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Issues in Quantitative Analysis and Security Studies Involving Muslims

Peter S. Henne¹

Abstract

There are very serious ethical and pragmatic issues in the quantitative and security study of Muslims. From an ethical perspective, many of these studies denigrate and stereotype Muslims. They also treat them as a problem to be solved, justifying and expanding US power. Pragmatically, it can be hard to collect detailed data on security issues in many Muslim countries, making conventional studies difficult. Yet, standard approaches to these problems are faulty. We cannot abandon positivist analysis, as well-done quantitative studies are actually the best tools we have to push back on negative stereotypes of Muslims. At the same time, we cannot ignore important security topics among Muslim states just because the data we have available is not ideal. Instead, I present a two-pronged approach that can address these issues without ignoring crucial aspects of international relations; scholars should follow best methodological practices to avoid ethical issues, and adopt new standards and novel tools to deal with imperfect data.

Keywords: *Muslims; Islam; quantitative research; security studies; ethics*

Quantitative and security studies are a dominant part of international relations. Influential studies on civil war, war initiation, alliance formation, and crisis escalation established many research programs in this sub-field. They touch directly on significant policy debates, providing an easy way for scholars to influence policymakers. Additionally, at a personal level, they are well-received by many scholarly journals, making them a good way for junior scholars to make a name for themselves.

Such studies seem like they should include numerous works on Muslim societies. Many of the most pressing security issues in the 21st century involve Muslims. From a conventional geopolitical angle, Iran's nuclear program continues to draw the attention of the international community, while its rivalry with Saudi Arabia risks war in the Middle East. Major terrorist threats emerge from and confront Muslim societies, including al-Qaeda and ISIS. From a broader definition of security, Muslims face discrimination and harassment throughout Western Europe and the United States.

Unfortunately, scholars run into significant problems when trying to conduct quantitative or security studies on Muslim societies and countries. Some of these are ethical. Quantitative studies risk generalizing and stereotyping Muslims, while security studies can present Muslims as threatening or a “problem” to be solved. There are also pragmatic issues. As many Muslim states are closed political systems, it can be difficult to gain data for studies, especially when the data is on security issues.

A few solutions have been offered to these problems. In response to the ethical issues, many scholars avoid quantitative methods, focusing on interpretive approaches to studying Muslims. Likewise, many security studies take a critical approach, focusing on the way Muslim-focused security studies serve US interests and demonize Muslims. These solutions helpfully force us to check our assumptions, but they ignore the benefit of positivist studies on these crucial issues. From a pragmatic perspective, many scholars recognize the issues in collecting security data in Muslim states and focus

¹ Peter S. Henne, University of Vermont, United States. E-mail: Peter.Henne@uvm.edu.



their attention elsewhere. This leaves us with a dearth of rigorous studies on security issues involving Muslims, and contributes to the Western bias in international relations.

In this article, I suggest two alternative solutions. While acknowledging the potential ethical issues with the quantitative security study of Muslims, I argue that these are the result of bad quantitative studies, not quantitative methodology itself. Using best practices in quantitative studies can actually prevent—rather than exacerbate—these issues. Additionally, I argue that scholars and editors should adopt new standards for both qualitative and quantitative security studies on Muslim states. Drawing on the latest advances in both quantitative and qualitative methods, we can transparently address the limitations in data on these topics while still studying these important areas of international relations. I discuss this through reference to methodological and philosophical works on the study of Muslims, as well as examples drawn from my work.

In this article, I discuss Muslim states, Muslim societies and Muslims generally. This is meant to be inclusive of the concerns this volume addresses. By Muslim state, I mean states whose population is majority Muslim; this does not refer to whether or not the state is officially Islamic. Muslim societies is a broader term, referring to any community of Muslims. There are potential issues with these terms, which I discuss below, but they are useful to scope this discussion. By security studies I refer to studies on the way states respond to threats against their territorial integrity or stability, as well as these threats themselves. Finally, I discuss positivist, interpretive and critical analyses. By positivist, I mean studies following mainstream social scientific standards. Critical and interpretive studies eschew such standards for alternate means of investigation (see (Jackson, 2011)).

I present my argument in four parts. First, I survey the ethical and pragmatic issues in the quantitative security study of Muslims. I then discuss common solutions to these issues, before discussing my own suggestions and providing some concluding thoughts.

Ethical and pragmatic issues in quantitative security studies on Muslims

Ethical issues in the quantitative security study of Muslims

Some of the ethical issues in quantitative and security studies are common to all social scientific study of Muslims. As Edward Said discussed in books like *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*, many modern scholars stereotype Muslims and present analyses with little direct knowledge of the societies they cover (Said, 1997, 2003 (1979)). The assumptions and generalities scholars draw on lead to inaccurate analyses of Muslims, and perpetuate images of Muslim societies as backwards or dangerous, as Sadowski discussed in the context of democratization (Sadowski, 1997). Given that quantitative and security studies are implicated in the same issues with scholarship that Said and others pointed to, these problems could easily extend to these studies.

There are other issues that arise specific to these studies. One is the risk of minimizing the complexity and diversity of Muslim societies. Muslim populations include Muslim minorities in the United States and Western Europe, religiously diverse countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and majority-Muslim states in the Middle East. Presenting analyses of “Muslims” or “the Muslim world” assumes a heterogeneity that does not exist and overlooks this great diversity. This can be seen in the debate over the “Muslim democracy gap.” As some scholars noted, the apparent exceptionalism of Muslims concerning democracy is really due to political conditions in the Middle East; ignoring diversity among Muslims obscured this (Stepan & Robertson, 2003). Beyond that, religious categories are contested and politically-charged concepts; calling a group “Muslim” may not be an objective statement, and may not reflect the realities of religious experience (Asad, 2003; Morgenstein Fuerst, 2014).



This potential issue can be seen in my book, *Islamic Politics, Muslim States and Counterterrorism Tensions* (Henne, 2017). In it, I analyze the reasons behind varying cooperation between Muslim states and the United States on counterterrorism. I include case studies of Pakistan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, but also conduct a quantitative study of all majority-Muslim countries. These range from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Malaysia. A critic could argue that there is little in common among these countries, while relevant countries are excluded based on my cut-off for “majority-Muslim.”

Additionally, these studies can denigrate Muslims. Many security studies on Muslims are an attempt to determine the relationship between Islam and things like suicide terrorism. Scholars have raised concerns that such a focus implicitly divides up Muslims into “good and bad” based on whether they fit with Western notions of behavior and belief (Mamdani, 2005). Similarly, some worry that the attempt to analyze the role of Islam in Muslim states’ foreign policies can present these states and societies as irrational and dogmatic (Shaffer, 2006).

This is also apparent in the response to one of my works. In 2012 I published an article on the effects of religious ideology on suicide terrorism in *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Henne, 2012). I attempted to differentiate between religious ideology, Islam as a religion, and Muslims as a people. Yet, while presenting this at an academic conference, a respondent raised concerns that the article could still present Muslims negatively. They argued that, no matter what terms I used, the article was still focused on Muslims, which was problematic.

Finally, such studies can serve US interests in a way that is harmful to Muslims. This was part of the argument of Said and those he inspired; the issue with many modern studies on Islam is not just that they generalize and stereotype Muslims. They are also closely connected with US power and the policies of the US government. This concern can be seen in some of the criticisms directed towards the late Bernard Lewis and his work with the US government (Cookson, 2018). Some have also worried that the democratic peace theory—a finding based primarily on quantitative studies—contributed to the Bush Administration’s desire to democratize Iraq (Owen, 2005).

Such concerns have been directed towards my work as well. I previously ran the Pew Research Center’s Global Restrictions on Religion project (Center, 2015). This project put out annual reports in which we quantified levels of religious freedom around the world and studied variations and trends across regions. Muslim countries—particularly in the Middle East—tended to have the lowest levels of religious freedom. While the Pew Research Center was not involved in policy analysis or advocacy, the reports were used by the US government and advocacy groups to make the case for religious freedom promotion. As a result, some have been critical of this project, as well as religious freedom promotion in general (Hurd, 2015).

Pragmatic issues in the quantitative security study of Muslims

There are also pragmatic issues when attempting to conduct security studies on Muslims, either quantitative or qualitative. First, data on political institutions—which are the basis for many influential quantitative studies—do not always capture variation among Muslim states. The vast majority of Muslim states are not democratic by most measures. That is not to say their political systems are identical, however. They vary from the paternalistic authoritarianism of Saudi Arabia to the mixed authoritarian-democratic system of Malaysia. Most quantitative measures of political systems do not capture these variations, limiting the ability of quantitative security studies to analyze Muslim states.

Additionally, it can be difficult to conduct cross-national studies on Muslim countries due to the relatively small number of observations. Many phenomena in international security—such as alliance formation or war initiation—are relatively rare (King & Zheng, 2001). This problem is accentuated when taking a sub-set of all states, such as studying only Muslim states. Quantitative security studies on Muslim states may thus be methodologically unsound, as scholars rely on a few events to drive their findings.

Granted, any sub-set of countries would run into similar situations. But scholars studying other parts of the world often rely on more detailed data on single countries or groups of countries to address this issue. This is not always possible in Muslim countries, however. Many Muslim countries have closed political systems. As a result it can be difficult to collect detailed data, especially on security issues. Government archives are not as available as they are for countries like the United States, removing an important data source for government deliberations and historical foreign policy. It is also difficult to conduct interviews in many Middle East countries on security issues. Of course, as I noted above, there is great diversity in Muslim countries, and many are very open societies. Unfortunately, the states that tend to be most crucial to international security studies—such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran—also tend to have closed political systems or social tensions that would make it difficult for researchers to collect data.

Existing solutions to these problems and the problems with these suggestions

There are thus very real ethical and pragmatic issues involved in quantitative and security studies on Muslim societies and states. While some scholars ignore these problems and conduct problematic and flawed studies, others have adopted several solutions. Some eschew quantitative methods for rich interpretive or critical studies. Others stick to conventional approaches in security studies, but avoid studying Muslim states. As I argue in this section, neither approach is effective.

One common approach is to adopt a critical approach in our studies. That is, if quantitative studies generalize and stereotype Muslims, we should not use methods that reduce diverse populations to ones and zeros. Likewise, if positivist security studies tend to denigrate Muslims, we should adopt critical lens that push back on the assumptions underlying these works. For example, some scholars have argued terrorism studies—focusing primarily on Muslims—is full of “epistemological, methodological and political-normative” issues, thus requiring a critical approach to this topic (Gunning, 2007). That is, instead of conventional positivist quantitative studies, these scholars push back on definitions and assumptions in mainstream terrorism studies. Others have applied the concept of securitization to Muslims, highlighting how Muslim communities have come to be seen as a security threat in Europe and elsewhere (Cesari, 2009). Still others have questioned the focus of many Western studies on Muslim women as a group that needs “saving” (Abu-Lughod, 2015).

By contrast, a common response to the pragmatic issues, at least implicitly, is to find topics more amenable to rigorous analysis. Terrorism studies includes many works on Muslims, as discussed above. Beyond that, however, many important areas of international security tend to ignore Muslim states. The Middle East has experienced both intense religious contention and numerous rivalries and conflicts, making it a ripe area for the study of Muslims and international security. Yet, there are relatively few international security studies on the Middle East. For example, *International Security*—one of the leading journals in this area—had only three articles specifically on the Middle East in the last four years. But two of those focused on external powers in the region, with the third a review essay on ISIS. And the major international security studies that do focus on Middle East states tend to either avoid or directly argue against the role of religion (Barnett, 1998; Ryan, 2009; Solingen, 2007;



Walt, 1987). Likewise, a major research program in international security is the study of international hierarchy. Muslim countries would seem to be ideal cases for this, as there are dense webs of exchange between them with informal status granting certain states influence over others (Bially Mattern & Zarakol, 2016; MacDonald, 2018). Yet, very few studies of international hierarchy look at Muslim states, focusing instead of the United States and Western Europe.² Of course, few scholars explicitly discuss why they did not study a region, but it is not hard to believe the data issues discussed above are part of the reason. Indeed, I have been counseled several times to shift the focus of my studies away from Muslim states to ones with more readily available data.

Thus, scholars have responded to the pragmatic and ethical issues with the quantitative and security study of Muslims in a variety of ways. While the concerns are apt, however, there are issues with these responses to them. First, I am skeptical that interpretive studies necessarily avoid all ethical issues or provide more accurate analyses of Muslim societies and states than do traditional positivist studies. Bernard Lewis—widely held up as the example of a dangerous, problematic, and inaccurate scholar of Muslims—was not a social scientist. His works tended to rely on expansive interpretation of religious texts and language. That is, in some ways he adopted the methods proposed by critical theorists. He obviously used them for different ends, and did not base his work on close contact with Muslim societies. But clearly avoiding positivist analyses is neither necessary nor sufficient for avoiding ethical issues in the study of Muslims. Indeed, some critical theorists have pointed out the ways critical studies on terrorism have inadvertently perpetuated the myths this approach hope to undermine (Toros, 2017).

Beyond that, quantitative analysis and rigorous qualitative studies can actually help address some of these ethical issues. Some of the more powerful responses to the claim that Muslims are inherently violent come from quantitative studies that rigorously tested this claim (Fox, 2000, 2002, 2003). Quantitative studies have also pushed back on essentialist claims that political repression, lack of support for democracy, and mistreatment of women are inherently part of Muslim culture (Hoffman & Jamal, 2014; Ross, 2008; Soysa & Nordas, 2007). Other studies have explored the roots of anti-Muslim attitudes and the ways American foreign policy can exacerbate instability (Bapat, 2011; von Sikorski, Schmuck, Matthes, & Binder, 2017)

The problem is clearly not quantitative studies; it is *bad* quantitative studies. A good quantitative study involves careful collection of data, an understanding of various confounding factors and biases in analysis, and an analysis that rigorous tests all possible hypotheses. Studies that do so provide a complex and nuanced set of findings that complicate simplistic over-generalizations and dangerous stereotypes. Moreover, the relatively universal set of standards scholars use to judge quantitative studies makes it easy to identify problems in bad quantitative studies and demonstrate their impact in follow-up studies.

Beyond this, while there is a risk of faulty studies due to the lack of good data on many Muslim states in security areas there is an even bigger risk of ignoring crucial aspects of contemporary international relations and perpetuating a Western bias in this sub-field. The political campaigns of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the ideological and geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Pakistan's sponsorship of religious militants are all incredibly important contemporary international security concerns. Scholars cannot avoid studying them in favor of another analysis of domestic audience costs in US politics because the data is better for the latter. Additionally, there is

² For an exception, see (Zarakol, 2011)

a real problem in international security of developing our theories and definitions based on Western European and US experiences, and assuming this holds for the rest of the world. A good example is the assumption that the balance of power—which held in Europe in the 1800s—is a universal law of international relations (Nexon, 2009). Avoiding the study of Muslim states' security policies because of data concerns only perpetuates this problem.

A better approach

Thus, there are very real ethical and pragmatic issues in the quantitative and security studies of Muslims. Others have noted this, and called for new approaches to the study of Muslims and Middle East international relations (Darwich & Kaarbo, 2019). In this section, I hope to contribute to these calls by proposing a two-pronged solution that will both avoid these problems and ensure we study important topics in a rigorous manner. First, we should be sure to always adopt best practices in quantitative studies, which will help avoid many of the ethical issues. Second, we should adopt new standards. Quantitative studies may not be able to follow the highest standards for quantitative or experimental methods, but alternate quantitative approaches are possible. And for qualitative studies, by incorporating the latest advances in qualitative methods we can make sure the analysis is still sound.

First, as I noted above, many of the supposed issues with the quantitative study of Muslims are actually issues with *bad* quantitative studies of Muslims. A study that linked violent extremism to Islam, but only analyzed Muslims, is ethically problematic but also methodologically flawed. By selecting observations according to which are most dramatic or which fit the author's assumptions, the study would fall prey to *selection bias*, selecting observations in a way that makes the study unrepresentative of the real world. In the case of a hypothetical study on Muslims, this may exaggerate the apparent connection between Islam and extremism, ignoring its presence outside of Muslim societies. Alternately, such studies may confuse cause and effect, placing the "blame" on Muslim communities that are actually the victim of political repression or instability. A study that looked only at the presence or absence of Muslims in a country to explain the lack of democracy or mistreatment of women would ignore important *confounding variables*, variables that affect both the explanation and outcome. That is, factors besides Islam or Muslim culture could explain political outcomes, and many of the apparent issues with Muslim culture may actually be the result of these other factors. Security studies that point to instability in Muslim cultures in order to justify American intervention or state repression may be overlooking the impact of these policies on terrorism, something systematic quantitative analysis can uncover.

We can address these issues by making sure we follow best methodological practices in our work. A proper quantitative study of the connection between Islam and violence should be sure to include Muslims and non-Muslims. Including the full population makes the study representative of reality, and gives us comparisons through which we can determine whether Islam really leads to violent extremism. Indeed, this is what some of the quantitative studies I mentioned above did (Fox, 2000; Soysa & Nordas, 2007). Likewise, studies of the relationship between Islam or Muslim culture and negative political and social outcomes should look at non-cultural factors, such as state policy and colonial legacies. Saiya's work has done this, examining the role of state religious policy in the spread of terrorism and extremism (Saiya, 2016, 2018). Thus, it is possible to conduct a quantitative study on Muslims that avoid ethical issues if we make sure we adhere to proper methodological protocols.

I have endeavored to follow these standards in my work. For example, in a study written with Jason Klocek, we explored the relationship between religious conflict and religious repression; the



persistence of both in Muslim countries can contribute to negative stereotypes (Henne & Klocek, 2019). Using an instrumental variable regression, we found that religious repression often arises from states' anxieties over religious conflict; neither can be ascribed to the presence of Muslims in a country. Likewise, some may blame sectarian violence on tenets of Islam or aspects of Muslim culture. However, Ashlyn Hand, Nilay Saiya and I found that—by taking into account state policy towards religious groups—it was actually state policy that favored particular religious groups that contributed to political instability, not Islam itself (Henne, Saiya, & Hand, 2019). Finally, some have argued that America should support Muslim states that restrict religious communities in order to control terrorism. However, in a quantitative analysis of the impacts of these state policies, I found they actually make terrorism worse (Henne, 2019a).

Of course, the pragmatic issues I noted above remain and we may not be able to satisfy all the requirements of rigorous regression analysis. These include a large number of observations and data that allows for an identifiable study, or one that allows us to gain some insight into the causal patterns in the data. In social scientific studies this involves things like no omitted confounding variables, no reverse causality between the outcome and explanatory variables, and a random or easily modeled selection process for observations to enter into the study. This is very rare in the real world, especially with messy data on things like conflict, extremism and political reform. One solution is to be careful with our studies, including caveats arising from the issues with the data. We can also ensure our models are robust, running the tests through a variety of alternate specifications—different ways of measuring the outcome, different control variables—to demonstrate the findings are not based on one specific set of assumptions. Indeed, most of my studies include numerous robustness checks and discussions of the analyses' limitations; this should be adopted as a best practice for quantitative works on these subjects.

But there are alternative quantitative analyses that we could draw on. Social network analysis is increasingly being used in international relations to analyze a variety of security topics (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, & Montgomery, 2009; Kahler, 2009). It has not been used much in the study of Muslims, although there has been some application to the study of religious politics (Everton, 2018). This could be used as an alternative to conventional cross-national data in study of Muslims. Data on interactions between states and societies is difficult to collect but more rich and detailed, avoiding the issues with a lack of observations. Additionally, descriptive social network analysis can reveal vast amounts of information without relying on the restrictive assumptions of advanced regression analysis. Again, more work in this area is needed, but I have begun using network analysis to present an alternate approach to political Islam in the Middle East (Henne, 2019b). Another promising area is automated text analysis, which similarly expands the data available to researchers (Brathwaite & Park, 2019).

For qualitative analyses, we should not expect security studies on closed Muslim societies to have the same detailed level of interview or archival analysis we use in studies on US foreign policy. These studies can present the deliberations of policymakers through archives, their reflections on their motivations and the impact of policies through memoirs, and the actual policies themselves through declassified government documents. As I had discussed, this is not feasible for studies on many Muslim countries, especially on security issues.

But that does not mean we cannot conduct good qualitative analysis. There are several insights we can draw from qualitative methods to ensure studies with imperfect data are valid. First, we can pay attention to how the data was collected and correct for any negative impacts in our analysis. If our data is primarily from outside observers, discuss what their biases or interests may be and how that

could color the results. If the study relies on media reporting, what secret information would lead us to different conclusions? Steps like these are not precise, but they can help guard against unwarranted certainty in qualitative studies. Additionally, we can triangulate between a variety of sources to make up for shortcomings in any specific area. When working with complex historical records we should avoid relying on one work or one school of thought; instead, scholars should find areas of agreement across historical works and note areas of disagreement (Lustick, 1996; Thies, 2002). This is useful when studying historical topics on Muslims, but may also be relevant to contemporary events. Without detailed data, we may have to rely on a variety of imperfect sources, like media reports, dissident claims, state communiques, and studies by international observers. Relying on any one of these would be problematic, as they could be biased. But comparing multiple types of sources to find patterns of information could overcome these problems.

Finally, a few specific methodological tools may be particularly well-suited for security studies with imperfect data. Process tracing is the most popular qualitative method currently used; most studies rely on detailed data on deliberations among individuals to demonstrate the causal mechanism through which an outcome emerged (George & Bennett, 2005). This is not possible when we lack such information. However, a specific variant of process tracing, Bayesian process tracing, may be helpful. In this approach, scholars look for evidence that would be unlikely to exist if their theory was wrong (Bennett & Checkel, 2014). This could easily be adapted to deal with imperfect information. We may not have access to all details of a policymaking process or the emergence of a non-state actor in Muslim countries. But we can look for evidence that would only make sense if our theory was accurate. In this way we can leverage the strengths of process tracing without its onerous information requirements. Counterfactuals may be another useful tool. These involve logically determining the outcome if a factor was different (Fearon, 1991; George & Bennett, 2005). This is designed for historical scenarios that do not exist, and is thus perfect for situations of imperfect information. That is, instead of relying on evidence that explains why something happened, the scholar would instead logically discuss what would have happened if the explanation they are focusing on was absent. Again, this may be less precise than some want but it can be used to produce valuable insights.

This is also apparent in my book. As I studied Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, I lacked detailed government archives and interview data for the first two cases. I therefore drew on a variety of sources—such as secondary studies and media reports—to gain some confidence in my data. I also used an informal form of Bayesian process tracing to highlight evidence that supported my arguments. Additionally, I drew on methodological tools from comparative historical analysis to determine the process behind the outcomes I studied in the absence of detailed data.

Conclusions

There are very serious ethical and pragmatic issues in the quantitative and security study of Muslims. From an ethical perspective, many of these studies denigrate and stereotype Muslims. They also treat them as a problem to be solved, justifying and expanding US power. Pragmatically, it can be hard to collect detailed data on security issues in many Muslim countries, making conventional studies difficult. Yet, standard approaches to these problems are faulty. We cannot abandon positivist analysis, as well-done quantitative studies are actually the best tools we have to push back on negative stereotypes of Muslims. At the same time, we cannot ignore important security topics among Muslim states just because the data we have available is not ideal. Instead, the two-pronged approach I suggest here—following best methodological practices to avoid ethical issues, and adopting new standards



and novel tools to deal with imperfect data—can allow us to still study these important topics in a rigorous manner. Further work in this area should elaborate on and specify the way network analysis, Bayesian process tracing, counterfactuals and other methodological tools can produce high-quality analyses in the absence of detailed data.

Biography:

Peter S. Henne is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Global and Regional Studies Program in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Vermont. He is also the director of the Middle East Studies program. He received his PhD in Government from Georgetown University, and BA in Political Science from Vassar College. He is the author of *Islamic Politics, Muslim States and Counterterrorism Tensions*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2017. His work has also been published in the *Journal of Church and State*; *Journal of Conflict Resolution*; *Journal of Peace Research*; *Politics and Religion*; *Religion, State and Society*; and *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

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