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Religion, peace and stability in the Middle East
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Abstract

Religion and conflict have grown into an expanding field of research. It is now increasingly recognized that religion has come to play an increasingly important role in shaping today's world. Middle East region is the origin of the three major monotheistic religious traditions of the world: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This paper relied much on literature review approach. Past studies were reviewed to uncover the actual situation regarding juvenile delinquency. The conflicts occurring in this region are fought between people who believe in one and the same God (or at least come from a religious tradition). Conflicts with an explicit religious dimension in the issue at stake have increased over time and do now represent about half of all the armed conflicts. Thus, how religious armed conflicts can be prevented from breaking out, and how they can be managed and de-escalated once they have been initiated, are research as well as policy questions of outmost importance. Religion tolerance and respect are critical towards establishing harmony, peace and stability in the Middle East. The acceptance that there is no superior religion to another will ensure that conflicts arising from religion are mitigated.

Key words: *Religion, peace and stability in the Middle East*

1.0 Introduction

Religion, which is very difficult to define and encapsulate at the theoretical level, is often overlooked in research, but this further widens the gap between theory and reality (Solarz, 2020). Since religion still plays a very important role in people's lives, it has many functions to fulfill in the life of society, so its inclusion in research would seem to be an important challenge to take up (Abdulmajid, 2018). The world's three major religions –Judaism, Christianity, and Islam– have originated in the Middle East, a fact that reflects the significant role this region has played in the historical development of human civilization.

The religious diversity that once enriched the Middle East on various levels and constituted a social mosaic, and (Olsen, & Emmett, 2020) the historic coexistence among the region's various communities, were threatened and jeopardized with the rise of some radical groups whose atrocities reached every single social component with different religious, doctrinal or ideological tenets (Baumgartner, Francia & Morris, 2008). Amid these developments one may ask whether managing religious diversity in such a complex region falls within the attainable or is it a mere unreachable aspiration, no matter the strategies employed.

Religious differences make the occurrence of conflict more likely and in most of the cases more intense (Rummel, 1997). The degree of religious diversity in a region predicts the level of violence in its domestic conflicts. The involvement of religious issues in conflicts leads to more cultural, political and economic conflicts (Koch, 2019). The religious differences could also make international wars more likely. Religion-related matters largely influence the dynamics of conflicts (Abdulmajid, 2018). Religious institutions usually facilitate unrest when a conflict is religiously driven, and avoid to do so when religion is not important in a specific conflict (ibid). In countries where religion prevails over the political discourse, religious matters take over other political, cultural and economic issues. Religion-related conflicts are most likely to lead to intervention by foreign forces, each to support one side of the conflict. Religion may facilitate discrimination and exclusion against ethnic minority groups (Midlarsky, 1998). In countries where religious differences are key distinguishing markers within the society, and where the religious discourse dominates politics, issues of inclusion-exclusion and participation-marginalization occur between the majority and minority groups, and even ethnic conflicts are more likely to be associated with religious considerations.

Religion and politics have always been intimately and uniquely intertwined in Middle Eastern culture. In modern times this remains the case. The Arab-Israeli conflict has had religious elements both in its international and domestic manifestations (Fox, 2004). The Israeli government since the establishment of the state has always had a religious party in the government (Gopin, 2002). Influential Islamic opposition movements and/or political parties exist in most Arab states.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

As much as religion is associated with violence in general, the two are even more closely associated in the Middle East. That all of the Middle East's major religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, have concepts of holy war illustrates this point.² The subject of religion and politics in the Middle East has been the focus of several studies which deal with the impact of religious radicalism (Fox, 2004). For example, Svensson, (2013) argues that Jewish religious radicalism has significantly influenced Israeli politics from the inception of the state. While this influence has varied over time from support of the government to opposition to the government, perhaps reaching its most extreme in the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, it has always been present. Similarly, Fox, James, and Li, (2009) argue that Islam has had a significant impact on Arab integration into Israeli political life.

2.0 Methodology

This paper relied much on literature review approach. Past studies were reviewed related to Religion, peace and stability in the Middle East.

3.0 Literature Review

A study by Baumgartner, Francia, and Morris (2008) on the influence of religion on public opinion of US foreign policy in the Middle East indicated that Evangelical Christians have remained strong supporters of a hawkish foreign policy toward the Middle East, even as overall public support for the Iraq War declines. They also find that Evangelicals are among the strongest supporters of Israel and hold more negative views of Islam than others. These results reinforce the growing importance of the "faith factor" in public opinion and American politics as a whole. Olsen, and Emmett (2020) in a study on contesting religious heritage in the Middle East indicated that the Middle East region has long attracted pilgrims and tourists from around the world who, for centuries, have come to engage with the region's religious heritage. This religious heritage, however, has long been highly contested between and within cultural and religious groups because of its role in national, cultural, and religious identity. These contests come about for many reasons, including questions and disagreements related to interpretation, authenticity, designation, encroachment, and visibility.

Religion and International Relations in the Middle East is a Challenge for International Relations Studies (Solarz, 2020). The problem of religion at the level of the international system, in large measure generated by the Middle-Eastern region, is therefore a present one in every sense, exerting a growing influence on the above system's evolution. The security-related issues that cause the above freedom to be violated encourage a recognition that the said interference or intervention might indeed take place, in line with the responsibility to protect. Abdulmajid, and (2018) in a study on religious diversity and conflict in the Middle East indicated that religion, as an important factor for alliances and prevalent over political discourse, is enormously incorporated into the decision-making processes and policies by the major powers in the Middle East. The political behavior of many countries in that region is remarkably influenced by the religious differences between the groups, leading to constant unrest and violent conflicts.

Also Fox, (2004) studying the unique role of religion in Middle Eastern Ethnic Conflict noted religion is at least twice as powerful an influence on Middle Eastern ethnic conflicts as it is on such conflicts in the rest of the world. However, other than this, Middle Eastern ethnic conflicts are not distinguishable from ethnic conflicts occurring elsewhere. Haider, (2017) in a study on persecution of Christians in the Middle East noted that the population of Christians in the Middle east has constantly been declining owing to persecution, physical violence, instructional marginalization among many other religious related atrocities. The constant harassment if Christians in the Middle East has made Christian dominated countries to view Islam as bad religion a continuation of religious conflicts.

5.0 Conclusion

Taking the previous findings into account, we find that religious incentives are, to a large extent, in the core of conflict in the Middle Eastern region. Religion, as an important factor for alliances and prevalent over political discourse, is enormously incorporated into the decision-making processes and policies by the major powers in the Middle East. The political behavior of many countries in that region is remarkably influenced by the religious differences between the groups, leading to constant unrest and violent conflicts. Considering the literature findings as well as the examples provided in the course of this paper, a conclusion is made that religious discrimination is considerably high in the Middle East, leading to the exclusion and marginalization of minority groups, increasing the chance of conflict in the region, and confirming to a large extent the involvement of religion in the conflicts in the region.

6.0 Recommendations

While management attempts made some success in other parts of the world, the complex religious-sectarian fabric of the populations in the Middle East might render many managerial strategies ineffective. Nevertheless, emphasizing shared cultural values and social norms could contribute to the maintenance of coexistence and the prevention of crisis outbreak, and could lead to social unity against extremism of any kind. Religion tolerance and respect are critical towards establishing harmony, peace and stability in the Middle East. The acceptance that there is no superior religion to another will ensure that conflicts arising from religion are mitigated.

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