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FAITH AND FORCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between religion and international security in the post-2015 era, challenging both the securitisation of religion as an inherent threat and its romanticisation as a universal force for peace. Drawing on constructivism and securitisation theory, the research analyses religion as a socially constructed resource that shapes security outcomes through discursive framing, institutional mobilisation, and contested meanings rather than through deterministic theological imperatives. Through comparative case studies of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama, the study demonstrates that religion operates through identifiable mechanisms such as framing, boundary-making, and governance whose effects depend fundamentally on how sacred claims interface with institutional vacuums, local political economies, and state strategies. The analysis reveals that religious actors function as both drivers of insecurity and resources for resilience, with outcomes contingent on their capacity to construct persuasive narratives that resonate with specific audiences and contexts. The findings contribute theoretically to International Relations by bridging constructivist and securitisation approaches with empirical evidence from under-examined contexts, while offering practical insights for policymakers by demonstrating that sustainable security in the twenty-first century requires recognition of religion's constitutive role in shaping the meanings and practices of international politics.

Keywords: *Securitisation theory, constructivism, faith-based diplomacy, religious soft power, jihadism, peacebuilding, international relations.*

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Introduction

The fall of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 did not only mark a new dawn of international terrorism; it also challenged the secularist assumptions that had long dominated International Relations (IR) since the Treaty of Westphalia. In the decades that followed, the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the entrenchment of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, and the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in India have made the interrelation of religious commitment and security calculations increasingly visible. Yet paradoxically, this convergence of faith and force has been poorly theorised within the mainstream of IR and security studies. What Fox (2001) calls the "desecularisation of international relations" has brought religious actors, motives, and structures back to the forefront of conflict and collaboration, but theoretical frameworks in IR have often remained ill-equipped to analyse them systematically.

The growing entanglement of religion and security is evident across multiple dimensions of contemporary politics. Religious terrorism is perhaps the most visible, but far from the only, expression. The securitisation of religious minorities, interstate rivalries with confessional undertones, faith-based peacebuilding initiatives, and the instrumental use of religious symbols by state and non-state actors all underscore that religion is not peripheral to international politics but central to how legitimacy, identity, and power are constructed (Hassner, 2025). Nevertheless, IR has long exhibited what Philpott (2002) terms a "blind spot" in relation to religion, a gap rooted in disciplinary commitments to secular epistemologies that confined religion to the private sphere and presumed its eventual decline. While liberal and realist paradigms have developed robust accounts of economic interdependence, institutions, and military capabilities, the study of religious dynamics has remained fragmented, scattered across subfields, and often treated as an exceptional case rather than a constitutive feature of global security.

This study addresses that gap by situating religion at the centre of international security analysis. The problem it tackles

is the persistent disjuncture between the widespread recognition that religion matters and the absence of systematic, theory-driven explanations of how religious ideas and actors shape security outcomes. Policy debates frequently oscillate between two extremes: securitising religion as a source of existential threat, or romanticising it as a universal force for peace. Both approaches fail to account for the mechanisms through which religious narratives acquire authority, legitimacy, and influence in practice. By bringing constructivism and securitisation theory into dialogue, this study analyses religion as both a resource for mobilisation and a contested domain in which actors struggle to define what counts as security, threat, and peace.

The research is guided by three objectives: first, to examine how religious actors and narratives contribute to securitisation and desecuritisation in contemporary conflicts; second, to analyse the ways in which religious institutions and movements function as norm entrepreneurs in international and regional security contexts; and third, to assess, through comparative case studies, the extent to which religion operates as a source of insecurity versus a resource for resilience and peacebuilding.

The scope of the study is limited to the period 2015 to the present, a timeframe that captures both the transformation of global jihadist networks after the peak of ISIS and the increasing prominence of religious diplomacy in peacebuilding. To test its theoretical claims, the study examines four cases: Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama as a non-violent counterpoint. Together, these cases provide a balanced view of violent and non-violent religious actors across distinct geopolitical contexts, allowing for comparative insights into the modalities of religious engagement in security politics.

The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution. Theoretically, it advances IR by bridging constructivist and securitisation approaches with empirical evidence from under-examined contexts, challenging the binary framing of religion as either inherently violent or

inherently peaceful. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights for governments, international organisations, and civil society actors by demonstrating that religious institutions are not marginal stakeholders but central participants in the production of security. Sustainable security in the twenty-first century, this study argues, requires not only material strategies but also discursive and normative interventions that recognise the constitutive role of religion in shaping the meanings and practices of international politics.

Literature Review

The literature review examines the evolving scholarship on religion and security since 2015, tracing how empirical research has systematically repositioned religious dynamics from peripheral concerns to central analytical frameworks in security studies.

Re-centering religion in empirical security research (post-2015).

Since the mid-2010s, a large volume of peer-reviewed scholarship has dislodged the notion of religion as an epiphenomenal backdrop to the study and practice of security, and positioned a new form of on-the-ground religion as a constitutive aspect of that same practice and analysis. This turn has been explicitly charted by Haynes, who posits a shift in IR/Security Studies away from a terrorism-oriented understanding and towards a more holistic consideration of the role of religious actors, ideas and institutions in shaping the perception of a threat, the range of available foreign-policy options and the application of diplomacy (Haynes, 2021). Such reorientation has been reflected in the flourishing of comparative and theoretically-informed research that explore the religious trace of populism, nationalism and statecraft in regional contexts (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). Simultaneously, research on the phenomenon of religious soft power and the performativity of religion in influence campaigns on the global scale has made it clear that the question of religion in security politics is not reduced merely to mobilisation to violence but also involve symbolic authority, networking, and diaspora governance (Henne, 2022; Ozturk, 2023). In sum, all these works re-conceptualise religion as centrally

organised resources and constraints overlaying the institutions, norms, and practices instead of it being a remaining cultural variable (Haynes, 2021; Henne & Ozturk, 2022; Ozturk, 2023).

This change has a methodological implication. One of the major developments is the appearance and cultivation of specific datasets and typologies that make religion an empirical problem of study in the conflict literature. The RELAC (Religion and Armed Conflict) project based in Uppsala developed a coding scheme that allows religious incompatibilities, actors and dimension to be distinguished in armed conflict dyads and events, permitting religious causal salience to be tested more systematically across time and space (Svensson & Nilsson, 2018). This infrastructure has stimulated advances that build on single-case narrative inference to include comparative and mixed-method designs, which combine geocoded conflict data with elite interviews, programmatic evaluations, and discourse analysis. Through this, the post-2015 scholarship has been able to examine how the claims of religion move through organisations and publics, how they both come into contact and interact with state capacity, and how they are refracted through domestic political competition, instead of attributing the results to doctrine, per se (Svensson & Nilsson, 2018; Haynes, 2021).

Another strand links this re-centring to modern conflict patterns more widely that do not take place in the Middle East and not framed in Islam. In the Asia-Pacific, comparative scholarship reveals how Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic idiomare being instrumentalised in the context of populism it reshapes security rhetoric and redraws the borders of belonging and authorises coercive actions in the modes of majoritarianism (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). In the meantime, studies of the involvement of Islamists in civil wars highlight the organisational and strategic processes; the process of recruitment, governance and cross-border connectivity through which religiously-packaged actors influence conflict dynamics, risks of relapse and transnational reaction (Kalyvas, 2024). Theorisation of the phenomenon commonly referred to as religious soft power is a summary of

these lessons, as they relate to state practice, articulating how states use clerical authority, cultural programming and transnational religious bureaucracies to appeal to foreign peoples and co-religionists, and the failures and blowback potential of these efforts (Henne, 2022; Ozturk, 2023). Summarily, the literature after 2015 shifts religion to the centre of empirical security analysis with the specification and construction of mechanisms, the development of repeatable measures and the expanding comparative canvas across traditions and regions (Haynes, 2021; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022; Henne, 2022; Ozturk, 2023).

Religion as a driver of insecurity

Religion is actually becoming a greater subject of literature concern not only as a passive liability issue, but as a productive source of insecurity in certain circumstances. Researchers point out that it is the mobilisation of religious ideologies by political elites or violent entities, which makes the conflict escalation legitimate (Basedau et al., 2016). Religion as a mobilising source of collective identity and through the medium of this symbolic action is particularly well placed to construct political dissatisfactions as sources of eternal peril. To illustrate further, Boko Haram in Nigeria presents its insurgency in terms of a divine will to fight against the influence of Western powers and conflates the discourses of religion with political and socioeconomic grievances (Thurston, 2016). On the same note, the global jihadist discourse of ISIS is also an example of how religious identity may override national borders, which leads to the emergence of insecurity that is localised and transnational at the same time (Byman, 2016; Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2025**).** Such processes highlight the fact that religion may be securitised due to the interest of actors encouraging them to prioritise sacred values to be able to justify violence and render a compromise illegitimate.

Simultaneously, other aspects such as political and institutional contexts determine the role of religion as a contributor to insecurity. Studies have revealed that a weak state capacity and a lack of a united political power is a particularly ripe ground in religious

radicalisation (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). Where there are failures to govern-the Sahel or sections of the South Asian region, in particular-religion sometimes serves as a means to replace the lacking state institutions (Dowd, 2014). In addition, the scope conditions that facilitate snAppy propaganda by extremist religious factions include social inequality, racial marginalisation and non-national interconnection in the digital sphere (Botha & Abdile, 2014). This implies that religion is not often used as a sole cause of insecurity but it combines with other structural vulnerabilities. That is, religion as an explanatory force is not principally related to doctrine but rather to its interlap with political structures of opportunities and social grievance.

Performative aspect of religious securitisation is also outlined in the literature. In order to justify an undue staging of security or to seize power, governments frequently portray religious groupings as existential vulnerabilities (Cesari, 2018). As an example, the current dictatorships in the Middle East have used Islamic movements in the name of securitisation to suppress citizens, and western nations have used Muslim minorities as threats to the security agenda, thus creating the feedback loop of social exclusion that leads to radicalisation (Kundnani, 2015). These results demonstrate that religion may serve as the source of insecurity as well as the target of securitisation, straightforwardly hinging on the way state and non-state actors conceptualise it. Therefore, how and when religion contributes to insecurity defines the pathways and the scope conditions by which religion drives insecurity, which is one of the critical areas of empirical inquiry regarding the study of international security.

Religion as a Force for Security & Peacebuilding

Research after 2015 traces the transformation of religious actors into the performance of peacebuilding functions-mediation, moral suasion and provision of community services-where state legitimacy is weak. Based on comparative evidence, scholars demonstrate that interreligious platforms act as track diplomacy 2.5 infrastructures that lower uncertainty, activate back-

channels and socialize an elite compromise in terms of normative signalling to local grassroots constituencies (Kwuelum, 2024). Critics of Nigerian open-access case studies and programme analyses posit that clerical brokers and faith-based organisations (FBOs) enhance uptake of reconciliation and reintegration provisions by integrating theological reframing with material assistance (e.g., livelihood pathways), which results in a decrease in the social cost of denying oneself violence (Jatau, 2023). The conceptual overview points to the multi-dimensionality of interreligious peace: attitudinal and behavioural, discriminatory and constructive, and thus the key and effective faith-based activities should be connected to both dialogue and practices that change daily behaviour (Kobrich et al., 2023). The results of these studies overlap with peacebuilding syntheses based on some of the same sources on the unique value-adds of religious engagement: heightened, spatially specific knowledge, reputation undergirded trust, the ability to draw on ritual to facilitate forgiveness, and the ability to "thicken" social norms against violence (Payne, 2020).

Asia and the Middle East provide empirically important variation which is important in clarifying scope conditions. The case of Myanmar demonstrates that multireligious peacebuilding has the potential to both succeed and fail: in the former cases, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim authority holders collaboratively frame restraint and establish concrete contact zones (schools, distribution of aid), allowing interfaith dialogue to gain traction; in the latter, ethnonationalist entrepreneurs control the discursive terrain, and then, interreligious initiatives are forced to exist in enclaves (King & Owen, 2020). In the Middle East and within diasporic communities, states occasionally rely on clerical authority to neutralise crisis narratives. Yet, when such religious legitimacy is instrumentalised as a political tool, it often undermines credibility. Contemporary opinion surveys indicate that citizens tend to interpret these gestures as regime branding rather than genuine moral leadership. The lesson for peacebuilding practice is clear: the soft

power of religious authority is most effective when grounded in authenticity, not when co-opted for short-term political gain (Henne, 2022; Payne, 2020). Digital mediation increased cross-regions post-2020: forums between inter-faith communities shifted online, keeping contact and problem-solving connected throughout lockdowns: this was helpful to sustain trust infrastructures even though physical convening is limited (Casavecchia, Carbone & Canta, 2023). The point is not that the presence of "religion" ensures de-escalatory effects, but that in situations with project institutional support (uniform gathering, figures to common secretariat, access to policy leverages) and the combination of dialogue with service delivery, de-escalator outcomes can be measured (Kwuelum, 2024; Jatau & Maza, 2023).

Another angle from the literature problematises durability and transferability. Critiques warn that faith-based peacebuilding should not be romanticised: initiatives which are anchored in the figure of the single charismatic figure can bring risks of succession to these programmes; leadership within the elite centred councils can re-establish gatekeepers and leave women and youth marginalised and, finally, donor led platforms may become atrophic as funds dry up (Kwuelum, 2024). Quantitative and mixed-methods contributions highlight that interreligious peace should be operationalised not just in terms of events but also in terms of behavioural consequences (e.g., rates of cross-faith cooperation, dispute-resolution caseloads) and of attitudinal change (trust, tolerance) a step that makes clear where faith-based interventions deliver better than secular alternatives, and where they do not (Koebrich & Hoffmann, 2023). The same note is found in conceptual work: that dialogue is the solution but only when it is attached to institutional incentives, which may be an education reform, a local restorative justice apparatus, or re-integration funding streams (Payne, 2020; King & Owen, 2020). To conclude, the evidence base in the post-2015 literature allows a conditional assertion: that religious actors have a role to play as peace resources when their moral authority is transformed into institutional force, when they

become aligned with encompassing state or municipal forms, and when they are able to maintain their social uptake through frequent and observable problem-solving.

International Security Institutions & Religious Engagement (post-2015)

Over the past ten years, religion has been integrated more overtly albeit with an inconsistent pattern in international and regional security institutions to participate more significantly in efforts to mediate, prevent and stabilise. Policy traction in the United Nations has been generated not so much in the form of establishing new units entitled religion but, rather, in integrating religious literacy into the mediation community of practice and in selective engagement with faith leaders by Track-2/2.5 means. New research on UN mediation emphasizes how envoys are increasingly turning to religious actors as norm entrepreneurs and credibility brokers in environments where state legitimacy is in dispute, though it cautions that this is ad hoc and extremely personality-based, with mixed results and poor organisational learning (Posada-Téllez, 2024). Similarly, the study of religion as soft power finds that the multilateral actors are implementing pragmatic, practice-based forms of cooperation (dialogue platforms, preservation of sacred sites, common messaging in response to hate speech), as opposed to the more transactional branding work of some states; the trade-off is uptake at the local level, but the threat is capture by gatekeepers and reproductions of exclusionary theologies unless care is taken (Henne, 2022; Ozturk, 2023).

In Europe, the practice of the European Union has been professionalised since the 2013 Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), though the critical change post-2015 has been the routinisation of religion in the European External Action Service (EEAS) and in the human rights toolkits of the related delegations. Comparative analysis suggests that the European Union is more inclined to treat freedom of religion or belief as a privileged approach of foreign policy tailored in frames of human rights which employs the instruments of freedom of religion or belief guidelines and dialogues whereas the United States

have established more explicit, law-enforced means, directly targeted and conceptualized as religious freedom acts and organizations in the form of International Religious Freedom Act and USCIRF. This leads to less volunteering governmental insensitivity in the EU and more rigorous uptake in bureaucracy in crisis situations which are highly dynamic (Toft & Green, 2018, Jenichen, 2019). Research on multireligious peacebuilding in and near EU theatres (Western Balkans, MENA periphery) has identified that Brussels- funded interfaith infrastructures can reduce the transaction costs of reconciliation when coupled to formal policy leverage points (education, justice reform), with results declining when the infrastructures remain projectised or elite-centric (King & Owen, 2020).

The African Union (AU) has been increasingly interested in more orderly engagement with religious actors in its post-conflict reconstruction and development (PCRD) architecture on the African continent, but this has varied greatly by region. As seen through the lens of inter-religious peacebuilding efforts, sustainable AU-faith partnerships are achieved through a platform institutionalization, frequent engagements, and cross-cutting with policy units (ex: Peace and Security Council briefings), but donor-funded or ad-hoc formats result in weak, performative results (Kwuelum, 2024). Gaining access : The current review of the PCRD policy of the AU has provided further avenues to integrate non-state actors (such as faith-based organisations) into the stabilisation and resilience programming and the literature also warns that mandates are still too broad and implementation still as diverse among member states (African Union PCRD Report, 2024).

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) offers an alternative institutional logic, its involvement with religion is not adjunctive but a constitutive part of the organisation. Some studies has demonstrated the OIC as a diplomatic umbrella in which member states pursue both convergence and divergence in their objectives mobilising solidary action around the defence of Muslim minorities and Palestine, and struggling with

internal member politics that limit collective action (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023). The result is evident in the provision of plain agenda-setting powers (resolutions, contact groups, convening power) and niche instruments (e.g., humanitarian and educational activities) but shallow enforcement and spotty enforcement in the events of hard security emergencies. Across the institutions, comparative work comes to a similar conclusion: the greatest value of religious engagement comes when it is locally-anchored, embedded with tangible policy tools (justice, reintegration, service delivery), and as isolating as possible against partisan co-option (Henne, 2022; King & Owen, 2020; Posada-Teltz, 2024).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual and the theoretical framework in this study is informed by the nexus between religion and security, and how religious ideas, actors, and institutions can impact international relations, that is, international relations in the post-2015 world. It is based on this framework that six interrelated concepts namely religious soft power, faith-based diplomacy, religious securitisation, institutional capacity, discursive framing and social uptake as well as international linkages through which the politics of religion in security governance can be operationalised are outlined. Likewise, the theory of constructivism and securitization are the crust on which the arguments and research of this paper is based on. These ideas are not presented as variables to be coded but are interpreted as frameworks through which the study of the manifestation of religion, which is constituted, perceived, and mobilised within international security practices can be looked at in a sophisticated manner.

Religious Soft Power

A concept given Nye & Power (2004) which was revisted in Nye (2019) is the soft power which encourages us to entice and recruit rather than command. Transferring it to the religious front, the definition of religious soft power is put forward, i.e., the ability of faith traditions, leaders, and institutions to influence international preferences by

way of cultural authority, moral rights, and normative power. Religious soft power as religious actors, in this case, is noted in the symbolic authority that religious leaders like Pope, the Dalai Lama or prominent Islamic scholars, can use in order to mobilise legitimacy, which is outside coercive or economic resources. This can be observed in the global appeal of Pope Francis' encyclicals on peace and climate change, or in the transnational influence of Al-Azhar University in mediating intra-Muslim relations. It can be articulated in the way faith-based organisations to influence humanitarian action or by the way religious discourses come within the purview of diplomatic processes.

Faith-Based Diplomacy

Religious actors or organisations that mediate between governments and international institutions or parties to conflict situations through their religious beliefs or at their own religious instigation are defined as faith-based diplomacy (Blakemore, 2019). One sees this in the efforts of actors like the community of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique that initated talks towards Mozambican General Peace Agreement in 1992 that ended the country's 16-year civil war (Anouilh, 2005) or the Muslim World League in encouraging dialogue in places of conflict. Faith-based diplomacy, in contrast to secular diplomacy, draws power out of transcendental commitments and moral vocabularies that have a tendency to appeal to local populations in a manner that state diplomacy itself might not. The concept emphasizes agency: It is important that religious actors are not members of a state, yet significant actors in international politics.

Religious Securitisation

Continuing on the theory of securitisation developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 2003), religious securitisation is characterised as the securitisation of religious identities or religious groups and practices as existential security threats in order to rationalise extraordinary interventions. This framework actualises the concept with analyses of Orders of Discourse/Remarkisation: speeches, policy pronunciation, media images, and general representations that framed Islam or Christianity or other traditions as

threats or protective bulwarks. As an example, the case of securitisation of Islam in Western Europe after 2015 was framed as counterterrorist discourse, demonstrating how a religious belief is not only being conceptualised in a specific way but is also capable of bearing practical implications on law, migration and civil liberties.

Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity can be defined as resources, structures and legitimacy religious and secular organisations could access as they respond to security concerns. Indicators of its operationalisation include the funding level, organisational density, ability to mobilise the volunteers and the embeddedness in frameworks of international governance. To take one example, the international humanitarian system of the Catholic Church gives the Catholic organization a distinct global transnational intervention capability, and charities in local Islamic communities can rapidly mobilise in response to refugee crises. The issue of institutional capacity is more vital as it determines the successfulness of both the soft power of religion and the concept of faith-based diplomacy.

Discursive Framing

Discursive framing process refers to the practices by which political and religious players construct issues, ascribe causality and make remedies with recourse to specific interpretive vocabularies; in security politics the process is the means by which (de)securitisation moves come into effect (Brugman & Burgers, 2018; Heidbrink & Becker, 2022). It is seen in the rhetoric of the street speech, oratory, official messaging, and even youth social media campaigns that present the conflicts as the idea of the holy war, fight with evil, or moral duty of peace. When actors present and frame their issues using religious language, the preference of the masses, priorities of policies and coalitions with other international stakeholders can be changed accordingly. Discursive framing is therefore at the meeting point between securitisation and soft power.

Social Uptake

Social uptake refers to the process of the beliefs used by religions or security to

appeal to a wider audience and gain legitimacy as well as mass action. This notion changes the point of emphasis to the grassroots reactions and this has been operationalised in terms of public opinion surveys, modes of mobilisation, and local reception of religious peacebuilding initiatives. As another example, the peace mediations conducted by the churches in Northern Uganda proved successful only when the communities embraced the authority of churches, and the securitisation narratives do not work when they are not accepted by the social group. Social uptake establishes the fact that religious soft power and discursive framing are significant factors that influence security practices.

International Linkages

Lastly, international linkages refer to the existing global networks in regard to actors, ideas and institutions of religions in global politics. Such connections can be traced in the trans-national transmission of religious peacebuilding activities, in networks of collaboration between faith-based organisations and intergovernmental organisations and in the trans-national transmission of religious discourses about terrorism or peace. International linkages indicate that religion cannot be trapped within the domestic realm; instead, it moves across the global governance domains either enhancing or limiting its role in security.

These are six concepts that can be used to form an integrative framework of examining religion in international security governance. Religious soft power and faith based diplomacy emphasize the constructive potentials that religion has to offer in terms of peace and legitimate actions. In this case, religious securitisation highlights the dangers of the securitisation of religion by characterising it as a threat. Institutional capacity determines the efficacy of religious actors, whereas discursive framing and uptake conditions the way messages of the actors are created and consumed. The channelling of these dynamics is done through international linkages which put localised religious practices in relation to the global security order. Collectively, this conceptual framework offers analytical rigour in examining its dual nature as both being a source of insecurity and a source of

peace, as well as putting into consideration observable dynamics of international relations.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism

Constructivism looks at the world and our knowledge of it as socially constructed, and puts fore references to issues of ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (the nature of knowledge). This is well illustrated by Alexander Wendt, (1995) in the classic where he explains that five nuclear weapons in North Korea are seen to be more threatening to the United States than five hundred British ones. The difference is not in the material structure, the material objects of war, the weapons but in the ideational structure, the meanings attached to them. In such a manner, constructivism in international relations (IR) is opposed to rationalist paradigms in the sense that the international politics is constituted through common ideas, norms, and identities but not only through material capabilities (Wendt, 1999; Adler, 2019).

Over the past decade, constructivist scholarship has further highlighted the role of non-state actors, including religious communities, in constituting international norms and shaping diplomatic practice (Hurd, 2017). Faith-based organisations, for example, influence global agendas on human rights, climate change, and humanitarian relief not primarily through material resources but by offering moral narratives and legitimising frames (Sandal & Fox, 2013).

Applied to this study, constructivism positions religion as a form of normative power that shapes diplomatic outcomes through discursive framing, symbolic authority, and the social uptake of religious narratives. This perspective reveals how religious diplomacy helps construct shared understandings of peace, legitimacy, and justice that state actors cannot easily ignore. It also underscores the institutional capacity of religious organisations to serve as norm entrepreneurs, diffusing values across transnational linkages (Thomas et al., 2005).

Securitization Theory

The Copenhagen School's Securitisation Theory complements constructivism by explaining how issues—such as religion—are framed as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998, 2003). In contemporary contexts, religion has often been securitised, particularly in relation to terrorism, migration, and interfaith conflicts (Wæver, 2015). The act of securitisation depends not on the inherent nature of religion, but on how political and social actors frame religious identities as dangerous or destabilising (Balzacq et al., 2016). In this sense, securitisation theory is valuable for interrogating the discursive framing of religion in diplomacy. For instance, Christian or Islamic institutions may be constructed as stabilising partners in peacebuilding, or alternatively as threats to liberal democratic order, depending on the speech acts of policymakers and media actors. The theory further allows for an examination of how faith-based diplomacy either counters or reinforces such securitisation processes.

Integrating the two frameworks, constructivism and securitisation theory together provide a robust analytical lens for this study. While constructivism emphasises the constitutive role of religion in shaping norms, identities, and diplomatic practices, securitisation theory highlights how religion can be discursively elevated into the security realm. Their integration enables a dual focus: (1) religion as a positive source of soft power in international diplomacy; and (2) religion as a contested subject of security framing.

For instance, Vatican diplomacy at climate conferences demonstrates that religion is a normative rule in global governance (constructivism), whereas Western reaction to Islamist movements are examples of religion being securitised in policy circles (securitisation). In a similar vein, the mediating role played by African religious councils in conflicted areas shows how the institutions of religion also become norm entrepreneurs on the one hand and negotiate their securitised image, within the international forums, on the other hand. With the implementation of the two theories, the study is in a favorable position to critically assess the positive and limiting

impacts of religion in interdefining international relations by providing a complex reflection to the mixed nature of the role of religion in diplomacy and security.

Methodology and Research Design

This study adopts a mixed methods of qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist and critical traditions of international relations. The objective is to investigate how religion functions both as a driver of insecurity and as a resource for peacebuilding. The research design integrates process tracing, manual content analysis, secondary-data triangulation, and desk-based network mapping. This mixed-methods qualitative strategy allows for the triangulation of evidence while maintaining methodological parsimony and feasibility in contexts characterised by limited data access and rapidly shifting dynamics.

Discussion

The discussion section presents four comparative case studies that empirically test the theoretical framework developed in this study, examining how religious narratives and actors shape security outcomes across diverse contexts through the mechanisms of securitisation and desecuritisation. These cases of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama were selected to provide analytical leverage across violent versus non-violent religious mobilisation, local versus transnational scope of operations, and different institutional contexts for religious authority, employing process tracing to examine how religious ideas become politically consequential through specific causal mechanisms rather than treating religion as a static independent variable.

Boko Haram and the Lake Chad Basin

Since 2015, the Boko Haram insurgency has evolved into a regionalised security crisis affecting Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The death of Mohammed Yusuf in 2009 and the subsequent leadership of Abubakar Shekau established Boko Haram as one of Africa’s most lethal insurgencies. By 2016, the group fractured into two factions: Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS, under

Shekau) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) across Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon which aligned with the global ISIS movement (International Crisis Group, 2019; ACLED, 2019). This split altered both the trajectory of violence and the modes of religious mobilisation across the Lake Chad Basin (Zenn, 2020).

Regional security mechanisms such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and national militaries have intermittently seized territory, yet military pressure frequently produced localised adaptation, fragmentation and displacement rather than decisive strategic defeat, a pattern that event datasets and policy analyses confirm (ACLED, 2019; UNIDIR, 2024). Alongside military measures, faith-based actors such as clerics, interfaith councils, and international religious organisations have sought to counter Boko Haram's religious claims and provide community resilience mechanisms.

Boko Haram mobilization strategy has consistently relied on discursive constructions of identity and legitimacy, central to a constructivist reading of the conflict. Its propaganda framed the Nigerian state as irredeemably corrupt, illegitimate, and hostile to Islam. Sermons and propaganda videos elevated jihad as a moral duty and created powerful social identities that resonated with unemployed youth and marginalised populations (Oriola, Onuoha & Oyewole, 2021, Ishaku et al., 2021; Pearson & Zenn, 2021). Securitisation theory is particularly relevant as Boko Haram securitised Western education and modern state institutions by presenting them as existential threats to Islam. This framing legitimised the targeting of schools, government workers, and humanitarian actors, embedding violence in a moral–religious narrative (Botha & Abdile, 2014).

ISWAP, compared to Shekau's faction, invested more heavily in institutional practices that bolstered its religious legitimacy. It established dispute resolution councils, distributed food, and enforced religious courts in captured territories (International Crisis Group, 2022). These activities reinforced its claims as a provider of authentic Islamic governance, a key constructivist

mechanism whereby meanings and practices consolidated the group's authority.

Consequently, Faith-based actors in the Lake Chad Basin pursued counter-mobilisation through desecuritisation strategies. Nigerian Muslim clerical associations issued sermons emphasising Islam's compatibility with peace and condemning Boko Haram's violence as un-Islamic. Christian organisations, particularly the Catholic Church, provided trauma counselling, interfaith dialogue platforms, and reintegration programmes for displaced populations (Ishaku et al., 2021). At the international level, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) engaged in faith-based diplomacy, publicly denouncing Boko Haram's violence as antithetical to Islamic teachings (Maiangwa, 2020). Such statements worked to delegitimise Boko Haram's self-proclaimed religious authority, contributing to regional desecuritisation narratives.

Process-tracing of 2015-2023 highlights important junctures that condition these dynamics: 2015–2016: Intensified Nigerian military campaigns reduced Boko Haram's territorial control but precipitated the ISWAP–JAS split, producing divergent approaches to religious mobilisation. 2017–2019: ISWAP consolidated authority around Lake Chad islands, combining governance and coercion. During this period, clerical counter-narratives expanded, though with limited reach in rural areas. 2020–2021: The death of Shekau in May 2021 marked a decisive juncture, with ISWAP absorbing many of his followers. This coincided with a rise in international religious diplomacy through OIC and clerical councils. 2022–2023: Escalating humanitarian crises (displacement and food insecurity) created opportunities for faith-based NGOs to strengthen interfaith solidarity and resilience-building. The sequence underscores how securitisation (by Boko Haram) and desecuritisation (by faith actors) dynamically intersected in shaping the trajectory of violence and peace responses.

Analytically, the case corroborates two linked theoretical claims: from a constructivist perspective, religion operates as a socially constructed

resource-competing discourses (jihadi sermons versus clerical counter-sermons) have materially shaped recruitment, legitimacy and local compliance; and from a securitisation perspective, the framing of certain practices or institutions as existential threats (by jihadists or, in some cases, by securitising state rhetoric) both legitimises extraordinary measures and risks producing counterproductive outcomes when those measures alienate populations

An assessment of the Boko Haram case illustrates that religion is not inherently violent or peaceful; rather, its effects depend on constructed meanings and the securitising/desecuritising moves of actors. Boko Haram's success lay in framing secular governance as a threat to Islam, while its opponents sought to reframe Islam as a source of peace and resilience. Institutional capacity mattered, but what proved decisive was the ability to construct persuasive narratives that resonated with communities.

ISIS Affiliates and Diffusion in the Sahel

The Sahel region has become one of the most active theatres of jihadist activity worldwide. Groups affiliated with the Islamic State, most notably the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and later the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) have expanded operations across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. These affiliates emerged out of local insurgent networks, including splinters from al-Mourabitoun and elements disillusioned with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Their embedding within transnational jihadist networks has altered both the local political economy of violence and the broader regional security landscape (Raineri, 2022; Ateku, 2024).

The collapse of central state authority in northern Mali following the 2012 Tuareg rebellion created fertile ground for jihadist mobilisation. Weak governance, marginalisation of peripheral ethnic groups (especially Fulani communities), and the proliferation of illicit economies enabled ISIS affiliates to construct themselves as legitimate protectors of local populations while simultaneously advancing a transnational jihadist agenda (Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh & Cohen, 2021).

From the angle of mobilization mechanism through the constructivist dynamics, ISIS affiliates in the Sahel have engaged in identity construction by portraying the Sahel's Muslim populations as under siege from corrupt governments, international peacekeepers, and non-Muslim armed groups. Through sermons, propaganda videos, and direct social engagement, ISGS framed participation in jihad as both a religious obligation and a path to social belonging. Particularly among Fulani herding communities, narratives of victimisation were reinterpreted as religious persecution, legitimising violence as defensive jihad (International Crisis Group, 2019). From the perspective of the securitization dynamics, ISIS affiliates consistently deployed securitising moves to frame external actors as existential threats. For instance, French-led Operation Barkhane was depicted as a "crusader occupation" targeting Islam, while UN peacekeepers were labelled apostates. By constructing international counterterrorism forces as hostile to Muslim identity, ISGS transformed external intervention into a rallying point for mobilisation (Raineri, 2021).

Conversely, states in the region often responded with securitising moves of their own, portraying entire ethnic groups as complicit with jihadists. This securitisation of the Fulani, in particular, fuelled cycles of communal violence, creating a fertile ground for ISIS affiliates to expand their recruitment base (Sangare, 2019; Gulati, 2024).

The counter to these dynamics has been the advance by faith-based organisations of desecuritisation approaches rooted in public preaching, collaborative communiques and community mediation as an alternative to isolated "fatwas". Platforms of imams, ʿulamāʾ and Quranic teachers hosted by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue developed and circulated a series of peace messages in and mobilised local mediations (such as a dispute between two communities over a well used by pastoralists and the internal organisational rifts within Muslim groups). Such efforts explicitly positioned Islamic instruction as being consonant with social solidarity and non-violence, and were linked both to the actual

practice of behavioural change at a local level (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2020). To the south in Niger, neighbouring Catholic missions have institutionalised interreligious dialogue in the hope of building peace and social cohesion by engaging Muslim and Christian leaders to maintain local platforms on reconciliation and practical problem-solving (Caritas Developpement Niger, 2023). Collectively, these interventions present the possibilities of how clerical and inter-faith infrastructures can help move the discourse towards shared civic norms rather than existential threat and how through locally legitimate pathways, desecuritisation can take place (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2020; Caritas Developer Niger, 2023).

At the international level, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and African religious councils have sought to delegitimise jihadist claims to Islamic authenticity. These initiatives emphasise the distinction between Islam as a faith and jihadist violence as a distortion. However, their reach has often been constrained by weak state institutions and limited rural penetration (Steinberg & Weber, 2015).

The process-tracing sequence of this case reflect from the 2015–2016 which is the formation of ISGS under Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, pledging allegiance to ISIS. The group consolidated networks among marginalised Fulani herders. The years 2017–2019: saw the intensification of violence in Mali's Ménaka and Niger's Tillabéri regions. French and Malian securitisation responses like the military offensives and community surveillance fed recruitment narratives. In 2020–2021, expansion into Burkina Faso and cross-border escalation. International clerical condemnations gained visibility, but faith-based counter-narratives lagged behind jihadist propaganda in reach. Now in 2022–2023 which start to show the decline of French Operation Barkhane and the drawdown of international presence reshaped jihadist discourses, with ISIS affiliates reframing themselves as defenders of Islamic governance against both Western withdrawal and fragile national governments. This sequence underscores the interplay of constructed meanings of identity and

victimhood with securitising/desecuritising moves, shaping both mobilisation and counter-mobilisation dynamics.

Furthermore, this case analytically corrobotates with the theoretical argument of this paper. The proposition of constructivism which illustrates how ISIS affiliates construct religious and social identities around narratives of marginalisation, thereby legitimising violence as defensive jihad. Clerical counter-narratives attempt to construct alternative Islamic identities rooted in peace and pluralism. On the other hand, the securitisation of external actors (France, UN) by jihadists and of ethnic groups (Fulani) by states reveals how securitising moves escalate cycles of violence. Conversely, clerical delegitimisations and interfaith initiatives represent attempts at desecuritisation, though with limited reach.

From the assessment of the Sahel case, it demonstrates how ISIS affiliates weaponise both identity and threat construction to mobilise support. Their success lies not only in military capacity but in narrative control, turning grievances into religiously framed existential struggles. Faith-based actors provide counter-narratives, yet their impact is constrained by weak state institutions, insecurity, and limited grassroots penetration. The case confirms the dual lens of constructivism and securitisation theory: religious conflict in the Sahel cannot be explained solely by material deprivation but by the contested meanings and securitising moves that shape how religion is mobilised in violent and peace-promoting directions.

The case of the Taliban in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's trajectory under the Taliban represents one of the starkest examples of how religion is socially constructed as both a source of political legitimacy and a framework for securitisation. Since their emergence in the mid-1990s, the Taliban have drawn upon religious narratives to shape collective identity, justify political authority, and wage conflict, while simultaneously securitising religious norms to regulate society and delegitimise opposition.

From a constructivist perspective, the Taliban have strategically mobilised religion as a socially constructed

resource, embedding their authority within the cultural and religious fabric of Afghanistan. Their interpretation of *Sharia* law is not merely theological but deeply tied to the construction of political order and national identity. Religion functions as a narrative that defines "authentic" Afghan values in opposition to foreign influence, thereby creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This constructivist lens highlights how religion was employed not only to mobilise support among conservative rural populations but also to reframe Afghanistan's political future in terms of resistance to Western cultural and political impositions (Giustozzi, 2019; Barfield, 2022). Importantly, the Taliban's religious discourse has been neither static nor monolithic; over time, its application has shifted as they navigated negotiations with international actors, reflecting the dynamic and contingent nature of socially constructed meanings.

Through the lens of securitisation theory, religion emerges as a central medium for defining existential threats and legitimising extraordinary measures. The Taliban securitised Islam by portraying secular governance, women's education, and Western military presence as existential threats to Afghan society and religion itself. This framing allowed them to justify violence, restrict rights, and consolidate authoritarian control. Conversely, in the post-2021 period following the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban have faced a reverse securitisation process: international actors frame their strict religious governance as a security and humanitarian threat, while groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) challenge their authority by securitising the Taliban's interpretation of Islam as insufficiently "pure" (Clarke & Shapiro, 2019). This dynamic illustrates how religion, once used as a securitising tool by the Taliban, is now contested within overlapping security discourses at local, regional, and global levels.

Taken together, the Afghanistan case demonstrates that religion is neither an inherent driver of violence nor peace, but a malleable social construct subject to securitisation and counter-securitisation. The Taliban's instrumentalisation of

Islam underscores how actors use religious narratives to reshape collective identity, justify extraordinary political measures, and resist external pressures. Yet, it also reveals the fragility of such constructions: competing religious claims (e.g., ISKP's challenge) highlight how securitisation processes can fragment legitimacy rather than consolidate it. For comparative purposes, Afghanistan illustrates that the interplay between constructivism and securitisation theory provides a sharper understanding of how religion functions not only as a cultural resource but also as a security instrument in contexts of protracted conflict.

Nahdlatul Ulama (Indonesia) — A Non-Violent Religious Countermodel

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of the world's largest Muslim mass organisations, with deep roots in Indonesian village life and a public theology often described as *Islam Nusantara*; an Indonesian, localised interpretation of Islam that emphasises tolerance, pluralism and social welfare. Since the mid-2010s, NU has been an active interlocutor in state and civil-society efforts to prevent violent extremism, promote deradicalisation and provide alternative religious framings that challenge jihadist narratives (Ilyas & Athwal, 2021; UNDP, 2020). NU's activities range from educational reform and pesantren (religious boarding school) curricula to social-media moderation and direct engagement with vulnerable communities.

From a constructivist standpoint, NU's strength lies in its capacity to reconstruct religious meanings and identities in ways that undercut extremist appeals. Rather than contesting extremists solely on material grounds, NU's clerical networks and educational institutions produce and disseminate interpretive repertoires that reframe jihadist symbolism. Through sermons, curriculum design and public statements, NU emphasises shared moral values (compassion, local custom, and national belonging), thereby reshaping how Islam is understood in everyday life. These discursive practices perform the work of identity-making: they offer adherents a religiously grounded but non-violent social identity that competes with

the identity packages offered by violent groups (Ilyas & Athwal, 2021).

This is not merely rhetorical. NU's rootedness in pesantren and local religious authority means its reinterpretations carry social weight. Constructivism predicts that where everyday religious authority is credible and pervasive, new normative frames can diffuse more effectively — a prediction borne out by NU's documented successes in local deradicalisation and in shaping public pedagogies against extremism (UNDP, 2020).

Securitisation theory clarifies how NU and allied actors work to desecuritise religion in Indonesian public life. Extremist actors securitise certain practices or groups (portraying them as existential threats to an imagined pure Islam), thereby justifying exceptional measures and recruitment. NU counters by delegitimising those securitising moves: senior NU clerics publicly denounce violent actors as un-Islamic, while organisational channels (fatwas, public communiqués, and engagement with the National Counterterrorism Agency) normalise pluralist, non-exceptionalist approaches to governance and religious practice (Ilyas & Athwal, 2021).

This desecuritisation has two components. First, NU's public speech acts aim to remove existential threat status from contested issues. For example, reframing civic pluralism as compatible with piety. Second, NU's practical interventions (education, social services) reduce structural vulnerabilities that jihadists exploit, thereby undermining securitising narratives that rely on grievance-based claims. The result is a hybrid strategy that mixes discursive plausibility (constructing alternative meanings) with sociopolitical resilience (reducing the conditions that make securitising moves persuasive).

Evidence since 2015 indicates that NU has had measurable impact in several domains. At the national policy level, NU-affiliated actors contributed to the development of Indonesia's preventive frameworks on violent extremism and helped shape public messaging that resists the polarising, securitising rhetoric that often accompanies counterterrorism responses (UNDP, 2020). At the

grassroots, NU's pesantren networks and community outreach have been cited in multiple case studies as instrumental in preventing recruitment and rehabilitating returnees by offering alternative narratives and material assistance (Ilyas & Athwal, 2021).

Critically, NU's success is not universal or unproblematic. The organisation's local authority varies regionally; its moderate theology can be undercut where conservative religious actors or political elites instrumentalise religion for electoral gain. Moreover, some scholars caution against over-romanticising NU: internal tensions, elite capture and uneven implementation mean the organisation's desecuritising effects can be fragile and contingent on broader governance and socioeconomic conditions (Arifianto, 2024). In short, NU exemplifies how non-violent religious actors can shift meanings away from securitisation, but their efficacy depends on institutional coherence and favourable political space.

Testing the case with the propositon of the theoretical framework, the NU supports the claim that religion's effects are mediated through socially constructed meanings: by producing persuasive alternative religious narratives, NU reduces the ideological traction of violent groups. While the securitisation theory, NU's public denouncements and community work function as desecuritising moves, demonstrating that contesting existential threat framings can weaken the legitimatory basis of violent actors.

As a non-violent religious mass organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama illustrates how disciplined, locally anchored religious authority can reconstruct meanings and counter securitising narratives but it also highlights the limits of discursive strategies when not paired with consistent institutional support and political space.

Synthesis of the Case Studies

The four case studies of Boko Haram in Nigeria, ISIS in the Sahel, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia show the connectivity of religion, identity and security in modern times. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the reconstruction of religiously infused movements as an existentialist threat in particular is both

similar and different, as well as counter-securitisation responses develop in various socio-political settings.

Across the violent movements examined – Boko Haram, ISIS, and the Taliban—the securitisation of religion was central to the legitimisation of their political violence. Each movement strategically deployed Islamic identity as a rallying point to redefine the boundaries of political community, presenting themselves as defenders of an authentic religious order against corrupt or "apostate" regimes. This aligns with constructivist claims that identity is not fixed but socially constructed and politically mobilised (Adler, 2019). Boko Haram's framing of Western education as a threat to Islamic values (Botha & Abdile, 2014, Ishaku et al., 2021), ISIS's invocation of a transnational caliphate (Raineri, 2022; Ateku, 2024), and the Taliban's positioning as custodians of an Islamic emirate (Barfield, 2022) illustrate how securitising religious narratives provide both ideological cohesion and a framework for violent action.

Yet, while the logic of securitisation appears consistent, its articulation was conditioned by context. In Nigeria, Boko Haram emerged from local grievances over corruption, poverty, and state neglect, framing these structural issues in religious terms (Zenn, 2020). ISIS, by contrast, represented a transnational enterprise that capitalised on weak governance and porous borders in the Sahel to expand its reach (Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh & Cohen, 2021). The Taliban's success in Afghanistan was rooted in decades of resistance against foreign occupation and a fragmented state apparatus, with their Islamic rhetoric providing continuity across shifting political realities (Guistozzi, 2019). These contextual variations affirm that while religion is instrumentalised, it is embedded within historically contingent struggles rather than existing as a purely theological driver.

The case of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) complicates the narrative by offering a non-violent counterpoint. Unlike the other movements, NU deployed religious identity not to securitise against an "other" but to resist the radicalisation of Islam within Indonesia. Through its promotion of *Islam Nusantara*, a

culturally embedded and pluralistic interpretation of Islam, NU has actively deconstructed extremist framings, advancing an inclusive religious discourse (Marjani, 2023). In securitisation terms, NU did not merely avoid radicalism; it countered it by redefining the referent object from an exclusionary faith-based state to a plural, democratic national identity (Woodward, 2017). This inversion underscores the agency of religious actors in shaping security landscapes in non-violent ways.

A critical comparison highlights that securitisation theory explains both the mobilisation of violence and its contestation. Boko Haram, ISIS, and the Taliban exemplify how religion can be securitised to legitimise violence against both domestic and international actors. However, NU demonstrates that the same theoretical framework can also capture processes of *de-securitisation*, where religious discourse mitigates existential threats rather than amplifying them. This insight challenges a reductionist view that religion and violence are inevitably linked, illustrating instead that the political context, leadership strategies, and societal reception mediate outcomes (Hellyer & Grossman, 2019).

From a constructivist perspective, the cases collectively affirm that security is fundamentally a matter of social construction. What counts as an existential threat, and what responses are deemed legitimate, are contingent upon discursive practices. Boko Haram and ISIS discursively constructed secular states as illegitimate and Western influence as corrupting, thereby justifying insurgency. The Taliban framed their struggle as anti-imperial resistance, which resonated deeply with Afghan historical narratives of sovereignty. NU, in contrast, constructed extremism itself as the threat, drawing on Indonesia's pluralist traditions to reinforce a national identity that delegitimises violence. These competing constructions show that the same religious symbols can underpin diametrically opposed security outcomes.

However, the analysis also exposes the limitations of securitisation theory when applied in isolation. The theory explains the discursive mechanisms at play but risks obscuring the material and structural conditions such as poverty, weak

governance, or foreign intervention that underpin the grievances these movements capitalise on. Boko Haram's rise cannot be understood without reference to socioeconomic marginalisation in northern Nigeria, just as the Taliban's endurance cannot be explained solely by discourse without considering external interventions. Thus, a synthesis of constructivism and securitisation offers a more comprehensive lens: constructivism foregrounds identity formation, while securitisation theory elucidates the discursive construction of threats, together capturing the interplay between material conditions and ideational processes.

Conclusion.

This study has shown that religion is neither an inherently violent nor an inherently peaceful force in international relations, but rather a socially constructed and contested domain whose meanings and implications are shaped through the interplay of actors, discourses, and institutions. By integrating constructivism and securitisation theory, the analysis has illuminated how religious narratives function as resources of power: they can legitimise political violence, as in the cases of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, ISIS affiliates in the Sahel, and the Taliban in Afghanistan; or they can diffuse values of tolerance and pluralism, as in the case of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama. Across these diverse contexts, the critical factor has not been the mere presence of religion, but the capacity of actors to frame religion persuasively in ways that resonate with specific audiences.

The comparative analysis of the four case studies demonstrates two key findings. First, securitisation processes are central to understanding how religion becomes entangled with violence. Groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS have securitised secular governance, education, and humanitarian actors by framing them as existential threats to Islam, thereby justifying attacks that would otherwise lack legitimacy. Conversely, faith-based leaders and organisations have attempted desecuritisation by reframing Islam as compatible with peace, justice, and resilience, though their reach has often been uneven and limited by institutional weaknesses. Second, religion's

contribution to security is contingent on the institutional and normative capacity of religious actors. Where groups can embed religious authority in governance structures, as with ISWAP's quasi-institutions or the Taliban's clerical councils, religion is harnessed to consolidate power. Where institutions are oriented towards pluralism, as with Nahdlatul Ulama, religion provides a framework for inclusive peacebuilding and norm entrepreneurship.

These findings suggest that religion in security politics should not be reduced to an object of suspicion or idealisation. Rather, it must be treated as a variable field of contestation, where outcomes depend on who speaks for religion, what narratives they deploy, and how those narratives are received. This has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it bridges the divide between constructivist emphasis on norms and identities and securitisation theory's focus on framing processes, demonstrating that religion provides fertile ground for studying how meaning becomes power in global politics. Practically, it underscores the need for policymakers and practitioners to engage religious actors not as marginal stakeholders but as central participants in the construction of security and peace.

Recommendations

1. **National Governments:** States affected by religiously framed conflicts should prioritise partnerships with local clerics, councils, and faith-based organisations that enjoy legitimacy among affected populations. Such partnerships should focus not merely on countering extremist narratives, but on amplifying positive religious discourses around justice, reconciliation, and community resilience. However, governments must also guard against instrumentalising religion for political gain, which risks further securitisation.
2. **Regional Organisations (AU, OIC):** The African Union and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation should expand platforms for interfaith and intra-faith dialogue that go beyond symbolic gestures, embedding them in concrete programmes for

education, conflict resolution, and community development. Their comparative advantage lies in their ability to convene religious leaders across national boundaries and lend regional legitimacy to desecuritisation efforts.

3. **International Institutions (UN):** The United Nations should integrate religious literacy into its peacebuilding and humanitarian missions. This does not mean privileging religion as a determinant of conflict, but ensuring that UN personnel understand the symbolic and normative dimensions that religious actors bring to the table. Structured engagement with faith-based organisations should become a standard component of peacekeeping and mediation mandates.

4. **Donors and NGOs:** International donors should support capacity-building initiatives that enable faith-based organisations to operate transparently and inclusively, particularly in conflict-affected settings where they are often first responders. At the same time, donors must adopt careful monitoring and evaluation frameworks that assess not only the reach of programmes but also their normative content, avoiding the inadvertent reinforcement of exclusivist or radical narratives.

5. **Scholarly and Policy Communities:** Academic and policy debates should move beyond binary framings of religion as threat or solution. A critical, empirically grounded approach that maps the processes of securitisation and desecuritisation will provide more reliable insights for both theory-building and policymaking. This requires sustained attention to under-studied cases, particularly in the Global South, where religious actors often play decisive roles in shaping the trajectory of conflicts.

In sum, the study demonstrates that religion is a constitutive dimension of international security, not an external variable. Future research should continue to explore the dynamic processes through which religious ideas and institutions shape global politics, particularly in

contexts where violent and non-violent actors coexist and compete. For practitioners, the core lesson is clear: sustainable security in the twenty-first century cannot be achieved without understanding and engaging the religious narratives and actors that help define what security itself means.

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