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## Sacred and Profane: Exploring the Relationship Between Religion and Terrorism

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### Abstract

Religious terrorism has become a global issue in the 21st century. Recently the world has seen an increasing number of religiously motivated terrorist activities. This article first attempts to explore the relationship between religion and terrorism, and then investigate why religion is often used as an influential tool of terrorism. The study also examines the factors that trigger young people to engage themselves in terrorist activities. This study follows a qualitative research design where primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten religious' leaders from four major religions: Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. Secondary data were gathered from various sources including journal articles, books, newspapers, and documentaries. The findings of the research reveal that a trivial number of deviated minds from various religions carry out terrorist activities by misinterpreting the verses of religious texts. Moreover, some interest groups influence young people in terrorist activities with the aim of serving their motives.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Religious Terrorism, Jihad, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

### Introduction

Terrorism has been one of the pressing issues in the era of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The term "terrorism", in the broadest sense, is the use of intentionally indiscriminate violence as a means to create fear or terror, to achieve any political, religious, or ideological aim (Fortna, 2015). Though the terms "terrorist" and "terrorism" originated during the French Revolution of the late 18th century, it gained popularity during the U.S. Presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981–89) after the Beirut barracks bombings in 1983 and again after the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. in September 2001 and also the attack on Bali in October 2002 (Heryanto, Ariel, 2006:161). However, after the 9/11 attack, the term terrorism has got a new dimension, and is often coined with "religious terrorism".

Since 2001 religious extremism has overtaken national separatism to become the main operator of terrorist attacks around the world (Wright, 2016). However, the overall death from terrorism dropped by 15% during the years of 2014 to 2019 (Global Terrorism Index, 2020). Specifically, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Russia and Eurasia, South America and South Asian regions have experienced a 20% of terror-driven death during this period. While terrorism has decreased in many parts of the world, it has become more prevalent in other parts of the world. Seven of the ten countries with remarkable rise were in Sub-Saharan countries (Global Terrorism Index, 2020).

Several terrorist attacks happened in the name of religion in the last few decades. From the World Trade Center attack, known as 9/11 attack, in 2001, Madrid train bombing in 2004, the notorious subway attack in London

in July 2005, and Jewish terrorism during disentanglement of settlements in Gaza and the West Bank in 2005, to the recent attack by a white Christian fundamentalist in a masque of Christchurch, New Zealand have given birth of a plethora of questions: Who would do such a terrible thing? Why would one comply with carrying out such a terrible attack? Are religions to blame for such kind of terrorist attack?

Thus, the aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of war and terrorism in light with the scriptures of four major religions: Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism. In so doing, using the qualitative research approach, the study seeks to answer to the two major questions: What is the relationship between religion and terrorism? And why do young people get involved in terror organizations and comply with carrying out such formidable attacks?

### **Relationships between Religion and Terrorism**

Drawing the relationship between religion and terrorism is an extremely painstaking task for scholars as the correlation between the two are often debated. While a considerable number of people across the world perceive that religion and terrorism have strong correlation, others believe that religions have nothing to do with terrorism. However, before delving into the discussion of the religion-terrorism nexus, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the concepts of war and peace in the holy scriptures of major religions.

### **War and Peace according to Islamic Philosophy**

The verbatim meaning of the Arabic word *Islam* means 'surrender' or 'submission'. The philosophy of Islam suggests that faith in *Islam* means a complete and sincere surrender to God so that one can live in peace and tranquility. (Seda, 2002:6). The Holy Quran, the scripture of the followers of Islam religion, asserts that Islam is the complete way of life for all mankind. It is a religion based on the belief that there is one no God except Allah, and the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) is the last messenger upon who the Holy Quran was revealed.

The word *Jihad* has repeatedly appeared in the Holy Quran. However, the word has often been distorted by misinterpretation, mis-connotation and misunderstanding. It is often the case that the word "Jihad" is used by the terrorist as a weapon to kill non-Muslims as they hold a dogmatic belief that killing people who disobey *Islam*, God and His messengers is one of the certain windows to enter Paradise. However, this long-held misbelief of the radical segment of the Islam religion contradicts what the Holy Quran prescribes about the protection of human lives. According to the Holy Quran, "He who kills a soul unless

it be (in legal punishment) for murder or for causing disorder and corruption on the earth will be as if he had killed all humankind" (Al- Quran, 5:32).

The word "jihad" is derived from the Arabic verb *jahada*, which means to endeavor, to strive, or to struggle. Sometimes it is translated as a holy war. In religious contexts, jihad means to struggle against one's evil inclinations, strive for the moral strengthening of society, or promote the spread of Islam. [Cyril Glasse,1989: 209-210, Eliad,1987:88-89]. The word "Jihad" does not properly mean any violent activities like war. This term can mean both violent and peaceful action depending on the context in which it is used as stated by Louay Fatoohi in his book *Jihad in the Qur'an: the Truth from the Source*.

Islamic Jihad does not refer to fight against those who hold different beliefs and do not lead a life according to the teaching of Islam. The Qur'anic concept of jihad refers to the attempt in the form of struggle against or resistance to something, for the sake of Allah. This effort can be fighting back armed aggression and resisting evil drives and desires in oneself. In a narration it is mentioned that the best Jihad is the Jihad against one's own soul. Even donating money to the needy is also considered a form of jihad. It involves struggling against one's selfishness and inner desire to keep one's money for one's own pleasures. Jihad can, therefore, be subdivided into armed jihad and peaceful jihad. Armed jihad means a response to any aggression. (Fatoohi, 2009).

On the other hand, peaceful jihad refers to the war of the Muslims against their "nafs", an Arabic term which means "lower self," and which refers to the individual's inferior drives and evil motives is a major form of peaceful jihad. (Fatoohi, 2009). Thus, it is clear from the above discussion that the word "jihad" not only means fighting against the enemy or anything, but also struggling against all evil deeds and desires.

As the terms *Jihad* and *War* often used and viewed as synonymous, it is important to highlight what the Quranic verses and Hadith of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) says about war and peace. In Quran Allah mentioned, "He who kills a soul unless it be (in legal punishment) for murder or for causing disorder and corruption on the earth will be as if he had killed all humankind, and he who saves a life will be as if he had saved the lives of all humankind." (Al-Qur'an 5:32). Similarly, according to Tafsir ibn Kathir, classic Sunni Islam Tafsir (commentary of the Qur'an) by Imad Ud Din Ibn Kathir - whoever kills a soul without justification, such as, in retaliation for murder or for causing mischief on earth will be as if he has killed all mankind, because there is no difference between life to life. if anyone saves a life by preventing its blood from being shed and

believing in its sanctity, it is equivalent to save all the lives. (Tafsir ibn Kathir, Surah Mai'dah, p:113)

There are other Hadiths on the importance of peace in Islam. On the authority of Abu Huraira (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), reported: The Messenger of Allah, (SAW), said, "You will not enter Paradise until you believe, and you will not believe until you love each other. Shall I show you something that, if you did, you would love each other? Spread peace among yourselves." (Sahih Bukhari). From the above Quranic verses and Hadith, it is clear that Islam is the religion that supported peace and harmony. Allah will reward those who will be kind to others.

There are also some important verses of Qur'an which forbid forcing anyone to change his religion. According to the Holy Quran, "There is no compulsion in religion. Truth is clear from falsehood" (Al-Qur'an 2:256). This verse strongly opposes to force anyone to become Muslim. Islam is plain and clear, and its proofs and evidence are plain and clear. Therefore, there is no need to force anyone to embrace Islam. Rather, whoever Allah directs to Islam, opens his heart for it and enlightens his mind, will embrace Islam with certainty. Whoever Allah blinds his heart and seals his hearing and sight, then he will not benefit from being forced to embrace Islam." (Tafsir ibn Kathir, Surah Al-Baqarah part-2, p: 277)

From the above discussion, this can be said that Islam does not permit any Muslim to kill anyone or fight against any person (Muslim or Non-Muslim) without any just reason. So, Islam does not support terrorism and there is no relationship between Islam and terrorism.

### **War, Peace and Nonviolence in Hinduism**

Hinduism is believed to be the oldest and one of the major world religions, originated in the Indian subcontinent and comprised several and varied systems of philosophy, belief, and rituals (Doniger et al, 2017). The beliefs of Hindus determine their thoughts and attitudes about life, which in turn direct their actions. Some of the verses related to war, peace, and non-violence is stated below with explanations taken from the commentary of Swami Mukundananda.

According to Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 13, Verse 8-12 – "Humbleness; freedom from hypocrisy; non-violence; forgiveness; simplicity; service of the Guru; cleanliness of body and mind; steadfastness; and self-control; dispassion toward the objects of the senses; absence of egotism; keeping in mind the evils of birth, disease, old age, and death; non-attachment; absence of clinging to the spouse, children, home, and so on; even-mindedness amidst desired and undesired events in life; constant and exclusive devotion toward me; an inclination for solitary places and an aversion for mundane society; constancy in spiritual knowledge; and philosophical pursuit of the

Absolute Truth—all these I declare to be knowledge, and what is contrary to it, I call ignorance."

These five verses narrate the virtues, habits, behaviors, and attitudes that purify one's life and enlighten it with the light of knowledge. From this verse, it is clear that Hinduism support non-violence. So, it is prohibited in Hinduism to kill someone without any reason. This is justified from the story of Arjuna who interprets the Lord Krishna's view of war in Gita as: "...If you are killed (in the battle) you will ascend to heaven. On the contrary, if you win the war, you will enjoy the comforts of an earthly kingdom. Therefore, get up and fight with determination... With equanimity towards happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat, fight. This way you will not incur any sin." (Bhagavad Gita 2.38)

In the context of this verse, Arjun had expressed his fear that by killing his enemies he would incur sin. Shree Krishna advises Arjun to become detached from the fruits of his action and only focus on his duty. If any action is not motivated by any ill-will or personal motive; they are performed as a matter of duty. So according to this verse, if one gives up all ill-will or selfish motives and works merely for the sake of duty towards the supreme, such work does not create any sin. (Swami Mukundanada). So according to Hinduism, one can fight only on the battlefield or against his enemy as a duty for any supreme reason, but it is not permissible to kill anyone without any ill or selfish motive.

### **War and peace according to Christianity**

Christianity is the major religion which inhibited from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God) in the 1st century AD. Geographically the most widely diffused of all faiths; it has a constituency of more than 2 billion believers. The largest groups of Christianity are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Protestant churches. There are also several independent churches of Eastern Christianity as well as numerous sects throughout the world. (Stefon *et al.*, 2017).

The verses related to war peace in The Holy Bible are as follows: God has given Ten Commandments to Moses stated in Exodus: 20 among them the sixth commandment says, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13: (6)). This verse from the Holy Bible suggest that God forbids the murder of any people and the Jewish people are told by God to attack people who oppose them on some occasions only. Killing anyone without any just reason is prohibited in Christianity. Another verse stated that "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

From these above verses, it can be said that Christianity support peace, and Jesus is always taught to his followers to love others. So, we can say that Christianity, like Islam and Hinduism, does not support terrorist activities.

### **War, Peace and Non-violence in Buddhism**

Buddhism and its philosophy developed from the teachings of the Buddha (Sanskrit: “Awakened One”), who was a teacher, lived in northern India between the mid-6th and mid-4th centuries BCE (Before the Common Era). Professor K.N. Jayatillake in his publication title “Buddhism and Peace” which was first printed in 1962, quoted that, “For, on the one hand, the aim of the good life, according to Buddhism, is described as the gaining of a state of “Peace” or *santi*, which is a characteristic of *nibbana*” (or in Sanskrit *nirvana*). On the other hand, the practice of the good life according to Buddhism is consists of “*sama-cariya*” or “harmonious, peaceful living”, with one’s fellow beings.

The Buddha disseminated non-violence and peace as a universal message. He did not support violence or the destruction of life and declared that there is no such thing as a “just” war. (Jayatillake 1962). The central message of the Buddha to the world in his words is: “*To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, purify your mind; this is the teaching of the Buddhas*” (Dhammapada 183). Thus, from the advice of Buddha it is clear that harmlessness is the root of all virtues: “Harmlessness has the characteristic mark of making one refrain from immorality which, on its part has the mark of harming. Hence harmlessness is an especially strong cause of morality; and morality, again, is the basis of concentration of mind, while the concentration of mind is the basis for wisdom. In that way harmlessness (nonviolence) is the root of all virtues.”

From the above quotation of Buddha, it is clear that the message of Buddhism peace and non-violence. Buddha teaches his followers to avoid all evils and purify their minds and do well for others. So it can be said that Buddhism doesn’t support killing any person without any reason.

### **Study Design**

A qualitative research design has been followed for this study to accomplish the study objectives as qualitative research is applicable for small samples and it helps to outline a complete description and analysis of a research subject. For finding out the relationship between religion and terrorism and addressing the interest of young people to involve in terrorist activities exploratory approach of qualitative research design was used here because exploratory research helps to investigate an issue or topic in order to develop insight and ideas about its underlying nature.

For a comprehensive understanding of the subject, several in-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured questionnaires where participants were free to answer any question. In-depth interviews were used for this study for understanding the emotions, feelings, and opinions of the participant regarding the relationship between religion and terrorism. Face-to-face interviews were done with different religious leaders of major four religions- Islam, Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian in Bangladesh. Interviews were recorded via phone and later transcribed and used for analysis. Permission was taken from the respondents before recording the interviews. Interviews were taken in Bengali Language and further translated into English. Secondary data were also used here along with primary data from some secondary sources including books, articles, previous research, and vigorous internet search. The collected information was presented according to respondents’ own views.

All the collected information was examined on the basis of the research objectives. Findings were presented by interpreting the data using qualitative analysis. The main texts of different religions such as the Holy Qur’an, Holy Gita, Holy Bible, and Holy Tripitaka were used as a reference to analyze the relationship between religion and terrorism. Religious leaders were selected purposively from four major religions in Bangladesh including six Muslims, two Hindus, one Buddhists, and one Christians.

The study has some limitations. The duration of the study was not sufficient for in-depth research. Interviews were taken only from Sylhet city of Bangladesh due to time and resource constraints. Considering the limitation, the sample size was not determined by following any recognized sample size determination formula. However, all the interviewees were very cooperative in this study.

### **Study Findings**

#### ***Is religion intrinsic to terrorism?***

From the informal talk with the religious leaders, it is clear that the major four religions do not support terrorism. All the religious leaders justify their answers from the verses of their religious texts. According to Mawlana Hafij Asjad Ahmed, a prominent Muslim religious leader, “Islam does not support any kind of terrorist activities. Terrorism has no place in religion. What are happening in the name of terrorism are injustice, crime, and oppression. Killing unjustly is cruelty and no religion support it”

In the words of a Hindu Religious Leader Debarshi Shreebas - “The essence of traditional religion or Hinduism is to love everyone. As all human being are the creation of god so the people of all the religions must be loved”. Similarly, a Christian Religious Leader, Dicon

Nizum Shangma also denied the relationship of religion with terrorism. He told that the main principle of the Christian religion is to love each other. Christian religion never supports any terrorist activities.

On the basis of the above statement and also based on religious texts which are presented in section one, it is clear that religion is not intrinsic to terrorism. No religion supports any kind of terrorist activities. All four religions are based on peace and harmony. All religions support any kind of war only in terms of self-defense. Terrorists try to misinterpret any religious verses to influence people in terrorist activities for their motive.

### ***Why Religion is used As a Tool for Terrorism?***

Hindu religious leader, Debarshi Shreebas Das argues that “Religion is used as a tool for terrorism because all human beings are distracted from the root. They are self-centric and think about themselves only. Moreover, lack of self-identification is also the reason for religious terrorism”. From the viewpoint of a Christian leader, Dicon Nizum Shangma, “Religious supremacy is the main reason for using religion as a tool for terrorism. All the people think their religion is the supreme one and try to establish their religious beliefs in the world so they use religious values to misguide people.”

From the above views, it can be said that Religion is used in terrorist activities for establishing any religious supremacy. Some group of people who thought that their religion is superior to others and they forced people to convert themselves in their religion. Moreover, sometimes religious terrorism is patronized to stymie any religion. As it is easy to influence and motivate people through spiritual beliefs, some interest groups try to use religion as an influential factor of terrorist activities by wrong interpretation of religious verses, and due to lack of proper religious knowledge, people are easily misguided by them and engage in terrorist activities.

### ***Reasons behind Young People’s Engagement in Terrorist Activity***

Surprisingly, in the present world, most of the religiously motivated terrorist attacks were done by young people. Bangladesh had experienced such a terror attack on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016. The attack was carried out by five gunmen at the Holey Artisan Bakery Café in the affluent Gulshan area of Dhaka. After a 12-hour siege, about 20 hostages (18 foreigners and 2 locals) and 2 police officers were killed. The victims were brutally murdered with sharp weapons. All the gunmen were young and most of those who came from affluent families were students of well-known private schools and universities. (The daily star, July 2, 2016) Youths are consistently and deliberately targeted by terrorists for many advantages. For example, youths who have no prior police records are especially

targeted by the terrorist group as they allow terrorist and violent extremist groups more operational freedom since it reduces the likelihood of arrest of the more senior terrorist leaders. Another reason that youths and young adults are targeted because of the skills that they might possess to ensure a cadre of educated and technically capable leaders for terrorist attacks. Lack of religious knowledge also recruits youth in violence. (BIPSS, 2017:29)

Muslim religious leader, Shahinur Pasha Chowdhury, remarks that- “Young people mainly engaged in terrorist activities due to lack of proper religious knowledge. Moreover, a group of people targeted young people by influencing them with the wrong interpretation of religious verses. The young people think that if they follow their path, they will get Jannat(paradise). The opinion of Buddhist religious leader, Ven. Sanghananda Thero, corresponds to the one by the Muslim leader that due to lack of religious knowledge the young people tend to involve themselves in terrorist activities.

Hindu religious leader, Debarshi Shreebas Das thinks that young people mainly engage in religious terrorism for money, employment, and other lucrative things. Christian religious leader, Dicon Nizum Shangma of Holi Church said, “Young people are not assimilated with religion so it’s easy to motivate them with wrong concepts. So due to lack of proper religious knowledge young people are mostly misguided by the people who are involved in terrorist activities.”

There are some clear reasons that derive from the above opinions of religious leaders that can be summarized as follow. Firstly, Young people do not have proper religious knowledge as they are often misguided by the wrong interpretation of religion. Secondly, Young people often get frustrated easily. From their frustration, they believe in religious beliefs or spiritual things and find it an easy way to get God’s blessing or paradise by engaging in terrorist activities. Thirdly, nowadays family values and bonding are decrementing than before, so lack of moral values young people is engaging in terrorist activities. Fourthly, sometimes young people are involved in terrorist activities for financial or economical gain.

### ***Influential Factors of Religious Terrorism***

Different scholars and researchers have identified a number of influential factors for religious terrorism. The most common factors indicated from these researches can be categorized into four: social factors, political factors, economical factors, and psychological factors. Tim Krieger and Daniel Meierrieks in their article “*What causes terrorism?*” mentioned some factors that cause terrorism. Briefly, these are:

- Economic deprivation leads to terrorism. Poor structural economic conditions create frustration, which influences violence as terrorist organizations find it easier to recruit frustrated followers or to receive funding from supporters due to economic deprivation.
- The process of modernization that promotes economic change, new forms of communication and lifestyles, and new ideas foster terrorism.
- Government policies and characteristics that emerged from the political and institutional order may also influence terrorist activity.
- Political transformation and instability also cause terrorism. Political change may create political vacuums which terrorist groups use to push their agendas.
- Identity and cultural clash and the global and economical order may also foster terrorism.
- Contagion may be considered as another factor of terrorism. Mainly terrorism exhibits a strong self-energizing nature with respect to both time and space (Krieger and Meierrieks, 2011:6-9).

So, it can be outlined that religion is not the only factor behind religious terrorism. Some other factors such as: political, economical, social, cultural, and psychological are also liable for religious terrorism.

#### **External Influence Behind Terrorist Activities**

American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, in his book "The Clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order (1996)" hypothesized that in the post-cold war world, in this new world order, the primary sources of conflict will not be ideological or economic, it will be people's culture and religion. (Huntington, 1996). In his book, firstly, he explained the nature of civilization and pointed out some major civilizations among the interactions of which the world will be shaped in the future. He further explained six causes for why civilization will clash. He also asserted the importance of religion in world politics and predicted that as a social factor religion will fill the vacuum created by political ideology. With a brief historical explanation of the conflicting nature of Islam and Christianity, he listed five factors that will be enhancing conflict between the two religions in the late twentieth century. He also emphasized that the interaction between the civilizations will be based on violence. He linked up Islam with violence. He argued that the conflicts between civilizations particularly dominated between Islam and the west or Non-Muslim. (Huntington, 1993)

Huntington's controversial argument has been criticized by various scholars. Some of them thought that this is a purposive thesis that serves a particular interest. Some argue that this thesis tried to create an Islamic threat to

the world. Some critics consider his argument as a strategy to influence US foreign and defense policy. As Huntington mentioned in his thesis that religion will be the influential factor of future clashes, so is there any relevance of his hypothesis to terrorist activities? Moreover, as some critics considered Huntington's hypothesis as a strategic plan of US foreign policy, is there any external influence behind terrorist activities?

The respondents of this study agreed that there might be any foreign influences. As strategically Muslim countries have more resources than others but they don't have any organized political form or political system. So the ruler came into power with the help of western block so they became obedient to them. As a result, the western block most often forces upon their ideology. They also try to misuse religion to patronize their ideology. Actually, the use of religion in terrorist activities is a part of diplomacy and conspiracy and the relevance of Huntington's hypothesis on clash of civilizations is found through these activities as Huntington mentioned that religion will be the factor of future clashes and there is increasing religious fragmentation today. Different understandings of religion are found today which are creating fragmentation. So, there must be a structured plan and financial benefit behind creating religious fragmentation to undertake terrorist activities.

Terrorism is mainly patronized by western block and as the people of developing countries want the lucrative things and financial solvency as they are on the back foot, so they are being engaged in such activities. Hence, foreign and national agents both are responsible for terrorist activities. Sometimes terrorist activities are done for political motives or economic gain. As terrorist attacks are mostly occurred in the name of Islam or using the concept of jihad so it may be partly true that the western block using the concept of jihad in terrorist activities to defame Islam and establishing their supremacy over the world.

#### **Conclusion**

Religion is a sacred word. It does not have any relationship with profane word like terrorism. No religion supports any kind of terrorist activities. From the verses of four major religious texts related to war, peace, and non-violence it is clear that all religions support the war for self-defense and it is prohibited to all religions to kill any human being. All religions support non-violence. Religion is used in terrorist activities by misinterpreting the verses of religious texts. All the verses of any religious text are revealed in any specific context, but the people who engaged in terrorist activities try to give wrong explanations of these verses and people consider their explanation due to lack of proper religious knowledge.

Some interest groups influence young people in terrorist activities for fulfilling their motives. They targeted young people because it is easy to motivate youth and youth has the capability to use the technology more conveniently than aged people. As young people do not have proper knowledge about religion so they can be easily misguided by wrong interpretation of religious verses. The youth usually think that through these terrorist activities they are following the command of God, which will help them gain paradise. Moreover, there might be any foreign influence behind terrorist activities. The powerful country always tries to rule over the other country and today mainly Muslims are visualizing as terrorists because of geopolitical interest. For combating religious terrorism awareness among the people have to be increased. Religious as well as moral values have to be increased among people. There can be introduced a combined religious study in academic discipline so that students can understand the values of other religions along with their own. Hence, religious leaders have to play important role in combating religious terrorism by explaining the right concept of any verse. They have to express their views through social media to create awareness among people about the wrong interpretation of any verses. To combat religious terrorism government, have to pay more attention in identifying terrorist and have to improve the legal framework of the state. Both international organizations and regional forums need to be more evolved to combat religious terrorism.

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