Study finds Islam political factions fan flames of anti-Americanism

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What feeds anti-American sentiment in the Islamic world? It's a question that has grown in volume since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, generating policy debate and cultural assumptions, but few hard answers.

However, a new study by Emory political science researcher Drew Linzer and Lisa Blaydes, of Stanford University, offers fresh insight, suggesting that American animosity in the Islamic world may have more to do with the intensity of conflicting factions within local Islamic politics than individual attitudes toward American culture, policies and diplomacy.

Studying data collected from 13,000 Muslims in 21 Islamic countries through the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, the researchers found evidence to suggest the amount of heated rhetoric between political elites in secular and religious groups within Muslim countries plays a central role in cultivating anti-American attitudes.

The report also found anti-Americanism to be strongest in the least religiously observant Muslim countries.

The study, published in the American Political Science Review, notes that while negative perceptions of the United States are widespread in the Islamic world, they are by no means universal.

"People talk about Muslim anti-Americanism as if it's this monolithic thing — that's false," says Linzer, an assistant professor in political

science who specializes in comparative public opinions, electoral systems and statistical methods.

"There is a huge amount of variation in Muslim countries," he adds. "In Turkey, for example, it's very high. In Senegal, it's very low. Why the variations?"

The roots of animosity

For the past decade, pressure has been growing to understand why some Muslim countries kindle such impassioned anti-American attitudes. But to date, evidence has been largely anecdotal, Linzer notes.

"Policy-wise, this has been a major source of debate," he says. "In our view, there has been a clearly divided set of conventional-wisdom arguments about what is the source of this animosity that we see in survey research and the news."

"Some people want to know directly why there is this animosity; others just want to know what to do about it," he adds.

According to the Pew Center data, those anti-American opinions actually remain relatively stable across Islamic countries. "It's not that it's getting worse, it's just that people are paying more careful attention to it," Linzer observes.

The researchers decided to take a closer, empirical look at the issue because they sensed something missing in the dialogue.

First, they recognized political opinions are formed, in part, by an electorate listening to the messages of local political leaders. "That helps shape views —and that's what led us to this theory," he says. "It's not a feature unique to the Muslim world; it's how people form their

opinions."

Historically, domestic political divisions within Muslim politics have fallen between secular elite and fundamental Islamic elite factions. And both groups have long laid claims to anti-American grievances, Linzer notes.

Examining the data, an interesting pattern emerged: As domestic political competition intensifies between secular and religious factions, anti-American sentiment arises, as respective parties attempt to exploit those attitudes for political gain.

"Competition between these groups heats up and they start using those claims to gain support," Linzer says.

Surprisingly, that competition appears most intense not in the most deeply observant Islamic countries, but where divisions between secular and religious factions are sharpest. There, competition between political forces — not religious fundamentalism — appears to spark the greatest anti-American sentiment, the researchers found.

Changing hearts and minds

While demonstrating that anti-Americanism in the Islamic world isn't tied exclusively to U.S. foreign policy or cultural differences, the study underscores a practical reality:

In order to change hearts and minds overseas, American diplomacy and public relations strategies must compete with local political environments with an established tradition of promoting negative views.

"In many countries, political factions will likely continue to use animosity toward America as an instrument of mobilization — citing

grievances often fed by U.S. actions and policy. As long as they do, there are segments of Muslim audiences who will be receptive to the message," Linzer acknowledges.

And while media outlets, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, also play a significant role in spreading that message, competing national politicians remain the most potent component of the public opinion formula, the researchers assert.

"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-U.S. rhetoric in order to bolster their own positions and win supporters," the study asserts.

"What has been achieved? I would be happy if there was a better understanding of this phenomenon," Linzer says. "I think the current debate has stalled — particularly because it isn't the whole story."

Provided by Emory University

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