamic revolution and terrorism, generic, rational explanations serve to highlight the similarities between Islamic and secular-political armed struggle, thereby reducing Islamic radicalism to just another alternative revolutionary ideology. Secular explanations tend to be expounded by Westerners and those opposing the Islamic goal, while the militants themselves have an entirely different frame of reference — one based explicitly in Islam. In their perception, the conflict is not limited to the socioeconomic or political sphere, but rather encompasses a larger goal and a higher aim. To ignore the religious frame of reference results in an incomplete picture.

This article will examine the various approaches used to explain, interpret, or justify Islamic violence and acts of terror, thereby underscoring the problem of developing a clear definition for, and criteria of, religious terrorism as distinct from secular-political violence.

Historical and Political Perspectives

Although gaining wide notice in the past two decades — from the attacks on American and French troops stationed in Lebanon in 1983 to recent attempts by Hamas and Islamic Jihad to derail the Middle East peace process in Israel — Islamic suicide bombings have precedents reaching back into ancient times and through the colonial era. Some historians and political scientists have criticized the contemporary focus that often pervades the study of this subject. Stephen Dale, for one, insists that such a "present minded bias" impedes development of a "truly satisfying explanation of the underlying causes that have given rise to attacks by Muslims."

Historical Precedents

Zayn al-Din al-Ma’bari authored a call for jihad ("holy war" or, literally, "striving in the path of God") against the Portuguese in his 1898 work, The Gift to the Holy Warriors in Respect to Some Deeds of the Portuguese. He perceived the Portuguese murder of Muslims, destruction
of mosques, and seizure of trade routes as clear indications of an attack on Islam. Citing Islamic jurisprudence and historical evidence, Zayn al-Din declared *jihad* as a necessary response, even an obligation, in defense of the faith. Those who died in the struggle, he argued, would be regarded as *shahids*, or martyrs for the cause of Islam. Earlier declarations of *jihad* may have served as examples; in 1512 a Portuguese viceroy reported that a Calicut Muslim had been “canonized” after dying in battle against the Christians, and wars fought in the Philippines by the Sultans of Sulu against the Spaniards were regarded as *jihad* in response to coerced conversions of Muslims to Christianity.\

The historical perspective focuses on *jihad* as a response to European colonial infiltration by Muslim populations suffering from religious persecution and economic decline. Colonialism undermined the indigenous social order and monopolized essential economic activities, thereby threatening the very existence of a viable Asian Muslim community. As they realized the futility of succeeding in direct battle against the Europeans, Asian Muslims sought to terrorize their colonizers through attacks in which perpetrators willingly gave their lives. Inability to sustain a prolonged full-scale war against a more powerful European enemy thus dictated this form of anti-colonial struggle.

Analyses of the historical precedents for Islamic attacks involving martyrdom, while expanding the focus of observation beyond a specific region or era, nevertheless fall short of providing a satisfactory explanation for Islamic radicalist violence. Modern Islamic terrorist actions are viewed as the functional equivalent of the Muslim attacks which occurred in colonial Asia, and U.S. support for Israel is considered to be a “continuation of Western colonial or neocolonial policies.” Islamic martyrdom is thus obscured from its distinctly religious character, and is reduced to just another method of anti-imperialist struggle carried out by those who lack political power. Understanding the historical context of regional struggle is meaningful, but insufficient on its own to explain the more general phenomenon of Islamic radicalism and violence.

**Political Crises**

Incorporating the historical perspective, an exploration of political crises attempts to correlate a related rise in Islamic militant action, in some cases leading to revolution. Urbanization, and the corresponding social, political, and economic consequences it produces, has been noted as a significant feature of many Muslim societies characterized by outbreaks of terrorist violence.

The Iranian Islamic Revolution marked the beginning, at least in rhetoric, of an escalation of tension between Islam and the West in the
From a political perspective, the 1979 revolution that deposed the Western-oriented regime of the Shah resulted from a unification of social and economic classes in popular opposition to oppressive governmental reform policies. The revolution's anti-Western character reflected a rejection of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as well as his U.S. patrons who supplied him with the Western ideologies and institutions with which he attempted to institute political and economic reforms. Considered by many as inherently alien to Muslim nations and in opposition to Islamic principles, these reforms were imposed upon the population in an effort to modernize the Iranian political, economic, and social spheres to meet Western standards. By denouncing the United States as the "Great Satan," and maintaining that any relationship between the countries was not only unnecessary but was also corrupting Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini denounced the West on a cultural, political, and economic basis. The only relationship existing thus far, he declared, had been one of "tyrant (zalem) to oppressed (mazlum)" and "plunderer (gharat-gar) to ravaged victim (gharat-shodeh)."

That Islam was a central factor in the Iranian Islamic Revolution seems obvious. Questions arise, however, regarding the extent to which Islam served a political purpose by providing a cultural basis with which to unify the social and economic classes necessary to effect a revolution. In the context of the Iranian revolution, Islam can be interpreted as a means to an end, a strategy to achieve revolution, albeit an Islamic one. The strategic means to an end approach is generally regarded as a central feature of secular-political revolutionary ideology. Libya's leader, Mu'ammar Qadhafi, more clearly manipulates Islam for political purposes. His ideology, the Third International Theory, blends revolution with Islam, using religion as a popular reference and for purposes of legitimation when dealing with foreign Islamic revolutionaries supported by his regime. A comparison of the Iranian and Libyan orientations toward Islam underscores the varying degrees of emphasis placed upon Islam as a basis for revolution. As Islam is a religion with implications for the political and social spheres of life, it can be difficult to discern when the politics of Islam meld or overlap into the religious realm. Indeed, Islamic fundamentalism asserts that a divorce of the two spheres is impossible; politics is thus defined by religion.

A description of the political situation and related economic conditions of Egypt during the late 1970s offers additional insight into possible explanations for an increase in Islamic militant activity. President Anwar Sadat had promised the beginning of a democratization program and economic prosperity in return for a peace accord with
Israel. When both failed to materialize, frustration and disillusionment rose quickly, especially among educated youth of lower-middle and working classes who more acutely embodied the widening discrepancy between rising socioeconomic expectations and economic reality. Religious groups began a campaign criticizing the government and its policies. In response, the Sadat regime increased censorship, harassment of religious groups, and in 1979, dissolved the university student unions after repeated election victories by the Muslim student organizations. The Egyptian government under President Sadat reacted to Islamic political opposition groups by relying upon a policy of repression, labeling them as “deviants” and “heretics.” Sadat’s 1981 assassination by the Islamic militant group Al-Jihad was, the militants claimed, the result of his failure to implement Shari’a, or Islamic law, in Egypt. As the second article of the 1971 constitution, signed by Sadat, provided for the eventual implementation of Shari’a, Al-Jihad accused Sadat of abrogating his political duty and ignoring the will of the Egyptian people.

In the same manner, the results of Algeria’s 1992 elections were voided by the government when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a majority of seats in parliament. The subsequent acts of terror by Islamic splinter groups targeting government officials and foreigners have their precedent in the Algerian independence struggle, during which terror had been used successfully by the National Liberation Front (FLN) to force the French to abandon Algeria as a colony.

East Versus West: Islam and the West as Ideological Blocs
Expression of the view that the West constitutes a political and economic threat as well as an ideological enemy has been voiced by an increasing number of Muslim authorities. In more radical Islamic circles, the West is portrayed as an enemy intent on destroying Islam by weakening its social and political base in Muslim countries.

A recent example of this view can be seen in Iranian President Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s January 7, 1994, political address, in which he predicted a marked escalation of the struggle between the West and Islam. Rafsanjani proposed that the West, in a last desperate attempt to stem the inevitable rise of Islam and its supplanting of Christianity, has adopted a policy of undermining the unity of Muslim states through its powerful economic and political world influence. This statement echoed a sermon of Iran’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Hussayn Khamene’i, who claimed that Christianity constituted the essence of the West’s cultural offensive against Islam. In his Christmas message of January 1994, Khamene’i denounced the use of Christianity as an instrument of access into the Muslim world by dominant powers. Un-
under the pretext of the Christian religion, he asserted, materialistic Western economic interests have committed injustices against Muslims. As the world view of Muslim leaders perceives an increasing threat to Islam by Western cultural and religious predominance in the international sphere, incidents of hostility will rise correspondingly.

Israel’s recent recognition by the Vatican represents evidence to some Islamic fundamentalists of a united front between Christianity and Judaism against Islam. Even non-Islamists have expressed defensive reactions to the accord. Walid Jumblatt, a Druze socialist, accused the "Christian West of allying itself with Zionism against Arabs and Muslims in a political, economic, and especially cultural offensive," and declared that Arab identity and Islam are in danger. The charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) is a more radical expression of the idea that Israel and the West are a combined force in a struggle against Islam, and thus must be opposed by all Arab and Islamic nations. Article thirty-two of the charter calls the current peace process between the Palestinians and Israel part of a larger strategy designed by "World Zionism and imperialistic powers" to "remove one Arab state after another from the circle of struggle against Zionism." Just as the Camp David Accord, forging peace between Israel and Egypt, was "treacherous," Hamas views the Oslo agreement as an effort to widen peace only in order to allow Israel, which represents merely an extension of Western imperialism, to expand throughout the region and beyond.

Conflict between the West and Islam can be viewed from the historical and political perspective as a struggle for power in the international system, with religion serving as an ideological bloc. Islamic violence, then, is a form of low-intensity warfare. Violent jihad is thus adopted as a defense against a Western-dominated political, economic, and cultural international order. However, despite the fact that Islamic radicalism expresses rhetoric similar to anti-imperialist revolutionary doctrine, its anti-Western orientation is nevertheless only one of many factors explaining Islamic violence.

**Socioeconomic Factors**

A climate that combines increasing repression with political change and that fails to meet rising expectations on the part of potentially volatile segments of the population does appear to be a viable explanation for increased radical action. However, the question still arises as to which segments of the population will respond to a call for action to rectify society’s problems through armed struggle. Research has focused on socioeconomic conditions that favor a rise in Islamic funda-
mentalism, using them to explain an increase in the numbers of recruits for radical religious groups. Studies on terrorist organizations and their members have been limited, but can offer some insight. "Islamic militancy," from a sociological perspective, is clearly defined as "actual violent group behavior committed collectively against the state or other actors in the name of Islam." While agreeing that the religious element may deserve attention, researchers focus primarily on Islam as a social force.

Methodological Studies and Socioeconomic Data
A 1977-1979 study by Saad Eddin Ibrahim provides a detailed analysis of the socioeconomic backgrounds of imprisoned members of two Egyptian militant Islamic groups. Although incomplete and consisting of a population of only thirty-four male individuals, the study revealed an incidence of common socioeconomic factors among the imprisoned militants. Researchers noted that almost all were university students or graduates and were upwardly mobile in relation to their parents and socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority came from rural areas and were exposed to their organization upon arrival at universities in urban areas. Class affiliation of most members was middle and lower-middle class. No significantly high instances of divorce, family deaths, or other abnormal events were reported which might have served as indicators of a disturbed personality or as impetus for anti-social behavior. Researchers further noted that the members were, overall, good students and exhibited a high degree of self-motivation and achievement, generally being considered above average, even "model" individuals.

Opposing characteristics, however, are found in an examination of suicide bombers in Lebanon. Although similarly young, these men were described as poor, uneducated social outcasts who found an identity for the first time within an Islamic militant group. Likewise, Hamas has traditionally represented the politically disenfranchised who occupy the lowest socioeconomic classes. Desperate conditions in refugee camps and oppression by an occupying Israeli force, followed by disillusionment with the newly elected Palestinian authority, is offered as a reason for the increased number of young men willing to undertake suicide bombing attacks in Israel. However, Hamas also claims adherents in the West Bank Islamic universities, representing the more educated youth. This may reflect the fact that the organization is allegedly split into a political wing and an increasingly autonomous military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigade, responsible for carrying out armed struggle.

Attempts to analyze the profiles of suicide bombers and other Is-
Islamic terrorists have inherent problems. Such research is of questionable value for wider application, since it is difficult to obtain a sufficient representative sample from which to draw general conclusions. Those individuals studied represent the small number of militants apprehended by authorities who agreed and were allowed to participate in such studies. Thus, studies on socioeconomic characteristics do not present a reliable indicator of predictability. Furthermore, such studies fail to explain why a poor, uneducated, marginalized youth or disillusioned student would choose to join a radical religious group instead of a secular extremist political organization, both of which engage in armed struggle.

Family members of suicide bombers and the recorded testimony of “martyrs” firmly dismiss secular reasoning. They insist the motivation is truly one of self-sacrifice to a religious and spiritual cause. Political, sociological, and economic factors can be viewed as contributing factors, providing insight into the particular domestic circumstances which indicate the likelihood of increased radical activity. A valuable, even necessary perspective, it is nevertheless an incomplete explanation, as it fails to consider what the militants or “martyrs” perceive as the justification for their acts of violence. Religious armed struggle requires and emphasizes the necessity of justification, and it is here that we turn in an attempt to discover an underlying explanation that differentiates it from other types of revolutionary struggle.

Religious Justification

Prominent in Islamic radicalism is the goal of establishing an Islamic order in which all laws, customs, and values conform to the Shari'a. The terms “Islamic order” and “Islamic society” may be used interchangeably, or an Islamic society may precede an Islamic order. Although they are somewhat unclear on the details of an Islamic society and differ on the methods to achieve it, fundamentalists agree on this main point: that the Shari'a can and should be the basis for everyday life and societal norms. Sayyid Qutb, the ideological mentor of the Muslim Brotherhood and father of Sunni radicalism (and ultimately executed by Egyptian President Nasser), stated clearly that the “foremost objective is to change the practices of this society...at its very roots.” Revolution becomes the means to achieve this higher end; only by overthrowing and replacing the current secular regime can Islam become the basis for an entire society.

Qutb spoke of the necessity to create a “vanguard” religious movement to challenge laws not in accordance with Shari'a. True Muslims, he asserted, should become “living examples of faith” in a “dynamic
movement which change[s] conditions and events and the course of life," Practical action must be combined with theoretical dedication to God to bring an Islamic order into existence; theory alone is useless when the opponent is so effectively structured and commands such vast resources. Struggle against the jahili (or corrupted) society, which exists in “ignorance of the Divine guidance” by usurping God’s sovereignty on earth and replacing it with man-made ideologies, values, and laws, requires activism. Qutb, stating that “those who rebel against God’s sovereignty should be opposed,” recognized the need for political power to affect societal change.

Faith is thereby tied to action and progress toward the goal of an Islamic order; where no progress is made, one must question the faith of its adherents. Those who follow Qutb’s teachings, therefore, have concluded that action is necessary to fulfill belief, that a pragmatic strategy of revolution is essential to achieve the goal of depositing a secular, non-Islamic order. Their understanding of jihad concentrates on a militaristic struggle, while many Sunni intellectuals view jihad as primarily a spiritual striving. Jihad has wide application, and can pertain to any form of Muslim activity, individualistic or group-led, that assists in fulfilling God’s prescription for society. Qutb, however, declares “defeatist” those who claim Islam is only a defensive struggle. Instead, an offensive war of jihad is necessary to remove jahili values and institutions that impede the establishment of an Islamic order.

Islamic militant groups may also target those Islamic regimes they believe have abrogated essential Islamic principles. The 1995 bombing attack in Riyadh is considered such a case. Saudi Arabian ruling elites had appeared capable of maintaining a delicate balance between commitment to Shari’a and to economic ties with outside interests, which involved a certain amount of contact with jahili society, but the increased presence of Western forces in Saudi Arabia following the Gulf War may have precipitated a reaction from Islamic radicals who understood the Islamic state to be in danger of corruption. The presence of foreign forces threatens to proliferate Western values, thereby corrupting the Muslim community and undermining Islamic society.

In some cases, liberation from foreign occupation is perceived as necessary before the internal struggle for an Islamic order can begin. Suicide bombing attacks and other acts of terror are used as a form of armed struggle against foreign troops viewed as an occupying force. Foreign governments providing logistical support for those Arab regimes regarded as illegitimate by radicalists and for other designated enemies of Islam are also targeted in terror campaigns. Hizballah’s
leader in the Biqa Valley, Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, declared the series of bombing attacks carried out against the Americans, French, and Israelis in Lebanon in 1983-1985 to be justified from the Muslim standpoint. The French and Americans, he explained, “came to Beirut to help the Phalangists and Israelis — our enemies — against the Muslims.”

Hizballah’s followers aim for the creation of an Islamic state in Lebanon, which they believe will impart true stability and unity to a state that has suffered many years of civil war. Hizballah, its leaders insist, is more than a militia or political party; it is a “mission” which encompasses all Muslims.

A noticeable problem inherent in religious justification, for violence or for any other action, is the ambiguity of interpretation. Like any religion, Islam has precepts that allow for wide interpretation, as the differing perspectives on jihad indicate. The doctrines of Sunnism and Shi’ism are the result of differing interpretations of central Islamic principles. Islamic Modernists, who endeavor to reunify the two doctrines, propose that through interpretation there can be a reconciliation between Islam and democracy. Islam, they insist, is not inherently antidemocratic. Hamid Enayat notes that any ideology linked to the state, such as Islam, tends to become a tool of vested interests, with those in authority imposing their own interpretations upon society. The realities of tyrannical rule, maintained by regimes relying on Islam to legitimize their authority, have caused an “acute cynicism” among politically minded Muslims. Seeking justice, Enayat proposes, they turn to radicalism.

Interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence is the method by which Enayat sees a reconciliation of Islam with democracy, implying that violence used to achieve social and political justice would therefore become an unnecessary recourse. The Shi’a concept of ijtihad, for example, refers to the exercise of independent legal judgment in inferring legal rules from religious sources. Enayat argues that it can be construed as a way to critique actions of religious and political leadership in determining whether its decisions concur with the best interests of the Muslim community. This would provide an essential component of democratic rule. Ahmad Amin, an Egyptian writer on Muslim civilization, argues differently, however. He declares the central feature of Shi’a doctrine, belief in an infallible and all-powerful Imamate, to be inherently opposed to the modern concepts of democracy.

Indeed, Enayat has problems reconciling the Shi’a propensity for passivism with political action, as Shi’a passivism has historically manifested itself in a rejection of rebellion against despotic rule. Traditionally, Shi’a rely on prayer and faith to overcome adversity, while await-
ing the return of the Hidden Iman as savior. Refusal to recognize secular government is rooted in the concept of man’s fallibility. If man is fallible, then so too are man-made laws and political order. Thus, only a system based on God’s law, with judgment reserved for God’s representatives on earth, is legitimate rule. Sunni realists Abu’I-Hasan al-Mawardi and Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazali, however, question the role of force in maintaining authority. They argue for a differentiation between rule based upon acquiescence to holders of political power and legitimacy based in pure Islamic precepts, thereby implying that the former, invested with considerably less legitimacy, would allow challenge.

It is clear that the question of whether Islamic precepts sanction revolution and individual resistance to authority or, conversely, discourage such action, depends entirely upon interpretation. Islamic militant groups engaging in offensive jihad can find defense for their actions in classical Islamic writings or in an interpretation of specific Qu’ranic sayings. Conversely, Islamic groups or individuals who negate violence as a means for establishing Islamic society also have Qu’ranic precedents. Therefore, an exploration of the connection between justification based upon interpretation of Islam and Islamic radicalism and violence, while enlightening, seems circuitous.

"Sacred Terror:" Messianism as an Explanation for Religious Violence

Identification of criteria that distinguish religious from secular terror becomes clearer in the context of ancient “sacred terror,” exemplified by the Ismailis-Nizari, known also as the Assassins. Surviving two centuries (1090-1275) until destroyed by Mongol and Arab armies, the Assassins aimed to reunite the Shi’ite and Sunni sects into a single Muslim community and, thereby, to purify Islam. Purification of Islam, according to Assassin belief, required purification of those elements hostile toward their “New Preaching.” Victims were religious or political leaders who refused warnings to desist from obstructing reunification of the Muslim community or from actions contributing to Islam’s corruption. The Assassins, for reasons of organizational preservation and to further their doctrine, retreated to a rural area where they established fortified city-states from which they carried out their campaigns. These entities were possibly the first to be organized around the central theme of international terror, and their isolation and independent base allowed the Assassins to instruct new generations of leaders, missionaries, and fidayeen, those who carried out holy assassinations. Fidayeen were prepared not only to carry out assassinations
but also to accept, even seek, martyrdom. Assassination required self-sacrifice and, in fact, martyrdom was considered essential to the doctrine. Assassins murdered prominent community members in public areas or holy sites, where large numbers of people would serve as witnesses. The instrument of murder was always a dagger, which required close access and precluded the possibility of escape, thus ensuring death for the assailant. Martyrdom was a means of demonstrating the depth of Fidayeen convictions. Those who succeeded in their holy assignment “freed themselves from the guilt of all sins and thereby gained entry into paradise.”

By identifying martyrdom as a “central, perhaps critical, method of message-giving religion,” David Rapaport begins to illuminate the qualities that differentiate religious or “sacred” terror from secular-political terror. He defines sacred terror as having a “transcendent purpose which fulfills the meaning of the universe,” and only terror justified by this purpose is holy. Both ends and means are revealed by a deity or through divine guidance. For this reason, sacred terror employs pre-determined methods which cannot be altered on the basis of expediency or efficiency. Secular terrorism, in contrast, is often employed in an expedient manner by altering tactics to fit changing circumstances. The Assassins’ choice of weapon and use of martyrdom to spread their message evidences a reliance upon divine justification. Just as there are terrorist movements with a religious component to their political ideology, sacred terror does not require, but often contains, a political goal.

A more important divine justification for the Assassins was their desire to expedite the arrival of the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam who would lead jihad and preside over a purified Islamic society. Mahdist theory regards jihad as the method by which a perfected social order must be established. A messianic aspiration is often fundamental to sacred terror, when a religious movement adopts a singular view of history in which a utopian order can only come into being if all people accept the message of the religion. Belief that society or the existing religious establishment has become so corrupted that it is preventing the realization of this utopian order gives impetus to acts designed to remove obstacles and to renew the community’s faith and commitment. The goal of sacred terror may be to hasten the appearance of a Messiah or to create conditions that facilitate an era of redemption or judgment day.

Another distinguishing feature of sacred terror identified by Rapaport is its audience. For secular terrorists, the target is not the actual victim but the public, whose consciousness is raised through such “propaganda by deed” for the terrorist cause. Sacred terror does
not necessarily require public attention, depending upon the particular religion, although for most it facilitates the divine objective, as in the case of Islam, with its goal of renewing the faith of the Muslim community. But the primary audience of the sacred terrorist is a deity, the same deity that prescribes the method of terror and consecrates the cause.\(^{44}\)

The application of “sacred terror” to modern religious terrorism is problematic. The politicization of Islam tends to obscure the delineation of the political realm from the religious. The rhetoric of delegitimization toward established authority, either the government or religious leadership, in an organizational framework demanding total dedication and loyalty to a higher cause that is only attainable through armed struggle, has much in common with secular revolutionary ideologies. It therefore becomes difficult to determine whether the inclusion of political aspects has diluted the sacred component of modern Islamic militant movements, possibly to the point where they may have more in common with secular terrorist organizations than with their ancient models. Although it is clear that the audience still includes God, and the means and ends are often divinely prescribed, it is debatable whether terror for Islamic radicalists has become the same “weapon of the weak” employed in a similarly expedient manner by secular terrorists.

It is difficult to differentiate between an ideology with a higher cause and a true religious movement employing terror for a divine goal. Messianism, the belief in a predestined utopia in which peace and justice will prevail without man-made government or ideologies, is a common feature of religious terrorism, but exists also in a secular form. The messianic aspiration is similar to the utopian revolutionary ideologies of France, Russia, and China. The similarity between messianism and political ideology was noted by Engels and Hobsbawm, among others. Hobsbawm linked messianism to revolution and thus to terror, declaring messianism “a necessary social illusion for generating the superhuman efforts” required for replacing a societal order.\(^{45}\) Secular revolutionaries, once successful in overthrowing the old order, attempt to establish an ideal society. When that fails, scapegoats are sought and terror is employed against those accused of impeding the utopian society.

**The Functional Link Between Violence and Religion**

Although the messianic perspective at times relies on variable or conflicting interpretations as indicators of impending religious violence, it examines an underlying assumption that there is an inherent asso-
The process of sacrificial violence is circumvented by the modern judicial process. It is no longer possible to avenge violence when the community delegates its role of choosing victims and implementing justice to a central authority. Reciprocal violence is thus avoided. However, when the community perceives the central authority as ineffective or the administration of justice as non-functioning, the sacrifi-
cial process will be reinstated. This occurs because although violence can be subsumed, it is nonetheless always present.

Girard’s controversial hypothesis, while certainly an interesting perspective on religion, raises questions regarding its provability and application. It is difficult to prove or disprove something claimed to be inherent. The fact that sacrifice is a feature common to all religions (the sacrifice of inanimate objects is included; thus, even Buddhist monks perform sacrifice when burning incense) does not necessarily prove an inseparable link between violence and religion in the manner he describes. In its application, Girard’s hypothesis can be made to apply to almost any violent situation. By explaining all conditions, it may lose its ability to fit more limited circumstances.

Martin Kramer attempts to apply Girard’s theory to the series of Shi’ite suicide bombings in Lebanon. Kramer suggests that not only were the bombings a form of warfare, but they also served to maintain an “internal equilibrium” between the participating groups, Amal and Hizballah, in their rivalry for power in Lebanon. Not only did the suicide operations succeed in driving out a foreign presence, they also functioned to prevent an escalating cycle of violence between adherents of Islam. When the sacrifices stopped, the violence turned toward the community, resulting in a fratricidal war between Lebanon’s Shi’ites. Thus, the sacrificial process, completed through the rituals of Islam, was disguised as an act of war.

A combination of factors contributed to the transformation of traditional Shi’ite passivism into civil conflict. Their historical isolation in the more remote areas of southern Lebanon and the Biqa Valley caused the Shi’ites to fall behind other groups in various areas of political and social development. The political power structure of the Lebanese state did not reflect the demographics of Lebanon’s groups. Added to the political and social factors was the presence of a foreign occupier, Israel, followed by French and U.S. troops. Finally, the influence of Iran on the Lebanese Shi’ite community increased after the success of the Iranian Revolution. While Iran supplied arms to Hizballah, Syria supplied Amal, and incidents between the two increased. The influx of arms from outside interests aggravated the already hostile environment.

Prior to the appearance of Hizballah in 1982, most of the Shi’ite community in Lebanon identified with Amal, a movement that combined many different elements of the various villages, towns, neighborhoods, and clans. Hizballah drew upon the differences, gaining dissidents from Amal and establishing a base in the Biqa Valley. Amal and Hizballah shared many similar activities, competing in their profession of loyalty to Ayatollah Khomeini, in their distribution of aid,
and in their propagandizing, demonstrating, and recruiting. Thus, explains Kramer, did an “imitative rivalry” escalate into a cycle of sacrificial bombings, as both groups vied for recognition as leader of the sacred struggle against foreign occupiers.\textsuperscript{56} Foreign troops, then, served as sacrificial substitutes in Lebanon’s civil war.

Suicide bombers both volunteered and were selected for martyrdom. It was crucial to prove that they were not forced, to show how they freely dedicated themselves to a sacred cause in assurance of their entry into paradise. Certain characteristics pertaining to martyrs did apply, however, and thus a process of selection ensued, with volunteers being prepared and guided toward their goal. Martyrs were required to be male, as Islam prohibits females from participating in armed conflict. They were required to be old enough to assume responsibility for their decision, but must not be at an age where they were likely to leave behind a dependent family. As previously noted, suicide bombers occupied the social position of the lower class. Kramer suggests these characteristics reflect Girard’s sacrificial criteria of vulnerability.\textsuperscript{57}

There is some question of the willingness and commitment of the suicide bombers to meet death. Evidence gathered from unsuccessful car-bomb attempts in Lebanon suggests that in at least some cases, suicide was an option, but not necessarily the intended outcome. Remote control apparatus were discovered in several instances. The driver of the 1983 car-bomb attack on the American Embassy in Kuwait attempted to flee his vehicle just prior to the explosion, causing speculation as to whether he simply changed his mind, or was deceived into believing there would be sufficient time to escape. Some car-bomb drivers stated that their task was only to place their charge in cur areas for later detonation. If true, the possibility of “fooled martyrs” is quite likely.\textsuperscript{58}

Sanctification of the sacrificial process is also required for suicide attacks. This was accomplished by Shi’ite clerics who urged armed struggle against Islam’s perceived enemies. Elimination of foreign occupiers, they proclaimed, would remove an obstacle to the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon. The transformation of Shi’ite passivism to activism was thereby effected through religious references and justifications. The rite of Ashura, the annual Shi’ite day of mourning for the seventh-century martyrdom of the Iman Husain at Karbala, was reinterpreted from a call for self-flagellation to active resistance. The leading cleric of Hizballah, Al-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, asked his followers, “Do you want to suffer with Husain? Then the setting is ready . . . You can be wounded and inflict wounds . . . Those who suffer . . . in a way that liberates, these are the ones who
mark Ashura." Fadlallah sanctified self-sacrifice when he abolished the distinction between those who destroyed themselves in the act of defending Islam against an enemy who was impossible to fight by conventional means, and those killed by such an enemy in a more conventional form of warfare. Self-sacrifice, he said, can be part of jihad since it differs little from "a soldier who fights and knows that in the end he will be killed ... There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself." Kramer concludes that since self-sacrifice proved to be an unreliable warfare tactic, it lost its value and thus its justification. Shi'ite clerics withdrew their support, retracting sanctification. A conditional ban was issued, proclaiming that self-martyring operations were only permissible when guaranteed to effect a political or military change. Fadlallah, while agreeing that past operations had been successful, placed harsher restrictions: "The believer cannot blow himself up unless the results will equal or exceed the [loss of the] soul of the believer." Kramer suggests that the self-martyrdom operations of Lebanon gave legitimacy to a type of violence that was not easily revoked, providing an example for other Muslims that they could "consign another to death in the name of Islam." Imitation has thus ensued by subsequent Islamic groups, such as Hamas.

Others have insisted, however, that Hizballah and Amal ran out of volunteers within the Shi'ite community, implying that the problem is merely one of recruitment. Suicide bombings as a military tactic clearly remain a viable option for those persons and groups willing to pay the price. Militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, lacking alternative means of effective armed struggle, may become less selective in choosing their martyrs. Sanctification for suicide bombing operations remains essential, but can also be justified when it is deemed necessary.

**Conclusion: Implications for Analytical Approaches**

One begins to wonder if the inherently ambiguous qualities of religion preclude any systematic approach to explaining religious terror. Despite the difficulties, analysts continue to explore the topic from various perspectives. Additional fields, such as anthropology and psychology, have been used as well to impart meaning to particular aspects within the phenomenon of religious violence committed by individuals or groups.

An ability to understand Islamic radicalism from a broad perspective is necessary. Islamic terrorism is a part of the more general phenomenon of religious violence. Inclusion of the various disciplines...
Islamic Radicalist Violence

should not be used only to clarify and emphasize a single contributing factor, but to assist in gaining a more general understanding of the problem. The true source of Islamic terrorism will undoubtedly continue to be debated vigorously, as will the criteria for determining which Islamic militants can accurately be labeled religious terrorists, and the extent to which religion serves as a precipitator of terrorism. There are certainly experts who, in this regard, dismiss religion entirely.

The argument over proper analytic approaches has implications for designing a policy of response to terrorism. Analyzing a single variable in a narrow approach can result in constructing counter-measures of limited applicability; for example, a policy that concentrates exclusively on socioeconomic factors precipitating terrorism may ignore an important historical contributor that must be addressed in the formulation of a solution. A consideration of the degree to which Islam acts as a motivator, a legitimator, or a justifier of terrorist acts can assist in formulating an appropriate policy response. A deeper understanding of the significant position Islam occupies among many Muslim populations is necessary to overcome a natural bias in analysis that reflects the politically dominant cultural norms of the international system.

Notes

1 I include revolution as it falls within the scope of the study of political violence; revolution, by its nature, involves the destruction of one society or political system and its replacement by another. Furthermore, insurgent movements often rely upon terrorism as a tactic of warfare, and many times revolutions are accompanied by acts of terror.
4 Dale, 46-47.
5 Ibid., 38.
6 Ibid., 59.
8 Specifically, it was an alliance of the religious community with the merchant class and intelligentsia. Leaders of the former enjoyed autonomous political power in the rural areas and were threatened by the Shah's attempts to centralize authority; the latter suffered under restricted civil liberties and expressed frustration over economic conditions. See Said Amir Arjomand, The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran (New York:
Oxford University Press, 1988).
10 Scarcia R. Amoretti, “Libyan Loneliness in Facing the World: The Challenge of Islam?” in Islam in Foreign Policy, ed. Adeed Dawisha (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 55-57. Egypt and Sudan have accused Libya of supporting Islamic fundamentalist movements in their countries; in the Philippines, Libya has assisted Muslim revolutionaries in their goal to overthrow the Philippine government.
12 Ibid., 426.
13 Rapoport, 110.
14 Weinberg and Davis, 33.
16 Ibid., 12-13.
17 Ibid., 3.
19 Ibrahim, 427.
20 Ibid., 439-40.
23 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 82.
27 Ibid., 61.
29 Qutb, 100.
32 Ibid., 132.
34 Ibid., 82-85.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 42-45.
37 Ibid., 10-13.
39 Ibid., 666.
40 Ibid., 665.
41 Rapoport, “Sacred Terror: A Contemporary Example from Islam,” 122.
43 Ibid., 663-64.
44 Hobsbawm, cited in Ibid., 660.
49 Ibid., 26.
50 Ibid., 146-48.
51 Ibid., 30-31.
52 Ibid., 36-37.
53 Ibid., 306.
55 Ibid., 35.
56 Ibid., 36.
57 Ibid., 38-39.
62 Merari, 206.