

The Influence of Demographics, Media Use and Islamic Religious Orientations on Attitudes Toward U.S. Military Action in the Middle East

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Abstract

The attacks in America on September 11th 2001 spawned many reactions that reverberated through all corners of the globe. In the history of civilization the world has never focused so intensely on a religion to help it understand what so tragically happened on the morning of September 11, 2001 in the US cities of New York and Washington. This study aims to examine the relationship between religious orientation, media use and attitudes toward the United States. The author used a web based survey on a sample of respondents from the Middle East, the US and South East Asia. Results indicate no differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, but a significant difference between politicized Muslims and non-politicized Muslims.

Introduction

Ever since the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent actions that followed, like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, public opinion in the Muslim world has shifted widely from feelings of sympathy to feelings of animosity as reported by many western and regional news outlets.¹ While this assessment may be true from a casual observer's point of view, little empirical work has been done to ascertain the dynamics of shifts in public opinion in the Islamic world when it comes to views about the role of the United States in the region.

It is worth noting that while the official response from almost all Arab and Islamic countries was one of condemnation of the September attacks and support for America in its fight against terrorism, some public opinion polls in the region show different results. For example, a controversial Gallup poll conducted in Kuwait in late 2001 revealed that 36% find the terrorist attacks on New York City's World Trade Center were "morally justified," while 41% have an "unfavorable" opinion of the United States.² A similar poll conducted in Lebanon showed that 62% find the US military action in Afghanistan was "unjustified".³ Western observers took these varying results as indications of the huge disparity between Arab peoples and their governments. Others pointed at the complex interplay of religion and politics in the Muslim world.⁴

The general aim of this study is to ascertain the empirical dimensions of public opinion in the Muslim world towards the United States. Furthermore, the role of mass media in shaping public opinion is also examined, especially in light of the profusion of new media such as the Internet and its offshoots of various mobile communication technologies. These technologies have reshaped the landscape of media consumption not only in the Muslim world, but also around the kaleidoscope of cultures that is our world today.

Explicating the theoretical dimensions upon which public opinion is based is not an easy task, especially when opinion is in large part shaped by deeply held and revered religious beliefs. One has to tread delicately in a path which forms a crossroads of the empirical and the sacred. Yet, this work needs to be done because of its importance to understanding matters such as opinion formation.

This study is an attempt to empirically test the interaction between belief system and mass media use with regard to the view of "the other", which in this case is the Muslim world versus "the other" as represented by United States of America. There is no shortage of studies focusing on the West's view of Arabs and Muslims,⁵ but very few have been done to examine the view of Arabs and Muslims of the West.

Research Problem

Against this backdrop three serious questions arise: 1) why do Muslims feel this way toward the United States? 2) Why is Muslim public opinion so much at variance with the official position of Muslim governments? And, 3) what role, if any, do the mass media play in shaping Muslim opinion? To shed some light on these complex questions we examine recent literature on the relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world.

Literature Review

To what extent do religious orientations account for variance in political attitudes in the Muslim world? Two different bodies of scholarly research may be consulted for possible answers, and findings from this study may contribute to each of them. The first looks at the relationship between Islam and politics, focusing mostly on matters of doctrine and political thought. The second consists of empirical studies that assess the impact of religion and religiosity on a range of political attitudes in Western countries.

There is much discussion, and considerable disagreement, about the relationship between politics and Islam. Despite the fact that much of it is based on stereotypes, questions about the influence of Islam are appropriate. There is a significant historical relationship between religion and politics in the Muslim world, reflecting Islam's attribute as a religion of laws governing societal organization as well as individual morality.⁶ Thus, as pointed out by a recent study, Islam plays a significant role in shaping political culture, with no Middle Eastern Muslim country able to break away from its overarching reach. Indeed, this analysis continues, the intersection of culture and politics may be more pervasive than in other [non-Islamic] contexts.⁷

Furthermore, Islam has become increasingly influential in the cultural and political lives of its followers in the last quarter-century. On the one hand, new Muslim associations, welfare organizations, financial institutions, and media have emerged, accompanied by a sharp increase in such expressions of personal devoutness as mosque attendance and public prayer. On the other, Islam has become a central issue in debates about how the Muslim world should be governed.⁸ Campaigning under the banner "Islam is the solution", Islamic political groups have had notable success in attracting new followers, including younger individuals, women, and many well-educated people.⁹

Developments in the Arab world since 2011, such as the so called "Arab Spring", have thrust Islamist governments into the political theater. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, won the presidency in 2012 with Mohamed Morsi as their representative. However, their hold on power did not last more than one year as the president was toppled by the army after popular protests asking him to resign.

But, what are the empirical connections between religious orientations and politics in the Muslim world? A small number of studies have examined these connections with data from Western countries. Results from these studies are not entirely consistent. But this body of research does offer evidence about how religiosity impinges on political attitudes.

Results from US data show that strong religious attachments are associated with more conservative political views. Several studies reported, for example, that personal religiosity is strongly and positively correlated with a conservative stance on issues of public policy, especially when these issues involve an ethical or moral dimension.¹⁰ Other studies, also using U.S. data, reported that religiosity, defined in terms of Biblical literalism and a tendency to seek religious guidance, is positively related to anti-Communism and higher levels of support for military and defense-related spending.¹¹ Survey research in the U.S. has also shown these hawkish foreign policy attitudes to be more prominent among those with strong Evangelical beliefs.¹²

Conversely, European data show that greater religiosity was positively related to higher levels of internationalism, and specifically with more support for European integration and for aid to developing countries. In his study, for example, MacIver (1989) found that religiosity was represented by the degree to which respondents said that religion was important in shaping their personal outlook.¹³ Another study based on survey data from twelve European countries found a significant positive correlation between religiosity and support for military security in three countries, a direct but negative correlation between these variables in two countries, and a positive but indirect correlation in seven countries.¹⁴

Another observation which is supported by some evidence is that the explanatory power of religion may vary as a function of demographic characteristics. For example, a study using data from several European countries reported that religion is a more robust predictor variable among women than among men, seemingly because women are more religious and are thus more likely be influenced by their religious edicts as they understand them. The authors postulate that the higher level of religiosity among women helps to account for their greater conservatism compared to men.¹⁵

Research conducted in the Middle East found that religiosity exhibits a very strong negative relationship with support for Arab-Israeli peace. In other words, respondents are much less likely to support peace and/or the normalization of relations with Israel if religion plays a more prominent role in their lives.¹⁶ Other studies discovered the existence of two separate dimensions of religiosity in Islam, a personal dimension and a political one. The personal dimension which was called 'attachment to Islam' bears no relationship to attitudes about the

Arab-Israeli conflict. The political dimension, however, was negatively related to a position of peace with Israel. Furthermore, the same researcher found that the bivariate correlation between support for political Islam and personal religiosity usually weak and in some cases virtually non-existent.¹⁷

Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine the influence of demographics, media use and Islamic religious orientations on attitudes toward international conflict using data collected from an online survey. More specifically, this research attempts to answer these questions:

- 1 - What is the relationship between demographics and attitudes toward U.S. military action in the Middle East?
- 2 - What is the relationship between religiosity in Islam and attitudes toward U.S. military action in the Middle East?
- 3 - Do media use patterns account for any of the variance in attitudes toward U.S. military action in the Middle East?

Method

The present study relied on a web-based survey of Internet users in the Middle East and around the world. Web-based surveys have been used in a variety of studies and have proven to be a valuable data collection method.¹⁸ Chief among its advantages are design flexibility, global reach, anonymity and low cost. However, web-based surveys do present some limitations that researchers should be aware of. These include the generalizability of results and the possibility of multiple responses from a single person.¹⁹ Comparability of methods is another issue that we need to be aware of. One way to validate a method is to compare it to other methods that are accepted within the research community. Since it is almost impossible to develop response rates to web page-based surveys²⁰, it is difficult to compare web page-based survey methods to traditional survey data collection methods such as postal mail and telephone surveys. Without an understanding of the size of the respondent pool in comparison to the size of the universe and the sampling pool, it is difficult to generalize research findings beyond the universe of those responding to the survey. With these caveats in mind, we proceed to a description of the research procedure.

To measure the study variables, a web-based survey was constructed and posted on the author's web page. There were two versions of the survey schedule, one in Arabic and another in English. Respondents were free to choose which one they wished to use. Before it went online, the survey was pre-tested on a number of people to assess its validity and comprehension

(for a discussion of survey web-design issues see Dillman; Couper et. al).²¹ Additionally, the pre-test was used to determine if the directions for completing the survey were clear. Minor adjustments were subsequently applied to the web page based on the feedback obtained from the pretest and the survey went online shortly afterwards. The final online form contained 22 multiple-choice items and required an average time of seven minutes to complete.

The survey was posted online on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in September, 2011. Respondents received a solicitation to participate via e-mail with a link to the survey web page. To maximize the number of respondents and to capitalize on a possible snowball effect, e-mails were sent to message board administrators, university web masters, online publications as well as individuals, in four geographical areas: North America, Europe, the Middle East and South-East Asia. They were asked to participate and alert others who might wish to participate by forwarding the e-mail invitation to them. This process yielded a non-probability "convenience" sample of 371 completed responses. The sample was non-probability because of the limitations of web surveys where anyone with an Internet access could participate regardless of location and time. The sample was 64% male and 36% female. The mean age was 34 years and the median was 31 years. 44% of the sample was single and 49% were married, while 6% reported 'other' on this item. 45% of the respondents had completed university, 38% had a master's degree or higher and only 2% had not completed high school. 77% completed the English survey and 23% completed the Arabic version. Finally, 64% reported they were 'Muslim' and 16% reported they were 'Christian' with the remainder distributed among other religions. Table 1 shows the reported nationality of respondents.

Table 1: Country of Survey Respondents

Country	Percent	n
Kuwait	32%	119
Malaysia	24%	88
USA	12%	46
Canada	5%	18
UK	4%	16
Sri Lanka	2%	9
Indonesia	2%	8
Other	19%	70

n = 371

The Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this analysis is attitudes toward the United States military actions in the Middle East in response to the September 11th attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. which came to be known as "The War on Terrorism" in U.S. popular media. These attitudes are measured by a scale composed on two inter-correlated items from the survey instrument. Table 2 lists the items used to construct these measures, all of which deal with how favorable or unfavorable one views the actions of the United States following the events of September 11th 2001.

Table 2

Items Used in Factor Analysis to Measure Attitudes Towards US Actions	
Item number	
1	- America's military action in Afghanistan is justified.
2	- Some of the money collected by Islamic charities goes to support terrorists all over the world.
3	- The attacks on New York and Washington are a direct result of America's policies in the Middle east.
4	- The attacks against America are somehow related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
5	- Money gathering by Islamic charities must be supervised by governments to insure that money doesn't go to the wrong people.
6	- The US-led attack on Afghanistan has nothing to do with the bombings of the World Trade center and the Pentagon.

Evidence in support of the validity and reliability of these measures comes from several sources. Face validity is high in all cases, and strong inter-correlations inspire confidence in reliability. This logic is further supported by the use of factor analysis; in each case, these items load highly on a separate factor when varimax rotation was applied to extract factors from a matrix of items. Two factors emerged from this analysis. The first factor represents a more favorable attitude toward the U.S. actions while the second factor represents a markedly more negative attitude toward these actions. Table 3 shows the factor solutions for this analysis.

Table 3
Factor Analysis: Attitudes Toward US Actions
(Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation)

Item Number	Factor 1: Pro US Ac- tions	Factor 2: Anti US Ac- tions
1	.81	-.28
2	.79	-.12
3	-.15	.83
4	.65	.18
5	-.54	.39
6	-.10	.85
Variance Accounted for	34%	28%

The Independent variables

As discussed, the present analysis seeks to determine the utility of religious orientations in accounting for variance in attitude toward the United States actions in the Middle East as part of its "War on Terrorism." The online survey contains several items dealing with Islam and Islamic attachments, which permits a more refined and multidimensional analysis of religious influences. Two variables represent two different dimensions of religiosity in Islam. The first variable is referred to as personal devoutness and the second variable is called socio-political Islam. Below is the operational definition of each of them.

Personal devoutness

Conceptually, personal devoutness revolves around aspects of worship and religious practice which are not directly related to politics (e.g. fasting). To represent this concept an additive index was constructed from three items, the number of Quranic verses memorized, the frequency of fasting outside of Ramadan, and the number of times a person performed umra (small pilgrimage) to Mecca.

Socio Political Islam

This variable represents the relationship between religion and socio-political life and includes support for Islamic political movements. Empirically it is the result of a scale consisting of five items. Factor analysis has been employed to identify the dimensionality of this scale. Factor analysis provides conceptual guidance and also has statistical and methodological advantages. One the one hand, it contributes to parsimony and the clarity of the meaning

of a variable. On the other hand, it increases the confidence in the reliability and validity of the items selected to measure particular orientations. The factor analysis produced a single factor solution of five internally consistent items. Table 4 shows the results of this analysis along with the reliability coefficient for this particular scale.

Table 4
Factor Analysis: Socio-Political Islam
(Principal Component Analysis)

Item Number	Factor Loading
1	.67
2	-.83
3	-.87
4	.77
5	.72
Variance Accounted For	60%

Demographics and Media Variables

Four demographic items were used - age, gender, education, and income - to locate respondents' position in the social structure. Media related variables include the time spent (days per week and hours per day) with newspapers, television and the Internet. The frequency of exposure to television news programs and hard news in newspapers was used to measure international affairs exposure through a specific channel.

Data Analysis and Results

As mentioned earlier, the main goal of the present study is to determine the effects of demographics, religiosity and media use on attitudes towards the U.S. actions in the Middle East a decade after 9/11/2001. Regression analysis was employed as the primary method of statistical analysis to accomplish this task. Demographic variables were entered as a single block to represent the baseline model. Thereafter, religion and media use variables were entered as separate blocks after controlling for the baseline model. This was done both to address the problem of multicollinearity through statistical controls and to assess the explanatory power of Islamic attachments relative to that of other factors. Table 5 shows the results of this analysis.

Table 5
Predicting Attitudes Towards US actions - Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	Anti US Actions		Pro US Actions	
BASELINE MODEL	Beta	R2	Beta	R2
Age	0.19		0.06	
Sex	-0.19		0.03	
Education	-0.01		-0.05	
Income	-0.19**	.06**	0.34**	0.12**
INCREMENT BEYOND BASELINE				
Religion				
Muslim	-0.03		-0.04	
Sociopolitical Islam	0.19**		-0.49**	
Personal Islam	-0.07	0.03	-0.13*	0.27**
Media Variables				
Internet Use	-0.12**		0.01	
Television Exposure	0.00		-0.02	
Newspaper Exposure	-0.03		-0.00	
Television News	0.14**		0.11*	
Newspaper World News	-0.14*	0.08**	-0.00	0.01

NOTE: Cell entries are beta weights and incremental R2 after controlling for demographics. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. n = 371

Looking at table 5 we notice several things. First, being a Muslim alone does not account for any of the variance in our dependent variables. Muslims do not differ from non-Muslims in their attitudes toward the U.S. actions in the Middle East. Second, among those who are Muslim, sociopolitical Islam is significantly related to attitudes toward the U.S. actions in the Middle East. More specifically, having strong sociopolitical Islamic attachments is a significant predictor of holding anti-U.S. attitudes. The same variable is also a strong negative predictor of holding pro-US attitudes adding further confirmation to the strength and direction of this relationship. In other words, respondents are more likely to be anti-US actions if they favor a prominent role for religion in political and public affairs, if they support Islamic political groups, or if they feel that "Holy Jihad" is every Muslim's duty. Indeed, these relationships are always stronger than those involving any other independent variable except income.

Third, Islamic devoutness does not bear a significant relationship to holding anti-U.S. feelings, but it does have a significant, albeit weaker, negative relationship towards holding pro-U.S. feelings. In other words,

Muslims who report high levels of religious devotion in their personal lives do not possess anti-U.S. attitudes anymore than those that report lower levels of religious devotion. Conversely, those who exhibit high levels of religious devotion are less likely to hold pro-U.S. attitudes than those with lower levels of religious devotion.

Fourth, media-use variables, as a block, are strongly related to the anti-US actions factor, but not to the pro-U.S. factor. Heavy Internet users are more likely to reject anti-U.S. attitudes than light Internet users. This could be due to the fact that heavy users are primarily located in the United States and Western Europe where Internet access is affordable. This idea is supported by the similar relationship income has with this variable. A more interesting finding can be seen in the relationship between exposure to television news and attitudes toward the fight against terror. Television news exposure is a strong positive indicator of holding anti-U.S. sentiment. Those who are heavy consumers of television news have decidedly more anti-U.S. attitudes than those who watch less news. Curiously, the same relationship exists between television news exposure and pro-U.S. attitudes. It would appear that television news exposure is related to holding strong attitudes toward this issue, as opposed to apathy or indifference. Newspaper reading has the opposite effect. People who are heavy readers of world news are less likely to be critical of US military action in the Middle East.

Discussion

The first of these findings is interesting insofar as it suggests that attitudes toward this issue are not organized along a Muslim/ non-Muslim divide. It suggests that when it comes to attitudes toward the fight against terrorism, it is not Islam against the rest of the world. This finding is at variance with the arguments advanced by some scholars, to the effect that Islam spawns militant attitudes and hostility towards the West and accordingly pushes toward international confrontation.²² The so-called “clash of the civilizations” thesis, for example, contends that Islam is a force for conflict among peoples and countries.²³

The second finding seems to lend support to the argument that political Islam, while related to the religion of Islam, is something that is conceptually different. Support for Islamic movements and political ideology is associated with anti-U.S. attitudes. But the basis of such support is, to a considerable extent, political, as much as or often more than it is religious. This is supported by the third finding which shows that Islamic devoutness is not related to having anti-U.S. feelings. So it is quite conceivable that a person is a devout, practicing Muslim, yet still supports the United States in its fight against

terrorism. Similar findings were reported by Tessler and Nachtwey.²⁴ In their investigation of Islam and attitudes toward international conflict the authors found no relationship between attachment to Islam, defined in terms of piety and observance, and attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Media use variables produced mixed results. Heavy exposure to television news was a strong indicator of both favorable and unfavorable attitudes toward the US actions in Afghanistan. This suggests that people with strong feelings on either side of this issue tend to be heavy watchers of television news. Because television brings images of dramatic war events into the homes of millions of people on a daily bases, it may tend to elicit emotional responses to these events regardless of one's stand on the issue. The same is not true of newspaper reading. Heavy newspaper readers tend to be supportive of US military actions in Afghanistan. Previous research in the United States has shown that newspaper reading had a greater impact than television viewing on the level of political information.²⁵ In a cross national study, Miller and Asp found that newspaper reading was more strongly associated with several measures of information holding than was watching television news.²⁶ This discovery confirmed the great uniformity of findings regarding the superiority of newspapers over television in conveying political information.²⁷ One is therefore tempted to conclude with extreme caution that having more information about the issue of Afghanistan leads to a more supportive stance towards the United States.

It should be noted the findings are very limited and cannot be generalized to the entire Islamic world. Having said that, this study serves as a useful pilot for a more comprehensive one which would include a more representative sample of all Islamic countries and peoples. In the current sample around 60% are from Kuwait, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. These do not represent the Islamic world in its entirety. This is due to the self-selection inherent in this type of electronically bound sample. As a result, respondents from countries with limited Internet access are not well represented. Future studies need to take this shortcoming into account and make corrections for it.

Conclusion

The principal goal of this study is to assess the impact of religious orientations on attitudes toward international conflict using online survey data. The results show an empirical distinction between personal and political dimensions of religion. Each one of these dimensions had a distinct relationship with attitudes toward the United States military action in Afghanistan. Specifically, support for political Islam is related to anti-American sentiment, while personal devoutness is unrelated to anti-US feeling, but it is negatively related to pro-US feelings.

The findings indicate that, being a Muslim alone does not predict attitudes toward the so-called "War on Terror" which is loaded with religious overtones. Furthermore, while religion influences political attitudes in the Islamic world, not all dimensions of religion are equally important. They also suggest a more focused conclusion about the kinds of religious orientations most likely to have explanatory power. Opinions and prescriptions concerning sociopolitical affairs appear to be more important than those pertaining to personal normative codes in shaping attitudes toward international conflict. This proposition offers a promising area for future research.

Beyond this, the present study has asked whether and with what theoretical implications media-use patterns influence attitudes toward US military intervention in Afghanistan. Given that this research is at an early stage, any serious response to this question is premature. However, results of this study seem to open up promising avenues worthy of future research focusing on the multidimensional nature of religious orientations and their effect on political attitudes and the role the media might play in this process. This type of research will be aided greatly by the use of web-based survey methods which offer many benefits including design flexibility, global reach, anonymity and low cost.

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