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Schisms: The Inherent Dangers of Religious Variance Within a Single Faith – An Analysis of Intra-State Conflict in the Modern World

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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between religious variance within a single faith and the frequency of intra-state conflict. Specifically, an emphasis is placed on Sunni and Shia conflict within the overarching umbrella of Islam. Utilizing the most recent empirical data in conjunction with other scholarly research, it can be hypothesized that the more diverse a state is within a single subset of one particular religion, the more frequent the incidence of intra-state conflict is as well.

Keywords

Intra-state conflict, religious diversity, civil wars, religious conflict, Sunni and Shia conflict

Disciplines

International Relations | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

Comments

Written for POL 103: Intro International Relations.

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International Relations Analysis Paper:

Schisms: The Inherent Dangers of Religious Variance Within a Single Faith - An Analysis of Intra-State Conflict in the Modern World

Ben Hazen

Political Science 103: Intro International Relations

Professor Hartzell

March 27th, 2017

I affirm that I will uphold the highest principles of honesty and integrity in all my endeavors at Gettysburg College and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect within and beyond the classroom.

Abstract:

This essay explores the relationship between religious variance within a single faith and the frequency of intra-state conflict. Specifically, an emphasis is placed on Sunni and Shia conflict within the overarching umbrella of Islam. Utilizing the most recent empirical data in conjunction with other scholarly research, it can be hypothesized that the more diverse a state is within a *single subset* of one particular religion, the more frequent the incidence of intra-state conflict is as well.

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Disciplines:

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Comments:

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Ben Hazen
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Professor Hartzell
Intro International Relations

There is little evidence to refute the insurmountable impact religion has had on the sociopolitical structure of the modern world. With roots dating back over 25,000 years, this notion of faith arguably remains the most polarizing topic within our shared global society even today. Entrenched deep within the overarching discipline of political science, and more specifically the study of international relations itself, an overwhelming emphasis has been placed on quantifying religion's impact on aspects of inter-state conflict. With that said, the international ramifications of intra-state discord must not be overlooked. In its vast entirety, recent empirical data begins to suggest *why* civil wars come to fruition. Still, these novel scholarly theorizations largely ignore a key attribute of the state in question. The current available research categorically disregards the importance of contrasting demographics within a nation. More specifically, there is an underwhelming attention to religious differences as being used to explain the inception of intra-state conflict.

I believe political scientists should grapple with the question of *how the overall religious composition of a country's population influences the onset intra-state strife?* More generally, one can ask *what role does religious variance play within state borders?*

Employing the second level of analysis, it becomes clear that religious variance within a state can and does in fact exist. To what extent these differences of faith impact internal conflict,

though, is yet to be revealed. The central question remains: *Are states with higher levels of religious diversity more likely to engage in civil war?*

Several ongoing intra-state wars, such as the crises in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, all bring a state's religious heterogeneity into the limelight. The Institute for Economics and Peace reiterates that "the past decade has seen a continuation of longer term trends in peacefulness, away from external conflicts between states, and towards more internal conflicts within states" (GPI Report 2016, 28). Taking this into consideration, the study also demonstrates how civil wars have the ability to disrupt the peace of other nations throughout the international community. Depending on a country's pre-existing allies and enemies, there is the potential for indirect conflict. For example, in 2016 the United States participated in arming the Syrian rebels to the great dismay of Syria's allies (i.e. Russia).

Additionally, it must be noted that "in recent years, organized religion has experienced a worldwide resurgence, and with it an increase in religiously inspired violence and war" (Toft 2007, 98). Due to this harsh reality, it is vital for policymakers to understand the implications surrounding religious diversity. The onset of religious intra-state war has the potential to impact a multitude of factors including, but not limited to, trade and economic aid. This occurrence is best demonstrated by what transpired in Iran after their revolution ending in 1979. While not fully an intra-state war between factions of the Islamic faith, scholars agree that Sunni versus Shia sentiment certainly impacted the conflict and its immediate aftermath. Following the Iranian Revolution, religious scholars of the Shia Islam faction deemed the consumption of caviar a halal (permissible) act. Before the war, the consumption of caviar was haram (forbidden), and because of this the Soviets profited greatly from "exploiting Iranian fisheries in the Caspian Sea"

(Chehabi 2007, 18). After the war concluded though, Iran began to take advantage of caviar by exporting the fine dining delicacy. This is just one of multiple examples of how the dominant religion, and changes within a nation, can directly modify preexisting economics.

With a recent spike in intra-state conflict, paired with religious violence, it is of paramount importance for political scientists to further investigate the correlation between modern civil wars and religious variance among the composition of a given state's population. The clear economic implications add an even greater urgency to this issue. As we begin to understand the root causes of conflict within a common civilization, we simultaneously develop a healthier perception of differing cultures. While there are certainly multifaceted pieces to the so-called “puzzle” of civil war, there is something to be said for attaining a more enhanced appreciation of differing religious groups as a whole. Accompanying this strengthened comprehension would come a newfound tolerance, more than likely aiding war stricken societies, in both the facilitation and attainment of peace. In order for this to occur though, a fundamental understanding of the relationship between religion and the incidence of intra-state war must be achieved.

Most scholars resoundingly agree that there is no *one* factor alone that contributes to the outbreak of civil war. Instead, historical antecedents point to “conflicting claims to resources based on interest groups, or language divisions” (Querol 2002, 29) as being large determinants of conflict. Speaking generally on international conflict, the Institute for Economics and Peace reiterates that “religion is not the main cause of war today” (A Global Statistical Analysis of the Empirical Link Between Peace and Religion 2014, 2). The report highlights that of the 35 armed conflicts from 2013, religious elements did not play a role in 14, or 40 percent” of them (A

Global Statistical Analysis of the Empirical Link Between Peace and Religion 2014, 2). Nonetheless, other experts in the field do place a larger insistence on examining how the treatment of religious minorities within a nation also may impact the *frequency* of intra-state war. Yasemin Akbaba and Jonathan Fox take into heavy consideration the relationship between “religious identity and religious discrimination” (Akbaba & Fox 2011, 807). Akbaba and Fox’s findings demonstrate that a “significant relationship between religious identities of the minority groups and discrimination” (Akbaba & Fox 2011, 815) is indeed prevalent in helping to explain the onset of religious intra-state conflict. Consequently, alternate conclusions regarding civil unrest can begin to be formulated.

Utilizing the most recent empirical data, in conjunction with previous scholarly theorization, a new and profound conclusion regarding intra-state conflict can be surmised. I hypothesize that the more diverse a state is within a *single subset* of one particular religion, the more frequent the incidence of intra-state conflict is as well. By way of explanation, the more schisms within a faith residing in a particular nation, the more likely civil war is.

Understanding “Religious intra-state Conflict”

To properly grasp the multiple pieces of religious intra-state conflict, there must also be a structural understanding of the term religion itself. Religion, not easily defined, includes several different components. Some of a religion’s distinguishing criteria include “a belief in a supernatural being (or beings); prayers and communication with that being,” and “a view that explains both the world as a whole, and a person’s proper role in it; a code of conduct in line with that worldview” (Toft 2007, 99). A combination of these factors, and several more, ultimately creates a “community bound by its adherence to [specific religious] elements” (Toft

2007, 99). Religious intra-state conflict arises when concerned ethnic parties, within these communities, that are organized in defense or promotion of their religious beliefs, “begin to feel threatened” (Bercovitch and Derouen 2005, 105). What occurs though when there are multiple religious groups consisting of this similar sentiment within a state’s borders?

What is a “Religiously Diverse” State?

The concept of “religious diversity” is also not easily defined as “social scientists have conceived of diversity in a variety of different ways” (Pew Research Center 2004, n.p). In order to accurately paint a picture of a state’s level of religious diversity, several different factors must be taken into consideration. For example, “the degree to which a society is split into distinct groups; minority group size, minority group influence, and group dominance” (Pew Research Center 2004, n.p), all play a role in distinguishing levels of religious variance from state to state. The most recent empirical study in regards to religious diversity, undertaken by the Pew Research Center, simplifies the issue by ranking countries on a ten-point scale. The study “looks at the percentage of each country’s population that belongs to eight major religious groups. The closer a state comes to having equal shares of the eight groups, the higher its score on a ten-point index” (Pew RDI Data Set 2014). Of the states currently engaged in civil war, all score extremely low on the scale (with the exception of South Sudan’s high RDI rank), as this finding points to a different commonality between them.

Upon strict analysis of the report’s data, it becomes clear that the states presently involved in intra-state conflict are not religiously diverse in the “traditional sense” of the word. Instead, these states seem to have higher levels of religious variance *within* the subset of one single religion. For example, Iraq, a state engaged in its second civil war in the last decade, scores an extremely

low total of 0.2 on the religious diversity index (Pew RDI Data Set 2014). The current Iraqi population is comprised of 99 percent Muslims. However, among that 99 percent, there is a further divide between followers of Sunni and Shia Islam. A different Pew Research study in late 2011, “found that 51% of Iraqi Muslims said they were Shia, compared with 42% saying they were Sunni” (Lipka 2014, n.p). In simplified terms, the current situation in Iraq finds ISIS, a Sunni extremist militant group, at war with the “Iraqi government and Shia militias” (Lipka 2014, n.p). Both groups are threatened by one another’s objectives and overall worldview. This current event is a commonality applicable to several of the other nations also involved in intra-state conflict, including Syria.

The Empirical Relationship Between Religious Diversity and Peace

It is vital to acknowledge that there is indeed a non-coincidental relationship between the *least* peaceful countries in the world, and their levels of religious diversity within the larger umbrella of a single faith. Synthesizing the most recent empirical data from the Pew Research Center and the Institute for Economics and Peace, it becomes quite evident that the most violent nations have a greater deal of *nontraditional* religious variance within their borders as compared to the least violent nations. According to the 2016 Global Peace Index Report, the world's six *least* peaceful countries are all engaged in some form of intra-state conflict (Institute for Economics and Peace Global Peace Index Report 2016). These states, consisting of Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen each have unique situations within their respective populations as they pertain to religion. Like Iraq, the nations of Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan all have a significant Sunni versus Shia divide, contributing to the civil unrest within their respective borders.

It must be recognized, though, that based on the two respective empirical reports, there is little to no correlation between *traditional* religious diversity, and the frequency of intra-state war. This fact is best demonstrated by Singapore, the most religiously diverse country in the world, also falling in the top fifteen percent of all other nations in regards to levels of overall peacefulness (Institute for Economics and Peace Global Peace Index Report 2016, 10 & Pew RDI Data Set 2014, n.p).

Conflicts Within The Same Religion

In his work, *“Religion, Politics and International Relations - The Rise of Religion and the Fall of the Civilization Paradigm as Explanations for Intra-State Conflict”* Jonathan Fox, explains that “conflict within factions of the same religion, are consistently more common than civilizational conflict” (Fox 2007, 361). Fox uses empirical data to demonstrate that “war between factions within the same religion—are consistently more common than civilizational conflict and became a majority of all conflict starting in 2002” (Fox 2007, 361), and that this is not “a post-9/11 phenomenon, but is, rather, the result of processes that date back at least to the late 1970s” (Fox 2007, 361). Fox explains that in recent years there has been a significant increase in Muslims fighting other Muslims. Again, this revelation is quite important because it hones in on the fact religious intra-state conflict does not necessarily have to be between those of different faiths. Instead, extreme hostility can be found within the subsets of a much larger umbrella.

Monica Duffy Toft posits that Muslim civilizations account for a majority of recent intra-state wars because “overlapping historical, geographical, and, in particular, structural factors” (Toft 2007, 97) have impacted the Islamic faith more so than others. In her work, *“Getting Religion?”*

The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War,” she clarifies this point, noting that “the geographic proximity of Islam’s holiest sites to Israel, large petroleum reserves, and jihad—a structural feature of Islam” can all be used in explaining “why so many civil wars include Islamic participants” (Toft 2007, 97). Although this is an important point, my hypothesis extends to all religions.

Islam is not unique in the sense that there is a fundamental divide within the faith as a whole. Christianity, for example, has similarly seen a great deal of conflict, as there are unquestionably different schisms within the central Christian ideology. For that reason, it would be ludicrous to insinuate that intra-state hostility with Christian implications has failed to exist. As a part of her study, Professor Toft analyzed all civil wars fought from 1940 to 2000 and concluded that in some capacity “Christianity was involved in 21 (50 percent) of the 42 religious civil wars, and 21 (16 percent) of the 133 civil wars examined” (Toft 2007, 113). Looking at Christian conflict from a more historical context, we must acknowledge that formative European lands were riddled with internal strife between the Protestants and Catholics, resulting in the 30 Years War. At heart, this conflict is reminiscent of the modern Sunni and Shia divide discussed earlier.

While the modern “state” was not recognized until after 1648’s Treaty of Westphalia, the basic assumptions of my hypothesis still apply. Similar to an original realist, I believe that human nature is largely unchanging, in the sense that, “religion is a central and, in many situations, the primary force that motivates, and moves” (Querol 2002, 31) us all. This key attribute has been the case since the derivation of faith itself, thousands of years ago.

The Effects of Religious Polarization

Professor Marta Reynal-Querol focuses on the importance of “religious polarization and animist diversity” (Querol 2002, 29) on the incidence of ethnic civil war from 1960 to 1995. Her work, *“Ethnicity, Political Systems, and Civil Wars,”* concludes that “religious divisions are more important than language divisions, and natural resources to explain social ethnic conflicts” (Querol 2002, 29). Like other scholars, Querol also points to the fact that “religiously divided societies are more prone to intense conflict” (Querol 2002, 29). While there is no specific reference to religious variance within a single faith, Querol focuses on how “religious identity is fixed and nonnegotiable” (Querol 2002, 29). Going back to the Sunni and Shia conflict, Querol’s opinion is certainly applicable. She notes that “disputes among identity groups based on their religious nature are particularly difficult to negotiate, raising the odds of violence” (Querol 2002, 29). Naturally, if these groups (Sunni and Shia) share *some* common belief, there is going to be a more religious polarization. Each group will denounce one another as “incorrect” or “fraud” likely increasing the possibility for intra-state conflict. The Pew Research Center supports this claim as a 2011 survey demonstrates that, “14% of Iraqi Sunnis say they do not [even] consider Shias to be Muslims” (Lipka 2014, n.p). This total is staggering, and certainly adds fuel to fire in Iraq, as it is quite evident “religion is a phenomenon that transcends simple identity” (Fox 2007, 379).

Contradictory Findings That Cast Doubt on My Hypothesis

Despite the obvious Sunni and Shia rift throughout the Middle East, there are studies that deemphasize the onset of intra-state conflict as being attributed to religion. In fact, many scholars maintain a stance that religion enacts the most minimal of influence on intra-state hostility.

Results from the 2014 Peace and Religion Report, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, directly challenge my hypothesis. According to the report, the demographic breakdown of Sunni and Shia within a country “is not necessarily a key determinant of peace” (A Global Statistical Analysis of the Empirical Link Between Peace and Religion 2014, 3). Instead, the report points to levels of corruption and the functionality of a state’s government as more likely factors to incite civil war. Referring to the Global Peace Index, the study points to the fact that “Qatar is the most peaceful country in the Middle East and North Africa region, while also having the same Sunni and Shia breakdown as the least peaceful country in the 2013 GPI, Afghanistan” (A Global Statistical Analysis of the Empirical Link Between Peace and Religion 2014, 13). Nevertheless, the report does indeed acknowledge that “countries without a dominant religious group are, on average, more peaceful than countries with a dominant religious group” (A Global Statistical Analysis of the Empirical Link Between Peace and Religion 2014, 2). The Correlates of War data set, pertaining to intra-state conflict, enhances this claim. Compiled by J. David Singer and Melvin Small, the data set demonstrates that there actually has been a dominant religious group involved in the most recent intra-state conflicts, such as the Zaidi Muslims in Yemen (Correlates of War Data Set 2010).

In Conclusion

It is quite evident that religion has an enormous impact in regards to how a state operates within their respective borders. In order to truly comprehend the vast implications of faith, the state must be analyzed according to the second level of analysis. Only when doing this does it become clear that religious demographics, specifically schisms within a single faith, do in fact increase the likelihood for intra-state hostility. World history, the treatment of religious

minorities, subsequent religious polarization, all paired with the last decade's Sunni versus Shia conflict, is best representative of this reality.

Despite the findings largely supporting my hypothesis, I do acknowledge that there is actually a myriad of factors that may contribute to the onset of civil war, as the Institute for Economics and Peace so clearly spells out. Although no single factor takes precedence over another in the explanation of intra-state conflict, religion (specifically religious variance) is perhaps the most complicated of them all.

To successfully complete my research, I had to embark upon quite an academic endeavour. After finally locating sources to support, and ultimately enhance, my hypothesis it became apparent to me that the field of international relations is ironically similar to any religion. Like that of a faith, international relations has many subgroups, or schisms embedded deep within it. I had no clue of how applicable sociology, anthropology, psychology, law, and various other fields were with respect to the discipline of IR as whole. These subgroups often contradict or refute one another, but may also share the same fundamental ideals, just as a religion might. Subsequently, it was a challenge to synthesize my findings into a coherent argument. I often found myself tweaking my stance until it evolved into its current, and final state. Nonetheless, it was a phenomenal experience as such a challenge was welcomed.

The Future

In order to combat the harsh treatment of religious minorities, and the frequent levels of religious conflict between factions of the same faith, education and communication are essential. It is a personal hope that in my lifetime, the incidence of intra-state conflict will decline due to an increased emphasis on peacebuilding. Creating new and improving upon the existing lines of

communication between hostile groups, is a beginning to this undoubtedly cumbersome task. As it is such a sensitive and often taboo topic, simply discussing religion has potential to worsen preexisting relations. For that reason, communication will remain they key to a peaceful future. With that said, I am cautiously optimistic for what is to come with regards to intra-state conflict.

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