**After the genocide in Gaza**

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During the post-September 11 forever wars launched in Afghanistan and Iraq, surveys of Muslim-majority countries and their opinions about religious extremism felt relatively commonplace. Most such surveys tended to be commissioned quietly and were meant to help concerned policymakers understand the places and people their countries had launched wars on.

One of the most widely cited reports in that period (that was publicly available) was Pew’s 2013 study of the Muslim world, which amalgamated surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center between 2008 and 2012 in a total of 39 countries and territories and was derived from a total of 38,000 face-to-face interviews. This study was controversial and drew a lot of criticism for the way some of the questions were framed. But now, with over a decade having passed since its publication and so much having changed around the world, it is instructive to go back to some of the findings from the survey. The reason is simple: the genocide in Gaza is going to shape an entire generation of Muslim attitudes all around the world. It would be useful to begin to prepare for what this might look like.

On American university campuses, the sights and sounds of how Israel’s genocide of Palestinian men, women, and children is shaping university students’ attitudes toward their government are already visible. The US establishment has dealt with campus protests for a long time, but those that attend university and explore their politics as young people end up shaping that establishment too. It would not be unreasonable to be excited about the mid to long-term prospects of how Gen Z will reshape American power and its deployment abroad. It would also not be overly cynical to recognize the intergenerational limits of campus politics seeping into public policy. A few delayed shipments of weapons to Israel’s radical right-wing extremist government will not fundamentally alter the fundamentals of how Israeli lobbyists own and operate influence in Washington DC.

The global Muslim population was 1.6 billion in 2010. Pew estimates that this will grow to over 2.2 billion by 2030. As the fastest-growing religious demographic in the world, Muslims are also the youngest major religious group on the planet. So how Muslim students absorb and process Israel’s genocide in Gaza is essential to the attitudes and postures the global Muslim elite will adopt in the 2030s and 2040s.

In the 2013 Pew study, the most memorable single question was the one about suicide bombings. “Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies... Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often, or sometimes, or rarely, or never justified?” Remember, these questions were asked between 2008 and 2012. Here’s how different countries’ Muslims responded.

Among the often justified and sometimes justified groups, the highest percentage was in the Palestinian Territories, with a total of 40 per cent. Afghanistan was a close second at 39 per cent. In Egypt, it was 29 per cent. In Bangladesh, it was 26 per cent. In Malaysia, it was 18 per cent. Pakistan was at 13 per cent.

These numbers are not surprising. Also not surprising: the authorities in GCC countries don’t let surveyors roam around asking whatever questions they want. A lot more of the world has become a lot less hospitable for such research. Given the cynical use of such data points, it isn’t hard to understand why.

Technology has become a great equalizer between terrorist groups and law-enforcement authorities. No conversation is private, in part thanks to some of the cutting-edge Israeli firms that supply software enabling authorities to listen in on what’s cooking in the ‘chatroom”’and in the minds and hearts of people – young and old. Still, the question begs repetition: What impact will the brutal atrocities that Israel is enacting in Gaza have on the adoption of violent extremism as a primary political identity among Muslims – both within their countries and globally?

In Syria, estimates of the number of foreign fighters have varied widely. In 2020, terrorism expert Abdul Basit cited the Soufan Group’s estimate of about 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 different countries. In a 2017 paper for the International Centre for Counter Terrorism, Alex P Schmid writes that “we know that more than 30,000 Muslims from some 100 countries have gone to Syria and other ‘jihadi’ (sic) theaters of war in recent years”.

These estimates are aggregations, but their real power and impact lies in how many fighters came from each of those countries. For each of those countries, each fighter represents multiple layers of nightmares. Above and beyond the reabsorption and deradicalization question, or the question of terrorist training regimes, or even the issue of countering terrorist financing (a key element of the FATF listings) – there is the more important question of how a fighter becomes a fighter. The nearly ceaseless broadcast of the Gaza genocide has highlighted and underscored Israel’s behaviour in Palestine as the most egregious sustained series of injustices ever witnessed by Gen X, millennials and Gen Z. What will the impact on recruitment for violent extremist groups be?

Consider the Afghan Taliban and why it has been so circumspect in its response to the genocide in Gaza. Among Muslim-majority countries, Afghanistan is the only one run by an avowedly religious doctrine and the only one with a recent history of military success in countering what it had framed as an occupation. One reason for the relatively tame response might be what the Afghan Taliban have to contend with at home: the threat of Daesh.

The so-called Islamic State Khorasan Province is based in Afghanistan and is widely seen as the group responsible for what Kings’ College scholar and counter-radicalization guru Shiraz Maher calls the three most significant recent terrorist attacks worldwide: the January 3 attack at a memorial event for Qassim Soleimani in Iran, the January 28 attack at a church in Istanbul, and the March 22 Moscow attack.

The fallout from these attacks is not insignificant. Iran first accused the US and Israel as having been behind the January 3 attack, and then launched a so-called counterattack on Pakistani territory on January 24. The ripples of what this has done to Pakistani public policy will be felt for years, but the balancing act has been a high-wire trip for the ages.

On March 29, the Ministry of Interior banned the Zainebiyoun Brigade which has recruited, trained and financed Pakistani fighters for Iran’s forever wars in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Less than four weeks later, on April 22 the foreign ministry red carpeted a warm welcome for Dr Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi, the president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These kinds of wild balancing acts are now going to be the standard public policy work that governments in Muslim-majority countries are going to have to engage in.

But the power in these dynamics lies less with the ruling elites in Tehran or Rawalpindi or Kandahar than it would seem. It lies more in the nerve centres of groups like Daesh and TTP than anybody wants to admit.

The problem is not restricted to Afghanistan or its immediate neighbours. The pressures faced by the rulers of Jordan and Egypt are intergenerational, but the Gaza genocide has added unprecedented urgency and complexity to the political economy there. In a Saudi Arabia seized by the reforms envisioned by young, new leadership, the genocide in Gaza is a disruption to the most spectacular national transformation story in decades. In places as far away from Gaza as Jakarta and Dhaka, Palestine is in people’s minds and their hearts. Public policy decision-making needs to account for complexity, but the public’s sentiment is not bound to any such filters.

The disparity between authorities that understand the risks that now pervade their world and public sentiment that is outraged at the daily massacres in Gaza that the international community has been unable to stop is a gap that will be filled by simple, linear and short-form ‘literature’ of the kind that populates Facebook, X (or Twitter), Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp. The world has already entered a new and much more insidious age of violent extremism. Like the previous age, it will be Muslims and Muslim majority states that suffer the most.

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