

## **RELIGION NOT MAIN CAUSE OF CURRENT CONFLICTS**

***New Research Uncovers Empirical Link between Religion and Peace***

- **Corruption, economic inequality and political instability have a greater impact on countries' likelihood of conflict than religious differences.**
- **The proportion of atheists in a country does not impact levels of peace.**
- **Many Muslim-majority countries with Sunni and Shia demographic mixes are relatively peaceful.**
- **Only 14% of conflicts in 2013 were motivated by religion alone, however religion was one of multiple causes in 60% of conflicts.**
- **Two thirds of the conflicts had as their main cause opposition to a particular government or opposition to the economic, ideological, political or social system of a state.**
- **More peaceful countries tend to have fewer restrictions on religious behaviour and less hostility towards religion.**

**New York & Sydney, 21 October 2014:** Despite the connections between Islamic extremism and the current conflicts in the Middle East, there is no general causal relationship between religion and conflict, according to a new research report released today by the Institute for Economics and Peace. The report answers five questions based on recent global media focus and provides important statistical analysis of the empirical link between religion and peace.

Terrorist activity involving religious extremism is distinct from the larger relationship between religion and peace. The “Peace and Religion” report aims to broaden the discussion on whether religion in itself is a cause of conflict or whether there are other more significant factors.

Looking at the 35 armed conflicts that took place in 2013, only 5 were motivated by religious elements alone. Importantly, nearly two thirds of the 35 conflicts had among their main cause opposition to a particular government or opposition to the economic, ideological, political or social system of a state. When analysing the motivation for these conflicts, the desire for identity and self-government was a part of 60% of conflicts.

“Although the violence being perpetrated by ISIL in Iraq and Syria is motivated by religious extremism, this broader analysis highlights that many other factors are also driving conflict” said IEP Executive Chairman Steve Killelea. “There is a need to recognise these other factors and to formulate policies that address exclusion, inequity and governance to create the underlying foundations for lasting peace.”

Factors other than religious beliefs, such as corruption, gender and economic inequality, political terror and political instability are more significant in determining countries’ levels of peace. The presence of multiple religions in a country appears to have a pacifying effect if they are free of restrictions. Full democracies have the best average performance in peace and also the lowest levels of religious restrictions and religious hostilities.

The research found no statistical relationship between atheism and peace. According to the World Religion Project of the Correlates of War, only nine countries have more than 30% of the population identifying as atheist. Interestingly, of these countries, only New Zealand is not a communist or ex-communist country.

In analysing Muslim-majority countries, including those currently embroiled in armed conflict, the research shows that the demographic spread of Sunni and Shia does not determine levels of peace. In fact, many countries with Sunni and Shia demographic mixes are relatively peaceful, such as Qatar, U.A.E. and Kuwait.

Finally, the report shows that religion can be a catalyst for peace, as religious groups and communities tend to strengthen the social bonds of citizens. Civic engagement and participation, as well as higher group membership, such as sports or religious groups, corresponds with slightly higher levels of peace and can strengthen the resilience of societies.

## **FIVE KEY QUESTIONS**

The report answers five questions based on recent media focus:

**Question 1:** Is religion the main cause of conflict today?

Religion is not the main cause of conflict today. Of the 35 armed conflicts that took place in 2013, only 14% were motivated by religion alone.

**Question 2:** Does the proportion of religious belief or atheism in a country determine the peace of the country?

Statistical analysis shows there is no link between religious belief and conflict. Of the world's ten most peaceful countries, three are highly religious.

**Question 3:** Does the demographic spread of Sunni and Shia affect peace?

Many Muslim-majority countries with Sunni and Shia demographic mixes are relatively peaceful. Qatar, the most peaceful country in the Middle East according to the Global Peace Index, has the same proportion of Sunni to Shia as one of the world's least peaceful countries: Afghanistan.

**Question 4:** Is religion key to understanding what drives peace?

Other factors such as corruption and inequality have a greater impact on levels of peace than religious traits. However the two religious characteristics that are positively associated with peace are: less restrictions on religious behaviour and lower hostility towards religion.

**Question 5:** Can religion play a positive role in peacebuilding?

Countries that have higher membership of religious groups tend to be slightly more peaceful. Religion can provide a basis for inclusion and social cohesion, which strengthen the bonds between citizens and creates a more peaceful society.

## About the Research

The report analyses the relationships between peace, as measured by the Institute for Economics and Peace's (IEP) annual Global Peace Index, and religious measures related to levels of religious belief and restrictions and hostilities towards religion, along with additional socio-economic factors. The main data sources used are: IEP Global Peace Index; Pew Government Restrictions Index; Pew Social Hostilities Index; World Religion Project; World Values Survey; and the Religious Diversity Index measured by IEP.

## Notes to Editor

The report "5 Key Questions Answered on the Link between Peace and Religion" will be available for download on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October at 12:00AM EDT at [www.visionofhumanity.org](http://www.visionofhumanity.org)

## Contacts

[media@economicsandpeace.org](mailto:media@economicsandpeace.org)

Michelle Breslauer, New York: +1 (646) 963-2160

Philippa Lysaght, Sydney: +61 (02) 9901-8500

## About the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP)

IEP is an international and independent think tank dedicated to shifting the world's focus to peace as a positive, achievable, and tangible measure of human well-being and progress. IEP annually produces the Global Peace Index, the world's leading measure of national peacefulness.

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