Why it's wrong to describe terrorism as 'religiously motivated' — and what to call it instead

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In the aftermath of violent attacks, public commentary quickly reaches for a familiar label like "religiously motivated terrorism". The term sounds intuitive but it is analytically flawed, socially harmful and counter-productive to both national security and social cohesion.

I would argue that a more accurate and useful concept is "identity-motivated terrorism": the use or threat of violence against civilians to advance an agenda grounded in the perceived defence, restoration or supremacy of a collective identity.

This shift in language is not semantic politeness. It reflects what decades of research in political violence, radicalisation and security studies have consistently shown — namely, that religion is not the causal driver of terrorism, even when religious language is loudly invoked. The underlying motivation is identity: racial, political and/or civilisational.

The problem with "religiously motivated"

To describe terrorism as "religiously motivated" implies the religion itself authorises or drives the violence. That implication matters. Language shapes how responsibility is assigned, how communities are treated and how policy responses are designed. Cases labelled as "religious

terrorism" violate core ethical norms, moral precepts and fundamental laws of religions such as Islam.

Islam is defined by its primary source, the Qur'ān, the criterion for determining what the religion teaches, permits and forbids. As Ibrahim Zein and I demonstrate in our recent book *Covenants with Allah: Keystone of Islam*, the Qur'ān allows fighting only under strictly limited conditions: in self-defence to repel aggression and oppression, and in response to treaty violation that threatens peace and security. Even then, the use of armed force is the exclusive prerogative of legitimate state authority — not individuals, groups or vigilantes — and is permitted under strict conditions, including the protection of civilians.

So-called "religiously motivated terrorism" tends to be carried out by individuals with low levels of religious literacy — shallow, selective or incoherent knowledge that relies on cherry-picked texts stripped of context and interpretive tradition.

Accordingly, it is significant that Muslim religious scholars and leaders rejected ISIS from the outset. An Open Letter categorically refuted the group's claims to legitimacy based on detailed references to Islamic scripture, authoritative legal norms and theological consensus. In the wake of the Bondi Beach shootings, the Australian National Imam Council issued a statement declaring ISIS "an evil and dangerous terrorist organisation with no connection to Islam".

Motivation needs normative authorisation

Calling terrorism "religiously motivated" commits a categorical error: it mistakes rhetorical justification for causal motivation and misses the underlying identity factors that drive extremist violence.

In any serious analysis, motivation implies that an action is driven by an authorising framework. If a belief system explicitly prohibits an act — as Islamic scripture, jurisprudence and law explicitly prohibit the killing of civilians, vigilantism and indiscriminate violence — it cannot logically be said to motivate that act. This distinction is well understood in other contexts, if not in relation to Islam.

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The Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in Norway in 2011, and the Australian terrorist Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 people in New Zealand in 2019, both used Christian symbols instrumentally and claimed their attacks were in defence of Christian-

[European civilisation from Islam and Muslims](). Yet, their acts of terrorism are not ascribed to Christianity or described as "religiously motivated". It is understood, largely based on in-group differentiation, that Christianity does not condone terrorism.

Islam is treated differently, as a civilisational rival. Muslims disproportionately bear the consequences of that inconsistency as an undifferentiated out-group, routinely represented in certain media and political discourses as criminals, antisemites and violent extremists. Such stereotypes, combined with low levels of religious literacy concerning Islam, reinforce a preference for designating terrorism as "religiously motivated" when Muslims are involved.

Identity, not religion, is the driver

Identity is a central factor in real and perceived grievances concerning dispossession and replacement, sense of belonging and exclusion, and a desire to reclaim or assert authority, control and power. Identity is also central to the erection of rigid "us versus them" boundary markers and emotional narratives of threat and restoration. Violence becomes a way of asserting and performing identity — proving loyalty, claiming superiority and resolving insecurity.

Religious concepts, narratives and symbols are often invoked in response to identity-driven grievances due to their emotionally potency and moral resonance. But their function is instrumental and performative, not authoritative nor authentic. That is why so-called "religiously motivated" perpetrators, like those inspired by ISIS, tend to be theologically inept, spiritually hollow and willing to kill even co-religionists. Indeed, [the majority of ISIS victims are Muslims]().

These are not the characteristics of the religiously literate and spiritually upright, but the hallmarks of identity politics taken to violent extremes.

"Identity-motivated" terrorism

Identity-motivated terrorism describes acts of violence in which the primary driver is a perceived threat to personal or collective identity, while ideological or sacred language is selectively invoked to legitimise actions that are otherwise divinely and/or legally prohibited. Terrorism motivated by identity perceives violence as legitimate for the defence, restoration or supremacy of an ethnic, religious, national, racial or civilisational identity. In most cases, identity-motivated terrorism, wittingly or unwittingly, betrays the authentic character, values, or laws of the nation, religion or civilisation with which it identifies.

Precision in language is not an academic luxury but a civic responsibility. The term "identity-motivated" terrorism offers several advantages:

- **analytical accuracy** — by precisely locating causality in grievance, belonging and identity construction, rather than in the misuse of religious texts;
- **policy relevance** — as security agencies already focus on identity formation, radicalisation pathways and social alienation, the term aligns public language with existing practice;

- **social cohesion** — by avoiding collective blame and the stigmatising of entire communities and religions, which contributes to Islamophobia and other forms of racism and bigotry.

Mislabelling terrorism has consequences. It fuels Islamophobia, distorts public understanding of religion and inadvertently amplifies extremist propaganda, granting terrorists the legitimacy they seek. Terrorist groups like ISIS want their violence to be seen as religiously grounded and to be acknowledged as the authentic representative of Islam. The use of the term "Islamic State" with reference to ISIS thus serves their agenda and reinforced Islamophobic misconceptions. Uncritically repeating the claims of groups such as ISIS is not neutrality or objectivity — it is a form of complicity in their narrative and identity framing.

Replacing the designation of terrorism from "religiously motivated" to "identity-motivated" will not resolve the problem of political violence. However, it will allow us to examine, understand and respond with the precision and responsibility needed for national security that is effective and cohesive.

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