

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Are Muslims more violent? *by M. Steven Fish**

Are Muslims especially prone to violence? Few questions are of greater public interest. Yet our understanding is based largely on impressionistic evidence.

I recently published a statistical study that assesses whether Muslims are inclined to violence. Drawing on global data, I distinguish among three types of violence: terrorist bombings, major episodes of intrastate political violence and violent crime.

Terrorism in the contemporary world is a predominantly Islamist phenomenon. Between 1994 and 2008, 204 high-casualty terrorist bombings (defined as bombings causing 15 or more deaths) occurred in the world. Islamists were responsible for 125, or 61 percent, of these incidents. These attacks, if we include Sept. 11, 2001, caused 70 percent of all deaths; if we exclude 9/11, 59 percent of all deaths.

I use a restrictive definition of "Islamist" and exclude attacks against foreign occupiers and their perceived agents. To this end, I exclude all events in post-invasion Iraq from the data set, and I classify most attacks by Chechen separatists as cases of ethnonational rather than Islamist terrorism. Even under these restrictive conditions, the evidence shows that Islam has a terrorism problem.

The picture changes when we examine major episodes of intrastate political violence, which is distinct from terrorism. Terrorist incidents are discrete, one-off events, while major episodes of intrastate political violence take the form of civil wars, large-scale rebellions and sustained government repression. Many observers -- most prominently, the political scientist Samuel Huntington -- have argued that Muslim societies are inordinately susceptible to such violence. To test this hypothesis, I investigated the frequency and intensity of mass intrastate political violence between 1946 and 2007. In the world as a whole, there were 235 episodes. Summing up the body count in these episodes, the -- sobering and stunning -- statistic is roughly 21 million deaths.

Yet predominately Muslim countries were not the sites of a disproportionate number of episodes or deaths. In the 43 major countries with Muslim majorities,

0.65 percent of the population on average perished in major episodes of intrastate political violence. In the 128 countries where non-Muslims predominate, 0.72 percent died in such episodes on average. Statistical analyses confirm that there is no correlation between the percentage of a country's population that is made up of Muslims and the danger of death in civil conflagration.

When we shift attention to violent crime the picture changes again. To assess violent crime, I focus on homicide rates. Murder rates are measured in typical fashion, as the number of intentional homicides annually per 100,000 people. Global data on homicide are reasonably reliable and far better than data on other forms of crime. Murder is the one crime that is adequately grave that it normally is reported and recorded. Even when a person of inferior social status is murdered, the act typically causes serious loss to someone more powerful -- be he (or she) a parent, a spouse, or an employer.

The murder gap is immense. Murder rates average 2.4 per annum per 100,000 people in Muslim countries and 7.5 in non-Muslim countries. Murder rates such as are found in predominantly Christian Brazil (11), Russia (20), Mexico (13) and South Africa (48) are unknown in the Muslim world. The murder rate in the world's most populous Christian country, the United States, is 6. In the most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, it is 1; in Turkey, it is 4. Further statistical tests confirm what is obvious from these raw data: more Muslims, less homicide.

The findings have weighty implications. The predominance of Islamists among terrorists verifies what we might suspect from casual observation. Yet the finding that Muslims are not more prone to major episodes of intrastate political violence shows that one of the great obstacles to democratization, the danger of civil conflagration, is not especially acute in the Muslim world. Despite high-profile civil conflicts in predominately Muslim societies such as Sudan and Algeria, on a global scale Muslims are no more likely to suffer mass intrastate political violence than are non-Muslims. Finally, the evidence on homicide reveals that non-Muslims have something important to learn from Muslims. What makes Muslim societies less murder-prone? Greater authoritarianism in Muslim societies does not explain the Muslim advantage, since my statistical analyses show that level of democracy does not influence murder rates. Social scientists have not yet closely examined why Muslims are less likely to commit murder, but it is a question that we would be wise to investigate.

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