

Transnational Religious Actors and International Order

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JEFFREY HAYNES, JAN 19 2009

In recent years, there have been a number of challenges to international order emanating from various entities, including 'Islamic extremists' and, more generally, those 'excluded' from the benefits of globalisation; sometimes they are the same people. Among the 'excluded' can be noted various social and ethnic groups who, for whatever reasons of culture, history and geography, find themselves unable to tap into the benefits of globalisation. It is often suggested that the 'Muslim world' is the greatest victim in this regard and, as a result, Islamic extremist pathologies present themselves in their most dangerous forms.

Such concerns highlight more generally how various issues linked to religion in international relations have become widely significant for international order since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, especially when linked to the often polarising economic and developmental impact of globalisation. This context is also informed by events following the end of the Cold War – the cessation of a four decades long battle for supremacy between competing secular ideological visions: communism and liberal democracy/capitalism – that ended with a near-global collapse in the efficacy of the former and a growing, but by no means universal, acceptance of the desirability of the latter. Two key issues in this regard are: (1) How international order has changed as a result of globalisation and the end of the Cold War, and (2) How this change can be interpreted regarding the impact of religion on international relations. This brief commentary refers to selected transnational religious actors in relation to international order.

There is renewed interest in religion and international relations, encouraged both by the fall of Soviet-style communism in the early 1990s and a decade later by the events of September 11, 2001 ('9/11'). Religion's re-emergence at this time could be observed among various cultures and religious faiths, and in different countries with various levels of economic development. For many observers, the re-emergence of religion in international relations was unexpected, not least because it challenged conventional wisdom about the nature and long-term, historical impact on societies of secularisation, widely thought to involve both 'political development' and a more general, non-religious 'modernisation'. It did this by calling into question a core presumption in most Western social science thinking: modernisation of societies and polities invariably involves increased secularisation. During this process, religion became excluded from the public realm, becoming both marginalised and 'privatised'. Consequently, the 'return' of religion to international relations involves religious deprivatisation, with both domestic and international ramifications; often there are political impacts, with, for example Islamic extremism having pronounced effects on international order.

What is 'international order'? It can usefully be thought of as a regime with widespread acceptance of particular values and norms of behaviour, comprising various actors, rules, mechanisms and understandings. This includes the expanding corpus of international law, as well as the organisations and institutions that seek to develop and enforce it. The goal is to try to manage the co-existence and interdependence of states and important non-state actors. On the other hand, it is a truism that international order is what is created and developed in the interests of some actors only.

Opinions about the current involvement of religion in international relations and its impact on international order tend to be polarised. On the one hand, re-emergence of religion into international relations is often seen to present increased challenges to international order, especially from extremist Islamist organisations, such as al-Qaeda or Lashkar-e-Taibar, implicated in the recent atrocities in Mumbai.

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A new and growing threat to international order comes from transnational religious terrorist groups, notably al-Qaeda, as emphasised in the 2005 Human Security Report:

International terrorism is the only form of political violence that appears to be getting worse. Some datasets have shown an overall decline in international terrorist incidents of all types since the early 1980s, but the most recent statistics suggest a dramatic increase in the number of high-casualty attacks since the September 11 attacks on the US in 2001. The annual death toll from international terrorist attacks is, however, only a tiny fraction of annual war death toll (my emphasis; 'Overview', Human Security Report 2005).

In sum, international religious terrorists fundamentally deny the (1) legitimacy of the secular international state system, as well as (2) foundational norms, values and institutions upon which contemporary international order is based.

On the other hand, some religious actors may help advance international order, for example the Roman Catholic Church and its widespread encouragement to authoritarian regimes to democratise, that significantly affected governments in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. There is also the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and its important role in helping to promote dialogue and cooperation between Muslim and Western governments. Other actors may however be viewed more ambiguously, such as states like China that, in emphasising cultural characteristics rooted in Neo-Confucianism, appear to promote a 'non-Western' perspective which potentially highlights different conceptions of international order.

Thinking of international order more generally, the issue of international conflict seems never to be far away. To focus on current international order is to note that various aspects of international conflict have significantly changed in recent years, with frequent involvement of religious, ethnic and cultural non-state actors, including, for example, Hamas (Palestine) and Hizbullah (Lebanon). Change in this regard is manifested in various ways. First, there are now fewer interstate wars – yet significant numbers of intrastate conflicts; all affect international order. The 2005 Human Security Report noted that:

* The number of armed conflicts declined by over 40% between 1992 and 2005. The deadliest conflicts (those with 1000 or more battle-deaths) fell even more dramatically – by 80%.

* The number of international crises, often precursors of war, fell by more than 70% between 1981 and 2001.

* International wars – that is, conflicts between countries – are less common now than in many previous eras; they now constitute less than 5% of all armed conflicts.

Second, there are significant numbers of serious conflicts within countries at the present time – and many involve religious, cultural and/or ethnic actors. While numbers of international wars and war-deaths have declined in recent years, some 60 armed conflicts raged around the globe in 2005; over 70 per cent were classified as communal wars, that is, conflicts significantly characterised by religious, cultural and/or ethnic factors and combatants (Human Security Report 2005).

Although the number of annual deaths from 'international terrorist attacks' is, according to the 2005 Human Security Report, only 'a tiny fraction' compared to overall war deaths in any one year, it is important to note that the number of deaths due to this source has been swiftly rising in recent years. The US State Department's annual report on global terrorism for 2005 stated that there were 11,111 attacks that caused 14,602 deaths in 2005. Those figures can be contrasted with earlier State Department reports from 2003 and 2004. In the former year, there were 208 terrorist attacks causing 625 deaths; in 2004 there were 3,168 attacks resulting in 1,907 deaths. Thus, comparing 2005 to the previous year, there was a more than seven-fold increase in those killed as a result of international terrorist attacks; most such fatalities were linked to the consequences of US-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), including the increases in deaths attributed to religious and sectarian extremists, especially in the later country. The significant recent increase in numbers of deaths as a result of international terrorist attacks, coupled with the fact that US personnel are often in the firing line in both Afghanistan and Iraq, has led to the present era

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being identified as 'the age of global terrorism'.

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