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## SECULAR ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS RAGE: SHAPING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### Abstract

In historic cases of religious conflict, religion was not necessarily the original source of the conflict, but was eventually established as the focal point around which individuals defined their identity. Although the differences between the two groups may have been numerous (political, economic, cultural, etc.), religion provided the easiest and most prominently accessible tool for mass mobilization and identity differentiation. Once this shift occurs, the religious identities become so salient that all future interactions tend to be defined along religious lines, which in turn lends itself to intractability. This paper draws parallels between previous intractable religious conflicts and the current developing conflict between the United States and the Islamic world. Although the United States has made a concerted effort to declare a war on "terror" and not Islam, the perceived threat associated with current U.S. foreign policy behavior is encouraging the redefinition of Middle Eastern identity in Islamic terms and creating the possibility of intractable religious conflict on a global scale. Consequently, while many within the region may not have initially seen this conflict along religious lines, Islam has provided the most prominent and convenient form for articulating their frustrations.

**Key Words:** Religion, Islam, Identity, Foreign Policy, Huntington.

While scholars have long pondered the intersection of religion and war, the 9/11 attacks prompted a renewed interest in the relationship. Much of the discussion has centered on the work of Samuel Huntington and his „Clash of Civilizations“ argument. Suggesting that the end of the Cold War ushered the world out of its „Western phase“, Huntington predicts that the current era of global politics will be increasingly defined by cultural and religious conflicts. Huntington focuses largely on the fundamental differences among civilizations, noting that these differences „are not only real; but they are basic“. Moreover, these differences are not artificial, but reflect longstanding differences of „history, language, culture, tradition, and most important, religion“.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Huntington, „Clash of Civilizations,“ Foreign Affairs, no. Summer (1993): 25.

These distinct traditions, according to Huntington, bring about vastly different understandings of „The relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority”.<sup>3</sup> Individuals may be able to compromise their political or economic beliefs, however their cultural and religious values are less mutable; making differences much more difficult to resolve. It is this inability to negotiate or compromise one's cultural beliefs that ultimately leads to conflict. That is to say, Huntington argues that „differences in culture and religion create differences over policy issues, ranging from human rights to immigration to trade and commerce to the environment”.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly the case in a globalized world system which has drastically increased the interactions of previously isolated groups. Thus for Huntington, the causal chain begins with differences over culture and religion, which in turn leads to disagreement over policy, and ultimately ends in conflict.

Huntington has faced more than his fair share of critics, yet his thesis continues to be a powerful force shaping the way in which much of the world sees and comprehends global politics.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to understand the appeal; so many of the events transpiring around the world (and particularly the Middle East) appear to fit his thesis flawlessly. The upheaval throughout Europe and the Middle East in early 2006 over the cartoon depictions of Muhammad stand as an almost perfect example of Huntington's civilization clash. The West's belief in a free press directly confronted Islam's deep-seated reverence for its religious leaders. And just as Huntington predicts, the disagreement inevitably boiled over into conflict and lives were lost. Moreover, the 9/11 attacks, the war in Iraq, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the fighting in Lebanon, India/Pakistan tensions, and Chechnya can all be viewed along civilization lines. All told, there appears to be a growing tendency to see and understand international relations as being driven by civilization divides.

The implication of this line of argument is that there is little that can be done to placate these powerful religious and cultural identities. The fundamental disagreement over core values and beliefs leaves no room for constructive engagement amongst civilizations. In a sense, the world is left with a seemingly hopeless future where Fukuyama's „End of History” is nowhere in site.<sup>6</sup>

We intend to dispel this understanding of religious conflict and detail how it dangerously misconstrues the true dynamics underlying most religious conflict. In fact, a survey of historical religious conflicts reveals that more often than not the *origins* of these conflicts had very little to do with religion.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the differences underly-

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.: 29.

5 Fouad Ajami, „The Summoning,” *Foreign Affairs* (1993), Robert Bartley, „The Case for Optimism,” *Foreign Affairs* (1993), Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Nirris, „The True Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Policy* (2003), Robert Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth: From Togo to Turkmenistan, from Iran to Cambodia, a Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), Kishore Mahbubani, „The Dangers of Decadence,” *Foreign Affairs* (1993), Albert Weeks, „Do Civilizations Hold?,” *Foreign Affairs* (1993).

6 Francis Fukuyama, „The End of History”?, *The National Interest* (1989).

7 Philip Barker, *Religious Nationalism in Modern Europe: If God Be for Us*, ed. William Safran, *Routledge Studies in Nationalism and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 2009).

ing these conflicts tend to be largely secular (land, power, money, or even love). It is only as time passes that religion enters the equation. Religion ultimately emerges because it provides the easiest and most prominently accessible tool for mass mobilization and identity formation. In other words, while the differences between groups may be numerous (political, economic, territorial, or security), religion proves to be the most useful point of differentiation. This essentially reverses Huntington's causal chain, suggesting that religion plays a relatively minor role in the origins of most religious conflict. This more nuanced understanding of religious conflict (particularly the roots of religious conflict) undermines the determinism of Huntington's civilization clash thesis. Moreover, it suggests that there may be room for constructive dialogue across the world's many religious and cultural frontiers.

This paper more fully develops the above argument by drawing parallels between previous cases of intractable religious conflicts and the current developing conflict between the United States and the Middle East. The similarities between current U.S./ Middle East tensions and the early stages of other historic religious conflicts are striking. In particular, although many within the Middle East did not initially see the conflict along religious lines, Islam is quickly becoming the most prominent forum for articulating their frustrations. Consequently, despite the fact that the United States has made a concerted effort to declare a war on „terror“ and not Islam, the perceived threat associated with current U.S. foreign policy behavior is encouraging the redefinition of Middle Eastern identity in Islamic terms and creating the possibility of intractable religious conflict on a global scale. Ironically, it appears that the use of conventional approaches to the war on terror will likely exacerbate and strengthen the Islamic identity of individuals in the Middle East contrary to the desires of the United States. Only with a more accurate understanding of the roots of religious conflict will the US be able to avoid a precipitous slide into an intractable religious conflict.

### ***Religious Conflict through History***

In order to accurately understand the process of religious identity formation, it is useful to look to the social identity literature, which explores the phenomenon of self-categorization and identification at the group level and which often tends to be overlooked by political scientists. It suggests that the process of identity-formation is, by its very nature, a process of differentiation. As such, it holds true to the psychological concept that in order to know who we are, we must first know who we are not. Therefore, the “other” is crucial in shaping our own self-perceptions. Each individual has nearly endless identities to draw upon (age, gender, nationality, religion, language, height, hair color, etc.), because each person interacts with nearly endless „others“. Which of these potential identities is emphasized (particularly in the group context) is oftentimes shaped by threats. When threatened, people and/or groups look for the most prominent and accessible point of differentiation for use in separating oneself from that threat. Religion often proves to be the easiest and most identifiable point for rallying in opposition to the threat, even if the threat itself is not religious in nature. To clarify, religious groups are formed in response to threats (religious or otherwise) from groups whose differences can be easily lumped under religious headings. Thus, the dispute may be economic, but the usefulness of religion for mobilization leads

to its use by leaders, whether elite or grassroots. For instance, in the case of Ireland, political, cultural, and economic threats were historically wrapped into a religious package because religion was the primary difference between the Irish and English. It was not the case that the Irish and English disagreed on economics, culture, and politics *because* one was Catholic and the other Protestant. This came much later in the struggle.

This is significantly different from Huntington and other traditional thought on the subject. For instance, Buzan, Waever and de Wilde argue that the makeup of the nation defines the threats presented to it.<sup>8</sup> In other words, a nation composed on linguistic roots will see threats from other linguistic groups. A religious nation will view as threatening any group of another religion. We argue that the authors have it backwards. Although this is clearly a chicken or egg conundrum, and as a result, one certainly reinforces the other, it seems clear that the nature of the threat created the religious identity, not vice versa.

It is useful to look at several historic examples to elucidate this pattern. As mentioned previously, the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland paints a clear picture of this transition from a political conflict to a religious one. The Irish-English dispute began, significantly, prior to advent of a religious divide on the island. In other words, the conflict began at a time when the English were still securely Catholic. When Strongbow first intervened in Irish politics in 1168, the English were still nearly 400 years from Henry VIII's famous split with Rome. As a result, the first four centuries of the Anglo-Irish conflict lacked any real religious element. As Adrian Hastings points out, „The grounding of late medieval English nationalism lay in economics, geo-political facts, the maintenance of power both at sea and over England's first empire – its Gaelic neighbors. All this precedes the sixteenth century”.<sup>9</sup> There was clear discrimination against the Irish (i.e. Statutes of Kilkenny), but it was based on economic and political subjugation and took shape along ethnic and linguistic rather than religious lines. The Statutes, passed in 1366, were aimed at Norman settlers in Ireland, who were adopting the local Irish language and customs at an alarming rate. This was threatening to the King, as it endangered his ability to effectively control the Irish territory. „Insistence on the obligation of speaking English in the Irish Pale was partly a matter of desperation – the English grip on Ireland was slipping badly”.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the Statutes ordained that „every Englishman do use the English language, and be named by an English name, leaving off entirely the manner of naming used by the Irish; and that every Englishman use the English custom, fashion, mode of riding and apparel, according to his estate”.<sup>11</sup> The division between the Irish and the English was political – primarily about power and resources. However, the divide between the two became centered on language and custom because language was a primary means of distinguishing the two peoples.

Therefore, the English Reformation played a crucial role in transforming the conflict

8 Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1998).

9 Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 55.

10 Ibid. 45.

11 Statutes of Kilkenny.

from a political and linguistic basis to a religious one. When England separated from Rome, there was a new and clear difference between the two conflicting parties. Religion made the „us vs. them“ mentality even easier to articulate. Therefore, the conflict began the shift to a religious war – one based on Catholic vs. Protestant, and one which would prove so intractable that we still deal with it today. It is important to clarify once again: the conflict was never really about religion. The fight was not about whether Catholicism was more right than Protestantism. Rather, the conflict was about political and economic rights for Irish men and women. In this sense, nothing had changed. However, the easiest way to rally the Irish in opposition to the English oppressors was now through the use of religious rhetoric and symbolism. Ultimately, the lines became blurred and Catholic came to equate with Irish, as did English with Protestantism. Once the conflict took on religious overtones, the stakes were raised so that losing the political battle meant losing the religious battle as well, and how could one's own religion possibly be wrong? It is always more difficult to solve a religious dispute than a political dispute because the issues are so much more basic to our understanding of ourselves and our world.

The same pattern can also be seen in many other regions of the world. Around the globe, modern religious conflicts are primarily about political issues. Chechnya, the former Yugoslavia, India and Pakistan, the conflict between Turkey and Greece, particularly in Cyprus. In each of these cases, political divisions and clashes over power have become wrapped in the rhetoric of religion. In each case, the religious overtones make peace increasingly difficult to attain. Cyprus provides a great example of the way in which a political conflict over territory and power can become, ostensibly, about the difference between Muslim Turks and Orthodox Greeks. These clashes between Turkey and Greece have led to a Greek state wherein there is a clear and formal establishment of Orthodoxy as the official religion. In Poland, national identity has long been associated with Catholicism, but prior to the partition of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Poland was highly diverse and tolerant. Political threats, primarily from Russia and Prussia, reshaped Polish identity into a strongly Catholic one. As a result, the anti-communist movements of the Cold War era were very closely tied to the Catholic Church. Each of these examples (and countless others) show the way in which a political conflict becomes transformed through threat into a religious conflict. Each example also shows the difficulty in solving the crisis once this religious conversion has occurred.

### ***The Roots of Muslim Rage: Policy or Religion?***

The argument we are pursuing makes the counter-intuitive claim that the origins of religious conflict have very little to do with any tangible differences over religious or cultural doctrine. Instead, religious conflicts tend to develop out of disagreements over decidedly non-religious issues. Yet despite the fact that the differences between groups are not of a religious nature, religion ultimately proves to be the easiest tool for mass mobilization and identity formation. Once this shift occurs, all future interactions are defined along religious lines and the conflict quickly gravitates towards intractability.

This understanding of religious conflict has significant implications for understanding the mounting tensions between the United States and the Middle East. Samuel Huntington would have us believe that the deteriorating relationship between

Islam and the West stems from the fundamental incompatibility of their religious and cultural beliefs. In fact, Huntington suggests the issue most likely to ignite cultural/religious tensions around the globe is the ongoing „effort of the West to promote its values of democracy and liberalism as universal values“.<sup>12</sup> According to Huntington, this effort by the West has led to widespread calls of „human rights imperialism“, a „reaffirmation of indigenous values“, and ultimately greater „support for religious fundamentalism“.<sup>13</sup> Again, the recent protests surrounding the cartoon depiction of Muhammad would appear to confirm Huntington's argument.

Yet a deeper examination of the views and opinions of the Islamic world suggests that the „Clash“ thesis grossly over simplifies the causal relationship. Recent survey work conducted in the Middle East has consistently shown that the region's frustration with the United States has very little to do with cultural and religious differences. Instead, much of the discontent stems from secular policy issues regarding security, economics, and most notably American foreign policy. While this is old news to anyone who closely follows Middle Eastern politics, it continues to be one of the most widely held misconceptions about attitudes in the Muslim world. This misperception has been widely reinforced by the press and particularly newspaper editorials.<sup>14</sup> Even the typically restrained British journal *The Economist* has come out in support of Huntington's conclusions noting that his judgment „was cruel and sweeping, but nonetheless acute“.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in its recent ranking of the top 10 winners of the Iraq war, the editors of *Foreign Policy* placed Samuel Huntington at number 4. In noting that „Paul Wolfowitz has lost“ and „Samuel Huntington has won“ they conclude that more and more Americans are „coming to believe that Islam really is inherently hostile democracy and the West“.<sup>16</sup> In general, most people in America and around the world believe religion plays a significant role in causing war and other conflict in the world. In 2005, a Pew Center survey they found that 65% of Americans and 75% of public around the world stated that „religion had at least a fair amount of responsibility for causing most global wars and conflicts“.<sup>17</sup>

Yet a deeper look into the attitudes of ordinary men and women in the Middle East makes it abundantly clear that cultural and religious predispositions, while important, are clearly not the source of the current conflict. Instead, opinion surveys conducted throughout the Middle East have consistently shown that American policy is the primary source of Islamic frustration.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the ongoing „Impressions of America“ survey conducted by Zogby International, examining Arab views of America,

12 Huntington, „Clash of Civilizations“, 29.

13 Ibid.: 41.

14 Bookworm, „We Are Already in a Religious War“, American Thinker, 7/25/06 2006, Michael Geer, „Religious War“, American Thinker, 7/17/06 2006, Salmon Rushdie, „Yes, This Is About Islam“, The New York Times, 11/2/2001 2001, Andrew Sullivan, „This Is a Religious War“, The New York Times, 10/07/01 2001.

15 Winston Davis, „Religion and Development: Weber Adn the East Asian Experience“, in Understanding Political Development, ed. Myron Weiner and Samuel Hungtington (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1987), „Enemies within, Enemies Without“, The Economist, 9/20/2001 2001.

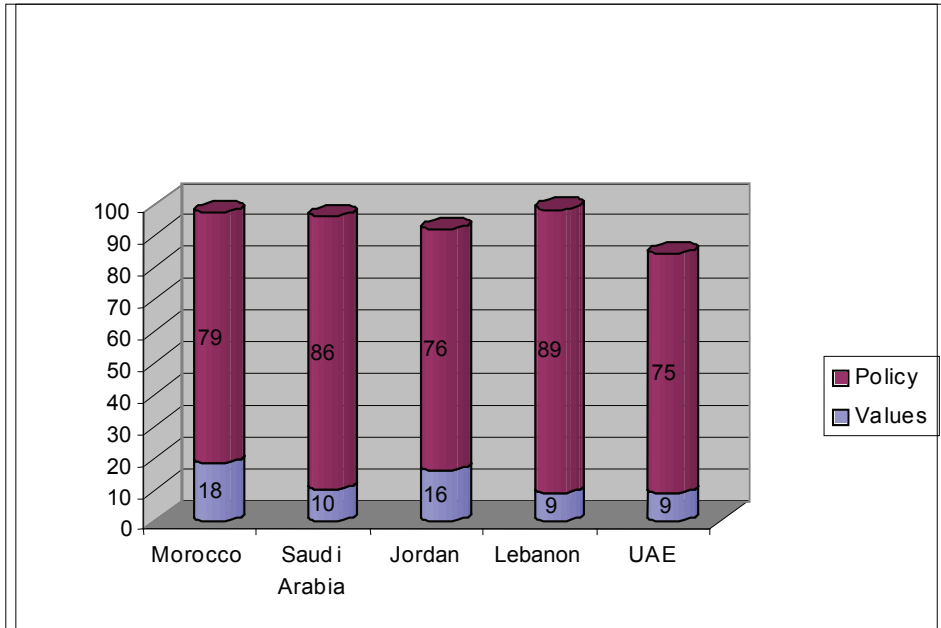
16 David Frum, „Who Wins in Iraq“, Foreign Policy (2007).

17 The Pew Research Center, „Fewer Say Islam Encourages Violence“, (2005).

18 The Zogby poll (supervised by Shibley Telhami) has been the most extensive, yet the Pew Center, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations have also engaged in extensive polling. In addition, Ronald Inglehart's work with the World Value Survey has provided vital detail on the attitudes of the Muslim world.

found that negative attitudes towards American policy significantly trump relatively minor concerns over American values.<sup>19</sup> When asked whether their overall attitude towards the United States was a result of policy or American values over 80 percent indicated that U.S. policy played the most important role. Figure 1 details these results, demonstrating the considerable weight that respondents placed on U.S. policy in determining their overall attitudes towards the U.S.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 1: Survey Results on the Importance of Values vs. Policy in Formation of Attitudes towards US<sup>21</sup>**



Somewhat surprisingly, the data indicates that many Muslims living in the Middle East actually hold quite positive attitudes towards American society and culture. In addition to having favorable views of „American people“, respondents also expressed generally positive views of American „science and technology“, „freedom and democracy“, „movies and TV“, „products“, and „education“. This stands in stark contrast to the extremely unfavorable ratings of U.S. policy towards „Arabs“, „Palestinians“, „terrorism“, and „Iraq“.

As Table 1 demonstrates, a similar dichotomy emerged from the polling conducted in Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and UAE. While the favorability ratings for the measures of „American culture“ (science, democracy, people, movie, products, and education) varied among the six countries, they were uniformly higher than any of the

19 The Zogby „Impressions of America“ poll was conducted in 2002 and 2004. Similar polling was also done in 2003 and 2005. Countries included in the Zogby poll included: Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and United Arab Emirates. Zogby International, „Impressions of America“, (2002), Zogby International, „Impressions of America“, (2004).

20 Zogby International, „Impressions of America“, (2004).

21 James Zogby, „Impressions of America“, (Zogby International, 2004).



policy measures. The mean favorability rating across the policy measures was a mere 5 percent, compared to a 52 percent favorability rating for measures of American culture. Most notable was that majorities in Morocco, Jordan, and UAE, expressed favorable views towards all six measures of American culture. Only in Saudi Arabia and Lebanon did majorities express unfavorable views towards these measures of American culture and society. Yet despite their lower favorability rating, the dichotomy between culture and policy continued to hold. That is to say, even states which held less favorable views of American culture still found them much more favorable than any of the measures of US policy.

**Table 1: Attitudes Towards US Culture and Policy<sup>22</sup>**

	Morocco	Saudi Arabia	Jordan	Lebanon	UAE
	Fav/Unfav	Fav/Unfav	Fav/Unfav	Fav/Unfav	Fav/Unfav
Science & Technology	90/8	48/51	83/13	52/46	84/12
Freedom/ Democracy	53/41	39/60	57/40	41/56	39/53
People	59/29	28/64	52/39	39/58	46/35
Movies/TV	60/37	35/60	56/41	30/66	54/43
Products	73/24	37/59	61/35	39/57	63/34
Education	61/16	12/74	59/29	38/54	63/23
Policy Towards Arabs	4/90	4/85	8/89	5/86	7/87
Policy Towards Palestinians	3/93	3/95	7/89	4/90	5/90
Policy on Terrorism	13/82	2/96	21/75	10/84	9/84
Iraq Policy	1/98	1/97	2/78	4/93	4/91

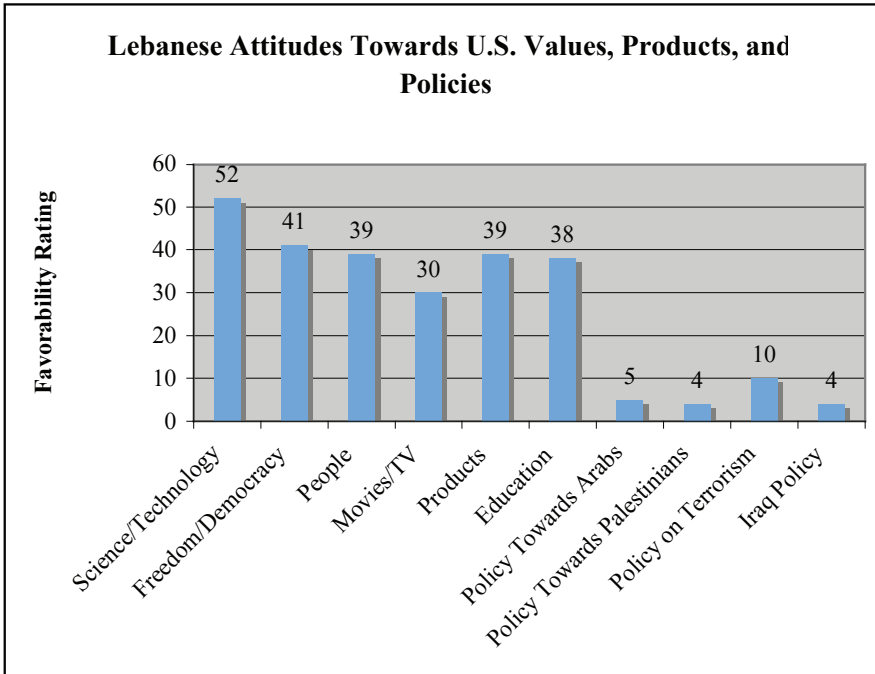
The survey data also provide an opportunity to analyze whether age or religious involvement influences Arab attitudes towards the United States. The results indicate that there is virtually no difference between those over the age of 30 and those under the age of thirty in regards to attitudes towards „science and technology“, „education system“, „freedoms and democracy“, and „policy towards Arabs“. In addition to reinforcing the point that Arab hostilities stem from frustrations towards American foreign policy not American culture, they also demonstrate that age is not a significant factor. Moreover Mark Tessler (2003b) found that the overall support/opposition

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 3.



towards democracy in Egypt, was not significantly influenced by the level of religious involvement. Interestingly, well over 70 percent of the 2,756 Egyptians interviewed for the 2000 World Values Survey (both religious and nonreligious) held either favorable or very favorable views of democracy and democratic reforms.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 2<sup>24</sup>:**



These statistics suggest that the dynamic between the Middle East and the United States is much more nuanced than Huntington's „Clash of Civilizations“ theory would suggest. The anti-Americanism that enjoys such widespread support throughout the Middle East is not a response to American culture or religion, but instead an unambiguous rejection of American foreign policy.

At this point it is necessary to note that there is an important distinction to be made between the views of the general public who reside in the Middle East and terrorist organizations, like Al Qaeda. One could argue that for the latter the battle with the United States is indeed all about religion. Unfortunately, given the lack of reliable data on the views of terrorists we can only speculate as to whether their actions are driven primarily by policy or religion. Yet if we explore the public rhetoric of Osama Bin Laden we see that it would be a gross mistake to assume that American foreign policy is not very much on his mind. In fact, on a number of occasions Bin Laden has gone

<sup>23</sup> Mark Tessler, „Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research“, *International Studies Perspectives* 4 (2003): 175-80.

<sup>24</sup> Zogby, „Impressions of America“, 4.

out of his way to articulate an extraordinarily detailed list of foreign policy grievances. In October of 2002 Bin Laden posted a letter on the internet titled „To the Americans” in which he directly confronted the question of “why are we fighting and opposing you”?<sup>25</sup> Bin Laden suggested „the answer is very simple: because you attacked us and continue to attack us”. Bin Laden went on to provide a remarkably cogent critique of US policy in Israel/Palestine, Somalia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the sanctions on Iraq throughout the 1990s. Keeping the religious rhetoric to a minimum, Bin Laden accused the United States of „steal[ing] our wealth and oil at paltry prices” and that „your forces occupy our countries” and „spread your military bases throughout them”.<sup>26</sup>

More recently, Bin Laden has condemned the decision by the United States to cut off aid to Palestinians after the Hamas electoral victory as well as the US attempt to bring peacekeepers to Darfur Sudan, noting “they are determined to continue with their Crusader campaigns against our nation, to occupy our countries, to plunder our resources and to enslave us”.<sup>27</sup> This is not to imply that Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization is indifferent to American culture; it clearly is not. Bin Laden considers the United States to be a most immoral and debaucherious place. Yet, when articulating his justification for attacking the United States these cultural references are largely absent as the focus is primarily on US foreign policy. Bin Laden has even proposed a truce between the two groups, something that would seem unlikely if the Jihad was principally about culture.

### ***The Potential to Become a Religious War?***

While religion is not the *source* of conflict between the United States and the Middle East, our analysis indicates that there is growing evidence to suggest that it may soon become the outlet. As in previous religious conflicts, religion has proven to be an incredibly useful tool for differentiating the Middle East from the „West” and particularly from the United States. Thus even though this conflict was not initially about religion, it has the potential to be a highly effective tool for political leaders in the region who wish to assert the „otherness” of America. Islam becomes a tool for gathering support and unifying resistance to American foreign policy. Religion’s role in the process becomes one of identity formation.

As discussed previously, the process of religious identity formation is exacerbated by the existence of a formidable threat to the affected community. When a group feels threatened it is more likely to gravitate towards an identity that differentiates itself from the threatening party. The question at hand then is 1) whether and to what degree the U.S. is currently perceived as a threat in the Middle East and 2) has this threat prompted a shift towards a broader Muslim identity? We do know that many within the Middle East have always been suspicious of the U.S. presence. However, the decision to preemptively invade Iraq sent shock waves throughout the region. Moreover, President Bush’s pledge to “make the world safe for democracy” and other similarly divisive rhetoric (i.e. „with us or against us”) has aroused fear and anxiety

25 Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005) 160-72.

26 Ibid. 162-64.

27 Craig Whitlock, “On Tape, Bin Laden Warns of Long War”, *Washington Post*, April 24 2006.

throughout an Islamic community apprehensive about aligning itself too closely with the United States. The degree of this threat was tangibly captured in a recent survey conducted by Shibley Telhami in six Arab countries. In the survey, it is clear that Arabs in these six countries uniformly see the U.S. (69%) and Israel (72%) as by far the most threatening states.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the study found that 71 percent of respondents believed that „weakening the Muslim world“ was an important foreign policy objective of Americans in the Middle East.

Thus it is fair to say that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has led many in the region to wonder whether Iran, Syria, or any other Islamic country might be next on the list. At a summit of Islamic nations held not long after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, countless Islamic leaders expressed tangible concern over the growing American „threat“. When commenting on the challenges facing the Islamic world, the Malaysian foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar argued that “the threats of unilateralism, the precarious situation in the Middle East and the uncertain future of Iraq ...have only served to threaten our very survival”.<sup>29</sup> It appears that in the process of waging the war on terror the United States has indeed established itself as a major threat to many in the Middle East.

The danger of such a situation is that many within the Middle East will gravitate towards an Islamic identity in reaction to the threat posed by the United States. If previous religious conflicts have taught us anything, it is that once a conflict shifts from being about policy to being about religion, extrication from that conflict becomes increasingly difficult. Attempts to resolve policy disagreements become clouded by fundamental disagreements over culture and religious values. From our perspective this is something the U.S. most desperately wants to avoid in its interactions with the Middle East. Unfortunately, there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that this process may have already begun.

In his survey of Arab attitudes towards the U.S., Shibley Telhami found that the Iraq war and the larger war on terrorism have contributed significantly to a growing Muslim identity throughout much of the Middle East. Telhami noted that increasingly „Muslims view the war on terrorism as a war on Islam“ and this has „further intensified identification with being a Muslim”.<sup>30</sup> According to Telhami, Arabs have historically had three potential identity options: Islam, pan-Arabism, or nationalism linked to individual states. Until his death, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser stood as the preeminent leader of the pan-Arab movement and identity. Yet even after Nasser's death in 1970 the Baathists in Iraq and Syria as well as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) helped sustain this secular Arab identity. The collapse of Iraq along with the weakening of Syria and the PLO significantly undermined the broader pan-Arab movement and effectively created an identity gap. A gap which is being filled by Islam. The same survey found that most Arabs stated a strong preference for the clergy playing a bigger role in politics. All in all, the data led Telhami to conclude that „the Iraq war and the way the war on terrorism have been perceived in much of the Islamic world have further intensified identification with being a Muslim”.<sup>31</sup>

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28 Shibley Telhami, “Arab Attitudes Towards Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy, and the Media”, (Zogby International, 2005).

29 [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com), Islamic Nations Cite U.S. Threat (2003 [cited October 13 2003]).

30 Shibley Telhami, “A Growing Muslim Identity”, Los Angeles Times, July 11 2004.

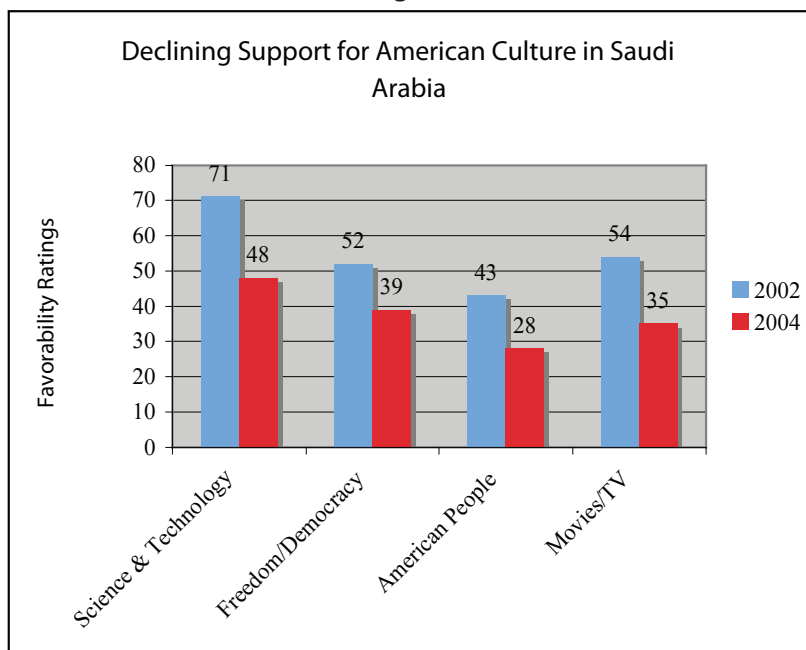
31 Ibid.

This shift is also perceptible in the rhetoric being used among political leaders. For instance, at the 2003 Organization of Islamic Conferences Islamic Summit Conference, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad stated:

We fail to notice that our detractors and enemies do not care whether we are true Muslims or not. To them we are all Muslims, followers of a religion and a Prophet whom they declare promotes terrorism, and we are all their sworn enemies. They will attack and kill us, invade our lands, bring down our Governments whether we are Sunnis or Syiahs, Alawait or Druze or whatever.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the most telling evidence of a shift towards a growing Islamic identity might be the fact that Arab support for American culture appears on the decline. In the previous section we detailed the sharp dichotomy between the genuinely favorable views towards American values (science/technology, democracy, people, products) and unfavorable views towards U.S. policy (policy towards Arabs, Iraq, Palestinians, etc). The data clearly indicated that the major factor contributing to the increasingly anti-Americanism across the Middle East is US policy. While this is certainly the case, some disturbing trends have emerged suggesting that Arab attitudes towards traditional American values may be changing. If we compare the favorability ratings from the 2002 and 2004 „Impressions of America” survey we see a precipitous decline in support for measures of American culture. Figures 3 and 4 detail this decline. One is left to wonder whether the anger and frustration in the Middle East towards American foreign policy is expressing itself through a growing disdain for American culture.

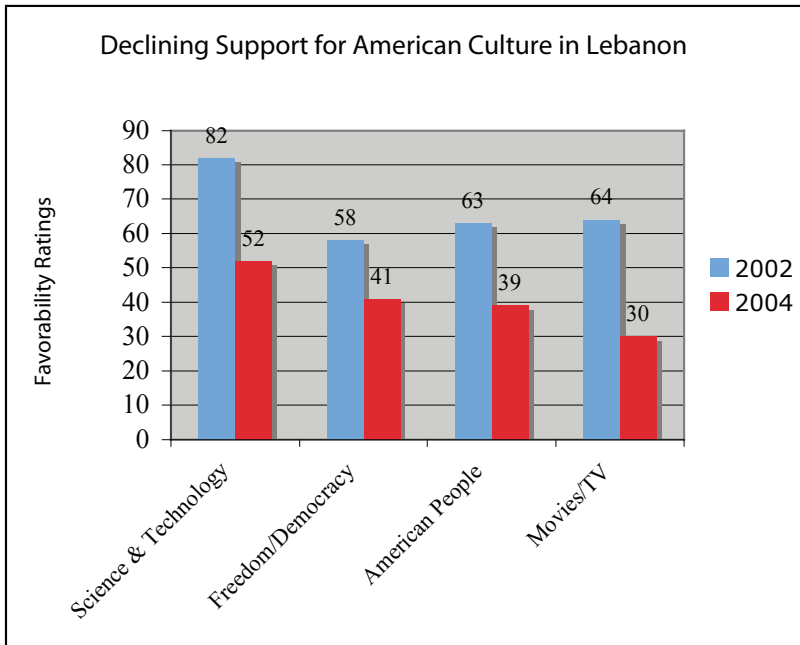
**Figure 3:**<sup>33</sup>



32 Anti-Defamation League, Speech by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (2003 [cited August 3 2007]).

33 James Zogby, „Impressions of America”, (Zogby International, 2002), Zogby, „Impressions of America”.

Figure 4:<sup>34</sup>



All in all, the data suggest that we may be seeing identity formation around the institutions of religion, in spite of the fact that the conflict itself is not religious in nature. Most Muslims in the Middle East perceive the U.S. as a dangerous and threatening foreign power – a power that happens to be Judeo-Christian. As such, Islam provides a strong building block for resisting American influence in the region. There is a great and dangerous potential for these identities (both U.S. and Middle Eastern) to solidify around these religious poles even further. At that point, what began as a war over terrorism, oil, sovereignty, or any other issue becomes a religious war. And religious wars are always more complex and difficult to solve. And as the next section shows, even though the process has been more rapid in the Middle East, there is danger of a similar process playing itself out in the United States.

### ***The American Public: A spiritual revival?***

While the Bush administration was attempting to convince anyone who would listen that the war on terrorism was not a war on Islam, many Americans were not so easily persuaded. A national poll conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks found that 54 percent of Americans "expressed the view that the attack was motivated by a conflict between Christianity and Islam."<sup>35</sup> The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks had created a growing sense of uncertainty throughout the country in the days and weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>. For the first time since Pearl Harbor, America was under attack and Americans felt threatened. Interestingly, this threat

<sup>34</sup> Zogby, "Impressions of America", Zogby, "Impressions of America".

<sup>35</sup> Tessler, "Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research".

perception quickly translated into a spiritual resurgence. Americans of all faiths were crowding into churches, synagogues, and mosques seeking solace and understanding of the recent events. Church attendance was up nearly 25 percent. Furthermore, a poll conducted a week after the attack found that a full 69 percent of Americans reported they were praying more since the attacks.<sup>36</sup> A Pew Study conducted in November of 2001 found that a staggering 78 percent of Americans believed that religion's influence in American life was growing. Amazingly, since 1957 this figure had never exceeded 45 percent.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, concerns about the proper division of church and state appeared to be waning as prayer and religious symbols were increasingly put on prominent display in public venues all over the country.<sup>38</sup> The turn towards religion was so significant that Pat Robertson, in an interview on CNN, described it as „one of the greatest spiritual revivals in the history of America". Robertson declared that „people are turning to God...and the churches are full".

Yet beyond inducing a rise in religious identification, the threat perception created by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks also instigated a number of more dangerous reactions. In particular, incidences of anti-Islamic hate speech and hate crimes significantly increased in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Hate speech emanated primarily from conservative Christian religious and media figures, whose descriptions of Islam and its practitioners as evil and war hungry filled the internet and talk radio. For instance, Rev. Franklin Graham, the son of the well-known Rev. Billy Graham described Islam as „a very evil and wicked religion".<sup>39</sup> The Rev. Jerry Vines, a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention suggested that the Prophet Muhammad was a „demon-obsessed pedophile".<sup>40</sup> In their book, *Why Islam is a Threat to America and the West*, Paul Weyrich and William Lind contend that „Islam is quite simply a religion of war". Ann Coulter went so far as to advocate a policy where the United States „should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity". What's more, when Fox News Network Talk-show host Bill O'Reilly learned of the University of North Carolina's decision to assign a book on Islam he vigorously attacked the University for teaching „our enemy's religion" and drew a comparison to the teaching of *Mein Kampf*.<sup>41</sup>

Such comments were not limited to religious and media elites, as even distinguished members of the American military got caught up in rhetoric attacks on Islam. Specifically, Lt. Gen. William G. Boykin, a deputy undersecretary of defense, garnered lots of attention when he spoke publicly about the war on terrorism as a battle between Judeo-Christian values and Satan. Stating, „I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol," Boykin argued that terrorists hated America „because our foundation and our roots are Judeo-Christians...and the enemy is a guy named Satan." The above comments were so troubling to Nicholas Kristof that he was inspired

36 The Pew Research Center, "Post-9/11 Attitudes", (2001), Ken Schick, "Our Religious Fervor?", St. Petersburg Times, September 8 2002.

37 Pew Research Center, "Post-9/11 Attitudes".

38 For a detailed discussion of the growing presence of religion and prayer in schools, government buildings and other public venues see the October 22, 2001 issue of Time Magazine.

39 All of the following quotes are drawn from Nicholas Kristof's Op-Ed piece. Nicholas Kristof, "Bigotry in Islam -- and Here", New York Times, July 9 2002.

40 Ibid.

41 Tessler, "Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research".

to write an Op-Ed piece for the *New York Times* in which he points out the hypocrisy of admonishing „Arabs for acquiescing in religious hatred unless we try vigorously to uproot our own religious bigotry“.<sup>42</sup> One is left to wonder whether the characterization of the „other“ with hate speech is the unavoidable byproduct of threat perception created by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks?

The second backlash to arise out of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks was a significant increase in hate crimes throughout the United States. While hate crimes are always troubling, the hate crimes that followed the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks distinguished themselves in quantity and character. Human Rights Watch noted that post 9-11 crimes included „murder, physical assaults, arson, vandalism of places of worship and other property damage, death threats, and public harassment.“<sup>43</sup> The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) noted that in the three days following the attacks there were nearly 300 hate crime incidents, which equaled nearly half the number reported for the entire previous year.<sup>44</sup> The FBI records of hate crimes showed that anti-Muslim hate crimes increased roughly seven fold from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001.<sup>45</sup> The CAIR, which reports on a wider range of incidents (ranging all the way from verbal assaults to murder) reported 1,717 incidents of anti-Islamic discrimination in 2001.<sup>46</sup>

Do these changes (increased religious participation, hate speech, and hate crimes) represent a permanent shift in America's religious identity? That is to say, has the threat posed by the terrorist attacks pushed the United States towards a distinctly Christian identity that defines itself primarily in opposition to Islam? Looking at the long-term trends since 9-11 the data suggests this conclusion might be a bit premature. In fact, the explosion in religious behavior, hate crimes, and anti-Islamic rhetoric following 9-11 returned to normal levels only a year after the attacks.<sup>47</sup> Church attendance was back to normal levels, hate crimes decreased to roughly 2000 levels, and the rhetoric from the conservative right was significantly toned down. So what is one to make of this short-term shift towards religion and anti-Islamic behavior? We believe that September 11<sup>th</sup> should be seen as an example of how quickly the country can be mobilized behind a Judeo-Christian identity when presented with a serious security threat. Large segments of the American populace responded to their feelings of collective insecurity (triggered by the terrorist attacks) by finding ways to reaffirm their common Judeo-Christian identity. However, as time passed and the threat became less immediate so did the country's religious character. Thus, the intensification of America's religious persona appears to correspond to the level of threat the country is perceived to be facing. America's post 9-11 reaction should therefore be understood as a preview of the religious identity that could emerge if America were to find itself facing a more sustained threat from Islamic terrorism.

42 Kristof, "Bigotry in Islam -- and Here".

43 "We Are Not the Enemy: Hate Crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to Be Arab or Muslim after September 11," Human Rights Watch 14, no. 6 (2002).

44 [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com), Hate Crime Reports up in Wake of Terrorist Attacks (2001 [cited September 17 2001]).

45 Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the US - 2001", (2002). Available at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/01cius.htm>

46 Council on American-Islamic Relations, "Anti-Muslim Incidents", (2002). Available at <http://www.cair-net.org>

47 Pew Research Center, "Post-9/11 Attitudes," "We Are Not the Enemy: Hate Crimes against Arabs, Muslims, and Those Perceived to Be Arab or Muslim after September 11".



### ***Conclusion: What Lies Ahead***

If the developments in the Middle East continue along the path towards religious war, it is unlikely that negative developments can be undone without a great deal of effort. As Muslims perceive the United States as more and more threatening, their identity will continue to shift towards Islam as a unifier, not only within states, but regionally as well. In turn, as the response from the Middle East becomes more centered on Islam, the threat to the US grows. This snowball effect will be increasingly difficult to abate once the process has begun. History has shown that once conflicts become ensconced in religious terms, the stakes increase drastically and the actors involved become less and less willing to compromise on what were previously negotiable issues. If this is allowed to occur in the Middle East, we may be faced with the first globalized intractable religious conflict. Such a conflict between Christianity and Islam would be devastating for world politics.

This is all the more important given how quickly things can improve when the focus is placed less on identity and more on issues, as evidenced in the drastic improvements that have occurred when the US has focused its efforts on actions, not image. The two most dramatic cases are the improvements which occurred in the aftermath of the US's humanitarian efforts following the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia and the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. In neither instance did the US attempt to explain its values, but simply provided aid to hundreds of thousands of suffering people. And as the two figures below detail, the positive impact was not limited to the favorability rating of the United States. The U.S.'s humanitarian efforts also seriously undermined the support for Osama Bin Laden and attacks on civilians.

Continuing to view the disconnect between the United States and the Middle East as one big cultural misunderstanding will inhibit substantive dialogue over the important policy issues facing the two regions. Ironically, if the US continues to pay such disproportionate attention to the cultural component it may bring about the civilization divide it so wishes to avoid.

Figure 5:<sup>48</sup>

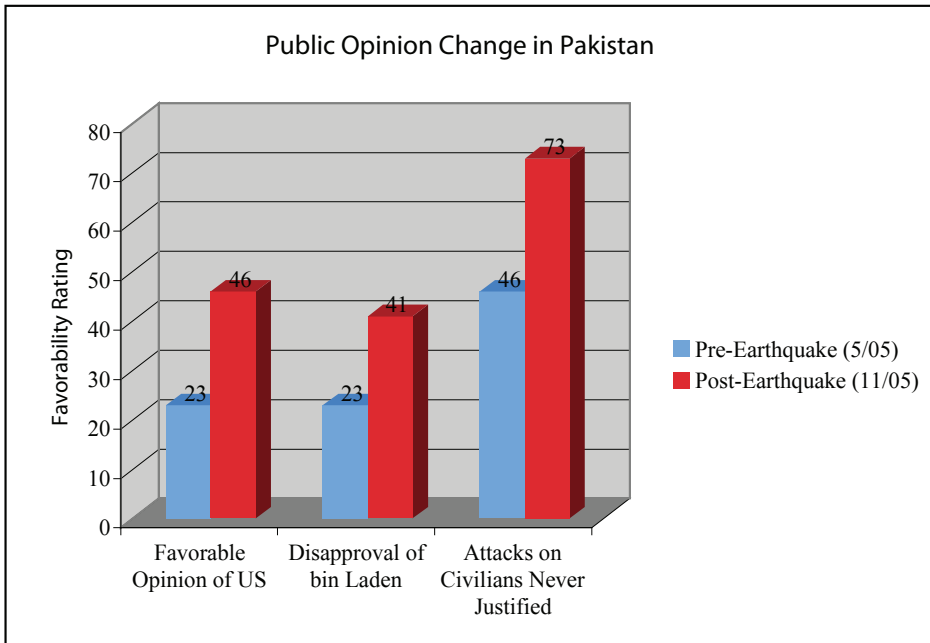
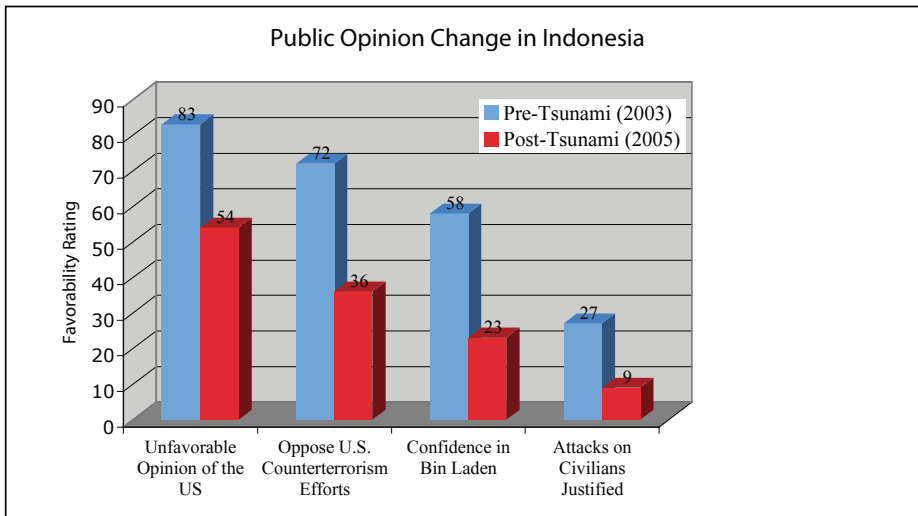


Figure 6:<sup>49</sup>



48 Terror Free Tomorrow, "A Dramatic Change of Public Opinion in the Muslim World: Results from a New Poll in Pakistan", (2005). Available at [www.terrowfreetomorrow.org](http://www.terrowfreetomorrow.org)

49 Terror Free Tomorrow, "A Major Change of Public Opinion in the Muslim World: Results from a New Poll in Indonesia", (2005). Available at [www.terrowfreetomorrow.org](http://www.terrowfreetomorrow.org)

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## СЕКУЛАРНИ КОРЕНИ РЕЛИГИЈСКОГ БЕСА: ОБЛИКОВАЊЕ ВЕРСКОГ ИДЕНТИТЕТА НА БЛИСКОМ ИСТОКУ

### Резиме

У случајевима религијских сукоба кроз историју, религија није нужно била њихов примарни извор али би касније постајала главна окосница дефинисања идентитета појединаца. Иако разлике између две групе могу бити бројне (политичке, економске, културне, итд.), религија је обезбедила најлакши и најдоступнији начин за мобилизацију и диференцијацију њихових идентитета. Када једном дође до овог прелаза, религијски идентитети постају толико истакнути, да се све будуће интеракције дефинишу на линији религије, што постаје нерешив проблем. Овај рад повлачи паралеле између ранијих нерешивих религијских конфликта и садашњег конфликта у развоју између САД и исламског света. Иако су САД учиниле значајан напор на проглашавању рата тероризму, а не исламу, претња у вези са актуалном спољном политиком САД подстиче редефинисање блискоисточног идентитета исламским терминима и ствара нерешив религијски проблем на религијском нивоу. И, док многи у региону нису одмах видели конфликт у религијским оквирима, ислам је обезбедио најистакнутију и најпогоднију форму за артикулисање њихових фрустрација.

**Кључне речи:** религија, ислам, идентитет, спољна политика, Хантингтон.

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