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# Exploring Religious Conflict

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NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

The proceedings described in this report were hosted by the RAND National Security Research Division, which conducts research and analysis for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Commands, the defense agencies, the Department of the Navy, the U.S. intelligence community, allied foreign governments, and foundations.

ISBN: 0-8330-3804-4

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Published 2005 by the RAND Corporation  
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## **SUMMARY**

After September 11th, it almost goes without saying that religious violence in the name of a holy cause has escalated. Killing in the name of God constitutes a major driver of violent conflicts today. No major religion has been, or is today, a stranger to violence from its extremists, and that violence will pose challenges for U.S. foreign policy and for the analysts who seek to inform that policy. So, too, comparisons across forms of religious violence are instructive. New Religious Movements (NRMs) – which are almost always offshoots, however bizarre, of major religious traditions – have also emerged as sources of violence. Yet Islamic extremists are now in a class by themselves as a threat to the United States, as a transnational, non-state movement with the chance to appeal to a billion and a half people. Understanding these phenomena, Islamic extremism in particular, and their implications for policymaking and the intelligence community are major aims of this report. It is divided into three sections – “cosmic war,” states and religiously motivated violence, and New Religious Movements.

### **COSMIC WAR AND ITS SOURCES**

Mark Juergensmeyer’s concept of “cosmic war” provides a useful conceptual framework for examining the larger-than-life confrontations that religious extremists are engaged in today. This concept refers to the metaphysical battle between the forces of Good and Evil that enlivens the religious imagination and compels violent action.

Cosmic war has roots in the theology of most religions. In the three monotheistic religions, it is the Day of Judgment, the cosmic battle between Good and Evil, and the realization of God’s ultimate purpose for His creation. In Hinduism and Buddhism, it is the perennial struggle to exit the Wheel of Existences with its continuous cycle of rebirths in order to return to Brahman or achieve Nirvana. Cosmic war ensues when this inner conflict between Good and Evil becomes manifest – physical, not metaphysical.

Cosmic war has several defining characteristics: It is more symbolic than pragmatic in intent and is performed in remarkably dramatic ways; its displays of violence find their moral justification in a religious imperative; it operates on a divine time line with victory being imminent but not in this lifetime; and it is empowering to those who take up the cause, providing divinely justified actions to real-world problems.

Finally, acts of terror in a cosmic war are seen as evocations of a larger spiritual confrontation between Good and Evil. The power of this concept surpasses all ordinary claims of political and earthly authority. In the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world where the battle for the soul of Islam continues, Islamists and Al-Qaeda's networks have placed their struggle against secularism, perceived Western domination, and the United States, in a cosmic context. This context animates and elevates their struggle giving it the imprimatur of the divine; hence the outcome of their fight is preordained: Islam in its pristine purity will prevail.

#### **STATES AND RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE**

States have tended to approach religious opposition tactically rather than strategically. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have focused on short-term political gains using the most expedient tools available to counter religious opposition – from concessions on social issues to crackdowns on political opposition. The history of changing and shortsighted state policies toward religious opposition suggests these approaches are not sustainable in the long term. Nor have states shown much success in managing the spiritual/ideological dimension of conflict once it has begun – even if they started to stir religious passions in the first place.

Political "wars of position," a concept coined by the Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci, is useful in understanding the types of states that use religion for political gain and in what ways they accomplish it. "Cosmic war," may be initiated by an extremist vanguard, but that may only be the first phase of the struggle. The next phase of conflict might be termed a "war of positioning," in which various actors

with competing agendas jockey for greater influence in and control over the state.

It is also important to offer a careful definition of radical political "fundamentalism" as distinct from radical apolitical fundamentalism, on the one hand, and from areligious political radicalism, on the other. For starters, radical fundamentalists might be defined as those who fit three criteria:

- They call for a radical, rapid, and comprehensive transformation of society.
- They believe that there is some direct link between adherents and the ultimate source of authority in the cosmos.
- They engage in politics to achieve their purposes.

Table 1 locates fundamentalism by comparison to categories based on different answers to the three criteria.

**Table 1**  
**Fundamentalists Compared to Others**

	Radical	Direct	Politics
Fundamentalists	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pietists, quietists	Yes	Yes	No
Utopian pragmatists, socialists	Yes	No	Yes
Fascist parties in fascist states	No	Yes	Yes
Yippies	Yes	No	No
Parties in pluralist democracies	No	No	Yes
Transcendental meditators	No	Yes	No
"Kiwani Club"	No	No	No

In particular, the Iran case under Ayatollah Khomeini offers insights into the "fundamentalist" phenomenon because it demonstrates how a "quietist" posture was transformed into politico-fundamentalist fervor. And it presents a dramatic example of this fusion between religion and politics in the 20th century. Political rule by clerics was a Khomeini-inspired innovation in Shiism. His message combined religion, politics, and nationalism, and his call for political action was not only appealing to the masses but it galvanized them into taking action against the Shah.

The Khomeini experiment in Iran was a watershed event. It emboldened Muslims across the world, making them more politically active and inspiring their fundamentalist fervor, and ultimately leading to radicalization of new groups such as the Mahdi Army under Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq.

#### **NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS (NRMs)**

Sometimes referred to as cults, NRMs have two defining characteristics – a high degree of tension between the group and its surrounding society and a high degree of control exercised by leaders over their members. There is a discernible proliferation of NRMs across the global landscape. While they have gotten most attention in the richer countries, they are found everywhere, including countries of the Third World and the Middle East. Nor are NRMs unique to one religious tradition. NRMs can be found in Hinduism (the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS), Israel (Gush Emunim), Christianity (the U.S.-based Identity Movement) and Islam, including Al Qaeda, a global network with a transcendent vision that draws support in the defense of Islam. While most are not violent, a few have engaged in ritualized acts of mass suicide and homicide. Notable examples include Heaven's Gate, the Branch Davidians, and Aum Shinrikyo.

Among possible conditions under which NRMs resort to violence, two stand out – if the group or movement feels threatened from the outside, by society or the government; and if it has young, inexperienced leaders that resort to violence when threatened either from inside or outside the movement. Therefore, a government's policies with regard to an NRM, if perceived as threatening, could prompt the group to resort to violence.

The Sadr movement in Iraq fits the definition of a NRM in many respects; it is a minority within the Shia population and is marked by a high degree of control and allegiance from those surrounding Muqtada. He and his movement became symbols of resistance to the U.S.-led coalition forces and to more politically quietist Shia leaders in Iraq, such as the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, who neither overtly challenged the



occupation nor called for the creation of a Shia-dominated Islamic state.

#### **POLICY AND INTELLIGENCE IMPLICATIONS**

For the intelligence analyst and for policymaking, an understanding of cosmic war is particularly useful when formulating strategies aimed at its mitigation. In particular, the use of military force as a tool for combating cosmic war could be counterproductive; force could perpetuate the perception that a religious group is under attack and must fight for the preservation of the faith and its own existence. It validates the appeal of cosmic war.

Intelligence analysis should pay close attention to religious language, to its style and substance, its historical context and symbolic content, and its deeper meanings and cultural undertones. Religious language could provide clues to determine whether and when groups see their battles as cosmic. Intelligence analysis should also look for identifiable state actions that trigger the perception of a cosmic war in progress.

Examples of such action might include coalition forces' decision to arrest Muqtada al-Sadr and forcibly disarm his movement in Iraq, as well as U.S. government policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that risks looking completely one-sided to the Muslim world. More generally, in dealing with a perceived clash between Islam and current U.S. foreign policy, an attempt ought to be made to blur the edges of that clash, not sharpen them. Instead of emphasizing the historic sense of conflict between Islam and Christianity or the West, policy ought to emphasize possible points of convergence.