



# Are Muslim Countries More War-Prone?

In recent years, most civil wars have taken place in Muslim countries. Are Muslim countries more war-prone? Not necessarily, if we look at data for the whole period after World War II. But in the post-Cold War era, most wars are civil wars. Muslim countries have a disproportionate share of these – not because such conflicts have increased but mainly because other conflicts have declined. We list several hypotheses for why this pattern has emerged.

## Brief Points

- In recent years most civil wars have taken place in Muslim countries.
- Increasingly, civil wars involve Islamist insurgencies.
- Civil wars in Muslim countries have not increased dramatically in absolute terms, but they make up a larger share of all civil wars.
- Thus, civil wars in Muslim countries have become more visible in the overall pattern of armed conflict.

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### A striking finding

In 2012, there were six wars worldwide, in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. All of them took place in Muslim countries. Of the nine rebel groups in these conflicts, seven had an Islamist ideology.

After the end of the Cold War, religion has once again come to occupy a central place in the study of conflict. In this policy brief, we first calculate how many of the internal armed conflicts after World War II have occurred in countries with different dominant religions. We then look at the pattern over time for conflicts in Muslim countries and conflicts involving insurgents with an Islamist orientation. Finally, we discuss a range of possible explanations for the predominance of conflicts involving Muslims countries and Islamists in recent years.

### Religion and conflict

We use data on religious belonging from a 2012 report from the Pew Research Center. The study is based on self-identification and seeks to assess the number of people who view themselves as belonging to a religious group. The study includes: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Folk religion. Based on these data, we code a country as 'Christian' if a majority of its population identify with that religion. We assume that the majority religion is unchanged for the period 1946–2013, although the exact percentage belonging to a given religion may well vary over time. More detailed data on the majority religion for all countries can be found in an online appendix.

We use a definition of armed conflict from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP): A contested incompatibility over government or territory, with at least 25 battle-related deaths in a calendar year. An intrastate armed conflict is one where a government is pitted against one or more opposition movements. A civil war is an intrastate conflict with more than 1,000 battle deaths in a year.

Table I shows the absolute and relative incidence of intrastate armed conflict after World War II in countries with different majority religions.

Only Islam and Christianity are majority religions in a large number of countries. Thirty-six out of 50 Muslim countries (72%)

Majority religion	Number of countries	No. of countries in conflict	%	Indep. years since 1946	Years with civil war	%
Buddhism	9	5	45	509	158	31
Christianity	110	56	51	5789	584	10
Folk Religion	3	1	33	148	10	7
Hinduism	3	2	67	181	70	39
Islam	50	36	72	2491	502	20
Judaism	1	1	100	67	64	96
Unaffiliated	6	1	17	312	8	3

Table I. Religion and the absolute and relative incidence of internal armed conflict, 1946–2013.

have experienced civil war and 56 out of 110 Christian countries (51%). Since Christian countries are more numerous, they dominate the global pattern of conflict for the period, even though Muslim countries are relatively more prone to conflict.

In the final three columns of Table 1 we look at the fraction of independent years in which countries in each group have experienced civil war. Judaist, Hindu, and Buddhist countries are most at risk overall. But these three groups are small (1, 3, and 9 countries respectively), so they count relatively little in the global pattern of conflict. Amongst the two largest groups, Muslim countries have a fraction of conflict years (20%) twice that of Christian countries (10%).

This pattern generally persists when we restrict the focus to conflict behavior after the end of the Cold War.

### Conflicts involving Muslim countries and Islamist rebel groups

In what follows, we focus on conflicts involving Muslim countries and Islamist rebel groups. Figure 1 identified the Muslim countries on the basis of the data cited in Table I. Specifically we ask whether or not the conflict occurs in a Muslim country and whether or not the conflict involves Islamist insurgents.

No less than 463 insurgent organizations are recorded in the dataset for the period 1946–2013. Many of them originate in and identify with ethnic or religious minorities. Although precise data are lacking, it appears that over 200 insurgent groups consist mainly of Muslims. Many of these operate in countries where Islam is not the majority religion (as in India and the Philippines), but a larger number are active in Muslim countries. There are few non-Muslim insurgent movements in

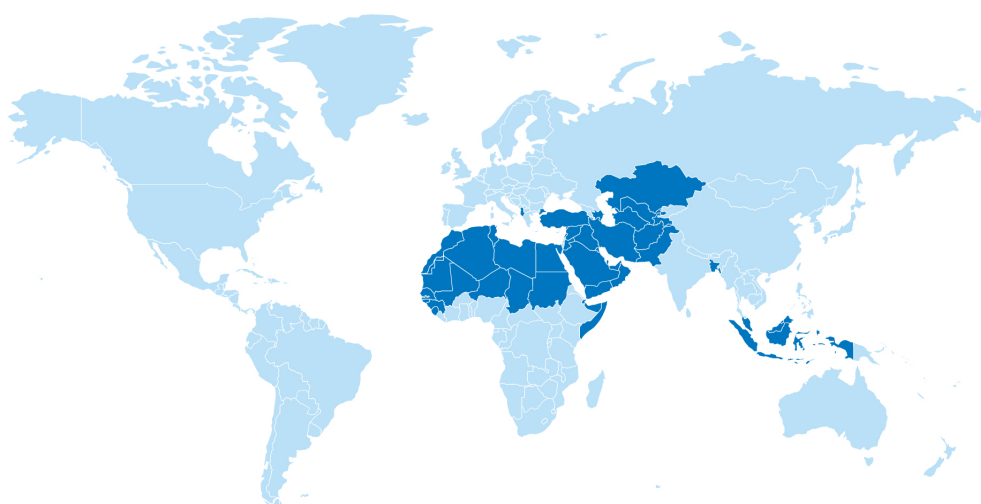


Figure 1. Overview of Muslim countries. Source of data on majority religion as in Table I.

Muslim countries – the movement in Sudan that fought for the independence of South Sudan, and eventually succeeded, is one of the best-known cases.

Muslim insurgents are not necessarily motivated by religion. We label Islamist insurgents as those groups that adhere to a religious ideology with the overall goal to strengthen Islam nationally or globally and who are willing and able to use violent means to attain this end. In the online appendix we provide a complete list of all insurgent groups in internal armed conflicts, with 67 groups marked as Islamist.

### Trends in conflicts

In Figure 2 we plot year by year the total number of civil wars as well as the number of civil wars in Muslim countries and civil wars involving Islamist insurgencies. The top curve shows the familiar increase in civil wars during the Cold War and a little beyond, the sharp decline afterwards, and the levelling out in the last decade.

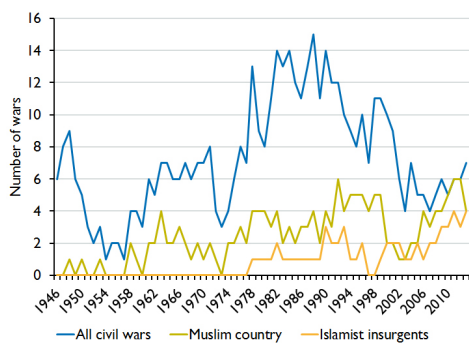


Figure 2. All civil wars, civil wars in Muslim countries and civil wars with Islamist insurgents, 1946–2013.

The curve for civil wars in Muslim countries shows a more modest increase during the Cold War than for the world as a whole, it peaks in the early 1990s, then decreases markedly, and finally increases again after 2001. The curve for Islamist insurgencies has also risen rapidly since 2001.

In the most recent years, almost all civil wars have taken place in Muslim countries and most civil wars involve Islamist insurgencies.

Looking at the last 50 years, we do not find a sharp increase in the number of intrastate armed conflicts or civil wars involving Muslim

countries. But since the overall number of civil wars decreased by about one-half after the end of the Cold War, the fraction of conflicts in Muslim countries has increased markedly, as shown in Figure 3. The increase is particularly dramatic after 9/11. As noted, all civil wars in 2012 took place in Muslim countries, and they all involved Islamist insurgents. The same was the case in 2011. For 2013 the fraction in Muslim countries was lower (60%), but still way above the fraction of the world's countries that have a Muslim majority, or the Muslim fraction of world population (both 23%).

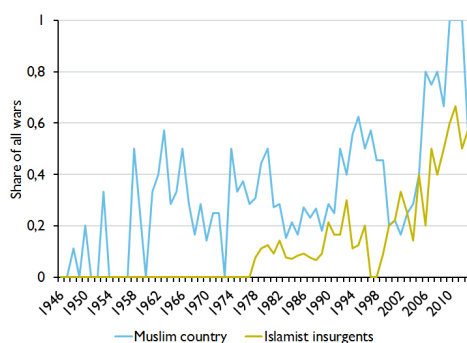


Figure 3. Civil wars taking place in a Muslim country and civil wars where the insurgents are Islamists, as a share of all civil wars, 1946–2013.

### The riddle of Muslim conflicts

Conflicts involving a Muslim country or Islamists in opposition have become an increasingly important part of the overall global map of conflict. This is not mainly because the absolute number of such conflicts has risen. In fact, during most of the Cold War, the number of conflicts in Muslim countries rose more slowly than the general trend.

The rise in armed conflict during the Cold War in part reflects the strongly increasing number of independent countries, and this applies to Muslim countries, too, but not quite to the same extent. After the end of the Cold War, the number of conflicts in Muslim countries first took a dip, and then increased again, producing essentially a flat trend for the whole period. Islamist conflicts have clearly risen since 2001, well beyond the level they occupied at the end of the Cold War.

Increasingly, the victims of conflict are now found in Muslim countries. There is great and understandable concern about terrorism in many Western countries. But the bulk of the

battle-related deaths are found in conflicts in Muslim countries, as shown in Figure 4. The figures include combatants as well as civilian victims.

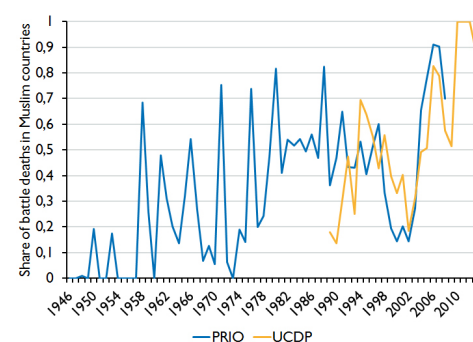


Figure 4. Share of battle deaths in civil wars occurring in Muslim countries. The figure shows two partly overlapping time series of battle deaths data, one from PRIO (1946–2008), the other from UCDP (1989–2013).

While the world as a whole is becoming more peaceful, as the *Human Security Report* by Steven Pinker, Joshua Goldstein, and scholars at PRIO and Uppsala University have argued, the Muslim world is not. Thus, the map of global conflict is increasingly colored by conflicts in Muslim countries and also by Islamist insurgencies. The islamization of conflicts in Muslim countries is probably contributing to an increasing severity and complicating conflict termination and settlement.

What can account for this development? One obvious and possible explanation is the history of colonialism, with its legacy of artificial boundaries imposed by European colonial powers. Territorial conflicts are generally harder to resolve than other conflicts. Another possible explanation is the interventionist policies of the West, and the US in particular, which has replaced seemingly stable dictatorships with unstable semi-democracies in a number of Muslim countries. The increase in conflicts in Muslim countries after 2001, in absolute terms but even more so in relative terms, suggests a counter-reaction in the Muslim world following the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another explanation is based on an essentialist notion of religion that sees Islam as a religion of war or at least more violent than other religions. However, there are violent and peaceful elements in virtually all religions. Thus, the real issue is why contestants

choose to rely on certain parts of the religious message. Some argue that the missionary character of Islam, as well as Christianity, makes for a more confrontational stance. Samuel P Huntington famously predicted that the East-West confrontation would be replaced by a 'clash of civilizations'. However, the dominant pattern now seems to be a clash within the Muslim world, although it spills over in violence in non-Muslim countries, too.

Conflicts with a religious dimension seem to be particularly intractable, but why does this affect the Muslim world more than others? One perspective is that Muslim countries have failed to adopt some of the changes that have led to a decline of violence in other parts of the world, such as secularization and increased respect for human rights. Others focus on how Muslim countries lag behind in economic and political development. Some of them are caught in a 'resource curse', with heavy dependence on export of raw materials and oil in particular. During a long period of high oil prices, oil-rich countries in the region have been able to channel resources to opposition movements that could undermine the position of their rivals in the region.

Earlier work at PRIO found that Islam did not make a significant contribution to explaining the frequent incidence of conflict in the Middle East, once regime type, level of development, and other variables had been accounted for. But if these factors are themselves influenced by religion, this does not prove that religion is unimportant. For example, scholars have found Muslim countries to be 'democratic underachievers', particularly with regard to women's rights. Others have argued that authoritarian governments and the suppression of women are more common in Arab countries than in other Muslim countries. The relationship between culture and democ-

racy can also change quite quickly, as evidenced in many Mediterranean Catholic countries from the mid-1970s onwards. Another PRIO study, that used a more fine-grained variable of religious belonging, found that Catholic countries engaged in more violent internal repression than Muslim countries in the period 1980–2000. But this study also included factors that may be part of the explanation.

We leave the argument there. The persistence of armed conflict in Muslim countries and an increased use of violence in many of these conflicts is a major tragedy, particularly for the civilian population. Accounting for these patterns is an urgent topic for scholars, and resolving religious conflicts is a priority task for policymakers. Hopefully, the data reported here can provide some pointers. ■

#### For further reading

de Soysa, Indra; & Nordås, Ragnhild (2007) Islam's Bloody Innards? Religion and Political Terror, 1980-2000. *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (4): 927–943.

Huntington, Samuel P (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Pew (2012) *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center ([www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf)).

Reichberg, Gregory M & Henrik Syse (eds.) (2014) *Religion, War, and Ethics: A Sourcebook of Textual Traditions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Svensson, Isak (2013) *Ending Holy Wars: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars*. Queensland: University of Queensland Press.

Additional documentation and further readings are provided in an online appendix posted at: [www.prio.org/datasets](http://www.prio.org/datasets).

#### Notes

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#### THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

#### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.