

THE PROBLEM OF TERRORISM IN ISLAM

Nasrullah

Universitas Islam Indragiri
Email: anas.banjar@gmail.com

Fadhil Tanjung

(Kulliyah Syari'ah Wal-Qanun Universitas Al-Azhar Kairo
Email: fadhiltjg22@gmail.com

Humaidi

Ma'had Aly Ali Maksum Krapyak Yogyakarta
Email: humaidiyaslaw@gmail.com

Abstract

The problem of terrorism is a serious discussion that is still open in scientific forums. Terrorism begins with thoughts and readings and life experiences that are shaken socially and psychologically. Added to this, the unfair world order in diplomacy and policy has contributed to the growth of terror attitudes and terrorist movements. Islam condemns any attempt at terror. Because it is contrary to the principles of Islam which are peaceful and merciful. On that basis, it is important to carry out counter-terrorism and deradicalization as a form of resistance to the potential and actions of terror and radicalism. The roots of terrorism also stem from a rigid and textual reading of religious texts. Exclusive understandings of religious and interfaith relations also lead individuals to acts of terror. Accusing Islam of being a religion of terror, simply because individuals from the minority Muslim community are at the forefront of these actions, is an exaggeration. This is done without a thorough examination of the entire framework of religious understanding, religious texts, and the religious practices of the early generations of Islam (the Prophet and

his Companions). This article aims to present the facts while rejecting the assumptions and stigmatization of the constructs of thought and the framing of discourse by those who dislike Islam (Islamophobia). It emphasizes that Islam is a religion of mercy (Rahmat), not a religion of terror.

Keywords: Problem, Terrorism, Islam

Introduction

There is no term as complicated as “terrorism”. Terrorism means “to frighten.” The word comes from the Latin, *terrere*, meaning “to cause fear,” and the term was used generally in a political sense as an attack on civil order during the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution in the late 18th century. In this context, the public response to violence, fear, and the consequences of terrorism are part of the meaning of the term. The term is not just an ordinary term, but a new discourse that is widely discussed by the world audience and has major implications for the global political order. Terrorism is not just a discourse, but a global movement that can occur anywhere and anytime.

Terrorism is increasingly emerging, as numerous acts of terrorism occur in various countries, particularly Western ones. The perpetrators or groups responsible are sometimes still, in terms of claims and accusations, directed at Muslims. At this point, terrorism is increasingly being questioned and questioned. What exactly is terrorism? Is it true that terrorism is identified as the primary cause behind these attacks? There is much speculation and assumption behind this. But what is truly interesting is that if terrorism is a fact, then why does it occur?. Terrorism is increasingly emerging to the surface, when

skyscrapers, the World Trade Center (WTC) and the Pentagon building, New York, were destroyed by a group, which until now is still mysterious. The international network of al-Qaeda is often mentioned as the actor behind the attack. At this point, terrorism is increasingly questioned and questioned.

It is crucial to distinguish between the religion of Islam and the political ideology of terrorist groups. Mainstream Islamic theology, as understood by the vast majority of scholars and adherents worldwide, explicitly prohibits the killing of civilians and the waging of aggressive war. Core Islamic principles emphasize justice, mercy, and the sanctity of life. Verses in the Qur'an that speak of fighting are historically contextualized to specific battles of self-defense in the early Muslim community. The ideological foundation of groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, however, is built on a selective and extremist interpretation of Islamic texts, one that is rejected by the overwhelming majority of Muslims. They prioritize a political goal—the establishment of a caliphate through violent revolution—over the religion's spiritual and ethical teachings, creating a stark divergence between their actions and mainstream Islam.

To ask why terrorism occurs, as the introduction does, requires examining the geopolitical grievances that extremist groups exploit. The late 20th and early 21st centuries have been marked by significant conflicts and interventions in Muslim-majority regions, including the Soviet-Afghan War, the Gulf Wars, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These events have created environments of profound instability, displacement, and

resentment. Terrorist organizations adeptly frame these complex political struggles as a simplistic "war on Islam," weaponizing this narrative of victimhood and foreign aggression to recruit disillusioned individuals. Their violence is not born in a vacuum but is often fueled by a potent mix of perceived injustice, political oppression, and the collapse of state structures.

The introduction rightly notes that accusations are often directed at Muslims, highlighting a critical problem in the discourse on terrorism: the inconsistent application of the "terrorist" label. Acts of violence perpetrated by non-Muslims, such as white supremacists or radical separatists, are frequently described using different terminology like "mass shooting" or "hate crime," often with a greater initial emphasis on the perpetrator's individual psychology rather than their ideology. This double standard reinforces a damaging narrative that terrorism is an inherently Muslim phenomenon. This selective labeling not only alienates Muslim communities but also hinders a comprehensive global effort against all forms of ideologically motivated violence, regardless of the perpetrator's identity.

Finally, the problem of terrorism in Islam is, significantly, a problem for Muslims themselves. Muslim-majority nations and communities have been the primary victims of terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, suffering immense loss of life and social disruption. In response, there has been a powerful internal movement of theological counter-narratives, fatwas (religious edicts) condemning terrorism, and active military campaigns by Muslim governments to combat extremists. This demonstrates that the fight against terrorism is not a

"clash of civilizations" between the West and Islam, but rather a civil war within Muslim societies between a violent, extremist minority and a peaceful, mainstream majority. Understanding this internal dynamic is essential to moving beyond simplistic and harmful generalizations

The Roots of Terrorism and Violence in Islam

Jihad is often translated and equated with aggressive holy war.¹ For many in the West, jihad has become a symbol of Islam as a violent and fanatical religion. Religious extremists and terrorists reinforce this belief when they freely declare jihad to justify attacks and killings against all who disagree with them.

In fact, as we have seen, Muslims throughout the ages have discussed, debated, and disagreed about the meaning of jihad, between defensive and expansionist jihad,² between legitimate and illegitimate.

In the historical practice of the early Islamic world, like most Muslim societies today, it has already faced terror from religious extremist movements. The Khawarij of the Ismaili Nizariyah³ group are

¹ John L. Esposito, *Unholy War*, trans. Arif Maftuhin, (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2003), p. 79.

² The verses of the Qur'an that speak of jihad as armed struggle are divided into two categories: defensive verses, which emphasize the struggle against aggression, and offensive/expansionist verses, which enjoin resistance against all unbelievers and call for the spread of the message of Islam and public order or Pan-Islamism. Muslims are encouraged to fight with a high level of commitment so that victory can be achieved and the war can end: "If you meet them in battle, scatter those behind them so that they may learn a lesson." (Q.S. al-Anfal [8]:57). However, as stated in the next verse, "if they propose peace, then the fighting must be stopped: "If they incline to peace, then incline towards it and put your trust in Allah. Indeed, Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing" (Q.S. al-Anfal [8]:61).

³ Called the Assassins because of their call to commit murder, They are one of the Shia sects, driven by the vision of Messiah or Mahdiism. They live apart in secret

early examples of disputes that can accompany a "dirty war" in the name of Islam. As will be seen in the traces of militant beliefs and fundamentalist views of the Khawariji that can be found in the Wahabi movement of Saudi Arabia, and in radical movements in the 20th century, such as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization and al-Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden.⁴

The Khawarij, were followers of ‘Ali’s companions who broke away because they believed that ‘Ali was “wrong” for agreeing to arbitration (tahkim), in resolving the war with Mu’awiyah’s group. After meeting ‘Ali (whom they eventually killed), the Khawarij formed a separate community, based on their vision of a true charismatic society that strictly followed the Qur’an and Sunnah. They used the Prophet’s model of hijrah and a radical and militant form of jihad. First they went out to live among their own communities and then they formed camps to wage jihad against their enemies in the spirit of theological doctrines they believed in.⁵

The Khawarij believed that the Qur’anic mandate to “enjoin good and forbid evil” was to be applied literally, strictly, and without reservation or exception. Their world was divided strictly between faith and infidelity, Muslims (followers of God) and non-Muslims (enemies of God), peace and war. Any action that did not conform exactly to the

communities that arise to attack infidels, and they are guided by great masters who rule in a strong fortress on the Alamud mountain, in Northern Persia. See John L. Esposito, *UnHoly War*, p. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵ Compare with Munawir Sadzali's book, *Islam dan Tata Negara: Sejarah, Konsep, dan Pemikiran*, (Jakarta: UI Press, 1997).

wording of God's law was a major sin. Sinners were judged to be infidels and expelled from the community of believers (takfir). Committers of major sins were not merely seen as violators of religious law, but as apostates, guilty of treason, and deserving of death unless they repented. The Khawarij viewed other Muslims who did not accept their uncompromising views as polytheists and therefore become enemies of God.⁶

In the issue of political power, they hold an egalitarian belief that the caliph should be elected based on the consent of the people, but they state that a caliph only holds office as long as they walk uprightly and do not sin. His inability to walk uprightly and without sin is a major sin. That sin causes apostasy, leaving Islam, and thus being outside the protection of the law so that he must be deposed and/or killed.⁷

The belief that they are God's soldiers waging jihad against the infidel forces, leads them to believe that the ends justify the means. Violence, guerrilla warfare, and revolution are not only legitimate but also obligatory in the war against sinners who ignore God's law and power. In modern times, this mentality is emulated by Islamic Jihad, the extremists who killed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Osama bin Laden, and other extremists who call for the overthrow of un-Islamic Muslim rulers and for jihad against the state.

Terror and Jihad in the Name of God

⁶See Harun Nasution, *Teologi Islam: Sejarah, Aliran-aliran Perbandingan*, (Jakarta: UI Press, 1995), p.35.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Terrorism as a ideology is indeed different from most ideologies that have grown and developed in the world, both in the past and in the present. Terrorism is always identical with terror, violence, extremism and intimidation. The perpetrators are usually called terrorists. Therefore, terrorism as an ideology that is identical with terror often has negative consequences for humanity. Terrorism often causes countless human victims. For example, the bombing of a foreign tourist bus in Cairo, the shooting of tourists in Luxor, Egypt, the bombing of the US Embassy in Kenya, the storming of the Grand Mosque by Juhaiman al-Utaibah and similar incidents are forms of acts of terrorism. These incidents prove that thousands of innocent human lives have been lost due to the actions of terrorists. The elderly, adults, young people and babies have also suffered the consequences of the ideological struggle.⁸

At this point, terrorism has received serious attention from the world community, that the methods used by terrorists can create instability, chaos and prolonged anxiety. Society is always haunted by feelings of anxiety and insecurity. However, the question that arises later is, "who actually carried out the acts of terrorism. At this stage, we will enter into its own complexity, because identifying terrorism is not as easy as turning over both palms. Especially if it concerns a particular group or country, accurate and precise data is needed. However, as far as we have observed until now, terrorism is articulated in three forms.

First, personal terrorism. Terrorist acts are carried out by individuals. Usually, bus bombings such as in Cairo are personal acts.

⁸ John L. Esposito, *Unholy War*, p. 87.

Bombings of malls and shopping centers such as those carried out by Hamas members in Tel Aviv can also be categorized as terrorism carried out personally.

Second, collective terrorism. Terrorists do it in a planned manner. Usually, this kind of terrorism is institutionalized in a neat network. What is often referred to as terrorism in this category is the al-Qaeda Network. The targets of terrorism in this category are symbols of power and economic centers.

Third, terrorism carried out by the state. This term is relatively new, commonly referred to as "state terrorism".⁹ The initiator was the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Muhammad at an OIC Conference event. According to him, terrorism deployed by the state is no less terrible than personal or collective terrorism. If the two previous forms are carried out secretly, terrorism carried out by a state can be seen with the naked eye.¹⁰

All three have a common ground, namely looking for scapegoats and victims. What is striking in terrorism is "revenge". Therefore, terrorism is identical to recklessness and the calling to fight recklessly. In short, there are victims. This is actually the problematic realm of terrorism. Terrorism is like a lion that is always hungry for prey. Like a lion, terrorism cannot take the "middle way", but rather

⁹Even the terrorism movement metamorphosed into five stages:, Terrorism as part of religious fundamentalism, then ideology, independence movement, and the struggle for justice. While the fifth is terrorism carried out as a way to fight for interests. See S. Indro Tjahjono, "Anatomi Bom Bali", in *Suara Pembaruan*, October 19, 2002.

¹⁰ See Chandra Muzaffar, *Islam, Dialog, dan Teror*, trans. Syamsul, (Jakarta: Profetik, 2004), p. 173.

takes a "shortcut". Because terrorists usually base it on the need to build a tower called "a single identity".

Terrorism presupposes the existence of "absolutism", both in the superstructure and structure levels.¹¹ Terrorism as a movement that carries the ambition of truth, uses various vehicles. Some use religious, political and economic vehicles. Whatever the vehicle, terrorism displays its hegemonic, anarchic and radical character. This is the

¹¹ In terms of understanding religious texts, it can be called a superstructure level. In this context, Khaled Abou el-Fadl's analysis of authoritarianism in Islamic thought is interesting. Khaled provides a very analytical explanation in the tradition of reading Islamic text sources. According to him, normatively, religious texts provide ample space for various variations of understanding (multiple interpretations/ikhtilaf). Various processes of understanding and interpretation aim to uncover the "will" of God. Because the text is an authoritative medium that documents the "will" of God, every interpreter tries to reach until he reaches that authoritative truth. In the position of all possibilities of a form of interpretation, it will be able to give rise to various other interpretations. The interpreter can sometimes get trapped in the pit of authoritarianism or absolutism, when he exceeds his authority by identifying the text with his own nature. In another sense, the interpreter positions himself as the "spokesperson" of the text or God. The inevitable consequence is that the interpreter closes off the possibility of other meanings, because he positions himself as representing the meaning desired by God. In this context, Abou El Fadl calls the authoritarian attitude an attitude of "seizing God's will". The signal of closing the door of *ijtihad* according to Abou El Fadl is an example of the perfect dynamics in the real form of an authoritarian attitude in Islamic legal thought. In other terms, Abou El Fadl states that authoritarianism is the act of "locking" God's will, or the will of the text, in a certain static determination, and presenting that opinion as something certain, absolute, and decisive. So the use of terror in the name of religion is an act of "hijacking" the text and religion itself. See Mun'im A. Sirry, "Islam, Teks Terbuka dan Pluralisme: Interpretasi atas Interpretasi Khaled Abou El Fadl", in the *Journal of Perspektif Progresif*, First Edition July-August 2005, p. 28. See his other books, *Melawan Tentara Tuhan: Yang Berwenang dan Sewenang-wenang dalam Wacana Islam* trans. Kurniawan Abdullah, (Jakarta: Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2003), and *Atas Nama Tuhan: Dari Fikih Otoriter Ke Fikih Otoritatif*, trans. R. Cecep Lukman Yasin, (Jakarta: Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2004). Meanwhile, the structural level is the creation of an orthodox Salaf social and political life that does not accept elements of modernity. Such as the form of the Taliban government in Afghanistan which is one of the centers of the al-Qaeda terrorist movement. See also Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Teror atas Nama Tuhan*, p. 264.

impression that can be captured about terrorism. Almost all of its images are bad and inhumane.

According to Tariq Ramadan's response, all types of terrorism are un-Islamic. Every Muslim must no longer be deceived by symbols that act as if they want to uphold the banner of Islam through violence. In fact, acts of terror are always a horror for humanity which should be saved by Islam's merciful character for nature. Therefore, Muslims must be critical of the claims of terrorist groups, while at the same time firmly distancing themselves from them. Delegitimizing acts of terror committed by those who use Islamic symbols is the obligation of all Muslims.

But, according to Ramadan, at the same time, at the international level, it is also very important to be careful in acting in the name of the war on terrorism. Because, the policy of the war on terrorism has also targeted Muslims around the world. In America, Europe, or countries with Muslim-majority populations, the war on terrorism has been used to suppress, or restrain Muslims from their civil rights.¹²

Conclusion

Acts of terrorism are not actually identical to Islam. But all other religions and beliefs also have radical movements that can carry out acts

¹² See the site <http://islamlib.com/id/index.php?page=article&id=410>, accessed November 20, 2007. In fact, according to Mark Jurgensmeyer, terrorist movements do not only belong to Islam per se. Other religions also have radical and militant movements that also use the name of religion. See his book, *Teror atas Nama Tuhan*, p. 15.

of terrorism. Using Islam as a terrorist is not wise. Islam in its ideal teachings is a religion of peace, not a religion that encourages physical jihad that leads to terrorism. Although, there are a few radical Islamic groups who are very extreme in defending the banner of jihad in the name of religion. But generalizing the label of Islam as a terrorist religion is naive and wrong. Now is the time for Muslims to look again and study the peaceful and polite doctrines of Islam, so that they can practice them in real life.

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