The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World

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Islamic terror is a global phenomenon. The Global Terrorism Index states that, "two thirds of all countries experienced a terrorist attack in 2016".[1] When one thinks of a terrorist group, there are an obvious few that come to mind: the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL), al-Qa'ida, and the Taliban. One might also reach for Boko Haram or al-Shabaab. These organisations represent a small sample of the world's Islamic terrorist groups. Their names are associated with a long list of shootings, explosions, beheadings, and savagery. In almost all measures, the years since the millennium have seen increased terror activity by more groups, and over a greater geographical area.[2] Many reasons have been advanced to account for this increase, and these will be investigated below. Here, the contemporary world will be understood as the period since the year 2000. Whilst a categorical definition still eludes the subject, terrorism "is usually understood as the use or threat of violence to further a political cause".[3] In addition, this violence cannot be employed by national armed forces.[4] As such, those groups which employ such strategies can be said to be terrorist groups. Islamic terrorist groups are vocal about their religious motivations and can be separated from independence-motivated groups like Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) or the Irish Republic Army (IRA) with some ease.

There is a litany of personal reasons why individuals decide to join Islamic terror groups, including religion, poverty, desire for social acceptance, and even those that have no choice at all. These will be largely put to one side to focus on a number of macro factors which have allowed the expansion and spread of Islamic terror. The discussion finds that three passive elements – weak states, technology and globalisation – provide the crucible for the spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups. This said, it is active engagement and funding by particular actors that must provide the initial spark.

It is worth acknowledging by way of methodology that being able to accurately track the spread and expansion of Islamic terrorist groups is difficult. Hasson notes, "that publicly available statistics about the group's membership and size may have been substantially inflated".[5] With the dispersal allowed for by the internet, and forced upon the organisations by national security services, terror groups do not follow the inclination of traditional membership organisations; overt monthly subscriptions and annual general meetings cannot be used to quantify these groups. That said, "since 2002, eight of the nine regions in the world experienced an increase in terrorism".[6] Indeed, "In 2016, more countries experienced at least one attack and one death than at any other point since data was first collected in 1970".[7] This includes non-Islamic terror but is indicative of an overall trend. There are also nuances which see groups folding or being subsumed into others. That said, going forward it will be assumed that the titular question is largely correct.

It is first necessary to note why Islamic terror groups are in vogue. Without an understanding of their formation, one cannot truly appreciate how they have gone on to expand and spread throughout the world. Rapoport's *waves* theory provides a convincing and useful starting point. He notes that the current trend of Islamic terror represents the fourth wave, following on from the Russian anarchists of the late nineteenth century; the anti-colonialists of the early twentieth century; and revolutionary terrorists during the Cold War.[8] Rapoport cites the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as important catalysts. As Kaplan writes, the latter, "emboldened many, including Osama Bin Laden, to believe that just as lightly armed simple believers could defeat one superpower,

The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World
Written by Patrick Hinton

surely alShaitan al-Kabir (the Great Satan aka the United States) would be just as vulnerable".[9] Connections can also be made to the Israeli-Arab conflict which put a distinctly religious spin on international affairs. The active and tacit support of Israel by Western, largely Christian, states has also shaped the political environment. Some are less convinced by Rapoport's thinking. Fine, for instance, writes that, "There has been an evolving and, perhaps, dominant strand of modern Islamist thought which finds Western culture to be inimical to Islam and, therefore, a legitimate target for jihad".[10] Similarly, Lee believes that, "the conflict is sparked not by grievance but rather by incompatibility between Islamist ideology and the natural rights articulated during the European Enlightenment and incorporated into U.S. political culture".[11] This has been exacerbated by Western influence and action in the Middle East over the last two decades. The movements were spurred on by a number of prominent thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and Ayman al-Zawahiri. The importance of an activist element is a key part of the argument presented below and can be traced back to individuals like this. This basis allows one to understand why Islamic terror groups have been able to spread and expand in the contemporary world.[12]

The early spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups took place in states that have gaps in their civil and security structure. It is apparent that Islamic terror groups can take advantage of weak state apparatuses, of which there is no shortage today. These often overlap with countries that are nominally Islamic, such as those in the Middle East and north Africa. This offers one explanation for the growth of *Islamic* terror groups in particular. Yemen, Nigeria, Somalia, and Syria are just a small sample where the state does not retain a monopoly on violence. A weak state security framework, or equally one that relies heavily on martial law and severe punishment, have been seen to gestate terror. As Walker writes, in the case of Boko Haram, "a weakness in the institutions of politics and the security services has created a political situation where such threats to stability are not dealt with until violence is a certainty".[13] These conditions do much to promote division and a lack of understanding between groups.

ISIL particularly was able to take advantage of having semi-autonomy within a specific piece of land, a quasi-Islamic state. The weakness of the Iraqi government and turmoil caused by the Syrian civil war created an area in which it could create a secure foothold. This provided a discrete geographical area for potential recruits to travel to. These ungoverned spaces, which include the Tora Bora mountains in Afghanistan, and stretches of desert in the Sahel, are breeding grounds for terror groups. As Ali writes of such areas, "The prevailing view holds that the more remote they are, the more vulnerable they become to the lure of violent radicalization and extremism".[14] As ISIL has been eroded and relinquished land, its ability to recruit has been weakened.[15] Equally though, one must be aware of the opportunities lent to terrorist groups by large urban areas. Cities like Cairo and Mogadishu offer shelter to Islamic terror groups. Even in capital cities, where one would expect the best hold on security, there are blind spots for the law enforcement and intelligence community. One example of the frictions posed by a weak state apparatus is the ability of terror groups to take advantage of an insecure bureaucracy. For instance, ISIL, "has obtained several thousand blank Syrian passports".[16] Whilst efforts have been made to trace these, it only takes one unscrupulous border check to allow the further spread of members of the group.

Importantly, it is when these ungoverned spaces are brought back under some sort of control, as the coalition campaign in the Levant has achieved in recent months with ISIL, that a spreading effect can be noted. As Mosul and Raqqa fell, militants had to die, be captured, or escape. This caused the dispersal of fighters. One can also analyse this effect in reverse. Those unable to get to these spaces to physically join these groups contribute to the further geographical spread of their influence. The term, "frustrated travellers," has been employed to describe, "individuals who demonstrate the intention to travel to conflict zones, but are unable to do so owing to increased control measures by Member States, and remain radicalized".[17] These people then take advantage of one of the other factors discussed below, technology. Weak states are not only where we see the foundations of Islamic terror groups laid, but also where most attacks take place. The *Global Terrorism Index* notes that, "94 per cent of all terrorist deaths are located in the Middle-East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia".[18] These areas correspond to the locations of weak and failed states. Indeed, "Just five countries account for three quarters of all deaths from terrorism: Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria and Pakistan".[19] This section has shown that weak states offer a harbour to Islamic terror groups, giving a foothold for their spread and expansion. However, most of their kinetic effects are still limited to their base location. They acknowledge this restraint and so have become masterful as using modern communications to aid their expansion.

The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World
Written by Patrick Hinton

Technology is tied to both the spread and expansion of terror groups. The period since the millennium has seen rapid technological development. Whilst often designed by liberal entrepreneurs with visions of freedom and democracy, these technologies have also facilitated the spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups. Those applications designed to bring people with similar interests together over great distances work for both fans of a particular television programme, as well as those who want to wage religious violence. The internet has, "allowed terrorist organisations to costlessly communicate their message and aims to the world, allowing them to recruit new members, coordinate global attacks and better evade surveillance".[20] Increased radicalisation is facilitated by the prevalence of the internet.[21] People who join are often, "isolated and alienated young people who want to join not only because they identify with the cause and idolize the group's leader, but also because they want to belong to a group for a sense of self-importance and companionship".[22] The internet is able to disseminate recruiting material throughout the globe at little cost and with great speed. This contributes to the expansion of Islamic terror groups.

The spread is also enabled by the ability to transmit information across borders which used to provide security. A trend that can be traced back to events like WikiLeaks, and outcries for privacy from government prying, has meant that Islamic terror groups are able to take advantage of encryption technology. FrozenChat, Silence, and Telegram are just a small sample of messaging applications which take pride in their security. People with nefarious objectives can plan and communicate with relative impunity. Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman cite the spectre of "virtual planners," who take advantage of, "the total pervasiveness of social media and especially the boom in end-to-end encryption".[23] Often, it takes the phone of a perpetrator who has already carried out an attack for the security services to discover the planning timeline. Even public platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have such a large volume of data to scour that it is difficult to limit extremist material. It is only with significant public pressure that they have begun to hire in moderators to scope out extremist material.

Only states that are blessed with a well-funded and stable security apparatus can tackle the digital elements of terror. France has recently published a 167-page white paper on cyber security and set up a new National Cybersecurity Agency; the UK has added millions of pounds to its counter terrorism budget; and the US is considering a $167 million increase for its Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.[24] Some nations meanwhile struggle to maintain a functioning state apparatus. This is in part why OECD nations suffer from many fewer attacks and deaths than less economically developed countries. Whilst recent years have seen a spike, the death tolls are comparatively small due to wealthy and well-trained security services. Even then, "there is the problem of "fresh faces" about whom no one-not the United States or its allies have information suggesting terrorist leanings".[25]

The internet allows for the complete radicalisation, training and funding of terrorist activities with little footprint. What is more, expansion may take place without the knowledge of the core group. A recent trend has been the pledging of allegiance to terror groups with which the individual has had no contact at all. Indeed, "Half of all plots with an ISIL connection have been conducted by people who have had no direct contact with ISIL".[26] Groups only need to put material online and it can be discovered before being acted upon with no further input. Technology has facilitated the spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups in the contemporary world. Groups can communicate with individuals on the far side of the world, radicalise them and give them instructions and funding with a laptop and an internet connection. The difficulty in restraining such trends is made worse by other effects often associated with globalisation.

There is a tendency today to think that due to oft-mentioned terms such as *globalisation* and a *shrinking world* that it should be simple to find and arrest potential terrorists. This can be seen in the regular criticism of security services in the aftermath of an attack.[27] One can be quite blasé blaming organisations like MI5 for not being able to keep thousands of suspects under constant surveillance. However, the job of monitoring every border crossing, airport and port with impeccable attention to detail is enormous. The Schengen Area of the European Union is a security nightmare. The EU is a useful example because it is a regional group of wealthy countries who have well-established security services. Despite this, the EU's terror database, "contains only 1,473 FTF [Foreign Terrorist Fighters] entered by member states. This despite well-founded estimates that around 5,000 EU citizens have travelled…to join DAESH and other extremist groups".[28] The volume of flights, trains, and huge road networks means it is problematic to track someone without vast dedicated resources. In support of this, Levitt notes that, "The counterterrorism challenges were underscored by the inability of security services to find Salah Abdeslam for some

The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World
Written by Patrick Hinton

four months after the November Paris attacks".[29] This was despite a vast multi-agency, multinational manhunt.

Globalisation has also had the simultaneous effect of forcing Western influence onto Islamic nations. This exacerbates tensions and enables those who desire it to spin reality in their desired image. As Lewis writes, "Muslim countries—in matters such as job creation, education, technology, and productivity—lag ever further behind the West. Even worse, the Arab nations also lag behind the more recent recruits to Western style modernity, such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore".[30] These themes, along with Western military intervention in Muslim nations provides fuel to the fire. It can be seen that the effects associated with globalisation have facilitated the spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups in the contemporary world. Facilitation is the operative term here, because the themes explored above are not enough on their own to cause the trend identified in the titular statement.

It takes action by some sort of agency to take advantage of the effects of globalisation, technology, and weak state structures which have been discussed so far. These passive realities rely on active engagement. Mauro writes that, "Islamic extremism can spread organically, but there is an identifiable infrastructure that spreads it. This infrastructure includes foreign governments, mosques, schools, media – including internet and social media — social services and non-governmental organizations".[31] Saudi Arabia, despite its claims to the contrary, has come under regular criticism for its sponsorship of Islamic terror groups. Hegghammer notes its, "alleged role as an exporter of recruits, ideology and money to violent Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda".[32] Iran is known for its support of Shia groups likes Hezbollah, and Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban has caused frictions with the country's Western allies.

One such feature of this engagement is money. Finance, as with any organisation, is key. Training, travel, forging documents, acquiring weaponry, and making explosives all incur some sort of cost. If nations were able to get a handle on cash flows, then the spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups would shrink. Whilst the material cost of a suicide bomb can be a low as $150, many of the more catastrophic of the last two decades were a lot more expensive.[33] The Bali bombing in 2002 reportedly cost around $50,000, and the 9/11 attacks around $500,000.[34] That said, the more recent trend of attacks has moved away from complex plans to more simple, blunt instruments. One troubling trend has been the employment of stolen, or legally hired, vehicles to kill civilians. This perhaps suggests that complex funding operations are becoming harder to fulfil under the watchful eye of international security authorities.

Enigmatic leaders such as Mullah Omar, Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi, and Osama bin Laden can also be cited as reasons for the spread and expansion if Islamic terror groups. Videos of these individuals preaching have spread via the internet as discussed above. Having an articulate figurehead calling individuals to arms and outwitting security services provides motivation to sympathisers. As Lankford notes in the case of bin Laden, as he evaded capture, his supporters, "could use him as concrete evidence that Allah supported al Qaeda's mission against the West".[35] These figures provide someone to rally around and look to when carrying out missions. Rarely, if ever, does one find such an organisation without some sort of leader providing direction. Agency has been a feature of many historical and political discussions, with analysis of the impact of Hitler, Napoleon, and Caesar rife. These are the people who use the ungoverned space of weak states to establish their groups. They employ new technology and the cluttered reality of the modern world to spread and expand their organisations. It is active engagement with the passive factors explored above that truly gives rise to the development of Islamic terror groups.

The discussion above has shown how Islamic terror groups have been able to spread and expand in the contemporary world. It is apparent that the crux of the problem lies in the ability of such groups to gain a foothold in weak states. One must however note that the spread and expansion of these groups is certainly not even, and their effects have not expanded in any uniform manner. Weak states allow groups to train and organise, and also have a history of harsh punishment which acts as a catalyst for radical violence. Modern technology enables groups to evade authorities and transmit ideologies as well as plans with impunity. It also facilitates recruitment. The complexities of globalisation have had the effect of worsening the relationship between Islamic fundamentalists and the West. It has also complicated the tracking of these groups. However, the reason for the spread and expansion of Islamic terror groups must be focused on active participants. Without individuals and institutions taking advantage of the passive factors mentioned above, it is unlikely the pattern explored here would have occurred in the same way.

The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World
Written by Patrick Hinton

Having articulated why and how Islamic terror groups have spread and expanded, further study might include the actual spread of kinetic effects resulting from this trend. It perhaps does not reflect the global spread of the groups, and is limited to a smaller sector. For instance, "In 2015 four groups were responsible for 74 per cent of all deaths from terrorism: ISIL, Boko Haram, the Taliban and al-Qa'ida."[36]

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The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World
Written by Patrick Hinton

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The Spread of Islamic Terror in the Contemporary World
Written by Patrick Hinton

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