Is “Radical Islam” active in South Africa?

Credit: Researched, written and compiled by Tony Stone

US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, has spoken out about the dangers of “Radical Islam” and what it means for the United States of America. So concerned is the Trump administration that it has officially designated radical Islam as terrorism, and that it is a primary national security threat. According to Donald Trump, the ideology of radical Islam directly shapes major policies, including the implementation of heightened travel restrictions on several Muslim-majority nations and the formulation of the National Security Strategy to combat Islamist extremist networks globally.



Photo Credit: Baker Institute

But what is radical Islam? And, why is it a danger to the West, and in particular South Africa?

Radical Islam is a controversial and broadly used term describing a spectrum of fundamentalist, political, and extremist ideologies that seek to strictly enforce Islamic principles, Sharia law, as the absolute basis for state, society and personal law.

In political and academic discourse, the term often refers to movements that view Islam not just as a personal faith, but as a revolutionary political system because of what it instructs its devotees to do in the Quran and Hadith. These ideologies—often referred to as *Islamism*—reject secularism, democracy, and Western influence, in fact the entire Western culture, and every other religion on Earth, aiming to unite the global Muslim community (*Ummah*) under an overarching Islamic state or Caliphate, a one world government.

When the term “radical Islam” is used in mainstream media or governmental security contexts, it is frequently used interchangeably with *Jihadism* (a modern, militant Islamic movement that promotes global warfare as a necessary tool to eliminate obstacles to establishing strict Islamic states) or Salafi-Jihadism (a transnational, fundamentalist ideological movement within Sunni Islam that advocates for the use of armed struggle (jihad) to overthrow existing governments, both in Muslim-majority and Western countries, and establish a strict, totalitarian state governed exclusively by Islamic law (Sharia).).

In broader social debates, the label is sometimes loosely applied to strictly conservative, fundamentalist movements that advocate for the strict imposition of traditional Islamic laws, rigid moral codes, and specific cultural or gender roles. These groups may not necessarily advocate for armed violence but reject progressive interpretations of the religion.

Many scholars, academics, and members of the Muslim community reject or criticize the term "radical Islam". Arguments against the phrase include: The term conflates devout, conservative Islamic practices with violent terrorism. Violent extremist groups represent a tiny fraction of the global Muslim population, making the term unrepresentative of Muslims as a whole. It blurs the line between political activism, fundamentalist beliefs, and criminal violence. So they say!

However, several themes in the Quran fundamentally diverge from modern Western cultural norms. These differences centre on concepts of gender roles, individual liberty, and moral frameworks, contrasting the Quran's absolute, divinely ordained laws with secular, progressive Western values.

The primary issues that clash with contemporary Western culture include:

- **Intolerance of other religions:** There are three specific verses in the Quran that contain variations of the explicit command to "kill them wherever you find them", which is murder justified. However, depending on how text counters compile verses related to warfare (jihad) or fighting (qital), some critics identify up to 100+ verses that deal with armed conflict against non-Muslims. The Quran also states that after an infidel is killed, his non-Muslim women (wife (and daughters)) marriage to the infidel is considered annulled. They can then be distributed among the Muslim men as a captive/slave, and ownership entitled that owner to a conjugal relationship (legal rape).
- **Gender roles and equality:** While the Quran grants women specific civil and economic rights (like property ownership and inheritance), it outlines different societal roles for men and women. It upholds traditional patriarchal structures, such as distinct divisions of responsibility and authority within the family unit.
- **LGBTQ+ and Marriage:** The Quranic narrative views marriage exclusively as a heterosexual union and strictly prohibits same-sex relationships, traditionally punished by severe whipping (caning), imprisonment or throwing the offender off a tall building to his/her death. This directly contradicts the Western cultural and legal embrace of LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage.

- **Personal Freedom and Expression:** Western culture places a high value on individual liberty, which includes the freedom to criticize religions, abandon one's faith, or adopt secular lifestyles. The Quran emphasizes communal submission to divine law and heavily discourages or condemns actions like apostasy (abandoning Islam, which is punishable by death) and blasphemy.
- **Sexual Ethics and Modesty:** The Quran advocates for strict sexual modesty (such as prohibitions against pre-marital relationships) and mandates specific dress guidelines, punished by severe whipping (caning), imprisonment or beheading. This contrasts with the highly permissive and individualistic nature of Western social and dating cultures.
- **Financial and Legal Practices:** The Quran expressly prohibits *Riba* (usury or the charging of interest on loans), which clashes with the foundation of Western capitalist and modern banking systems. Additionally, while rarely practiced in most Muslim-majority nations today, the Quran includes penal codes (like corporal punishments for theft or adultery) that are widely viewed in the West as severe.

Ultimately, these ideological differences reflect a fundamental contrast between secular Western liberalism—which prioritizes human autonomy—and the Quranic framework, which emphasizes moral boundaries and obedience to divine commandments.

How many countries has radical Islam destroyed in Africa and the Middle East?

Radical Islamist insurgencies have contributed to the severe destabilization or collapse of approximately 7 to 8 countries across the Middle East and Africa. Rather than a sudden total wipeout, "destruction" in this context refers to prolonged state failure, massive displacement, and the loss of central government control over large territorial swathes. The regions and/or countries most deeply affected include:

In the Middle East, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and related groups caused catastrophic civil conflicts and infrastructural ruin. Much of Syria was decimated and fragmented following the rise of ISIS and subsequent multi-faction civil wars. The Iraqi state lost significant sovereignty and control to ISIS, leading to massive reconstruction struggles. Yemen was torn apart by internal sectarian conflict and ongoing civil war, with radical factions severely degrading infrastructure and basic governance. Lastly, Libya, following the 2011 collapse was overrun by warring militias and various jihadist factions, resulting in enduring power vacuums.

In Africa, in recent years, the "centre of gravity" for global jihadist violence has shifted heavily from the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa. Somalia faced decades of persistent state failure, with central governance continually undermined and the capital regularly attacked by the militant Islamic group Al-Shabaab. Large portions of Mali have been overtaken by militant Islamist groups such as JNIM, contributing to the collapse of state authority and the rise of a military junta. In Burkina Faso, the country was heavily impacted by militant groups, leaving the state unable to secure large swaths of its territory and displacing millions. In Nigeria, while the state has not entirely collapsed, radical groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP have effectively taken over local administrations and caused widespread devastation in the northeastern and northwestern parts of the country.

Do we have radical Islam in South Africa?

Yes, radical Islamist elements exist in South Africa, functioning primarily as logistical, financial, and recruitment hubs for international terror networks rather than posing an immediate, large-scale domestic insurgency threat.

The primary manifestations of radical Islam in the country include:
International bodies, including the United States Department of the Treasury and the Financial Action Task Force, have repeatedly designated South Africa-based individuals and entities for acting as financial conduits for Islamic State (ISIS) affiliates across Africa.

Localized militant cells have emerged over the years. Notably, a Durban-based ISIS-linked cell led by Farhad Hoomer was implicated in extortion rings, kidnappings, and attacks on local Shia mosques. Hoomer attempted to register a political party named the "Islamic State of Africa" to bring Sharia law to South Africa, but it was rejected by the Electoral Commission.

In the 1990s and 2000s, radical groups like Qibla and PAGAD (People Against Gangsterism and Drugs) engaged in vigilantism, urban terrorism, and bombings. While much of this original militancy has dissolved or shifted focus, some networks still harbour extremist ideologies.

Islamic State (ISIS)

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is a transnational Salafist jihadist militant group is actively operational in South Africa, primarily functioning as a vital financial hub, logistical base, and recruitment centre to support its networks across Africa. While South Africa rarely experiences the large-scale, territory-holding militant violence seen in parts of the Sahel or Mozambique, the country hosts active ISIS cells and operatives.

Local operations and their impact on the country are structured through several key activities:

South Africa serves as a critical conduit for moving money from global ISIS leadership to active operational affiliates in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mozambique, and Somalia. In response to these networks exploiting the country's formal and informal financial systems, the United States Treasury has repeatedly issued targeted sanctions against South Africa-based ISIS financiers and their front companies. This massive vulnerability in countering terrorist financing contributed directly to South Africa being placed on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) "grey list".

Local ISIS cells use organized criminal activities within South Africa to generate revenue. Operatives frequently rely on robberies, extortion, and high-profile kidnap-for-ransom schemes targeting wealthy businessmen. For example, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) authorised terrorism-related charges against a syndicate operating a fake "Sharia Court" in Johannesburg, exposing how they used religious dispute-resolution frameworks as a front to extort local business owners and fund their activities.

Operatives use South Africa's relatively open infrastructure to facilitate the movement of foreign fighters. Local cells recruit members from within South African communities and dispatch them to training camps or active conflict zones on the continent. Intelligence experts have highlighted reports of discrete training facilities and safe houses functioning within South Africa's borders.

Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʾIslāmiyyah (HAMAS)

Hamas, a Palestinian nationalist and Islamist political organization, and militant group, that governs the Gaza Strip, is operational in South Africa, but its operations differ completely from those of ISIS. Instead of running underground militant cells or carrying out domestic terror attacks, Hamas operates as a legitimate political, diplomatic, and fundraising entity.

Because South Africa follows the United Nations Security Council list—which does not classify Hamas as a terrorist organisation—the group is legally permitted to establish a presence within the country's borders. Its operations in South Africa focus on several key areas:

Hamas maintains an official political and media presence in South Africa, including an established office in Cape Town. The group designates formal political representation for the region. Emad Saber serves as Hamas's official representative in South Africa and international relations director for East, Central, and Southern Africa. Hamas delegations frequently and openly visit South Africa to sign memorandums of understanding (MOUs), attend political conferences, and engage directly with ruling African National Congress (ANC) officials and other political parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

The South African government provides a highly permissive environment for Hamas officials. Following the October 7 attacks, South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) confirmed direct high-level telephone discussions with Hamas leadership. The state defends these interactions as necessary diplomatic channels to facilitate regional dialogue and coordinate humanitarian aid for Palestine. Furthermore, the government explicitly declared it has no legal mandate to track or restrict the presence of individual Hamas members domestically.

Local operations rely extensively on established civil society groups, religious organizations, and solidarity campaigns. Pro-Palestinian groups and prominent religious figures routinely host Hamas leadership, issue joint communications, and mobilize public backing. Security think tanks note that these deep structural ties allow Hamas-linked networks to comfortably engage in domestic advocacy and fundraising campaigns.

South Africa’s open embrace of Hamas has drawn severe criticism from domestic opposition bodies, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and Western allies like the United States. International policy institutes have actively called for targeted US sanctions against South Africa-based Hamas representatives, warning that Pretoria's diplomatic alignments jeopardize its broader trade security and international banking standing

South Africa’s official and unofficial support of ISIS and Hamas

While South African authorities (supposedly) work alongside Western allies like the U.S. to dismantle ISIS financial networks, the domestic threat level remains a concern. Security analysts warn that South Africa's military involvement in counter-terrorism deployments within the Southern African Development Community (SADC)—such as fighting ISIS-linked insurgents in Mozambique—places the country at risk of retaliatory "lone wolf" or localized terror attacks.

South Africa's grey listing was not caused solely by SA’s alleged involvement with the Islamic State (ISIS), but the country's failure to investigate, prosecute, and dismantle terror financing networks—including those linked to ISIS

and other extremist groups—was a significant factor in the decision. South Africa's removal from the grey list does not necessarily mean the state no longer collaborates with or sponsors ISIS, nor does it mean that all terror financing or organized crime has been completely eradicated. That is highly unlikely in fact. Even so, South Africa officially exited the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list in October 2025. The delisting restored South Africa's global financial credibility, significantly reducing international transaction frictions and costs. It eliminated the heightened risk flags applied by foreign counterparties, paving the way for renewed foreign direct investment. However, although off the list, the FATF required sustained enforcement. South Africa's systems that will remain under observation in preparation for its next Mutual Evaluation concluding in October 2027.

Also, there is no confirmed data showing South African citizens currently operating as active combatants in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria or Iraq alongside ISIS and/or Hamas. Historically, between 60 to 100 South Africans travelled to the Middle East to join ISIS; however, due to combat casualties and about half of those who went to fight having returned home, there are believed to be virtually no active South African fighters remaining within ISIS or Hamas ranks today.

However, South Africa and Iran maintain a strong diplomatic and strategic alliance, heavily rooted in historical ties dating back to the anti-apartheid struggle. Despite facing severe international pressure and economic friction, particularly with the U.S. and Israel, South Africa has refused to cut ties with Tehran, prioritizing an independent foreign policy and BRICS solidarity. Iran as is known and designated is a state sponsor of ISIS, Hamas and Hezbollah.

Pakistani groups

Estimates of the Pakistani population in South Africa by community leaders suggests the number is around 200,000. Located mainly in Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Pretoria, they are mainly engaged in spaza shops and other community businesses.

There is no verified, overtly operational "radical Pakistani group" engaged in terrorist activities in South Africa or internationally. However, local and international intelligence agencies have documented substantial links between South African criminal networks and radical Pakistan-based groups, primarily revolving around terror financing, document fraud, and logistical hideouts.

Rather than executing violent insurgencies within South Africa, radical networks tied to Pakistan use the country as a rear-base of operations. This presence manifests in several specific ways:

Historically and currently, international terror financing networks utilize South Africa's financial system to move capital back to major extremist groups based in Pakistan.

Multiple US Treasury actions and intelligence probes have targeted individuals in South Africa who actively funded and facilitated travel for recruits to train in radical camps situated along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

South Africa, alongside its BRICS partners like India and Brazil, has signed joint international declarations explicitly demanding stricter global action against prominent Pakistan-based extremist groups, specifically Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). This highlights Pretoria's recognition of the shared threat, even as it tries to police domestic nodes connected to these groups.

Where Pakistani networks do intersect with South African security concerns, the boundary between radical religious extremism and organized crime is highly blurred. Investigative bodies, such as the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), have extensively mapped how transnational Pakistani crime syndicates control a significant portion of the heroin trade flowing from Afghanistan through South Africa to Europe.

Funding Extremism via Crime: Security analysts note that the immense revenue generated by these syndicates via drug smuggling, human trafficking, and extortion is frequently funnelled into broader, transnational fundamentalist networks.

Radical or criminal operatives from South Asia heavily exploit South Africa's state infrastructure to remain undetected. Despite South Africa's Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Leon Schreiber's efforts to tighten down on documentation fraud, transnational syndicates frequently target the home affairs to acquire fraudulent identity documents, passports, and work visas. This allows foreign operatives from high-risk regions to move freely or blend into local expatriate communities without raising suspicion from counter-terrorism units.

There have been instances where unverified intelligence leaks created local controversy. For example, reports previously emerged alleging that a radical Pakistani sectarian group, Sipah-e-Sahaba, was running an underground network out of Lenasia, Gauteng. However, these claims faced severe backlash from the South African Press Ombud and local community leadership due to a lack of concrete evidence, illustrating that many assertions regarding specific Pakistani terror cells inside the country remain unproven or highly exaggerated.

Radical Islam's intent with South Africa

The primary intent of radical Islamic groups operating in South Africa is to use the country as a strategic financial and logistical hub, rather than a primary theatre for large-scale domestic attacks. These networks use South Africa's sophisticated economy and banking systems to generate revenue and move funds to militant affiliates across the continent.

Localized militant cells and facilitators raise money primarily through extortion, kidnapping-for-ransom, and robberies. These funds and procured equipment are then funnelled to broader, more active insurgent branches in countries like Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Somalia.

The country serves as a logistical conduit to move operatives across Africa. Radical groups exploit vulnerabilities in local security to establish safe havens, recruit vulnerable youths, and coordinate cross-border travel.

While historically viewed merely as a staging area, some militant cells have plotted attacks against Western and U.S. interests within South Africa, alongside local targets such as major businesses and places of worship.

Radical Islamic factions do not represent the broader, peaceful Muslim majority in South Africa. However, the severity of these networks has prompted significant international intervention.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury has repeatedly stepped in to sanction South African-based organizers, financial facilitators, and front companies linked to the Islamic State (ISIS) and Hamas. These international designations have increasingly pressured South African law enforcement and state security agencies to clamp down on terror financing networks and comply with international anti-money laundering standards.

Final say

Critics often highlight a perceived double standard in South Africa's foreign policy. The government has faced sharp domestic and international criticism for its aggressive legal actions against Israel while simultaneously maintaining warm relations with ISIS, HAMAS and the IRGC, who recently slaughtered between 30,000 and 40,000 of its young citizens in just two days. The SA government justifies its approach by emphasizing its doctrine of non-alignment and its focus on mediating disputes and ensuring humanitarian access to Palestinians. However, it is clear that its sentiments are skewed to the left, to radical Islamists who are quite happy to murder innocent people. The ANC sees them as "revolutionaries" fighting the legacies of colonialism, imperialism and white supremacy.

And yet, given their stated intent, the imperialists of today are the radical Islamists. Why? Because the duty of establishing a caliphate is – and has always been – known as a fard kifaya (communal obligation) in Islamic law. According to the Quran, Hadith, and centuries of Islamic scholarship, if this obligation is not fulfilled by some in the community, the entire ummah remains in a state of sin.

Thus, it is an inevitable reality that the radical Islamists in South Africa will want to turn this country into a caliphate. So, yet another cycle of violence will begin.