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Strengthening Interfaith Dialogue through Religious Moderation Discourse: An African Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the dynamic political landscape of religiously dominated countries, the link between religion and the state is ever-evolving. Understanding these nuances is crucial if the international community is to support positive change in these nations. For instance, the Sub-saharan countries; especially Nigeria, where the population is almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam. Faith is therefore of crucial spiritual and cultural significance to millions of people across the region. Currently, most nations; especially around the Lake-chad, and indeed, Nigeria are facing large- scale religious, ethnic, political and economic challenges. Intense religious debates around these challenges have led to negative rhetoric, hate speech, discrimination are manifest in escalating tensions and conflicts. History has demonstrated again and again how easy it is for religious leaders and the interfaith community to become inextricably caught up in religious, political, and territorial disputes. However, experts have realized that in most cases religions have been negatively used to justify these criminal atrocities. We have seen several instances of faith leaders grooming radicals and violent extremist youths to perpetrate these crimes in the name of religion. The religious moderation is not new, but many have continuously jettisoned its importance in building cohesion among the people. Hence, religious moderates engaged in politics have actively provided peaceful and conciliatory solutions to safeguard communities from the militants and radicals. This paper will, however, focus on exploring the trajectory of moderation in reducing religious bigotry, hate and discrimination along inter/intra religious divides, and, enhance tolerance and acceptance of others. It further recommends concepts and initiatives that could help exacerbate the importance of the discussion to galvanize partnership support to design and implement a programme of action to promote "religious moderation" in the Sub-saharan region and other parts of the world. This would not only enhance inter-religious understanding, collaboration and peaceful coexistence among religious groups and communities, but creates a peaceful atmosphere for political landscape and sustainable economic development, which is the major essence of Religion.

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1. Background/Description

In the dynamic political landscape of religiously dominated countries, the link between religion and the state is ever-evolving. Understanding these nuances is crucial if the international community is to support positive change in these nations. For instance, the SubSaharan countries; especially Nigeria, where the population is almost evenly divided between Christianity and Islam. Faith is therefore of crucial spiritual and cultural significance to millions of people across the region.

Currently, most nations; especially around the Lake-Chad, and indeed, Nigeria are facing large- scale religious, ethnic, political and economic challenges. Intense religious debates around these challenges have led to negative rhetoric, hate speech, discrimination are manifest in escalating tensions and conflicts. History has demonstrated again and again how easy it is for religious leaders and the interfaith community to become inextricably caught up in religious, political, and territorial disputes. However, experts have realized that in most cases religions have been negatively used to justify these criminal atrocities. We have seen several instances of faith leaders grooming radicals and violent extremist youths to perpetrate these crimes in the name of religion.

The religious moderation is not new, but many have continuously jettisoned its importance in building cohesion among the people. Hence, religious moderates engaged in politics have actively provided peaceful and conciliatory solutions to safeguard communities from the militants and radicals.

This paper will, however, focus on exploring the trajectory of moderation in reducing religious bigotry, hate and discrimination along inter/intra religious divides, and, enhance tolerance and acceptance of others.

It further recommends concepts and initiatives that could help exacerbate the importance of the discussion to galvanize partnership support to design and implement a programme of action to promote “religious moderation” in the Sub-Saharan region and other parts of the world. This would not only enhance inter-religious understanding, collaboration and peaceful coexistence among religious groups and communities, but creates a peaceful atmosphere for political landscape and sustainable economic development, which is the major essence of Religion.

2. Introduction

Radicalization and violent extremism are underpinned by multitude of different belief systems and ideological dynamics of religion, socio-economic and personal tribulations; and are dependent on the regional location individuals come from (Hutson et al., 2009, pp. 19-20) Hence, radicalization and violent extremism have become norms of expression of agitations, struggles and protest by certain groups or networks across the world; especially in the SubSaharan African region. Many of these agitations and struggles are based on context and the use of religion as a tool for seeking redress or gaining attention. Some leverage on the cultural and religious divides of vulnerable societies and groups whose political, economical and social lives have been compromised.

In recent times, attention have been shifted to fundamental issues of political-Salafism - using religion to achieve political power and dominance is some climes; thereby, creating political crisis within the region. Fundamentalism has been framed in the light of radicalization and violent extremism; and of recent, Islamist-groups who have used terrorism to drive their agitations Today, the issue of Islamophobia in the west has equally compounded the problem about how people perceive Islam. Perpetrators have carried out their various onslaughts and nefarious criminal act in the name of religion -Islam where they legitimize their actions referencing citations from the holy books, especially the Qur'an. Groups such as the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWA), Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP), As-Shabaab group in Somalia, Boko Haram Insurgents of Lake Chad which include, Niger Republic, Cameroun and Nigeria, Recently, we have witness the upsurge of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria and its borders. In contrast, many scholars have established the fact that most of these crises have some political and economic undertone that support these agitations, and the use of religion is just a mere strategy to malign Islam and the Muslims and to leverage on the religious sensibility of the people in order to attract attention and solidarity. Some argued that religion is peace and cannot be used to legitimize crime and criminality. Thenegative narratives being promoted by perpetrators lack merit and religious values and norms as enshrined in the scriptures. They posited that "crime committed in the name of any religion is actually a crime against that religion".

In furtherance to this, this paper will strive to discuss some of the crises emanating from the use of negative religious narratives, address the issue of criminality in the name of religion, strengthen interreligious collaborations among faiths using the religious moderation trajectory in the Sub-Saharan region.

3. DEFINITION OF TERMS

RELIGION

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Harriet Martineau] Religion is the belief in an ever-living God, that is, in a Divine Mind and Will ruling the Universe and holding moral relations with mankind.

[Bradley] Religion usually has to do with man's relationship to the unseen world, to the world of spirits, demons, and gods. A second element common to all religions ... is the term salvation. All religions seek to help man find meaning in a universe which all too often appears to be hostile to his interests. The world salvation means, basically, health. It means one is saved from disaster, fear, hunger, and a meaningless life. It means one is saved for hope, love, security, and the fulfillment of purpose.

RELIGIOUS MODERATION

Religious moderation is a concept that emphasizes tolerance, balance, and harmony among different religious communities. It involves recognizing and respecting the beliefs and practices of others while upholding one's own religious beliefs. Religious moderation is seen as a means to reduce religious radicalism and promote stability in society. It is characterized by a middle ground between religious radicalism and religious liberalism, allowing individuals to practice their faith while respecting the existence of other religious followers.

Religious moderation is necessary to guarantee social stability against the unwanted ideological force and even physical collisions in society. Social and religious lives are not isolated but must be integrated into one another. Building an educated and open-minded religious community is required to achieve this goal.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

The term 'Interfaith Dialogue' refers to the positive and cooperative interaction between people of different religions, faiths or spiritual beliefs, with the aim of promoting understanding between different religions to increase acceptance and tolerance

Interfaith Dialog is a specific type of interaction between religious and/or spiritual groups intended to build bridges and foster understanding between religious groups. The terms “inter-religious dialog” and “inter-church dialog” often refer to the same process.

RADICALIZATION

The action or process of making someone become more radical or extreme in their political or religious beliefs.

Radicalization refers to the gradual social process into extremism and is often applied to explain changes in ideas or behaviour.

VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Extremism is essentially a political term which determines the activities that are not in accordance with norms of the state, are fully intolerant toward others, reject democracy as a means of governance and the way of problem solving and also reject the existing social order.

Extremism is a political or religious philosophy that's very far from the mainstream. Because it's so different from the average person's politics. being an anarchist is often considered extremism.

POLITICAL-SALAFISM

Salafism is the idea that the most authentic and true Islam is found in the lived example of the early, righteous generations of Muslims, known as the Salaf, who were closest in both time and proximity to the Prophet Muhammad.

Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam that developed in the 19th century; the word comes from an Arabic term meaning “the pious predecessors” and reflects adherents’ emulation of early generations of Muslims. However, the act of using this idea to promote or actualize political powers or dominance is refer to as political-salafism. Today, many groups have become or tagged as terrorist groups due to this appellation claiming to be fighting for Islam.

INNOVATION IN RELIGIONS

Innovation in religious is any change in religious practice, organization, or belief is religious innovation. The major world religions such as Islam and Christianity have developed orthodox bodies of belief, custom, and practice, which are regarded as part of a sacred tradition.

Religious innovation is thus seen as a departure from orthodoxy, because it is a threat to tradition. Since religious innovation is inevitable, there is a permanent tension between belief in the unchanging nature of orthodox tradition, and the actual social change of religious organizations.

INFIDELITY (TAKFIR)

Takfir is an Arabic word used to describe a Muslim as infidel or non-believer. The practice of accusing another Muslim of apostasy or declaring another Muslim as infidel is called Takfir.

Takfir is the process by which one Muslim characterizes another Muslim as a kafir. This designation carries with it a death sentence, according to certain interpretations of Islam.

The origins of takfir date back to the late 7th century, when the early Khawarij sect broke off from Sunni Muslims to commit wanton takfir on members of the Umayyad Caliphate and justify their indiscriminate attacks.

ISLAMOPHOBIA

Islamophobia refers to the fear of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam that is driven by racism and that leads to exclusionary, discriminatory, and violent actions targeting Muslims and

those perceived as Muslim. Although the word "Islamophobia" entered widespread public and political discourse only in the late 1990s, hostility toward Islam and Muslims in the West dates back to the Middle Ages.

Islamophobia, is a structural organizing tool located at the contemporary racial, gender, and class crossroads, is employed to rationalize and extend the dominant global power hierarchies, while embarking on a project for silencing the collective global other." Dr. Hatem Bazian, 2009

Islamophobia in Muslim majority countries is a political, socio-economic, cultural and religious process emerging and shaped by the colonial-Euro-centric hegemonic discourses dating from late 18th Century, is constituted and internalized through an imitative project by post-colonial elites that posited itself or was designated by Western powers as the custodian for the "modern, secular, nationalist and progressive" Arab and Muslim nation-state project." Dr. Hatem Bazian, Defining Islamophobia in Muslim Majority States, 2018

FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism refers to religious belief that maintains the literal truth of the worlds in a holy book. It can also mean strict adherence to the tenants of a religion.

Fundamentalism is a religious movement that believes that the words found in religious texts are literally true and cannot be challenged by new evidence or logical analyses. Religious fundamentalism is almost always used to describe movements in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; however, it can be applied to any religion that is based on holy texts.

Fundamentalism is a strict interpretation of the scripture, like Protestant Christians who believe that all the miracles in the Bible really happened. The word fundamentalism was originally associated with a Protestant movement of the early 1920s, which protested the treatment of the supernatural miracles and events of the Bible as anything but literally true. Fundamentalism was created in direct opposition to modernism, a movement that sought to reinterpret the events of the Bible based on modern times.

Fundamentalism was formalized in the late 19th century and early 20th century by conservative Christians—John Nelson Darby, Dwight L. Moody, B. B. Warfield, Billy Sunday, and others—who were concerned that moral values were being eroded by modernism—a belief that human beings (rather than God) create, improve, and reshape their environment with the aid of scientific knowledge, technology and practical experimentation. In addition to fighting the influence of modernism, the church was struggling with the German higher criticism movement, which sought to deny the inerrancy of Scripture.

RELIGION AND MODERATION

Hasan K · 2024, religious moderation lessons in education play a crucial role in shaping student character beyond academics. This study highlights the need for more scholarly conversation about religious moderation and education through bibliometric analysis. Although still new, the increase in related documentation shows significant momentum. These findings identify related topics, such as religious intolerance and extremism, that need more attention. This situation

emphasizes the need for a responsive religious moderation learning model in the future. The contribution of this study directs the focus of research and development to support inclusive and tolerant education amidst complex challenges in religious communities.

R Mulyana · 2023, the study finds that the content of moderation values, such as non-violence, egalitarianism and fairness, and tolerance, aligns with the Indonesian government's religious moderation pillars. The study also reveals that the implementation of moderation values has been carried out, especially by Islamic religious education teachers, resulting in a safe and respectful school environment for Muslim and non-Muslim students alike

Moderation is a moderate thing in religion related to understanding and worship, and it is balanced and not too exaggerated. This article aims to find out whether the Qur'an and Al-Hadith as holy books spoken to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), have a basis or principle that has enormous potential in inviting Muslims to commit violence and terror against religions other than Islam. In this study, researchers use the method of literature review or library research, which is to review a study whose data is sourced from literature related to the object of research. The results showed that the verses of the Qur'an and Al-Hadith do not invite

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Muslims to commit violence and exaggeration in everything, especially in religious matters. The Qur'an and Al-Hadith teach and offer to understand and practice religion, which should take a middle path. Even balance is a necessity that belongs to the laws of nature.

Religious moderation is the key to creating tolerance and harmony, both at the local, national and global levels. The choice of moderation by rejecting extremism and liberalism in religion is the key to balance (tawâzun), for the sake of maintaining civilization and creating peace. In this way each religious community can treat others with respect, accept differences, and live together in peace and harmony. In a multicultural society like Indonesia, religious moderation may not be an option, but a necessity.

In an analogy, moderation is like movement from the edge which always tends to the center or axis (centripetal), while extremism is the reverse movement away from the center or axis, towards the outermost and extreme (centrifugal). Like a clock circle, there is a dynamic motion, not stopping at one extreme outside, but moving towards the middle. If then this is analogous to the context of religion, then a moderate attitude is thus the choice to have paradigms, attitudes, and behaviors in the middle among the existing extreme choices. Meanwhile, religious extremism is a viewpoint, attitude, and behavior that exceeds the limits of moderation in religious understanding and practice.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN PEACE-BUILDING

Iweze 2021, mentioned that there is the dire need to critically examine the reception of the covenants of Prophet Muhammad among interfaith actors. Interfaith actors are important stakeholders concerning the reception of the Prophet's covenants as they play a key role in inter-religious dialogue and peace-building (. As such, interfaith actors are an ideal starting point for studying how 'new' religious knowledge about Islamic covenants influences existing thought and worldviews concerning Islam and inter-religious relations.

James P July 2020, Inter-religious dialogue has an important role to play in building peace, especially in ethnic-religious identity conflicts. Until recently, the field of conflict resolution did not pay enough attention to religious traditions as a source of conflict resolution, and many

secularists argued that it was still naive to see inter-religious dialogue as a way to resolve conflicts triggered by religion (Kadayifci-Orellana 2013). There are quite a number of initiatives among young people and women, trying to find ways to work together on projects of justice and local community service (Smith 2007)

The Effective Inter-Religious Action in Peace-building Program (EIAP) began in November 2014 with support from the GHR Foundation and is led by Alliance for Peace-building in partnership with CDA Collaborative Learning and Search for Common Ground (SFCG). This three-year initiative is investigating how inter-religious action can help in building resilient and peaceful societies with diversities. Specific goals include generating guidance on how to evaluate inter-religious action and developing a framework for ongoing research regarding what constitutes effective inter-religious action in peace-building. As part of the EIAP, this literature review examines the “state of play” of inter-religious action in peace-building, the theories of change behind programming, and the evidence base for those theories.

This literature review is a desk review of program and evaluation documents, academic research, and interviews. The AfP secured most materials through its membership, with additional documents found through publicly available sources including, the United States Agency for International Development’s Development Experience Clearinghouse, United Nations Development Program’s Evaluation Resource Center, and DME for Peace. These documents formed the basis for the generation of Section 4.2 (Program Design) and Section 5 (Theory of Change). The seven evaluations used in the meta-evaluation informed the review of Section 4.3 (Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of Inter-religious Peace-building Programs). Conclusions reflect what is documented in available records, which may not fully capture implementation or reality. Moreover, the reliance on AfP’s network may bias findings towards secular Western implementer partnering with religious actors rather than religious individuals and institutions conducting their work. Many programs reviewed used context and conflict analysis in the design phase, identified key partners and included core assumptions. Areas for improving design include: engendering the program and having a clear theory of change. Drawing on a meta-evaluation of seven inter-religious programs, all of the evaluations stated the evaluation purpose, limitations, and used evaluation questions. Opportunities to improve evaluations include, providing clear criteria for analysis, using more rigorous evaluation design, substantiating conclusions with evidence, and utilizing engendered and conflict sensitive techniques. Given the unique opportunities and challenges of engaging in inter-religious peace-building, this report outlines the macro theories of change used in inter-religious action. Macro theories of change reflect assumptions about the

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fundamental drivers of conflict and how they can be transformed. The King Abdullah Bn Abdulazeez Centre for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Lisbon, Portugal has really invested much in raising new generation of dialogue practitioners across the world with their various initiatives and cross-cultural interventions.

RADICALIZATION

The phenomena of radicalisation today develop and change at high speed, with their extreme forms manifested globally. The destructive dimensions of (violent) Islamist or right-wing radicalisation have become dramatically visible in Europe posing serious challenges to European

societies. This literature review presents key academic conceptualisations and debates on the phenomena of radicalisation that might lead to violence. It deals with three different forms of radicalisation, including Islamist radicalisation, right-wing as well as left-wing radicalisation. In addition, an overview is provided of current academic debates regarding the role of the internet in radicalisation processes. The review is intended to help social scientists who are entering the field of radicalisation studies navigate through the complexity of underlying processes and factors that lead different individuals or groups to adopt radical ideas and commit acts of violence. The review is particularly relevant for countries of Central and Eastern Europe where radicalisation remains understudied, although most countries in the region share histories of extremism and political radicalism.

Hinds R · 2013, Islamic radicalisation in North and West Africa, with a particular focus on the drivers of radicalisation and evidence on approaches that have attempted to tackle radicalisation. There is significant debate in the academic literature concerning the definition of 'radicalisation'. For the purposes of this report, the definition of Islamic radicalisation adopted is 'a political rupture with the nation state in order to establish the early Islamic califat by violence'.

EXTREMISM

Stephens W · 2021, The rapid growth in research directed toward preventing violent extremism has resulted in a rich but fragmented body of literature spanning multiple disciplines. This review finds a number of themes that cut across a range of disciplinary approaches and suggests that the concept of resilience could provide the basis for a common framework for prevention. However, thus far the notion of resilience to extremism has often focused on the individual, and insufficient attention has been given to the role of contextual structures and institutions. We suggest that a social–ecological perspective on resilience could re-orientate the discourse on resilience to extremism.

Nasser-Eddine M · 2011, This demonstrates the complexity of understanding Violent Extremism (VE) and best strategies for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). This has been undertaken with the broader analysis of radicalisation and social cohesion theories, models and government policies and how they may impact on or contribute to best practice and policy in countering violent extremism.

Violent extremism has become an area of interest to government and policy makersthroughout the Western industrialised world. In Australia initiatives aimed at counteringviolent extremism are being led by the current Attorney General, Minister Robert McClellandMP. In May 2010 the government announced that violent extremism will be targeted by a$9.7million package of measures. This was based on the Counter-Terrorism White Paper(Australian Government, 2010) which acknowledged the risk of 'home grown terrorism' andhighlighted the importance of 'building a strong and resilient community to resist violentextremism and terrorism'. The government strategy to counter violent extremism draws onnumerous programs 1 . The brief for this project comes under the 'improving responses toviolent extremist messages and ensuring they are evidence-based and appropriate toAustralian circumstances' strategy. These measures complement a range of existing initiativeswithin the Government's broader national security and social inclusion agendas. The

government's position is that, "An effective counter-terrorism strategy requires a combinationof security and law enforcement responses, and broader strategies to enhance social cohesionand resilience that lessen the appeal of extremist ideologies that fuel terrorism" (May 11, 2010Media Release).This report reviews existing literature on violent extremism and terrorism, radicalisation,countering violent extremism and social cohesion and identifies gaps that need to beaddressed through research or policy initiatives. The database provides access to referencesgenerated through the literature review for those working in policy and related areas. Thekey concepts researched and analysed in the review are violent extremism, terrorism,radicalisation, countering violent extremism, and social cohesion. The ways in which theseconcepts are defined, conceptualised and theorised in the literature are reviewed in Part 1 ofthis report.

FUNDAMENTALISM

Hassan I · 2008, he Georgia Review seeks to create a lasting environment for literature by supporting writers at every stage of their careers. Committed to the art of editorial practice, the Review collaborates with authors of essays, stories, poems, and reviews in pursuit of works of enduring appeal that engage with the evolving concerns and interests of readers from around the world. Our aim in curating content is not only to elevate literature, publishing, and the arts, but also to promote diversity and to help facilitate socially conscious partnerships in our surrounding communities.

Moaddel M · 2018, To overcome these limitations, we propose that fundamentalists, despite their diversity and often irreconcilable differences—such as those found between Christian and Muslim or Shia and Sunni variants—share core orientations toward their own and other's religions (Altemeyer 2003; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 2004; Moaddel and Karabenick 2008, 2013; Schwartz and Lindley 2005; Summers 2006). We conceptualize these core orientations as a distinctive set of beliefs and attitudes that rests on a disciplinarian conception of the deity, a literal reading of the scriptures, religious exclusivity, and intolerance. Focusing on the Abrahamic faiths, fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes are distinguishable from the basic tenets of these faiths that the adherents unquestionably accept. These tenets in (Shia and Sunni) Islam, for example, include the belief in the oneness of God, the Prophecy of Muhammad, the Quran as the word God, and the Resurrection and Day of Judgment. In Christianity, they are the belief in the trinitarian notion of God as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, Jesus as the Son of God, and the Virgin Mary. Muslim or Christian fundamentalists certainly believe in the tenets of their own religion. But the belief that their religion is closer to God than other religions, that only Muslims or Christians will go to heaven, that God severely punishes people even though they have engaged in only a minor infraction of religious laws, or that the Quran or the Bible is literally true—all constitute fundamentalist beliefs because they display distinctive religious orientations rather than asserting specific tenets of either faith. Fundamentalism also differs from religious conservatism (Belcher, Fandetti, and Cole 2004). For some, fundamentalism is a subset of conservatism, such as conservative Protestants (Wood- berry and Smith 1998), and for others, it is similar to conservatism (Glass and Jacobs 2005; Glass and Nath 2006). However, a clearer

conceptualization and more precise measurement of the term, which are necessary for a better understanding of the subject (Woodberry and Smith 1998), require considering fundamentalism and conservatism as distinct phenomena. The latter is primarily concerned with social issues and preserving the norms associated with the religious tradition such as those governing gender relations and communal practices

ISLAMOPOBIA

Rehman I · 2023, The current socio-political climate has magnified the stigma and discrimination Muslims continue to face. Muslims are increasingly portrayed as the villain, however, the studies reviewed as part of this review have found Muslims to be a marginalised group, often in need of support. The fields of counselling and psychology with their emphasis on human well-being have much to offer in this regard, particularly in terms of developing a holistic understanding of human experience. Issues pertaining to Islamophobia and associated marginalisation, however, have remained largely unaddressed in psychological philosophy and research. The disciplines of Psychology must seek to incorporate and advocate multicultural perspectives, in theory, research and practice. Psychological researchers and practitioners must also seek to recognise the multiplicity of factors that impact on the psychosocial health and wellbeing of Muslims, a marginalised, stigmatised and often misunderstood group of people.

Tama YW · 2023, Islamophobia is a concept that includes various types of discrimination against Muslims and their followers. This study explores trends in previous research on Islamophobia between 2013 and 2022, focusing on factors that contribute to Islamophobia in the media and prevalent stereotypes. A systematic literature review was conducted, involving the identification, evaluation, interpretation and analysis of relevant studies. The study found that Islamophobia in the media has gained significant attention and requires further investigation to understand current trends and develop solutions. Factors associated with Islamophobia include negative portrayal, structural bias, and a lack of understanding of Islam, which contributes to anti-Muslim sentiment. The study also identified stereotypes, such as Muslims being suspected of attacks, seen as a societal threat, labelled as "other," and women wearing headscarves being stigmatized as religious fanatics. Addressing Islamophobia in the media is crucial, and recognizing these contributing factors and stereotypes can help challenge biases and promote inclusivity in society

VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ACT IN AFRICA

ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) and Boko Haram (BH) continued attacks against government and security forces and civilians in the North East region of the country, which resulted in deaths, injuries, abductions, and the destruction of property.

BH attacks did not appear to discriminate between civilians and government officials, whereas ISIS-WA generally focused attacks on government and security forces and expanded efforts to implement shadow governance structures. Following BH leader Abubakar Shekau's death in May, BH's attacks in Nigeria decreased and thousands of BH fighters reportedly surrendered in the largest wave of defections since 2002. The Nigerian Air Force deployed A-29 Super Tucanos purchased from the United States against BH and ISIS-WA, beginning in September.

The Nigerian Army largely succeeded in preventing terrorists from overrunning forward operating bases for extended periods of time. However, BH and ISIS-WA exploited the military's absence outside the "super camps" and abducted aid workers, attacked humanitarian operations hubs, and controlled security along many of the major roads. The deteriorating security environment exacerbated conditions for civilians and severely constrained relief operations in northeastern Nigeria.

Nigeria worked under the MNJTF with neighboring countries to counter terrorist activity in the region. ISIS-WA continued to enjoy a large degree of freedom of movement throughout Borno State and eastern Yobe State. BH and ISIS-WA terrorist actions contributed to the internal displacement of an estimated two million people in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States, and the external displacement of more than 328,000 Nigerian refugees to neighboring countries, principally Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

Attacks and kidnappings in the North West and North Central regions of the country by criminal gangs colloquially known as "bandits" reportedly caused more civilian deaths in 2021 than BH and ISIS-WA in the Northeast. Nigeria designated these groups as terrorists under domestic law on November 25 to maximize a federal security response, including the increased use of the military. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), separatists designated by the Nigerian government as a proscribed terrorist group in 2017, reportedly conducted violent attacks in the Southeast.

Nigeria is a member of the Trans-Sahara Counter-terrorism Program. U.S. Mission Nigeria coordinated with the Nigerian military at the Nigerian Defense Intelligence Agency's (NDIA's) Joint Intelligence Fusion Center (JIFC), Geo-spatial Intelligence Directorate Analysis Center, and Nigeria Defense Intelligence College. NDIA leadership requested assistance from the embassy to help build the JIFC's capabilities.

Terrorist Incidents in 2021

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA carried out hundreds of attacks in Nigeria using small arms, captured military equipment, improvised explosive devices (person borne, vehicle borne, and animal borne), ambushes, and kidnappings. The following list details a fraction of the incidents that occurred:

On February 23, a Boko Haram rocket attack in Maiduguri, Borno State, reportedly killed at least 16 civilians, including nine children.

During March 1-2, ISIS-WA attacked a humanitarian hub in Dikwa, Borno State, forcing dozens of NGO staff to flee and take refuge while the attackers burned several NGO compounds.

On April 5, gunmen believed to represent IPOB and its Eastern Security Network attacked a jail in Imo State, reportedly freeing nearly 2,000 inmates and killing one police officer.

On April 9, fighters believed to be BH insurgents attacked in Adamawa State, killing at least five civilians and abducting around 30 women. The fighters set fire to approximately 50

homes, as well as churches, government buildings, schools, and other property, before withdrawing. At least 5,000 people were displaced to neighbouring communities.

On December 23, rockets reportedly fired by ISIS-WA exploded near the airport in Maiduguri, Borno State, minutes before President Buhari was scheduled to arrive by plane. Four civilians on the ground were reportedly killed.

INTERVENTIONS

It is of critical concern to raise the alarm over the incessant surge of violent-extremism, radicalization and terrorism acts happening across the world in Africa, where war entrepreneurs have continuous recruit foot-soldiers of different categories; especially youths to carryout their horrendous acts against humanity under the disguise of religion. The atrocity crimes cannot be over-looked at this time. Hence, the dire need for quick and proactive interventions.

We must thereby acknowledge the various efforts of International organizations both at the Intergovernmental and national levels that have taken the

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bold step to challenge perpetrators of violent crimes using religion and cultural hegemony to justify their dastardly acts.

The King Abdullah Bn Abdulazeez Centre for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in Lisbon, Portugal, as an intergovernmental agency, has really invested much in raising new generation of dialogue practitioners across the world with their various initiatives and cross-cultural interventions. Same to the new 'Moderation initiative' of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, King Salman Bn Abdullah Al-Saudi for his bold action to establish the Saudi Arabia Centre for Moderation to promote moderate discourse and balance interpretation of Quranic texts. Most importantly, ensuring that Saudi citizens embrace dialogue and learning about rules of engagement with non-Muslims, build the culture of tolerance, acceptance, respect and human dignity across all faiths, cultures and traditions. No wonder, the NEOM initiative is thriving; thereby enhancing socio-economic development in the country. This kind of trajectory would go along way to help develop other countries especially the African region where sects and sectarianism have caused serious damage to the unity of the Muslim community and Interfaith collaboration.

I will not hesitate to mention our little intervention so far. The Strength in Diversity Development Centre through its various organs and collaborators have just launched new moderation initiative in Nigeria, the International Centre for Religious Moderation (ICRM) in Nigeria. The Centre seeks to provide adequate moderate narrative to foster intra and inter-religious understanding and collaboration, build cohesion among Muslims irrespective of sects, brotherhood, ideology or affiliation. The Centre will run a full literacy programme on Inter-religious dialogue, peace-building, conflict transformation, scriptural reasoning; rehabilitation, reconciliation and reintegration projects across the continent of Africa. Our local partner, Muhammadu Rosulullah Global whose new Masjid is hosting the first Centre in Nigeria in collaboration with the Islamic Platform Society of Nigeria and the Muslim Youth Empowerment

Initiative Project.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We envision that since we are committed to ensuring that religion plays a pivotal role in achieving global peace and development, discussion around “Moderation” is highly sought to promote its agenda of building the needed nexus between religion and development; especially in the Sub-saharan region of Africa. And, ensure that we keep exploring all available means towards engaging our youths from all kinds of crimes in the name of religion. The moderation centre, as established, will focus more on balanced religious narrative trajectory to clean up the menace of hate, bigotry, discrimination that could lead to atrocity crime and other social vices. The Moderation centre shall effectively run various kinds of deradicalization programmes, and equally serve as rehabilitation, reconciliation and reintegration centre. It also ensure that a series of both Intra and Interfaith scriptural reasoning dialogue training and engagement sessions are implemented. Summer camps for youths and young adults would also be organized to foster intra and inter-religious understanding and literacy among all faiths, brotherhoods and sects in Africa.

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