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INTRODUCTION
Religion and politics in an era of uncertainty

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The first edition of this handbook was published in 2009, and the second edition in 2016. Now, seven years later, this is the third edition. As editor, I was able to enlist many of the contributors to the second edition to provide updated chapters for the third edition. There are also a few new ones, reflecting recent changes in the subject matter. I asked all contributors to ensure that their chapters reflect updated understanding of how religion impacts on both politics and international relations.

Handbooks are inevitably contextualised by what is going on in the ‘real world’. Thus, the first edition appeared a few years after an epochal event: the attack on the USA by al-Qaeda on 11 September 2001 (9/11). For the next decade, the universe of religion, politics and international relations was dominated by the consequences of 9/11. Now, two decades later, topics emanating from 9/11, such as, ‘religious terrorism’ and ‘religious violent extremism’, are still important and topical, but they are not the whole story. The 30 chapters comprising the third edition focus on many relevant issues, including democratisation, populism, soft power, development, religious difference, gender, civil society, the state, foreign policy, international relations theory and many more. What stands out, however, is continuity as much as change when comparing the universe of religion, politics and international relations now to 15 years ago when the handbook’s first edition appeared.

In 2023, as in 2009, religion’s social and political significance and influence are universal. While religion’s impact varies from country to country and international context, religion is now much more consistently socio-politically significant today compared to 50 or 60 years ago. How and why is religion now so politically ‘significant’? It is largely because religion encourages, or helps resolve, typically interlinked political, social, economic and developmental disagreements and conflicts. Religion has important functions, serving to engender and/or significantly influence individual and group values that, in turn, impact upon common existential issues. Such issues may lead to irresolvable conflict within countries; sometimes they spill over to become serious regional or international concerns. In both cases, they impact on state and people’s security. To comprehend political issues involving religion both within countries and internationally, the handbook’s analyses are within the context of two overlapping, but conceptually distinct, issues: security and governance.

Focusing on today and in some cases seeking to extrapolate to the next few decades, the handbook’s chapters identify and examine emerging trends of strategic importance to our
understanding of religion, politics and international relations. Centrally informed by the centrality of religion’s influence – affecting individual identity, society and governance – we start from the observation that for billions of people around the world, their religion is the most important signifier of their identity. But religion does not act in isolation, and in recent years, two key developments led to increased religious responses in many parts of the world. On the one hand, the expansion – and in some cases, reversal – of representative government to all global regions, with the important exception of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), provided new political and social space for religion to be assertive. On the other hand, because religion is so fundamental to many people’s identity, opening political and social space often encouraged new or pre-existing tensions to surface or resurface, leading in some cases to inter-group conflicts.

In 2023, two world religions – Christianity and Islam – are growing fast. Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, is currently growing annually by around 1.47%, implying 30% expansion in followers by 2035. Christianity’s current growth is particularly swift in South and East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Progress of Islam between 2010 and 2020 was estimated at 1.7% a year, mainly linked to ‘high’ birth rates among Muslims in Asia, the MENA and Europe (Martel, 2013). A 2010 report by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life estimated that, on present trends, the global Muslim population will grow by about 35% by 2030, increasing from 1.6 to 2.2 billion. Given that some countries – such as Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania and Russia – are already experiencing growing tensions between followers of Christianity and Islam, then it may be that swift expansion of these world religions over the next two decades will exacerbate such tensions, with significant implications for global security and governance (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Overall, the chapters of the book underline the following:

• Politically assertive religion impacts upon governance and security outcomes within many countries, as well as internationally.
• Globalisation and associated technology, including satellite television channels and social media, play an important role in spreading sectarian and interfaith mistrust.
• Factionalism within religious traditions exacerbates societal tensions, both within countries and internationally.
• High levels of economic and developmental inequality – linked to religion, ethnicity and/or class – endure as sources of regional and international tension, including in Sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA, Central Asia, South and East Asia, Western Europe and North and South America.
• Sectarian and other inter-religious tensions reflect long-standing socio-economic disparities which escalate when governments fail adequately to deal with them.
• Sectarian conflicts deepen pre-existing religious divides which in some cases escalate into serious national, regional or international conflicts, deleteriously affecting governance and political and social stability.

Religion, politics and security

The twenty-first century has seen numerous examples of politicised forms of religion, both within countries and internationally. This development affects all the ‘world religions’ (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism). With hindsight, we can see that the ‘resurgence’ of politicised forms of religion started several decades ago, with the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979. This epochal event had national, regional and international impacts, comprising
a form of revolution regarding our understanding of the political roles of religion. Within Iran it led to a *sui generis* form of government, which endures to this day, ending an experiment in Westernisation, which, like in Turkey decades earlier, was posited on the apparent strength and desirability of a strongly secular, pro-Western, development model. Regionally, the revolution exacerbated Sunni/Shia tensions and conflicts. Internationally, the revolution highlighted religion’s transnational political significance, whereby Iran’s post-revolution sought to export revolution to further its national interests, leading to extreme rivalry with the regional ‘Sunni’ power, Saudi Arabia, and affecting relations with, *inter alia*, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Consequent to Iran’s revolution, the US political scientist, Samuel Huntington (2002; also see Haynes, 2019), claimed to see a ‘clash of civilisations’, centrally involving Christianity and Islam, because of supposedly clashing values and norms. Many critiqued Huntington’s argument, yet it is impossible to deny that over the last two decades his ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis and associated rhetoric helped further perceptions of a globalised division between ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’, with significant impacts on security and governance issues both within countries and internationally (Haynes, 2019).

In addition, recent decades have been especially characterised by growing political assertiveness of several world religions, notably Christianity and Islam. Political assertiveness is manifested both within countries as well as internationally and transnationally. Central to this development is the phenomenon of globalisation and associated developments in communications technology. The latter permits religious entities’ messages to unite or divide real or imagined communities, even when physically separated by international borders and thousands of kilometres. In particular, it enables diaspora populations to feel a closeness otherwise denied them and appeals to a far wider audience than previously possible. Globalisation technology based on the internet is also likely to contribute to diaspora communities being increasingly affected by intra-faith discord in countries of origin, such as Pakistan and India. In addition, some governments may have to address new challenges from religious groups at home. For example, it is posited that over the next two decades, China will be home to some of the world’s largest Muslim and Christian populations. The impact on China’s internal politics and global attitude and focus are likely to be influenced significantly by the manner in which these two faith groups pursue their goals and seek enhanced religious freedoms. A wider point is that as religion is so fundamental to many people’s identity, where tensions between different groups already exist, they may be exacerbated by real or imagined religious differences.

Post–Cold War globalisation led to dramatic, continuing increases in interactions between people and communities, no longer dependent on geographical closeness easily to enable such connections. Globalisation encourages religions to adopt new, revised or reformed social, moral and/or political agendas. It stimulates many religious individuals, organisations and movements to look not only at local and national issues and contexts but also to focus on regional and international environments, which, in many countries of the Global South, often link into or exacerbate pre-existing negative perceptions of foreign – including, US and Western – cultural, political and economic hegemonies. Moreover, encounters between different religious traditions, both within faiths and between them, are increasingly common and not always harmonious. Sometimes the result can be extreme hostility, captured in the term ‘culture war’. Culture wars, for example, in countries as diverse as Israel and the United States, occur in relation to pronounced, potentially irreconcilable, differences between secular and religious groups regarding the appropriate positions of religious and secular norms, values and behaviour. Culture wars occur when differing religious worldviews encourage different allegiances and standards in relation to various areas, including the family, law, education and politics. As a result, conflicts involving, *inter alia*, gender, ethnicity, class and nations are often framed religiously. Such
conflicts may ‘take on “larger-than-life” proportions, depicted as the struggle of good against evil’ (Kurtz, 1995), impacting on security, sometimes dramatically, both within counties and internationally. This is also the case with some religious minorities who may regard their own existential position – for example, Muslim minority communities in Thailand, the UK, France, the Philippines, and India, and Christian minorities in many countries in MENA – to be unacceptably weakened because of actual or perceived pressure from majority religious communities (such as Buddhists in Thailand; Christians in the UK, France and the Philippines; and Hindus in India) which encourage religious minorities to conform to the hegemonic norms and values of the religious and cultural majority.

This issue has recently affected a region long thought to be immune to the public impact of religion and culture: Western Europe. There, governments long ago went down the path of secularisation, with linked ‘downgrading’ of religion from public realm to privatised belief. Today, however, many urban areas across Western Europe contain areas of pronounced social deprivation, often the home to many migrants. Recent extensive migration to Western Europe from the MENA and elsewhere in the global south, coupled with enhanced global mobility, led to increasingly multicultural societies, albeit often within a wider trend towards secularism. Yet, local communities with strong religious beliefs continue to exist and, due to natural expansion, are growing in size. Recent political developments, such as the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), highlight that many, perhaps most, Western Europeans at best tolerate – not actively embrace and welcome – migrants from the global south. Suspicion and hostility are particularly apparent in times of economic stress – for example, since 2008 and the latest international economic collapse – when many Western Europeans appear to revert to older societal affiliations, including reference to cultural models of Christianity, said to exemplify and underpin two key components underpinning modern (Western) European culture: liberal and individualistic values. For some, especially on the political right, this sets apart Western European culture from what is regarded as less liberal, more conservative values and norms of Europe’s Muslim immigrants from the global south.

The issue is a perceived security threat within Western Europe and internationally (Haynes, 2021a). Future projections are that the population growth of non-Muslims in Europe will be slow, while the Muslim population of Europe is expected to continue to grow, exceeding 58 million by 2030 (that is, approximately 8% of the total population), but with numbers of people claiming to adhere to Christian traditions (primarily Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox) not expanding (Pew Research Center, 2011). Reflecting the impact of globalisation and internet-based communications technologies, diaspora Muslim communities in Western Europe are likely to be increasingly affected by intra-faith and intra-Islamic discord emanating from the MENA. Tensions between Sunni and Shias are likely to spread. For example, in 2012, hard-line locally based Sunnis firebombed Belgium’s largest Shiite mosque.

Several countries in the MENA are regional focal points of religious actors’ increased political involvement. On the one hand, religious minorities across the region, including in the region’s largest country by population, Egypt, are squeezed and their security compromised. While ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ or ‘Islamism’ attracts much attention, there is also serious sectarian division and conflict across much of MENA, including in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, as well as in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The situation was exacerbated by the 2011 Arab Spring and its aftermath, leading to widespread regional state weakness or failure which, combined with the impact of politically assertive religious actors, led to increasing pressure on religious minorities to convert to the dominant religious tradition or, failing that, to flee for their lives.

Extremist actors such as ‘Islamic State’ and al-Qaeda thrive on, and seek to perpetuate and deepen, sectarian divisions. The resumption of power in Afghanistan of the Taliban in 2021, the
removal of American influence from the country, and the assassination of the al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a drone strike in Kabul in mid-2022, highlight that the forces that gave rise to conflict with the West as highlighted by 9/11, are still around, and capable of producing significant impacts on both domestic and international political outcomes.

Given the widespread diminution of state capacity in the MENA following the Arab Spring and the linked expansion of aggressive Sunni entities, such as Islamic State, then it is likely that the short and medium term will see significant sectarian conflicts in regional countries, leading to significant friction and, in some cases, conflicts between warring sectarian groups. There is also a notable regional and international dimension to these issues. There are significant tensions between Shia-majority Iran and the (Sunni-dominated) Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, not all regional Shia movements are pro-Iranian, and not every Salafist or Wahhabist Sunni movement kowtows to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there are significant Shiite minorities in GCC countries, as well as a growing (Sunni) Salafi movement in Iran. Sectarian tensions reflect socio-economic disparities and seem destined to escalate if governments continue to address existential economic and development. For example, in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where there is pronounced economic inequality between Sunni and Shia, tensions are likely to rise with unclear consequences. In addition, globalisation, characterised by influential satellite television channels and social media, plays a pivotal role in spreading anti-government rhetoric and sectarian mistrust. Finally, the next few decades are also likely to see growing tensions within Sunni and Shiite communities. Sunni Islam is becoming increasingly factionalised. As Salafist groups grow in prominence, a backlash may emerge from moderate Sunnis. Correspondingly, Shi’ite Islam contains a number of internal divisions.

The countries in the MENA that have suffered most from decades of systematic political, sectarian and racial repression and mass killings – such as Iraq and Syria – made possible the foundation, emergence and development of Islamic State. What makes these countries’ situation even more dire is the failure of the ‘international community’ consistently to condemn this oppression, in effect turning a blind eye to the roots of Islamic State–style radicalisation, and failing, due to political considerations at home, to help meaningfully to deal with the real and present existential threat that Islamic State still poses, despite its recent reversals. Yet, it is no longer about a choice between countering terrorism and respecting human rights. It is impossible to win the fight against terror in the region without addressing the oppression and lack of opportunity that encourage it. Defending human rights and confronting religious extremism, working to end the discrimination against Syrian and Iraqi Sunni populations, as well as against the Bedouins of Sinai, would be the necessary first steps in a long journey to deal with human rights violations in MENA and, as a result, begin to undermine the attraction of Islamic State and similar ideological entities for tens of thousands of alienated young people.

Whereas in Western Europe Muslim minority populations question their social and cultural position and in MENA state breakdown encourages sectarian strife and the persecution of religious minorities, in ‘secular’ Central Asia, Islamist movements represent a challenge to the status quo. This is not because they are especially powerful: today they stand almost no chance of overpowering state institutions or gathering substantial support in urban areas. Yet, regional governments have sought to combat what they see as extremism in a heavy-handed manner, which has exacerbated the problem that Islamist movements see themselves fighting against: poor, corrupt and repressive ruling regimes. Many Central Asian governments are Western friendly and, while Islamism is likely to remain a long-term (if low-level) threat to stability, it does highlight to many ordinary Central Asians that the West is a friend to their often highly disliked governments. Continued socio-economic adversity and growing animosity towards an overbearing, monopolistic state is likely to increase the number of instances of instability across
Central Asia. Social discontent may result in support for underground religious movements rather than opposition parties, while strengthening anti-Western feeling in many Central Asian countries.

**Religion, politics, governance and global order**

In 2023, many people see the world in the midst of serious disorder, consequent to the Covid pandemic, Russia’s war in Ukraine, and associated economic travails, including high price inflation and natural resource shortages. Then there is the grotesque spectacle of climate change and its associated environmental catastrophes being treated as a ‘hoax’ by right-wingers around the world. Recent analyses of religion and politics highlight the relevance of such issues, as well as the economic range and social and cultural significance of transnational corporations (TNCs) (Haynes, 2021b). There is a widespread perception that TNCs today have more power than many governments and are largely beyond democratic control. Whether TNCs improve or exacerbate mass impoverishment of already poor people in countries around the world is a contested issue. Numerous religious organisations, including, for example, the 350-member World Council of Churches, now focus on global and domestic economic imbalances and suggest ways to ameliorate them using the power of religious organisation and community. Religious concern is manifested in various ways, including new religious fundamentalisms; support for anti-globalisation activities, such as recent anti-globalisation and anti–World Trade Organisation protests; and North/South economic justice efforts, including the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030). In short, recent religious responses to what are perceived as an unacceptable – yet potentially amendable – result of economic globalisation highlight – yet again – the potential power of religion to be a globally significant public actor with (potential or actual) ability to impact significantly on global issues.

This observation draws on a recognition that around the world many religious organisations and (secular) development agencies share similar concerns: (1) how to improve the lot of materially poor people; (2) the societal position of those suffering from social exclusion; and (3) widely unfulfilled human potential in the context of glaring developmental polarisation within and between countries, a position which international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, accept is untenable. Developmental concerns focus upon, but are not confined to, issues linked to poverty, HIV/AIDS, conflict, gender concerns, international trade and global politics. These issues explicitly link all the world’s countries and peoples – rich and poor – into a global community. How to resolve them poses a challenge to governance and global order. In this context, religious authorities and actors increasingly raise their voices, although it is unclear whether decision-makers, both within countries and internationally, take them seriously enough to take their views into account.

Challenges to the status quo manifest themselves in the actions of some extremist religious organisations whose impact upon Western interests is explicitly hostile and very difficult to counter. They are likely to get worse over the coming decades – unless coordinated, concerted efforts are made to blunt their impact by ameliorating the conditions that give rise to them. For example, al-Qaeda has a stronghold in Yemen, while Islamic State is still influential in various countries, including Syria and Iraq, and controls the ‘State of Sinai’, an area of Egypt outside the jurisdiction of central government. For a while, Islamic State controlled the city of Derna in Libya but was ousted. In 2023, Islamic State carries out a ‘roving insurgency’ without a territorial base but with a transcontinental alliance with Boko Haram in Nigeria.
Introduction

In Nigeria, Boko Haram is a long-running regional threat to security. Premised upon the claim that ‘Western education is forbidden’, in order to deny girls the right to an education, Boko Haram is an apparently indiscriminate killer organisation, making no distinction between followers of different religions. Yet, Boko Haram cannot be understood in isolation. To a significant extent, the organisation is an outcome of decades of the absence of good governance leading to severe social injustices, rampant Islamist and Christian extremism, and sweeping human rights violations.

The example of Boko Haram highlights how religion, along with culture, ethnicity and identity, are important components in understanding governance and global order issues, while contextualising post 9/11 Western counterinsurgency efforts. Following 9/11, first al-Qaeda and its affiliates and then Islamic State and its allies sequentially posed serious threats to governance in many countries and by extension global order and Western security. While it is well known that al-Qaeda perpetrated multiple attacks against US and Western targets in the 1990s and early 2000s, these outrages raised questions about the ideological assumptions and goals of al-Qaeda. While Bin Laden was personally committed to the fight against the ‘far enemy’ – that is, the USA – Islamic State seeks to target the ‘near enemy’ – that is, governments and populations in the MENA which Islamic State deems ‘un-Islamic’. However, given that many of the dead in the attacks are not Western Christians or Jews but local Muslims, it raises the question of what exactly the perpetrators are seeking to achieve. What today are the ideological assumptions and goals of what is left of al-Qaeda, Islamic State and their regional affiliates, such as Boko Haram? Al-Qaeda first emerged in the late 1980s to challenge the incumbency and authority of rulers in various Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, with the objective of replacing them with plausibly ‘Islamic’ leaders. Over time, however, a lack of success in achieving these objectives led al-Qaeda strategists to shift attention to regional and global goals, including taking the fight, on 9/11, to the ‘far enemy’ (Gerges, 2005). The result is a continuing ‘anti-Western’ conflict, seeking to utilise various ‘weapons of terror’, a campaign more recently adopted by the down-but-not-out Islamic State. Both al-Qaeda and Islamic State share concerns about spreading the ‘right’ religion by jihad, and the global balance of power currently dominated by the USA and the West. Over time, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as more recent – and in some cases continuing – conflicts in Mali, Nigeria and Syria, indicate that religion, culture and identity are continuing concerns in many conflicts. In each case, there are explicit links to long-term and systemic governance shortfalls, which have to be ameliorated before the threat from extremist Islam can be nullified and the threat to the West’s security significantly reduced.

Conclusion

The first and second editions of this handbook were contextualised by 9/11 and other examples of ‘religious terrorism’. They significantly affected Western interests while also fundamentally changing perceptions of the role of religion in politics and international relations. The third edition seeks to bring things up to date, to an extent moving on from 9/11 and associated events to pay attention to new developments, including links between religion and soft power and religion and right-wing populism. As with the first two editions, the chapters comprising the third edition are collectively informed by the continuing impact of religion on politics and politics on religion. It seems likely that nothing will fundamentally change in this regard in the coming decades. This is because around the world high and growing levels of inequality, often contextualised by societal differences, including those related to religion, ethnicity and/or class, are almost certain not only to endure but also in many cases to get (even) worse. There will
continue to be often serious sources of tension in many countries and regions, and these will impact on the overall governance and stability of many countries, while also affecting global governance.

It is clear that areas of considerable sectarian tension exist across the world, especially in many of the 20 or more countries that comprise the MENA. If there was a prolonged period of escalation, perhaps underpinned by further deteriorations in political and developmental well-being, then campaigns of terrorist attacks could be carried out on a previously unseen scale, further plunging the MENA region into chaos with knock-on effects experienced in Western Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. It is possible that attacks on such a level could cause a major power, hitherto relatively stable, such as Egypt, to descend into civil war. In addition, pre-existing religious and sectarian divisions, including intra-Islamic and Islamic-Christian and/or Islamic-Jewish conflicts, could come together and rapidly escalate into a transnational conflict between several faith-based components of global (civil) society. In such circumstances, it is conceivable that some countries would be drawn into a wider war, as pressure from their populations, existing treaty obligations and allegiances might force them to take sides in the conflict. If the United Nations was, as it was in 2023 over Russia’s war in Ukraine, deadlocked, weak and hamstrung, and regional security organisations were unable to take up the challenge, then widespread killings linked to religious differences could occur across much of the globe.

While the scenario sketched out in the previous paragraph represents an extreme outcome, it is clear that both terrorism and sectarian and inter-religious tensions and conflicts have been at the centre of global security concerns since at least 9/11 and, arguably, as far back as the late 1970s and the unexpected success of the Iranian revolution. As we have seen in recent years in relation to the Arab Spring events and political developments in many countries in MENA more generally, governance problems are at the heart of religion’s involvement in regional and transnational conflicts which collectively impact significantly on global security and development. A starting point for our analysis in the third edition of this handbook in this regard is to note the continued impact of globalisation which not only serves both to highlight and boost religious pluralism but also encouraged intra-faith and inter-religious hostility and conflict. Several of the world religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam (the so-called religions of the book, because in each case their authority emanates principally from particular sacred texts), claim ‘exclusive accounts of the nature of reality’, that is only their religious beliefs are judged to be true by adherents. This is not to expect that the latter outcome is somehow inevitable. On the contrary, religious responses may well aim to be both constructive and ameliorative.

There are many examples of religious involvement in recent and current national and international conflicts; many directly affect global security. In this context it becomes imperative to stress that a stable and prosperous MENA is, or should be, a pivotal goal of the ‘international community’, as it is essential in order to achieve widespread political stability, diminution of poverty and undermining of religious extremism. On the other hand, the Middle East region is particularly emblematic in relation to religion – in part because the region was the birthplace of the world’s three great monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism). This brings with it a legacy not only of shared wisdom but also of conflict – a complex relationship that has impacted in recent years on countries as far away as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, the US and Britain. A key to peace in the region may well be achievement of significant collaborative efforts among different religious bodies, which along with external religious and secular organisations, for example from Europe and the US, may through collaborative efforts work towards developing a new model of peace and cooperation to enable the countries of the MENA to escape from what many see as an endless cycle of religious-based conflict. Overall, this emphasises that religion may be intimately connected, not only in the Middle East, both to
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international conflicts and their prolongation and to attempts at reconciliation of such conflicts. In other words, in relation to many international conflicts, religion can play a significant, even a fundamental, role, contributing to conflicts in various ways, including how they are intensified, channelled or reconciled. In addition, religion has a key part to play in resolution of conflicts in other parts of the world, including South Asia (notably India/Pakistan) and sub-Saharan Africa (for example, in relation to the recently ended civil war in Sudan). We can also note continuing involvement of religious actors in rising religious and ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka, principally involving minority (Hindu) Tamils and majority (Buddhist) Sinhalese.

Over the last two decades, continuing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq served to encourage support for al-Qaeda and other extremist entities, including Islamic State, among disgruntled Sunni Muslims in two key ways: (1) generally to focus discontent against the ‘West’, and the US in particular; and (2) to polarise often sensitive relations between Sunnis and Shias. Both goals are in line with the ideological and strategic objectives of al-Qaeda and Islamic State. It is unfortunate that Western counterinsurgency activities in both Afghanistan and Iraq are seen by many Muslims as a key component of an ‘anti-Islam’ strategy, which some Muslims perceive as part of a wider Western strategy informing a global ‘war’ against ‘Islam’. This makes it very difficult – perhaps, ultimately, impossible – to win the conflict as there is a ready, apparently inexhaustible, supply of both domestic and foreign recruits to the anti-US/Western insurgency. In this context, classical counterinsurgency theory seems of limited relevance in the context of a global struggle against religiously informed terrorism, as it is focused on a domestic conflict, while al-Qaeda and Islamic State’s goal is to fight and win a transnational – ultimately global – battle of, if necessary, long duration. The question remains: to what extent are individual conflict zones – such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Somalia – facets of a wider, transnational and international war that pits a generic ‘Islamic extremism/terrorism’ against the ‘West’ (especially the USA)? If the conflict is indeed a regional or global one, then the likelihood of success of classical counterinsurgency theory, which focuses on winning wars in individual countries, is likely to be partial at best. This is because, as extremist Islamist combatants have shown themselves ready, willing and able to transfer their anti-Western activities to other emerging theatres of war – such as Mali, Libya, Egypt’s Sinai desert and Nigeria – then classical US counter-agency activities will always be playing catchup in a fast-changing situation, and chances of success are by no means ensured.

Note

1 A few days before writing these words, there was an unsuccessful attempt in New York State to murder the controversial author, Salman Rushdie. The government of Iran, responsible for the original fatwa in 1989 against Rushdie for his 1988 book, The Satanic Verses, claimed in August 2022 that ‘Salman Rushdie and his supporters are to blame for what happened to him . . . Freedom of speech does not justify Salman Rushdie’s insults upon religion and offence of its sanctities’ www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/salman-rushdie-stabbed-attack-stage-new-york-updates-b2145131.html

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