

To Talk or not to Talk to Terrorists: That is the Question of these Unhappy Times

This year's general assembly focused on the future of Africa and tackled a whole range of issues the continent grapples, with including terrorism and radicalisation of the youth.

As a solution to the problem of terrorism, prominent political scientist, Prof Mahmood Mamdani of Columbia and Makerere Universities, recommended that governments consider holding talks with terror groups such as Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda and Boko Haram.

He argued that refusal to engage these groups in negotiations only serves to further embitter and embolden them. Prof Mamdani said this during a panel discussion on the connection between fundamentalism, terrorism, and radicalisation of youth chaired by former Kenyan Cabinet minister, Prof Anyong Nyong'o.

Prof Ousmane Kane of Harvard underscored the increasing importance of religion to Africans, noting that research shows that twenty-first century Africans often spend more time and money on religious activity than those of the previous century.

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Prof Kane shared his recent research, which indicated that more than 98 per cent of Africans considered religion the most important thing in their lives, with Senegal taking the lead in levels of religiosity.

Prof Jibril Ibrahim of the Centre for Democracy and Development (Nigeria) stated that the rise of religion, and by extension fundamentalism, is down to the failure of the postcolonial state in Africa and the commodification of religious practice.

Religion is good business in Africa, shown by the fact that Nigeria has seven of the 10 richest religious leaders in the world. However, the scholars noted that despite the heightened level of religiosity, crime has also increased tremendously.

Religion and terrorism, to my mind have now become inextricably bound up together. Clearly certain interpretations or misinterpretations of religious scripts

have justified and fuelled radicalisation and terrorism.

By the same token, there is room for an efficacious religious de-radicalisation process as a counterterrorism strategy. The movement led by Muslim clerics and scholars in Kenya, Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) is a case in point, sending, as it does, the message via the media that killing non-believers is not a jihad but murder and they quote the Koran.

But admittedly, detoxing the minds of individuals and groups convinced that there is a heavenly reward for maiming and killing is an arduous and uncertain process. It will require listening to what the terrorist says and what he does not say because the door has been shut on him. It will require listening to the silences.

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Sources: <http://www.theeastafican.co.ke/OpEd/comment/To-talk-or-not-to-talk-to-terrorists/-/434750/2775208/-/item/1/-/havamj0z/-/index.html>



One of the Round Table sessions at the General Assembly