Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics

Terrorism and Religion: An Overview

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Subject: Contentious Politics and Political Violence, Political Values, Beliefs, and Ideologies, World Politics
Online Publication Date: Jan 2019 DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.693

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Summary and Keywords

The terrorist attacks of 9/11—in which al-Qaeda operatives flew airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and attempted to crash an additional plane into the Capitol Building in Washington, DC—highlighted for many the role religion could play in terrorism. Al-Qaeda, an Islamist terrorist network striving to undermine U.S. influence in Muslim countries, combined a global religious ideology with brutal violence in a way that caught the attention of policymakers and scholars. Since then, academics have been attempting to analyze and understand how religion and terrorism intersect.

Scholars have debated whether religion is a distinctive aspect of contemporary terrorism or is secondary in importance to other factors, such as nationalism and rational calculations. Some scholars take a critical approach to the topic, pointing to normative concerns with the study of religion and terrorism, and disparate other scholars have analyzed how religion and terrorism relate to a vast array of topics from public opinion to political repression.

After surveying the literature, it is difficult to question the distinctiveness of religious terrorism. Yet it also appears that terrorism does not arise inevitably from religious beliefs, nor is it unique to Islam. Moreover, religion seems to be connected to the transnational nature of contemporary terrorism. One particularly useful approach moving forward may be to draw on the relational approach to contentious politics that scholars such as Charles Tilly have formulated.

This article's approaches religious terrorism as violence or the threat of violence motivated by religion that intends to effect political change. This article will thus focus on how acts of violence that fall within the above definition relate to "religious imperatives," and what the effects of these connections are. Charles Tilly's approach to political violence, which conceptualizes terrorism as one manifestation of the range of political violence types, extends from brawls and riots to full-scale civil war. As a result, insights into how religion affects related forms of political violence can inform our understanding of religion and terrorism. Terrorism can also be understood as a nonstate phenomenon. Although states can commit terroristic acts, *terrorism* as a distinct tactic involves nonstate actors. State behavior—particularly religious repression—can have significant impact on the incidence and severity of religious terrorism in a country, however.

Keywords: politics and religion, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, terrorism

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The History of Religion and Terrorism

This article is an overview of the research on religion and terrorism, not a history of the topic. That being said, a brief summary of how religion and terrorism interact can guide the discussion of the scholarly work in this area. Several studies provide more in-depth history, such as those of Rapoport (1983), Cronin (2002–03), Stern (2003), and Hoffman (2006).

Modern terrorism, usually considered to have begun in the 1800s, was secular for much of its history. There are examples of ancient or premodern political violence by religious groups that some considered terrorism; these include the Sicari in Roman-occupied Israel, the Hashashin in the medieval Middle East, and the Hindu Thuggees. The earliest terrorist campaigns, however, were motivated by anarchism. Succeeding terrorist campaigns in the 20th century involved nationalist and leftist or Marxist ideologies.

This changed in the 1970s. Political Islam became a dominant force in the Middle East, attracting state support (such as in Saudi Arabia) and nonstate power through Islamist movements. Alongside the increasing political importance of religion was an increase in religious terrorist attacks. Some of the groups carrying out these attacks were motivated by religious ideologies; others infused religious beliefs into nationalist struggles. Examples include Hizballah in Lebanon, the Islamist assassins of Egyptian president Sadat, and HAMAS in the Palestinian territories. The trend continued in the 1990s with the rise of al-Qaeda and Islamist groups fighting in Algeria and Southeast Asia.

Religious actors came to prominence in non-Muslim countries as well, from the rise of the religious right in American evangelical Christianity to the Hindu nationalist *Hindutva* movement in India. Likewise, religious terrorism was not confined to Muslim societies. The United States has experienced recurring terrorist attacks against abortion providers by far-right Christian activists. Israel has also experienced far-right Jewish terrorist attacks, including the 1994 attack on Muslim worshippers in Hebron by a far-right American-Israeli Jewish man. And Japan’s Aum Shinrikyo cult, which launched a sarin attack on the Tokyo subway, was an apocalyptic offshoot of Buddhism.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks had a massive effect on the nature of religion and terrorism. The United States launched the Global War on Terrorism to uproot al-Qaeda, and after 9/11, the threat from religious terrorism expanded. The U.S. invasion of Iraq allowed a brutal al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in Iraq, to emerge in that country. Persistent unrest and foreign intervention in Somalia enabled al-Shabaab, a violent Islamist militant group, to seize large portions of territory. And Boko Haram emerged in Nigeria, launching a series of intense attacks that threatened to destabilize the country.

Even as al-Qaeda appeared to be fading with the death of Osama bin Ladin in 2011, a new transnational terrorist threat emerged; the Islamic State (IS). The IS took advantage of the post–Arab Spring civil war in Syria to eventually seize a large swathe of territory in

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Iraq and Syria before a series of military offensives retook much of this land. The IS developed a transnational presence as well, connecting individuals in Western Europe and America through its robust internet presence. This led to a series of loosely coordinated attacks in France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere. Militant groups in Libya, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and other countries aligned themselves with IS.

Religion also motivates terrorism through far-right extremism in Western Europe and North America. In 2011, an attacker killed nearly 80 people in Norway before authorities managed to stop him. The attacker's motivation was rather confused, but it included references to European identity and was driven by anti-Muslim bias. In 2017, a Canadian man attacked a Quebec mosque, killing six. The attacker held far-right and anti-Muslim views. And in 2015, an American man attacked an African American church in South Carolina, killing nine. He was motivated by white supremacist ideology. Far-right terrorist attacks are often difficult to classify, but they tend to involve religion either as a target or as part of an extreme nationalist identity.

This history of religion and terrorism raises a few questions for those hoping to understand the phenomenon. The first question is, Does religion cause terrorism to happen? Religion appears to be driving the current wave of terrorism, but it is very possible that other factors are more important and that religion is secondary to this violence. Alternately, some may argue that these questions—on the role of religion in terrorism—are themselves dangerous, and could lead to the demonization of Muslims.

The second question is, How does religion affect terrorism? This gives rise to other questions such as, Does religion matter as an ideology that intensifies violence? Does it have other effects on terrorism, like making it harder for struggles to be resolved? Or are acts that are apparently religious terrorism really driven by rational calculations? Beyond that, is our focus on terrorism itself the result of U.S. political interests?

Another major question has to do with the relationship between religion and political conditions: How does the interaction between religion and political institutions affect religious terrorism? To what extent do broader political conditions, notably religious repression and discrimination, relate to terrorism? The next section surveys the scholarship on religion and terrorism and presents research that has attempted to answer each of the these questions.

How Scholars Have Tried to Explain (or Explain Away) Religion and Terrorism

The first research considered consists of studies that debate whether religion—or specific religions like Islam—causes terrorism. Second will be studies debating how religion

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affects terrorism, either through means unique to religion or by obscuring rational calculations. The third set explores the relationship between religious terrorism and political institutions.

Besides these questions, the literature on religion and terrorism seeks to answer can also be organized according to whether or not a scholar believes religion matters in terrorism. One way to organize studies is by their attitude toward religion—that is, to what extent do they believe religion matters? Many influential studies on religion and terrorism highlight religion's distinctive impact on terrorism and on broader political violence. Such studies emphasize that the power of religious beliefs can make violence more likely, or they focus on the influence of Islam. Of course, not all scholars believe that religion is an important aspect of contemporary terrorism. Many scholars have criticized the focus on religion; others emphasize only other factors, to the exclusion of religion. Beyond this, several studies take a more critical approach to the topic, criticizing the overemphasis on Islam. Such scholars also argue that the focus on religion (particularly Islam) in many of the terrorism studies is the result of problematic political agendas. They claim that analyzing and critiquing this process rather than religious terrorism itself should be the priority. Finally, some focus on the exaggerated nature of the terrorism threat; they do not necessarily critique studies on religion and terrorism, but they worry that they represent misplaced resources.

Another way to categorize studies is by the level of analysis. Some are macro-level studies, focusing on society-wide conditions and changes to explain religious terrorism. Others are meso-level ones, focusing on dynamics among organizations and regimes. Finally, some are micro-level, examining individual decisions and opinions to explain religious terrorism.

Foundational Studies

Several foundational studies in religion and terrorism are rather descriptive, but they are a useful starting point for further analyses. Although he did not focus on terrorism, Samuel Huntington (1996), in his clash of civilizations thesis, focused much attention on religious conflict. Huntington posited that struggles between broad "civilizations," many of which are defined by religion, would define the post–Cold War era. Some have applied his thesis to terrorism, arguing that the religious terrorism of groups like al-Qaeda represent a "clash of civilizations" between the West and the "Muslim world" (Hirsh, 2016). Although many have criticized Huntington's work—as discussed in the section *DOES RELIGION CAUSE TERRORISM OR OTHER FORMS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE?*—it provides one template through which to understand how religious belief leads to terrorism.

Besides Huntington, another useful set of works looked broadly at the connection between religion and violence. These works did not deal specifically with terrorism, but their insights greatly expanded our knowledge of the topic. For example, R. Scott

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Appleby's (2000) classic *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* highlighted religion's capability to produce both great good and great evil in the world. Similarly, Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003) examined the fundamentalist strains in several religious traditions—which can turn to violence—in their book *Strong Religion*. A number of books by Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) examined the elements of religion that can lead to extreme violence. When religious communities connect their religious beliefs to real-world struggles, this can lead to extreme violence, what he termed "cosmic war." Juergensmeyer also provided useful case studies of the variety of forms religious extremism takes in today's world (Juergensmeyer, 1993, 2008). Bruce Lincoln (2006) provided a theological discussion on the connection between religion and violence, specifically on how al-Qaeda connected its terrorist attacks with religious discourse to try to justify its campaign as a religious struggle.

Another useful series of works has provided overviews of the nature and history of religious terrorism, even if they did not attempt to answer any of the questions asked in this article. One of the most influential is David Rapoport's work on religious terrorism. Rapoport (1983, 1992) compared religious terrorist groups from Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, highlighting the importance and power of religious beliefs in terrorist violence. Rapoport (2004) formulated his wave theory of terrorism to show that modern terrorism has occurred in several distinct waves since the 1800s; he characterized the wave beginning toward the end of the 20th century as the "religious wave." Hoffman (2006) provided a useful categorization of religious terrorism in *Inside Terrorism*. Audrey Cronin (2002–2003) usefully compared religious terrorism to other forms of terrorism, distinguishing between "leftist," "rightist," "ethnonationalist/separatist," and religious or "'sacred' terrorism." And Martha Crenshaw (2008) discussed the significance of religion in her analysis of a "new terrorism." Finally, Jessica Stern (2003) produced a valuable study, *Terror in the Name of God*, in which she interviewed Christian, Jewish, and Muslim terrorists and extremists to highlight the similarities in terrorism connected to different religious traditions.

Other scholars tried to problematize the nature of terrorism studies and of states' counterterrorism policies. Richard Jackson (2007) discussed the development of "critical terrorism studies," which was a reaction to mainstream terrorism studies; critical terrorism studies emphasize issues with defining terrorism and "the politically constructed nature of terrorism" (p. 244). The latter focus was particularly relevant to studies on religion and terrorism. Marie Breen Smyth, Jeroen Gunning, George Kassimeris, and Piers Robinson later expanded this work with Richard Jackson in the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (Smyth, Gunning, Jackson, Kassimeris, & Robinson, 2008). A similar approach is apparent in the Copenhagen School of securitization studies in international relations. It argues that states do not automatically view issues or actors as threats; instead, certain areas of international relations become threatening through a political process (Buzan, Waever, & Wilde, 1998).

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Does Religion Cause Terrorism or Other Forms of Political Violence?

Many studies focus on whether religion—either in general or specific religions like Islam—makes terrorism more likely to occur. These studies examine the relationship between religious beliefs and movements and the outbreak of political violence. Some argue that religion is an important part of contemporary political violence, and a few look specifically at the role of Islam in conflict. Others, however, argue against this view and suggest that much of what seems to be religious terrorism is actually related to material factors and strategic calculations.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that religion intensifies terrorism and other forms of religious violence. These studies, which are often quantitative, use rigorous research designs to determine whether religion does seem to contribute to terrorist violence when one is looking at a large number of terrorist groups or attacks. Jonathan Fox has presented this argument in a number of studies. For example, in a 2007 article, he highlighted the increasing role of religious conflicts in instances of state failure (Fox, 2007A). And in an influential 2004 article, he found that “religious nationalist” groups increasingly contributed to violent conflict around the world (Fox, 2004). In another study, Fox (2007B) found that conflicts over religion have been increasing in number and intensity since the 1970s. These studies did not deal specifically with terrorism, but the conflicts they addressed included many terrorist attacks. More importantly, they demonstrated the significant role religion played in conflicts and provided a model for later studies on religion and terrorism.

By contrast, some studies have argued that Islam—or the state of Muslim societies—explains much contemporary terrorism. Bernard Lewis’s (1990) influential article “The Roots of Muslim Rage” argued that much of the violence then originating in Muslim countries had to do with specific elements of Islamic history, as well as the “humiliation” felt by many in the Muslim world over Muslim countries’ decline vis-à-vis the “West.” Martin Kramer (1992) argued that the violence of Lebanon’s Hizballah was connected to its religious traditions. The claim that Islam and terrorism are connected remains influential in popular understandings of religion and terrorism.

Despite the popularity of this view, many studies focus on undermining the claim that Islam drives or is connected to terrorism. Fox has also analyzed the relationship between Muslim populations and violence and found that Muslims are not necessarily more violent than other religious groups. Fox and others have also quantitatively tested the clash-of-civilizations argument and claimed that there little evidence of a wide-ranging clash between Muslims and non-Muslims (Fox, 2000, 2002, 2003; Henderson & Tucker, 2001). Pearce (2005), in a quantitative study, also argued against the distinctiveness of Muslims in religious conflict. These studies do not necessarily contradict the importance of religion, but they reject the notion that Islam is the cause of terrorism.

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By contrast, many argue that religion is secondary to other factors in terrorism. A notable example of this is Robert Pape's (2003, 2006) work on suicide terrorism, presented in both book and article form. Pape argued that suicide terrorism is not driven by Islam or a broader religious ideology. Instead, it is motivated by the military occupation of a region and the nationalist sentiments that arise from this. Some who criticized Pape agreed with him about the limited importance of religion. For example, Mia Bloom (2007) rejected Pape's explanation of suicide terrorism in favor of an outbidding dynamic; she agreed with Pape, however, in his dismissal of the notion that religion is the cause of suicide bombings. De Soysa and Nordas (2007) argued that political and economic conditions mattered more than religion in severe terrorism. Other studies, by Krueger and Maleckova (2003) and Abadie (2004), highlight the importance of poverty, education, and political repression to explain terrorism.

Some have taken a more critical approach to the question of religion's influence on terrorism, arguing that the emphasis on religion and Islam represents ideological blinders or underlying biases. In *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, Mahmood Mamdani (2005) criticized the counterterrorism field's attempt to differentiate between "moderate" Muslims and the "extremists" who participate in or support terrorist groups. Mamdani argued that contemporary terrorism arose in part as a reaction to U.S. foreign policy, and that the distinction between moderate and extreme Muslims is a misrepresentation of the nature of the phenomenon. Additionally, in *Covering Islam*, Edward Said (1997) argued that the U.S. media and academics paint an overgeneralized picture of Islam and portray it as a threat in their coverage of terrorism, expanding on his broader critique of the field of Middle East studies in *Orientalism*.

Still others argue that the attention to religion as a cause terrorism is misdirected, because terrorism is an overblown threat that inappropriately dominates scholars' and policymakers' attention. John Mueller has argued that U.S. academics and policymakers have exaggerated the threat terrorism poses; much of the attention and effort that is devoted to studying and countering terrorism, then, is wasted (Mueller, 2006; Mueller & Stewart, 2012). Others have made similar points. Thrall (2007) analyzed post-9/11 threat inflation, specifically how the Bush administration convinced the American public that Saddam Hussein posed a threat. And in *Terrorizing Ourselves*, Friedman, Harper, and Preble (2010) criticized U.S. counterterrorism policies, arguing that U.S. policymakers have exaggerated the threat terrorism poses to America.

Finally, some studies do not explicitly analyze the role of religion in contemporary terrorism, but do explore how religious beliefs have contributed to current terrorist threats. Works such as Gunaratna's (2003) *Inside Terrorism* and Coll's (2004) *Ghost Wars* provide an overview of how al-Qaeda developed into a transnational force starting in the 1980s Afghanistan conflict. Likewise, in *The Far Enemy*, Gerges (2005) discussed the divisions inside Islamist terrorist groups over whether the United States or Muslim regimes are the primary target; this debate contributed to the emergence of al-Qaeda as a transnational network. Additionally, Kepel (2002) discussed how the limited successes

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of political Islam gave rise to terrorism, which developed into the transnational struggle of al-Qaeda.

Many of these studies focus on the macro-level, but a few are meso-level analyses. Most of the macro-level studies emphasize society-wide conditions, from the presence of religious actors, Muslim identity, or political and economic development. Pape's and Bloom's meso-level analyses, however, focus on the dynamics within terrorist movements.

How Does Religion Affect Terrorism?

Another group of studies examines not whether religion causes terrorism, but how religion influences terrorism—and other forms of political violence—that has broken out. That is, what are the mechanisms through which religion influence terrorism? Do religious beliefs make terrorism more intense? Do apparently religious terrorists actually rely on rational calculations? Or is the apparent influence of religion on terrorism a result of overlooked political agendas?

Several argue that when religion is mobilized as an ideology, it increases the severity of terrorism. Asal and Rethemeyer (2008) found that ideology—particularly religious ideology—made terrorists more deadly, as did other conditions, such as organizational strength and the connections among terrorist groups. Likewise, Piazza (2009) argued for a distinction between "strategic" religious terrorist groups and "abstract/universal" religious terrorist groups, the latter being more violent. Henne (2012) extended Piazza's argument, finding that religious ideologies—whether or not they are tied to ethnoreligious struggles—led terrorist groups to conduct more violent suicide attacks through the use of religion to frame their terrorist struggle. Similarly, Moghadam (2006, 2009) analyzed the role of al-Qaeda's specific religious ideology—which he called *Salafi jihadism*—in its transnationalism, and argued against attempts to downplay its importance.

Other studies argue that religion's effects on terrorism and political violence arise through a variety of other means. One example is Hassner's (2009) work on religion and indivisibility; he studied the manner in which religious disputes and beliefs can make it difficult for groups to negotiate tensions over sacred space, leading to intractable and often deadly conflicts. Similarly, Monica Toft (2007) highlighted the prevalence of Islam in late-20th-century civil wars and the intensity of these religious conflicts; she argued that "religious outbidding," or the attempt by combatants to gain support by making religious appeals, can explain the intensity of these conflicts. A quantitative example of this sort of study is Ellingsen's (2005) analysis of the role of religion in post–Cold War conflict, which found that religious differences seem to increase the likelihood of intrastate conflict breaking out.

Some others focused specifically on how dynamics within Islam produce terrorism. In *The Crisis of Islam*, Lewis (2003) argued that al-Qaeda's terrorist acts indicated the

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"resumption of the struggle for religious dominance of the world that began in the seventh century" (p. 162). Ben-Dor (1997) argued that certain elements of Islam—such as the concept of *jihad*—left Muslim societies vulnerable to extremism and violence.

Others argued against any role for religion, claiming that religious beliefs are secondary to rational calculations in seemingly religious terrorism. Pape's (2003, 2006) aforementioned studies not only argue that suicide terrorism is caused by occupations, not religion; they also argue that religious terrorism is a rational, calculated tactic unrelated to beliefs. Similarly, Berman and Laitin (2008) used a rationalist explanation to argue that religious terrorism is not driven by religion, but is a rational process. Religious organizations provide exclusive benefits in weak states, and also require sacrifices to eliminate potential defectors from the cause.

Other scholars of terrorism did not explicitly reject religion's importance, but they highlighted other factors in their explanations of how terrorism works. A prominent example is Kydd and Walter's (2006) argument that terrorism is a form of "costly signaling" that violent groups use to gain support and intimidate targets; they argue that the "strategic logics" terrorists follow are rationalist in nature. Similarly, Ethan Bueno de Mesquita has advanced rationalist explanations for terrorism, focusing on its strategic nature (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005A, 2005B; Bueno de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007). And in a series of articles, Abrahms (2006, 2008) argues that terrorism is not effective—countering other rationalist explanations for terrorism—and that it is driven by a desire for social belonging.

Critical studies focused on the political process behind U.S. counterterrorism efforts, which led to an overemphasis on the apparently threatening nature of religious terrorism. John Esposito (2003) in *Unholy War* acknowledged the threat posed by groups like al-Qaeda but argued that such groups are driven by U.S. foreign policy, not Islam. Additionally, Jocelyne Cesari (2009) argued that in response to terrorist threats, Islam has been securitized by Western Europe and the United States. Krebs and Lobasz (2007) argued that post-9/11 U.S. counterterrorism efforts were determined by the aggressive and confrontational way President George W. Bush framed the 9/11 attacks. These works attempt to redirect scholars' attention away from religion—or Islam specifically—and toward the political process through which terrorism became a major world concern after 9/11.

Finally, some explorations of the dynamics of religious terrorism provided insights into how contemporary groups draw on and use religion in their violence. Several studies analyzed how the Islamic State terrorist group became a transnational entity, attracting virtual and tangible support around the world; examples include McCants's (2016) *ISIS Apocalypse*, Atwan's (2015) *Islamic State*, and Cockburn's (2015) *The Rise of the Islamic State*. Other scholars, such as Hegghammer (2013) and Sageman (2004), analyzed the transnational networks and spread of foreign fighters in contemporary terrorism.

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Although they did not examine religion per se, their work provides useful insights into the networks through which religious terrorism operates.

Because these studies tend to focus on terrorist organizations, most of them occur at the meso-level. For example, studies on religious ideology emphasize the role ideology plays in terrorist movements. And the studies emphasizing rational calculations also explore why terrorist movements operate the way they do. Some studies did focus on different levels, however. Some of Abrahms's work explores why individuals join terrorist movements, and how this affects the movements' violence. And the explorations of Islam's effects discussed macro-level historical developments.

How Does the Interaction Between Religion and the State Affect Terrorism?

A final area of study involves the interaction between religion and the state. Some of these studies focus on the ways political institutions intersect with religious beliefs to produce extreme terrorism. Others look more broadly at how the dynamics of religious repression and discrimination affect society. As noted, while terrorism is a nonstate phenomenon, *state terror* can contribute to religious violence. Analyses that examine the nature of states' religious repression are thus extremely relevant to the study of religious terrorism.

Several studies examine how state religious policies increase the risk of terrorism. For example, Philpott (2007) argued that the interaction between the "political theology" of religious groups and the state's attitude toward religion could explain whether religious groups were peaceful or violent in their interactions with the state. Significantly, he discussed how the "integrationist" political theology of religious terrorists helps give rise to their violence, especially when combined with restrictive political conditions. Daniel Philpott later expanded this argument in *God's Century*, a book he wrote with Toft and Timothy Shah that provided a comprehensive explanation for the severity and variation in religious conflict around the world (Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011). Likewise, Grim and Finke (2011) analyzed the relationship between religious repression and religious hostilities, and found that repressive state policies intensified religious tensions in society, including religious terrorism. And in a more recent example, Nilay Saiya (2016) found that blasphemy laws in Muslim states encourage "Islamist terrorism." Henne (2017) expanded on the work of these scholars, highlighting how the nature of ties between religion and the state in Muslim countries affected their counterterrorism policies. All these works highlight the political conditions that can affect terrorism and states' responses to terrorism and thus may prove relevant to studies of religion and terrorism.

Many other studies look at the relationship between religion and repression, and its impact on social tensions. Fox, James, and Li (2009) analyzed ethnic conflict and found that states that exclusively support a certain religion are more likely to repress minority

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religious groups. Basedau, Fox, Pierskalla, Struver, and Vullers (2017) found that religious discrimination by states intensifies grievances but does not always lead to violence. By contrast, Akbaba and Taydas (2011) found that religious discrimination can increase the likelihood of violent conflict breaking out in a country. And Henne and Klocek (2017) found a reverse causation: Religious conflict in a country led regimes to intensify religious repression. These studies suggest that religious repression may increase the likelihood of terrorism, although the relationship is not always apparent.

Other studies focus on the relationship between terrorism, religious beliefs, and electoral politics. These studies emphasize the importance of understanding the electoral context, but provide diverging insights into the importance of religion. Satana, Inman, and Birnir (2013) found that religious group dynamics can matter; the exclusion of religious groups from a governing coalition can increase the likelihood that extremist wings of that group will use terrorism. By contrast, Chenoweth (2010) found that democratization can enable ideological competition among groups in society, which may increase the threat of terrorism. In Chenoweth's study, ideological competition mattered, but specific ideologies —such as religion—did not.

A few studies examined public opinion data to assess how political conditions affect attitudes relevant to terrorism. Tessler and Robbins (2007) found that the attitudes of Middle Eastern Muslims toward their governments and U.S. foreign policy had more effect on their support for terrorism than did their religious beliefs. Similarly, Buckley (2013) argued that institutional policies toward religion in Western European states affected Muslims' integration into society, but not their support for suicide terrorism.

Most of these are macro-level studies. They tend to study overall political conditions in a country, and thus require a broad scope. A few do focus on more detailed levels, however. Some of the studies of political competition examine organizational dynamics. Likewise, the public opinion studies combine a macro-level analysis—the political conditions—with micro-level attitudes.

Religion and Terrorism: Complex and Important

Research on religion and terrorism has produced a massive amount of high-quality work. These studies address numerous aspects of religious terrorism and span multiple levels of analysis. Organizing them according to the specific questions they ask allows us draw some tentative conclusions on what this research can tell us about whether and how religion influences terrorism. We can also point to a few areas in which further research is required.

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First, it is difficult to argue against the distinctiveness of religious terrorism. Terrorism motivated by religion appears to be more deadly than terrorism motivated by secular or leftist ideologies. The studies discussed in this article provide a wealth of quantitative and qualitative evidence for this claim. Critics of the importance of religion are right to point to strategic calculations or nonreligious motivations mattering as well, however. Religious terrorism is not driven by sincere religious beliefs or fervor alone; material conditions often matter. But it is increasingly difficult to argue that religion has no impact at all on the actions of groups like al-Qaeda. The back and forth between the two sides on this issue has usefully pushed us to realize the subtle and complex nature of religion in politics. Future research on how terrorist groups turn to and mobilize religion, and specifically on how this affects their organization and violence, would be useful.

It is also increasingly clear that terrorism does not inevitably arise out of religion and is not inherently connected to Islam. Because religious terrorism is not marked by deep devotion to a tradition, religion itself does not seem to cause violence. Moreover, the existence of violent extremism across religious traditions and the complex manner in which religion influences terrorism in Muslim societies indicate that Islamic beliefs do not lead to terrorism. Critiques of religion's importance and critical approaches to the topic of terrorism have been helpful in undermining attacks on Islam or Muslims as a result of terrorism. Yet, terrorist movements do draw on Islamic beliefs to justify and mobilize their violent acts; this can be seen in McCants's (2016) study of the Islamic State's use of Islamic apocalyptic prophecies. Extremist movements from other religions—such as the US Christian anti-abortion movements—have drawn on scripture to justify their violence. This has occurred on a smaller scale than terrorist movements that draw on Islam. Further research into why terrorist movements are more readily able to mobilize Islamic beliefs in the current era would be useful.

Finally, two important aspects of much contemporary terrorism—its religious nature and its transnationalism—appear connected. The transnational networked nature of groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State has taken the international nature of earlier terrorist groups from the 1960s and 1970s even further. Moreover, there are indications that the religious ideology of these groups facilitates this transnationalism by instilling in members an identity that transcends state boundaries. And the similarities in forms of religious extremism across religious traditions around the world suggests that a more diffuse transnationalism is occurring through the globalizing nature of religion. More work is needed to understand this aspect of religious terrorism, however. It is not clear whether the transnationalism is due to religion or to other aspects of late-20th-century life, such as expanded access to information technology. The effect of the transnationalism also remains unclear. Does it make religious terrorism more resilient, or more brittle? Does it intensify the violence of that terrorism? Further research in these areas would be very helpful.

In conclusion, a useful direction for the study of religion and terrorism to take would be toward the relational approach to political violence spearheaded by the late Charles Tilly. In *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Tilly (2003) expanded on insights from earlier works

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—including the influential *Dynamics of Contention* he coauthored with Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow—to present a new approach to political violence (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2008). Tilly argued that terrorism, civil war, and riots are not discrete events but overlapping manifestations of broader dynamics of political violence. Moreover, he called on scholars to focus not on the ideas behind political violence or the conditions that give rise to it, but on the interactions between groups and individuals that lead societies to become polarized and outbreaks of political violence to occur.

This relational approach to political violence could provide tools for scholars to analyze the complex and subtle nature of religion in terrorism mentioned above, as well as the mechanisms through which transnationalism and religion intersect in terrorism. Studies could focus on the framing techniques used in religious terrorism and their effects on both adversaries and target audiences. Other studies could emphasize how terrorist networks serve as brokers for the spread of religious ideology, such as the role al-Qaeda played among Islamist terrorist groups globally in the 1990s. Still others could focus on how religious ideology itself emerges from the interaction between peaceful social movements and terrorist groups; that is, how religion itself is part of the process of political violence. Additionally, studies could use Tarrow's (2005) relational approach to transnational contention to develop nuanced analyses of transnational terrorism. Moreover, such work could intersect with studies of religious politics as a relational phenomenon (Nexon, 2009, 2011).

A relational research program on religion and terrorism would involve a few steps. The starting point—following Tilly—would not be ideas but interactions. Instead of analyzing the religious beliefs of terrorist groups and ascertaining how they affected the groups' violence, scholars would examine how religious actors—both violent and nonviolent—interact with each other, and how religious terrorist groups deploy religious appeals in their violence. For example, scholars could draw on recent work in field theory, and conceptualize religion as a type of "capital" actors can deploy to gain support and undermine opponents (Goddard, 2006; Nexon & Neumann, 2017; Pouliot, 2010). Next, the focus would be on *mechanisms*, not *variables*. That is, instead of characterizing terrorist groups or conflicts as religious or nonreligious—and comparing these characteristics to the effects of other variables—scholars would attempt to uncover recurring types of interactions or forms of mobilization among groups that draw on religion. This can highlight, for example, how socioeconomic conditions and religious traditions intersect to produce religious terrorists. The final analysis would not attempt to uncover the causes or effects of religious terrorism; rather, it would reveal how religious terrorism is itself a process. Religious terrorism is not a distinct, self-contained phenomenon; it arises from broad social forces and involves dynamic interactions among violent and nonviolent actors. This in no way downplays the role of religion; indeed, it may further highlight its importance. Many contemporary terrorist groups would struggle to mobilize followers without the power of religious appeals, and the specific forms religious terrorist mobilization take depend on the influence of religious beliefs.

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This would move the study of religion and terrorism toward a realization of the complex and dynamic nature of both religion and terrorism. Scholars could build on the excellent foundation of the existing research on religion and terrorism and on the wealth of topics this new approach would open up. Moreover, as these studies would begin with a relational approach, it would be easier for the research program to accumulate knowledge. More importantly, this approach would emphasize the importance of religion and at the same time highlight strategic interactions and structural conditions. This can move the research on religion and terrorism beyond the interminable debates over whether ideas or interests matter more, which tend to paralyze progress; similar moves are underway in the broader study of religion and politics (Nexon, 2011). Finally, this approach could produce policy-relevant research, as studies could suggest to policymakers how to interrupt the mobilization of religious terrorists or counter their messaging.

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