

## Islamic Religion and Terrorism in Nigeria: A Critical Review

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**Abstract.** Globally, there are various actors staging violence against civilians to foster fear and suspicion of others. People in many countries are convinced that terrorism represents the most significant threat to their daily lives. There are political movements that take advantage of tragedy and stage citizens against each other to gain greater support. It is important to remember that terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Many countries have suffered for decades from groups, both internal and external including both State and non-State actors, wielding violence against civilians as a political strategy. In many cases, the local population emerged stronger and more resilient, proving that brutality is no match in the long term for the progress of unity and shared values. Religion on the other hand is intended to mold character for a violent free world. Islam has been getting an extremely bad reputation across the world and Muslims have had to face some major hate because of it. People feel it is okay to blame the religion and its teachings and mar Islam's reputation. Hence, this paper studies the nexus between Islamic religion and terrorism in Nigeria and elucidates the impact of the Islamic religion on terrorism in relation to having a violence-free Nigeria. The scope of this paper however is a reconnoiter of the extent to which Islamic religion has been a causative factor or a panacea to terrorism in Nigeria and finds that Islam is a religion of peace but the Quran- which is the Islamic Sacred Book and rule of faith, has suffered major misunderstanding in the hands of ignorant extremists and fanatics distorting this view. This study adopts an evaluative method of research to arrive at its findings

**Keywords:** Religion, Islam, Terrorism, Nigeria.



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## INTRODUCTION

The negative effect of terrorism on the world and Nigeria, in particular, is palpable and can never be over-emphasized. Terrorism affects the overall system of the society ranging from the government institutions and their gross domestic production (GDP) and the people and their means of livelihood. Terrorism is an international phenomenon that threatens national security and infuses anxiety to the peace of the global community. It "is an international problem that endangers the wellbeing of whole populations" (Kassim 2008, p. 208). The events of 11 September 2001 brought about negative changes internationally in the political, economic, and social milieu which also threatened the national existence.

Globally, there are various actors staging violence against civilians to foster fear and suspicion of others. Populations in many countries are convinced that terrorism represents the most significant threat to their daily lives. There are political movements that take advantage of tragedy and stage citizens against each other in order to gain greater support. It is important to remember that terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Many countries have suffered for decades from groups, both internal and external and including both State and non-State actors, wielding violence against civilians as a political strategy. In many cases, the local population emerged stronger and more resilient, proving that brutality is no match in the long term for the progress of unity and shared values. Okoro Kingsley (2010) quoting Wilson puts it these ways:

*Terrorist attacks have taken a heavy toll on humanity, especially innocent civilians. According to UNICEF, 80% of victims of such oppression in recent years have been civilians, mainly women and children. Looking back at the last century, despite all its valuable accomplishments, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has turned out the bloodiest century in human history. It is estimated that more than 60 million people were killed by fellow human, more than all the previous centuries of human history, the century ended with about 21 million refugees around the globe, including about 6 million internally displaced people and more than 300,000 child soldiers under the age of 18 girls as well as boys engage in armed conflict (p. 551).*

Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2016 Report reveals that of the last 16 years, the worst year for terrorism was 2014 with 93 countries experiencing an attack and 32,765 people killed. Since 2006, 98 percent of all deaths from terrorism in the US have resulted from attacks carried out by lone actors, resulting in 156 deaths. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) foreign fighters who have gone to Syria generally have high levels of education but low incomes, with many fighters joining in pail due to a feeling of exclusion in their home countries. There were 18 deaths caused by ISIL-affiliated attacks in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2014. This number increased significantly in 2015 to 313 deaths from 67 attacks. Half of all plots with an ISIL connection have been conducted

by people who have had no direct contact with ISIL (Institute for Economics and Peace 2016).

Similarly, GTI 2017 report shows that attacks against civilians globally increased by 17 percent from 2015 to 2016 and the primary targets of terrorists are private citizens and property. Terrorist attacks according to the report are deadlier in conflict-affected countries where there is an average of 2.4 fatalities per attack in 2016 compared to 1.3 fatalities in non-conflict countries. This report shows that that is a great upsurge in the level of terrorism in the world at large.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Terrorism

Terrorism has been defined by many scholars in different ways. It has been defined as “a form of violent struggle in which violence is deliberately used against civilians in order to achieve political goals” (Ganor 2017, p. 17). Some scholars opine that this definition emphasizes the goals of terrorists (political goals), the means they endorse in order to achieve their goals (violent actions), and the civilians as their targets (Silberman, Higgins and Dweck 2005). However, this definition according to this paper identifies the nature of terrorism (violent in nature); the motives for terrorism (political motives); the instrument for achieving its motives (violent tools); terrorist’s strategies (deliberate strategies); and the channel or medium to get to their focus (civilians). The political motives according to Ganor could be nationalistic, socioeconomic, ideological, religious, etc. These motives also serve as the causes of terrorism in any country and are achieved using violent measures. In other words, the act of terrorism can be triggered by national differences, socioeconomic imbalances, ideological misconceptions, religious conflicts, etc. as one perceives their existence (Oben & Egege 2018; Okoi 2018).

Terrorism from an etymological point of view is from the French root word *terrorisme* and from the Latin root word *terror* which means “great fear or dread”. In its Latin verb form *terrore*, it means “to frighten”. In 105 BCE, a panic and state of emergency in Rome was referred to as *terror cimbricus* and was used as a response to the approach of warriors of the Cimbri tribe. The word terrorism gained its first appearance in the English language dictionaries in 1798 and means the practices of coercing government to accede to political demands by committing violence on civilian targets or any similar use of violence to achieve goals. The term terrorism is:

*“The use of violence or threat of violence in the pursuit of political, religious, ideological or social objectives [which can] be committed by governments, non-state actors, or undercover personnel serving on the behalf of their respective governments [and its effects] reaches more than the immediate target victims and is also directed at targets consisting of a larger spectrum of society. It is [seen] both [as] prohibita “crime that is made illegal by legislation” and mala “crime that is inherently immoral or wrong” (Matusitz 2012, p. 34)*

Criminal acts of terrorism intended to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are said in any context to be unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them (UN General Assembly Resolution). This is because of its effects not just on the government but on the general public. "Terrorism is an anxiety inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by a semi- clandestine individual, group or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons, whereby in contrast to assassination the direct targets of violence are not the main targets" (Schmid and Jongman 1992, p. 28).

From the legal perspective, the United States Code of Federal Regulations defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (28 C.F.R. Section 0.85). Thus, terrorism is identified here as unlawful, violent marked by intimidation and force, with the major objective of achieving political or social gains and the civilian population is the ones who suffer it. Terrorism is an activity intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants to intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or abstain from doing any act (Tams 2009). Schmid and Jongman (1992) find five elements in the definitions of terrorism with greater than 40 percent frequency which includes: violence or force (83.5%); political (65%); fear or terror (51%); threat (47%); and 41.5% of psychological effects and anticipated reactions.

Terrorism can therefore be defined as any criminal acts or activities targeted against residents, committed with the intention of causing death or serious bodily injury, or taking of captives, with the determination to stir or stimulate a state of fear in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, bully a population or force a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.

### **Religion**

The task of defining religion is a very difficult one. For centuries now, efforts to have a single definition of religion have failed as it has been defined from different perspectives by different scholars. Scholars opine that religion is an elusive concept and has no single definition that suits everyone, the solution therefore as far as defining religion is concerned seems to be to identify one's perspective and then define it to suit the current purpose (Ejim 2017; Egbe & Okoi 2018). Rimai Joy (2007) defines religion as a set of beliefs and practices generally held by an individual and community involving adherence to codified beliefs and rituals. Religion is both personal and communal faith stemming from shared conviction. Therefore it is an abstract set of ideas, values or experiences developed as a part of a cultural matrix. In other words, religion is a non-concrete set of the idea, values or experiences communally developed and shared as a result of the environment (Duke 2016; Duke

2018; Duke & John 2019). This means that the environment plays a very important role in man and he is religiously been influenced by his environment. No wonder Sigmund Freud defines religion based on fear (childhood neuroses) and Karl Marx as an addictive narcotic experience (the opium of the masses). Sigmund Freud's view of religion was summarized thus:

*Religion, Freud believed, was an expression of underlying psychological neuroses and distress. Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires. Religion is comparable to childhood neurosis. While fascinated by religion and spirituality, Freud was also at times quite critical. He critiqued religion for being unwelcoming, harsh, and unloving toward those who are not members of a specific religious group (Novak 2016, p. 24-34).*

Freud's psychological views on religion are rather injustice and an unfair value judgment on the true nature of religion. Scholars opine that religion serves as a unifying factor among adherents who share a belief system but it should be noted that it also becomes a divisive factor among those who share different belief systems (Ajasa and Solomon 2014). Hence, Freud's negative perspective of religion repudiates its positive aspects that is a development catalyst, welcoming and accommodating, not harsh and peaceful, and loving toward those who are not members of a specific religious group. This paper, while not denying the psychological influence of religion on adherents defines religion as the outward act or form by which humans show their recognition of the reality of the existence of god or gods having positive or negative psychological and behavioral influences over their destiny, to whom obedience, service and honor is due. This influence controls their emotions, behaviors, attitudes and so on. On the other hand, the influence regulates their love and affections, fear and awe, faith, duty and conformity.

### CAUSES OF TERRORISM

1. **Nationalistic.** terrorism may arise as a result of national issues and disagreements on the part of one group feeling not reorganized in their nation. These groups may be political, ethnic, social, etc and may agitate using force to attract the attention of the people or government to their interest which may lead to terrorism.
2. **Socioeconomic.** terrorism may be triggered where there is an inequity in the share of economic proceeds of a nation.
3. **Ideological.** terrorism may also be caused by sociopolitical and conceptual differences. The different ways people of different parties or groups see a particular idea as not going to favor them.
4. **Religious.** differing religious views and standpoints may lead to extremism and fanaticism on the part of religious adherents leading to terrorism to preserve, protect, or correct views and believes.

## **THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TERRORISM**

As noted earlier by Ajasa and Solomon (2014), religion serves as a unifying factor among adherents who share a belief system. It should be noted that religion also becomes a divisive factor among those who share different belief systems. Thus where religion is a unifying factor among adherents, there is bound to be peace but where it is a divisive factor among different religions, misunderstanding, rancor, resentment, violence and terrorism are inescapable. "The virtues and dangers of religion have long been a contentious and hotly contested issue. Declarations of doom notwithstanding, religions remain a robust, influential, widespread and even growing phenomena worldwide (Feldman and Ruffle 2008). Viewed as a firm, "religion produces local public goods such as communal prayer, hymn singing and scripture studies. Participation in these activities provides a positive externality to other members (Lannaccone 3, 156-177). Lannaccone also postulates that the stricter the church [religion], the higher the average levels of church [religious activities] attendance, contribution and frequency of prayer" (109-129). Religious activities are expected to produce a human positive result for peaceful co-existence.

The world is religiously heterogeneous with different teachings and views about terrorism. These teachings and views are most times scripturally based. However, amidst all diverse motivations of the contemporary upsurge of terrorist attacks, religious motivations have been spotlighted as the major source of terrorism in the 21st century. In the next section, this paper looks into the religious scripture of Islamic religion to see what their ideal views are as it relates to terrorism and to ascertain their contributions in the upsurge or curbing of terrorism positively or negatively.

## **ISLAM AND TERRORISM**

The Jihad, the civil war propaganda, the Sharia law controversy, the tensions provoked by the Nigerian accession to the Organization of Islamic countries now organization for Islamic corporation and the recent herdsmen attack, the influx of the almajiris in the Southern parts and the incessant religious crisis that has engulfed Northern Nigeria indicate [Islamic] religion cannot be ignored or wished away in the Nigerian political development (Nmah 2012). Hence, looking at the Islamic religious teaching concerning terrorism is of utmost importance. With what seems to be obvious about the Islamic religion, it may be surprising to find that Islam has sound teachings and doctrines of love, peace, compassion, tolerance, and so much more which adherents are enjoined to emulate. But more puzzling and worrisome is that irrespective of the above-listed teachings, accusing fingers are on this religion as leading terrorism in the Northeast of Nigeria. If these ethical and moral principles are taken to heart by adherents of Islam, then terrorism will be far from society. The following Quran quotations show that violence and intolerance are against the teachings of the Quran:

**Holy Quran: 2, 208** declares: "O You who believe! Enter absolutely into peace (Islam). Do not follow in the footsteps of Satan. He is an outright enemy to you". The Arabic word for peace is the root word for Islam. Thus, the word peace is used interchangeably with Islam in the Quran. In the verse above, Islam fundamentally calls for peace and fosters a life in absolute sincerity and honesty before God. The text in other words sees Satan as the one who brings violence to society and all Muslims are warned by God against following Satan's ways.

**Holy Quran: 2/ 256** and **28: 56** similarly declares: "There is no compulsion where the religion is concerned; you cannot guide those you would like to but God guides those He wills. He has the best knowledge of the guided". Consequently, the assumption that Islam is a religion that uses force and compulsion for evangelism is been negated by these Islamic scriptural quotations. This scripture states that there is no compulsion in bringing men to adhere to their faith but God is the One to bring those He wills based on His wisdom.

**Surat al-Mumtahana, 8** also states that "God does not forbid you from being good to those who have not fought you in the religion or driven you from your homes, or from being just towards them. God loves those who are just". The Quran provides an environment where people can fully enjoy the freedom of thought and freedom of religion and allows people to live by the faith and values they believe in. According to Islam, everyone has the right to live freely by his beliefs, whatever they may be. Anyone who wants to support a church, a synagogue or a mosque must be free to do so. In this sense, freedom of religion, or freedom of belief, is one of the basic tenets of Islam.

**Holy Quran: 2:190** "You may fight in the cause of GOD against those who attack you but do not aggress. GOD does not love the aggressors". An exegetical study of the Arabic root words MAY reveal that the use of "fight" and "attack" found in the text under extermination may mean something different from the translation given to it by translators and adherents who take this text to be the basis for perpetrating acts of terrorism given the numerous shreds of evidence in other parts of the Quran that are in opposition to this text. This assumption gains credence on the strength of the fact that this paper assumes that the Quran will not contradict itself. More so, the import of the phrase "do not aggress" is significant. The use of this phrase suggests that it is impossible to fight back and attack (under their literal meanings) without aggressing and God hates aggressors.

Furthermore, the context may also have been misconstrued. Quran 2:192 teaches that God is a merciful One and forgives. The Quran declares "If they refrain, then GOD is Forgiver, Most Merciful". Note that 2:192 is a continuation of 2:190. If cognitively linked, the two texts (2:190 and 2:192) will read thus: "if they [those who

attack you] refrain [repent], then GOD [who hates aggressors and will not have you fight aggressively] is [a] Forgiver, Most Merciful". Hence, if the "fight" and "attack" in its English translation has a direct literal interpretation, then there will be no need to present God as Most Merciful and the Forgiver of those who refrain. To refrain means to abstain, to keep one's self from interference, to hold back and to curb. Logical reasoning suggests that the fight or attack in 2:190 considering the use of refrain in the subsequent verse 2:192 may be a call to teach (fight) to correct heresies (attack) in Islamic faith which if the teaching is successfully done with love (do not aggress. God does not love the aggressors) and the Islamic heretics refrain (abstain from heresy), God (who hate aggressors) is Most Merciful and will Forgive those who refrain (return to Him). However, the researcher do not have access to the Quran in its original language and is not an Arabic language scholar to further buttress these assumptions.

Texts like "You are enjoined to fight, though it is something you dislike..." Quran 2:216-217 has also been notable in the assumption that Islam is a religion of terrorism. Warfare and violence are justified in self-defense in Islam. During his time in Medina the Prophet Muhammad believed that he received revelations from God permitting him to fight to protect the new Islamic community from the pagans of Mecca who sought to defeat him. Context is needed here to understand the premise under which this instruction is given. 2:217 continues:

*"People ask you about fighting in the holy month. Say: "Fighting in it is an awesome sin, but barring people from the Way of Allah, disbelieving in Him, and denying entry into the Holy Mosque and expelling its inmates from it are more awesome acts in the sight of Allah; and persecution is even more heinous than killing." They will not cease fighting against you till they turn you from your religion if they can. (So remember well) that whoever from amongst you turns away from his religion and dies in the state of unbelief their work will go to waste in this world and in the Next. They are destined for the Fire and it is there that they will abide".*

Fighting according to the above text is a sin. It is only allowed to act in defense. Muslims have permission from God to fight in protection against heresy and fight back only when they are expelled from their houses or lands. It should also be noted that Islamic law lays down clear guidelines for the conduct of such a fight. Don't cut a tree, don't kill children, women, old people, those who surrender, those who run away, those sick, monk or priest, animals (except for food), don't destroy the temple or church, building, don't disfigure the dead, be good and feed the prisoners, and don't enforce Islam. This indicates that fighting in Islam is not against the innocent but against attacks on the cause of God.

The question at this juncture must be asked: what about the churches burnt, the priests, men, women and children killed and the suicide bombers in Northeast Nigeria by the "religious" terrorists in the name of Islamic struggle? Quran 2:195 stipulates thus: "spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your

own hands contribute to (your) destruction, but do good; for Allah loveth those who do good." This text shows that the Quran which is the rule of the Islamic faith forbids suicide bombing because it contributes to your own destruction. The problem for the majority of Muslims is that some groups are following traditions and superstitions invented centuries after the Quran was first sent and the Prophet lived, and these have gotten more radical over time. "The socioeconomic, political, and cultural circumstances of Muslims are varied across the globe, but I believe that we can distinguish three different groups of Muslims in the world today based on how they envision and practice their faith (Ali 2015)

Ali (2015) argues that the different groups include:

1. The Medina Muslims or problematic group: These are according to him fundamentalists who envision a regime based on sharia, Islamic religious law. They argue for an Islam largely or completely unchanged from its original seventh-century version and take it as a requirement of their faith that they impose it on everyone else. They see the forcible imposition of sharia as their religious duty, following the example of the Prophet Mohammed when he was based in Medina. They exploit their fellow Muslims' respect for sharia law as a divine code that takes precedence over civil laws. It is only after they have laid this foundation that they are able to persuade their recruits to engage in jihad.
2. The mecca Muslims. This is the second group — and the clear majority throughout the Muslim world — which consists of Muslims who are loyal to the core creed and worship devoutly but are not inclined to practice violence or even intolerance towards non-Muslims. The fundamental problem is that the majority of otherwise peaceful and law-abiding Muslims are unwilling to acknowledge, much less to repudiate, the theological warrant for intolerance and violence embedded in their own religious texts (P. 5).
3. modifying Muslims. This is the third group that is emerging within Islam and may also be referred to as Muslim reformers. This group promotes the separation of religion from politics and other reforms. Although some are apostates, the majority of dissidents are believers, among them clerics who have come to realize that their religion must change if its followers are not to be condemned to an interminable cycle of political violence (P. 6)

Psychologists provide examples of the psychological effects of religion on people. Sometimes, this effect begins subtly and seems harmless, while other times it can produce serious tragedy and even death. One of the examples of the effect of religion on people's behavior and emotions is what is called the Jerusalem syndrome. This syndrome made an Irish schoolteacher walk into a Jerusalem hospital fully convinced she was about to give birth to the Baby Jesus when in fact she was not even pregnant. A tourist from Canada believed he was the Biblical strongman Sampson and tried to tear stone blocks out of the Wailing Wall. It also made a man from Austria fly into a rage in his hotel kitchen when staff refused to prepare the Last Supper for him. A Nigerian man believed he was committed to God so much that he

went to the zoo to play with the lion believing he would be protected just the way Daniel was.

Sociologists have pondered on the role of religion not only regarding a nation's sociological make-up but also its tendency to economic failure or success. Karl Marx wrote extensively on the role of religion and its negative influence on the public. Marx called religion the opium of the people and noted religion's seductive power. Religion, however, has also caused great acts to occur, and it has acted as a social control mechanism for millions of people. Religion for centuries now has had both a positive and negative influence on human history depending on how one chooses to define religion. Hoffman, Bruce (1994) citing David C Rapoport opines that religion provided the only acceptable justifications for tenor. According to Nmah, in *Nigeria* especially, religion plays a vital and influential role in the society that manifested itself as a potent force in the political development of the Nigerian state from pre-independent to post-independence.

### **FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Weber (1955) opines that Islam has always been preeminently dedicated to delivering a moral message aimed at transforming social existence in this world. Although Weber's position is negated by the obvious terrorist attack in the Northeast of Nigeria and elsewhere, this paper finds that what seems to be terrorism motivated by religion is nothing but ignorance, leading to fanaticism, and undercover political terrorism hiding under Islamic religion. Islam as a religion is not a religion of terrorism but people hide under the Islamic faith wielding terrorism. This finding is supported by Shmuel Bar (2004) who argues that:

*While terrorism, even in the form of suicide attacks is not an Islamic phenomenon by definition, it cannot be ignored that the lion's share of terrorist acts and the most devastating of them in recent years have been perpetrated in the name of Islam. This fact has sparked a fundamental debate both in the West and within the Muslim world regarding the link between these acts and the teachings of Islam. The non-Islamic etiologies of this phenomenon include political causes (the Israeli-Arab conflict); cultural causes (rebellion against Western cultural colonialism); and social causes (alienation, poverty) (p. Para. 1 and 2).*

The Quran is very clear in matters concerning terrorism and supports a peaceful co-existence between Muslims and non-Muslims. The problem is the low level of education in the regions predominantly inhabited by the Muslims, lack of understanding of the Quran texts, reading personal ideologies into Quran texts, reading the texts out of context, and the long psychological influence the ideologies has had on the extremists and fanatics. Given these findings and conclusion, this paper seeks to make the following recommendations:

1. The learned among the Islamic believers who understand that the religion is not a religion of terrorism should stand up and speak out against those who

are perpetrating terrorism in the name of Islam and support the government in providing security measures to combat terrorism.

2. The Islamic religious leaders should invest more time and resources in teaching their adherents to correct the mentality behind fanaticism.
3. The Quran should be studied contextually in order to understand the context within which backup texts are used.
4. The Quran should also be systematically and comparatively studied by comparing text to text to enhance better cross-textual analytical interpretations of its perceived teachings.
5. Politicians must refrain from using religious means to foster political gains.
6. The Islamic religious leaders should use Quran to teach adherents how sinful terrorism is to Allah and encourage them to know that a peaceful Nigeria is what Allah requires of all.

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