

# Why do some Muslims hate America?

## Researchers offer an intriguing new answer

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The US struggle for hearts and minds in Muslim countries has been aiming at the wrong targets, a new study claims.

The effort poured into diplomacy and public relations to counter anti-American sentiment among some Muslims has so far ignored the main source of their anti-US feeling - competing political factions in their own countries.

In a groundbreaking study in the [American Political Science Review](#) (APSR) published by Cambridge University Press, Lisa Blaydes of Stanford and Drew A. Linzer of Emory University examine the views of thousands of Muslims across the Islamic world on American culture and American foreign policy for their paper, 'Elite Competition, Religiosity, and Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World'.

In a finding that could potentially have far-reaching effects for how the US shapes and conducts its outreach to Islamic countries, Blaydes and Linzer conclude that the main explanation for high levels of anti-American opinion in a given country depends, not as previously thought on Muslim perceptions of what America is culturally or what it does politically, but on the degree of competition between the [political elites](#) within that country itself.

Policy-makers and the public often assume that the most religious and fundamentalist Islamic societies are most anti-American, but the research suggests this is incorrect: really anti-American Muslim societies

tend to have strong secular groups.

Analysis of a huge amount of survey data collected from 13,000 Muslims in 21 countries showed that those countries where people expressed the most anti-American views were also those where two powerful political elites (one Islamist and one secular) were competing fiercely with each other for supporters. In countries where this did not apply, the amount of anti-Americanism expressed was significantly lower.

Blaydes and Linzer conclude that these battling political forces are prone to exploit grievances against the United States for political gain and, in the process, create a heightened sense of anti-American feeling among their citizens. Media outlets such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya also played a significant role, but Blaydes and Linzer's central tenet is that competing national politicians are the main force behind high levels of hatred of America. Blaydes comments:

"When the struggle for political control between two factions escalates, they both tend to ramp up anti-American appeals to boost their own mass support with the result that political debate in certain countries is more or less saturated with anti-American messages. This means that larger numbers of Muslims hear, consider, and are led to adopt anti-American attitudes.

"Conversely we found that in Islamic countries where the battle for local supremacy has already been won by those who are more religious, neither side of the political divide had strong incentives to invoke grievances against the US to recruit supporters and hence the level of anti-Americanism among citizens was lower."

The implications for how US diplomacy goes about winning over public opinion in the most anti-American countries is clear, adds Linzer. They

must find ways to counter the messages being put out by the competing political forces within those countries:

"A core assumption made by those who advocate increasing investment in public diplomacy campaigns is that anti-Americanism stems from poor 'strategic communication' on the part of the US. The results of our study suggest, instead, that Muslim publics are highly responsive to messages from their own domestic elites and the media that report what they say about America. Any American-led effort to change the story in the most anti-American [countries](#) will have to find a way to counter the effects on Muslim minds of local politicians spouting anti-US rhetoric in order to bolster their own positions and win supporters."

Provided by Cambridge University Press

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