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South Africa's Muslims and Extremism: An Alternative Interpretation: A Review Essay
Hussein Solomon. 2013. *Jihad: A South African Perspective*. Bloemfontein: SUN. 139pp. ISBN 978-1-920382-30-8

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Abstract

South Africa's Muslim community is by and large a fairly aged community; a community that is more than three hundred years old and one that has been inspired by their forebears who physically struggled against the Dutch and British colonial powers respectively. Despite the hardship of the nascent Muslim community, they survived the ordeals and transformed themselves into a vibrant community with multiple identities; as a result of a mixture of identities, they showed that they could adapt to the South African conditions throughout its colonial era and continued to demonstrate their resilience throughout the apartheid era. However, during the contemporary period the community encountered a new democratic environment in which they continued to display their vibrancy through various strands.

Whilst the majority of this community's members, who may be described as traditionally moderate, have remained law-abiding and subservient to the new dispensation, pockets of minorities reared their heads to either join the extremely conservative groups or chose to subscribe to extremist perspectives of Muslim thinking. Since these strands reflect the multiple identities and outlooks of South Africa's Muslim community, the essay engages with Hussein Solomon's text that brought to the fore the extremist elements that function within this small religious community, and it raises a few pertinent questions and the reviewer pose these questions as a consequence of Solomon's thrust and that is that the phenomenon of 'Islamism' has been on the rise continentally and its presence is palpable with the South African Muslim community.

Keyword: South Africa, Religious Extremism, Islamism, Terrorism, *Jihad*

Introduction: *Jihad* Heading South?

Though this book by Hussein Solomon, Senior Professor of Political Science at South Africa's University of Free State, is somewhat 'dated' when considering a review, one cannot ignore the fact that its contents like those others that preceded it (such as Richard Bonney's *Jihad: From Qur'an to bin Laden* [Palgrave Macmillan, 2004], David Cook's *Understanding Jihad* [University of California Press, 2005] and those that came after it (such as Patrick Cockburn's *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East* [Verso,

2016] and Mohammad Khalil's *Jihad, Radicalism and the New Atheism* [CUP, 2017]) remain a subject of intense interest.

Whilst they are especially important for those who work, inter alia, as government policy makers, agents for intelligence industry networks, decision makers in think tanks, and security analysts, ordinary individuals such as this reviewer are also keen to know what this text has to share with the readers, and he thus takes the opportunity to pose the question: why has *jihad* turned heads in the South as it did in the proverbial North? Before answering this question later in the essay, one should make the point at the outset that this essay is essentially a review essay of Solomon's text; a text that deals with what may be regarded as a very sensitive subject not only in the Southern African region where it has generally been a marginal phenomenon but also across the continent where it has engulfed regional communities in West Africa (Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroun) and East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia) respectively.

Book's Commendations: A Celebratory Text on Islamists and their *Jihad*?

When one takes a quick glance at the book's front cover with the word *JIHAD* – that literally means 'to strive' and that has a double meaning - emblazoned on it and when looking at the back cover where it was accompanied by numerous commendable comments by a member from the security sector, another from the defense academy, and a third from one of the Israeli think tanks, it immediately behooves one to ask an array of questions such as: why do these specialists highly commend Solomon's text? What is in it that makes it a 'superb' text? In which way is it 'a must read for any serious student of terrorism'? And to what extent does the publication add value to a scholar's understanding of the South African Muslim community as a whole? Well, when one considers the last question first then one should straightaway say that Solomon did not set himself the task to reflect on this community per se and this therefore means that any scholar who wishes to get to know this community intimately will have to seek for more information elsewhere (such as scanning the University of Cape Town's *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa* that has since been renamed *Annual Review of Islam in Africa*). What Solomon provided for the reader throughout this text was snippets of extremism/radicalism that have been generally associated with Muslim societies continentally and beyond.

Being an avowed Muslim (p.1) and concomitantly a trained political scientist with a lucid view of Islam's teachings (pp.11-13), he chose to use the term 'Islamism' (pp.14-15) as an operational one for his text. Though he based himself on other Muslim scholars such as Abdul Hadi Palazzi and Abou El Fadl who defined it as 'a totalitarian ideology' (the former) and a 'puritanical tradition' (the latter), he should have consulted Martin & Barzegar's useful *Islamism: Contested Perspectives on Political Islam* (Stanford, 2010) that pointed out that the term has been used as 'a stand-in for political Islam' (see Cesari 2017) and that many Muslim scholars (correctly) regarded it as, quoting Barzegar (2016:563), 'a banal attempt to discriminate Islam and Muslims from larger patterns of politicized religion in the modern world' (also see Mozaffari 2007:17). Nonetheless, if one goes along with Solomon's usage then the term – as noted from the various cases that he cited in his text - refers to Muslim individuals who adopted extremist or radical political positions to convey their religious message. Now this reviewer, who belongs to those scholars that Barzegar (and Mozaffari) referred to, coming from the field of Religious Studies find the mentioned as well as other terms such as 'Islamist terrorism' or 'Islamic terrorists' (p.2) highly contentious.

Here one does not wish to get entangled linguistically as regards the employment of the term 'Islamic' but a scholar should bear in mind that this descriptive word connotes a particular meaning (see Ahmed 2016); the term 'Islamic terrorist' is indeed an oxymoron and so is the phrase 'Muslim extremism' (see Gould 2014:23). Apart from the linguistic dimension, the argument is also based on the fact that when one witnesses how these terms are loosely employed by the media for sensational effect and when one notices with dismay how seasoned academics such as Solomon used them (see Gabon 2016), then one senses the net effect of these terms' usage on the readers and others who are less informed about the issues at stake. Nevertheless, one would wish to advise Solomon, like others who are reasonably informed about Islam and Muslims, to be more mindful and perhaps sensitive when deploying these loaded terms in his writings.

South Africa's Muslims: Adopting Ostrich-like Postures in an era of Global Jihad?

Continuing forward, one would like to state that one fully empathizes and identifies with Solomon's anger towards individuals and groups who have pursued extremist and terrorist methods to achieve their political Islam goals. He rightly argued that these methods cannot but be described as non-Islamic, and hence totally unacceptable from a human rights' perspective. The challenge that this reviewer, however, encounters when reading Solomon's readable text is that there is an underlined assumption that when moderate Muslims - against whom these extremist wage war p.79) - are silent then they are indirectly complicit (p.2) for having allowed the loud-mouth, vocal extremists to do their dastardly deeds without being severely reprimanded or censored for their acts. So when looking at South Africa and its minority Muslim community, Solomon (pp.61-62) stressed that they adopted an ostrich-like posture with their heads buried in the sand when it comes to openly disapproving acts of extreme violence and heinous crimes such as suicide bombing. On this matter, Solomon (p.63) referred to the Pretoria-based Muslim Review Network, an advocacy group, and Maulana Ebrahim Bham, who is a senior member of the South African Muslim theological umbrella body, for not having categorically condemned suicide bombings. One is certain that both MRN and Bham - if they were granted a chance - would be able to come to their own defense in terms of how Solomon interpreted their respective positions. Regarding suicide bombings, most, if not all, traditional Muslim scholars argued theologically against this act; one need only consult Tahir-ul-Qadri's (2010) tome.

Besides the issue of these extremists' diabolical deeds, Solomon gave the impression as a result inherent weaknesses of the South African state structures such as its porous borders, through which illegal migrants (including potential extremists) enter, that South Africa's Muslims have too been partly accountable for harboring and creating safe houses for these extremists. For anyone to put forward such an argument one would find it not only audacious but preposterous to say the least. One tries to understand Solomon's arguments by making the point that South Africa's Muslims - that is more than 300 years old - have generally demonstrated their hospitality towards their neighbors as well as strangers from wherever they came. In the light of this noble religious characteristic, they hosted and continue to host individuals who come on short or long visits; from their vantage perspective, they carried out their basic Muslim duty in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an. So when a stranger such as Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, who was on the Interpol's list and a fact unknown to the host, found an opportunity to stay in a South African Muslim home, one can argue that the person who hosted him had no idea of Khalfan's background and he/she only hosted him because he/she considered it his/her duty - as a Muslim - to do so; an issue that Solomon knows very well since he hails from this very

community. Solomon should therefore avoid generalizing and he should steer clear of censoring the community for ‘harboring’ a person about whom they had no prior knowledge. He, however, explored the ‘Playing Ostrich Inadequate Response to Terrorism’ (pp.45-66) further in chapter four. Herein Solomon critiqued both the government and the community for their attitude towards the phenomenon; one that he and others such as journalist, Kurt Shillinger, and security analyst, Anneli Botha, purportedly pointed to and reported on with the hope that they would be proven correct. Unfortunately for them, so far they have not succeeded to bring forward hard evidence to hand to South Africa’s intelligence agents in order to take drastic steps against this phenomenon; so can one even suggest that it is a phenomenon on the rise on South African soil? That question should be left to the author who also questioned evidence was not brought forth to nip these in the bud.

Global Jihad (in Africa) – Is not a myth?

Returning to the evocative term, *jihad* that Solomon had on his front cover, one browsed through the text to detect whether he offered a fair assessment of it before having used it as a reference point throughout his text. Well after having done that and without any index to assist, the reviewer could not find the word being neatly defined and explained. Since it was imprinted on the cover, one expected Solomon to have spent a page or two expounding on it so that one fully appreciates Solomon’s exposition of this concept; this was, however, not to be. Solomon like all of us is aware that it is a loaded term that naturally evokes negative rather than positive images about Islam and Muslims and these usually result in various expressions of Islamophobia that have been witnessed in Europe. So instead of having placed emphasis on it and having inserted it in the title, he should have first explained it from a traditional Muslim viewpoint and thereafter unpacked it as understood during the contemporary period; something akin to what Hashimi (2010) did in his short encyclopedic contribution. And moving to the sub-title, one would have preferred if he had altered the title to read ‘A South African political scientist perspective’ to alert the reader to the fact that this is a political scientist analysis.

Leaving that aside and going on to his ‘a point of clarity’ in his introduction, Solomon highlighted how the nature of terrorism changed over the decades during the latter part of the 20th century. He pointed out that European organizations such as the Bader Meinhof gang and others were ones that functioned purely as political groups but by the end of the 20th century the motivation shifted to extremist groups that were religiously inspired and in the end ‘terrorism’ as it is currently understood has become a religious phenomenon. In other words, politics was used for religious ends and along with these they used various methods including terrorist methods to achieve their goals. Solomon ended off the introduction by placing South Africa in a global context and among the list of points that he confidently laid stress on was that international extremists from the Muslim heartlands have forged ‘clear connections’ with local ones; a statement that seems to give the impression that the ties are so deep and expansive that South Africa has to jack up its internal structures to combat this global scourge. Even though a handful of South Africans have gone to Afghanistan to fight against the USSR as Solomon correctly stated, one cannot conclude from those examples that these men were - as he put it - ‘Islamists’ (based on his definition and explanation); and despite a few South Africans having joined ISIS, one should not use this to argue that it’s a wide-spread phenomenon within the South African Muslim or any other African Muslim community; this is far from the truth and this, one wishes to emphasize, is not an ostrich-like response but a reality.

When turning to the second chapter that rhetorically questioned whether the issue of about 'War on Terror or the War of Ideas' (pp.9-26), one observes that he introduced the notion that there is a global fight against terrorism, and in it he briefly explained how he understood Islam and he elucidated how 'Islamism' emerged during the contemporary period. Thereafter, Solomon first reflected on what he termed the 'democratization of jihad', and then he expounded on the 'implications for South Africa.' As regards the last mentioned section in this chapter, one would like to have tackled each of the issues (such as anti-Semitism, mosques, madrasas, and organizations) that needed elaborate responses but this was not possible because of one's restricted space; this being the case only one issue will be picked out for comment and the rationale for this is to show to what extent Solomon glibly over-rated and classified it as an extremist organization; here he commented on the Tabligh Jama'at (TJ) that was given unfavorable coverage by Alex Alexiev. One should say that as a religious movement within the house of Islam TJ continues to follow the traditional teachings and its members generally remain faithful to it without undermining its leadership and nor entering into society's political affairs.

Now what one wishes to stress here is that the TJ, unlike organizations such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jama'at al-Islami that have to some extent been maligned in this text based on Solomon's readings as a political scientist, distanced itself from politics; and it is, however, rare for its leadership to publicly utter a political statement. That said, Solomon, one notes, relied too much on ill-informed writers such as Alexiev and others; and this, one adds, is very perilous for any scholar when he/she knows that there is an abundance of literature on this movement. In this regard, one wishes to encourage him to read, among others, Khalid Masud's 2000 edited volume on the movement and more specifically Ebrahim Moosa's (1997) dated but insightful article 'The World's Apart' and McDonald's (2010) research article '...the case of the Tabligh Jama'at in Johannesburg.' Each of these works offers insights that have been overlooked by Solomon; if at any stage Solomon decides to re-assess it as an extremist organization without relying on spurious sources, then one strongly suggest that he returns to these as well as others that have been written on it. Though one does not want to find fault with all the remarks made by Solomon, one does agree with him - and this is something akin to what many anti-TJ critics stated and have pointed to - when he critically questioned about its agenda, ideas, and funding. These have remained issues of debate that should be explored and one assumes that those TJ members who developed or harbored extremist tendencies in Europe have probably, as Solomon avers, used TJ resources as a possible vehicle for their extremist agenda; something that was unbeknown to the TJ leadership that had no inkling of their members' intentions. Surveying TJ's South African - or for that matter its Southern African - branches one can assure Solomon whilst there might have been a small number that possessed those thoughts, they have never demonstrated any inclination towards any form of (socio-political) extremism over the past fifty years of their existence in the region. And for Solomon to use the Philippines example is stretching the imagination too far (p.24) since the Saudis, in fact, do not accept the TJ as a viable Muslim movement though it has tacitly acknowledged its presence on its soil.

Before bringing this chapter to a close he confidently and explicitly expressed that that there were ties that existed between al-Qaeda and South African subscribers to its ideology. Since Solomon made this claim fairly categorical he gave a few examples of these connections in the third chapter based on his sources; hence the title 'Global Jihad - Target South Africa?' (pp.27-44). In its opening pages, Solomon admitted 'the difficulty of assessing the terror threat to South Africa' and as a result of these problematic encounters he touched upon 'the regional dimension of South Africa's terrorism problem' before he narrated a case study that he titled 'I

am South African – please do not arrest me!’ Among other issues, Solomon commented on South Africa’s (Muslim) ‘paramilitary camps’ (made reference to Hezbollah camps [!] – pp.37-38), its ‘explosives link’ (furnished no evidence [!] – see p.38), its ‘operational base’/transit point (cited the Haroon Rashid Aswat case – pp.38-39), its ‘foreign terror networks’ (mentioned the Shahied Davids as an example along with Qibla that adopted extremist postures since the 1980s - p.40), and ‘the connection between foreign and local terror networks’ (used the Zubeir Ismail and other as case in point – pp.41-42). As already indicated, Solomon catalogued a few examples and briefly unpacked each to demonstrate that links existed and that the South African government as well as its Muslim community should realize the gravity of using its territory as a safe haven and permitting, among others, these paramilitary cells. At the time of writing this text, Solomon somehow indicated that though South Africa was not necessarily the target as he rhetorically posed the question in the chapter’s heading, the country, according to his reading as a political scientist and drawing from journalist reports, was regarded as ‘a vital support and logistics hub for global terror networks...’ (p.42). Now whilst one admires Solomon’s deep concern for these developments some of which he listed in the end of this chapter, here again he narrated a tale that appeared to be questionable and wide-spread. More than five years have elapsed since this text appeared and the question that one asks is: has there been any further terror cells uncovered or explosives found in the hands of extremists from within the Muslim community? One leaves the question to the author to answer since this reviewer could not find any tangible evidence that points one to a cell or a network.

(South) Africa’s *Jihad* against *Jihad*: Are there methods to contain it?

In Solomon’s opening lines of the final chapter titled ‘Responding to Terrorism: The Way Forward’ (pp.67-77), he assuredly stated that ‘... global jihad has found a comfortable base in South Africa’ (p.61). He, however, expressed utter trepidation with the fact that whilst the government recognized that there was a problem by 2009 it seemed to have neglected taking a pro-active position on this matter soon after the 2010 World Cup ended; a major event that South Africa successfully hosted but that was punted as a security threat by journalists and a host of others. In the light of this, he felt strongly that radical reform needs to take place in the police sector, criminal justice system, and the intelligence network. He recommended that the South African government: (a) finds the requisite political will, (b) counters Islamist ideologies & its attendant radicalism, (c) ensures a greater level of restraint (by security forces), (d) de-politicises and de-criminalises the state security apparatus, (e) moves from reactive to pro-active measures, (f) creates smarter partnerships, (g) considers the regional dimensions, and (h) connects the global with the regional dimensions. Among this list, Solomon uttered his concerns regarding the influence of Islamist ideologies and he highly recommended that these be stopped in their tracks (pp.68-70); one of the arenas where these ideas have been disseminated via the process of indoctrination was the school; he saw the Muslim school, as a whole, as a source of radicalization and a potential hiding place for extremists. On this issue one has a major problem with his assertion because it is purely based on conjecture; he does not argue his case with tangible evidence and as a consequence his recommendation is very problematic and contentious. One should quickly make the point that whilst there is some truth in his concern in that one or two such schools do adopt this approach, one cannot apply this to all these schools since they do not subscribe to extremist ideas. One’s argument is that whilst his list of recommendations are by and large acceptable, he should not over-emphasize some of them as

possible ways of arresting these developments; extremists like others would always find other ways of skirting around the obstacle to get to their target.

Solomon wrapped up his study, which he undertook during his sabbatical in Japan, by producing a 'Conclusion: (that commented on) Jihad – (from a) South African Perspective' (pp.79-81). He followed this up with a 'Chronology of Terror-Related Incidents in South Africa' (pp.82-85) that he assumed began during the 1980s with the formation of Qibla Mass Movement and that continued until May 2013 (before the book's publication). This was then followed by his End Notes (pp.86-106) that consisted mainly of newspaper reports as his sources that one would like to have scrutinized, and he wound up with an Appendix that contained 'South Africa's Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorist and Related Activities Act, 2004' (pp.107-131) with a Schedule of amended and repealed laws (pp.132-139).

Towards a Conclusion: A time for Re-Assessment of Theory and Practice?

Anyone who has been targeted by extremists or terrorists would agree that one cannot and should not tolerate them by adopting ostrich-like approaches towards their actions. That being the case, many of us would echo Solomon's sentiments on this matter by arguing that all attempts should be made to counter this phenomenon by as far as possible nipping it in the bud. However, one should also caution scholars and journalists not to 'make mountains out of mole hills' – as the saying goes – by creating unnecessarily fears in the minds of communities that do not fully grasp this phenomenon and its related issues.

Interestingly, some scholars such as Gabon (2016) and Cesari (2017) have pointed out that the notion of extremism and radicalization has been blown out of proportion; they argued that whilst these phenomena do exist and not overlooking external and internal factors that gave rise to them, they should intelligently be tackled and dealt with and that they should not tackled in a rash and rough manner the way some have suggested. One would therefore argue that those who participate in 'Terrorism Studies' should revisit, rethink, and reassess the theories and practices associated with this field and not simplistically say - as one of the commentators did - that it is 'a must read for any serious student of terrorism'; and one affirms that whilst it is an interesting read it cannot be claimed to be a superb text!

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