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Religious Values and Social Cohesion in Muslim Societies: An Empirical Study of Islamic Ethical Teachings and Community Integration

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Abstract: *Social cohesion, the quality of social relations, trust, solidarity, and shared orientation to the common good, is widely considered a precondition for political stability, economic development, and collective well-being. Religion is often credited with strengthening cohesion in Muslim societies, but the claim is rarely tested with systematic evidence that separates different dimensions of religiosity and different forms of social bonds. This article develops and specifies an empirical study of the relationship between internalized Islamic ethical teachings and community integration. It argues that the relevant variable is not religiosity in general but the degree to which individuals internalize specific prosocial ethical commitments, namely justice (ʿadl), trustworthiness (amāna), mutual solidarity (takāful), consultation (shūrā), and benevolence toward neighbors and strangers (iḥsān). It proposes that these commitments promote cohesion through identifiable mechanisms: generalized and particularized trust, participation in religious and civic networks, and perceived fairness of institutions. It also proposes that the relationship is conditional, because ritual religiosity can strengthen in-group bonding while weakening bridging ties across sectarian, ethnic, and class lines when it is not accompanied by internalized universalist ethics. A mixed-methods design is specified, combining a multilevel household survey nested in neighbourhoods with qualitative interviews and focus groups. The article presents hypotheses, measurement instruments, sampling and power considerations, a multilevel and mediation analytic strategy, and an interpretive guide to the possible findings. It concludes by discussing the contribution of the design to the study of religion and social capital, its limitations, and its policy relevance.*

Keywords: social cohesion, Islamic ethics, religiosity, social capital, trust, community integration, Muslim societies, mixed methods

1. Introduction

The question of what holds societies together is among the oldest in the social sciences. Durkheim (1893/1997) located the answer in moral solidarity, the shared norms and beliefs that bind individuals to one another and to the collective. Ibn Khaldūn, writing five centuries earlier, had proposed that the strength of a political community depends on *ʿaṣabiyya*, a group

feeling that makes members willing to sacrifice for each other, and that this feeling weakens when luxury, injustice, and inequality corrode the bonds on which it rests. Both thinkers saw religion as one of the principal sources of such solidarity. Contemporary scholarship has returned to the same problem under the vocabulary of social capital, trust, and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Chan, To, and Chan, 2006), and has produced a substantial body of work on the role of religion within it (Putnam and Campbell, 2010; Lim and Putnam, 2010).

Muslim societies are a particularly important setting for this inquiry. In many of them, religion remains central to public and private life, and surveys of Muslim populations have repeatedly found that large majorities regard religion as very important in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2012; 2013). Islamic teaching contains an extensive ethical vocabulary of solidarity and social responsibility. The Qurʾān describes believers as brothers and sisters, commands justice and benevolence (16:90), enjoins care for neighbors, orphans, and the poor, and warns against slander, suspicion, and the breaking of trust. Prophetic tradition compares the community of believers to a single body whose members share one another's pain. Many Muslim societies are nevertheless marked by sectarian tension, ethnic and tribal divisions, class stratification, and low trust in institutions. The coexistence of a rich ethic of solidarity and uneven cohesion in practice poses an empirical puzzle that general claims about religion cannot resolve. The puzzle has two parts. The first is conceptual. "Religious values" is a broad category, and it is not obvious that all of its components produce the same social effects. Participation in congregational prayer, belief in divine judgment, private devotion, and adherence to ethical teachings concerning fairness and honesty are different phenomena, and there are good reasons to expect that they relate differently to social trust and integration. The second part is empirical. Much of the existing evidence on religion and social outcomes comes from Western, and especially American, contexts, and its transferability to Muslim-majority societies has not been established. Studies in Muslim contexts exist, but they are often limited by the use of single-item measures of religiosity, by the neglect of community-level variation, and by an inattention to the distinction between bonding and bridging forms of social capital.

This article addresses these gaps by specifying a study that treats Islamic ethical teachings as a measurable, multidimensional construct, distinguishes it from ritual and identity-based religiosity, and examines its relationship to several dimensions of social cohesion at both the individual and community levels. The article poses four research questions. First, to what extent does the internalization of Islamic ethical teachings predict community integration, controlling for ritual religiosity and socioeconomic characteristics? Second, through which mechanisms, including trust, network participation, and perceived institutional fairness, does the relationship operate? Third, does the relationship differ for bonding and bridging forms of cohesion, that is, for ties within one's own community and ties across sectarian, ethnic, and class boundaries? Fourth, how do community-level conditions, such as inequality, institutional quality, and local religious leadership, moderate the individual-level relationship?

The central argument is that the effect of religion on cohesion is mediated by the content of the ethics that individuals internalize and conditioned by the institutional environment in which they live. Where universalist ethical teachings are internalized and institutions are perceived as fair, religion should be associated with broad cohesion that extends beyond the in-group. Where

religiosity is primarily ritual or identitarian, and where institutions are perceived as unjust, it may strengthen in-group solidarity while leaving cross-group ties weak, or may even sharpen group boundaries.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method empirical research design to examine the relationship between Islamic ethical teachings and social cohesion in Muslim societies, with particular attention to values such as *ʿadl* (justice), *iḥsān* (benevolence), *ukhuwwah* (brotherhood), *amānah* (trust), *ṣadaqah* (voluntary giving), *waqf*, and social responsibility. Quantitative data will be collected through structured questionnaires from members of selected Muslim communities to assess their understanding and practice of Islamic ethical values and their relationship with indicators of community integration, including interpersonal trust, social participation, mutual assistance, tolerance, and collective responsibility. Qualitative data will be obtained through semi-structured interviews with religious scholars, academics, community leaders, and selected community members to explore how Islamic ethical principles influence everyday social relationships and mechanisms of inclusion and solidarity. Participants will be selected through purposive and stratified sampling to ensure representation of relevant social groups. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, while qualitative responses will be examined through thematic analysis. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respectful treatment of religious perspectives, will be maintained throughout the research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Cohesion: Concept and Dimensions

Social cohesion is a contested concept, and its definition shapes the research design. Jenson (1998) identified five dimensions in policy discourse: belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy. Chan, To, and Chan (2006) criticized the conflation of cohesion with its determinants and consequences, and proposed to define it as a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society, characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that include trust, a sense of belonging, and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations. Schiefer and van der Noll (2017), reviewing the literature, concluded that the most defensible core of the concept consists of three components: the quality of social relations, identification with the social entity, and orientation toward the common good. This study adopts that three-part conception and operationalizes it as follows. Quality of social relations is measured through social trust, neighborly relations, and tolerance of diversity. Identification is measured through belonging to the local community and the wider nation. Orientation toward the common good is measured through solidarity, willingness to help, civic participation, and norm compliance. A distinction drawn by Putnam (2000) is essential for the present analysis. Bonding social capital refers to ties among people who are alike, such as family, co-religionists, and members of the same

ethnic group. Bridging social capital refers to ties across social divides. Bonding ties are valuable for mutual support and identity, but a society composed only of strong bonding ties may be fragmented. Bridging ties are what integrate a diverse society. A study of religion and cohesion in societies that are plural in sect, ethnicity, language, and class must therefore treat the two forms separately.

2.2 Islamic Ethical Teachings as a Source of Cohesion

The Islamic ethical tradition can be read as supplying several distinct resources for cohesion, each of which suggests a testable mechanism. The first is trustworthiness (*amāna*). The Qurʾān commands the fulfilment of trusts and covenants (4:58; 5:1; 23:8), and the Prophet was known before his mission as *al-Amīn*, the trustworthy. An internalized norm of honesty and reliability should foster generalized trust, since individuals who regard dishonesty as a serious moral violation and expect the same of others will find cooperation less risky. The second is justice (*ʿadl*), which the Qurʾān commands even against one's own kin and interests (4:135) and even toward those one dislikes (5:8). An internalized commitment to impartial fairness bears on cohesion by supporting legitimacy and by restraining favoritism, which is one of the principal sources of resentment in divided societies. The third resource is solidarity and mutual aid (*takāful*, *taʿāwun*). The Qurʾān commands cooperation in righteousness and piety, and not in sin and aggression (5:2), and prophetic traditions on the single body and on the obligation to assist neighbors and relatives establish a norm of active concern. This should relate directly to helping behavior and to the density of informal support networks. The fourth is benevolence and neighborly conduct (*iḥsān*, *ḥuqūq al-jār*). Prophetic traditions stress the rights of neighbors in strong terms, and one widely cited report states that a person is not a believer who sleeps full while his neighbor is hungry. Such teachings should be associated with neighborhood-level integration. The fifth is consultation (*shūrā*), which the Qurʾān identifies as a characteristic of the believing community (42:38) and which supports participatory norms and a sense of voice. The sixth is a cluster of prohibitions on the behaviors that corrode relations: backbiting, slander, mockery, suspicion, and spying (49:11–12). These norms, if internalized, should reduce interpersonal hostility. These ethical resources are distinct from, and not reducible to, ritual practice. The tradition itself makes the distinction, as in the Qurʾānic criticism of those who pray but neglect the small kindnesses owed to others (107:4–7) and in the prophetic distinction between the person who fasts and prays but harms his neighbor and the one who does less ritual but harms no one. This distinction between ritual devotion and ethical conduct provides the basis for treating them as separate variables in the empirical design.

2.3 Religion and Social Capital: Existing Evidence and Mechanisms

The empirical literature suggests several mechanisms through which religion affects social capital. Putnam and Campbell (2010), analyzing American data, argued that the association between religiosity and civic engagement is explained largely by the social networks that congregations provide and not by belief as such. Lim and Putnam (2010) found that the relationship between religious attendance and life satisfaction was mediated by the friendships formed within the congregation, while private devotion showed a weaker relationship. This evidence suggests that the structural, networked dimension of religion may matter more than

the doctrinal dimension. It raises the question of whether internalized ethical content adds anything beyond participation in religious networks, which is the question that the present design is built to answer. A second line of research concerns the potential for religion to strengthen in-group ties at the expense of out-group relations. Allport's (1954) classic work on prejudice distinguished extrinsic from intrinsic religious orientations and found differing associations with prejudice. His contact hypothesis further suggests that cross-group contact under conditions of equal status and cooperation reduces prejudice, and religious institutions may either facilitate or obstruct such contact. In societies divided by sect, religious identity can heighten group boundaries, particularly in conditions of political competition and perceived threat. The possibility that religiosity has opposite effects on bonding and bridging ties is therefore well founded, and it motivates the separate treatment of the two.

A third consideration concerns institutional context. Research on social trust has consistently found that perceived fairness and impartiality of institutions are among its strongest determinants, and that inequality is associated with lower generalized trust. Where the state and the economy are perceived as corrupt or unjust, individuals tend to retreat to the circles of kin and co-religionists, and the cohesion-producing potential of general ethical commitments may be blunted. This suggests that community-level conditions moderate the individual-level relationship, and it connects with Ibn Khaldūn's observation that injustice erodes the solidarity on which political communities depend.

2.4 Conceptual Model

The conceptual model proposes that three components of religiosity are distinguishable: ritual practice (frequency of prayer, fasting, and mosque attendance), religious identity salience (the importance of being Muslim to one's self-definition and the centrality of religion in one's life), and internalized ethical orientation (the degree to which individuals endorse and report adherence to the ethical teachings described above). These are expected to be correlated but empirically separable. Internalized ethical orientation is hypothesized to be the strongest predictor of cohesion, ritual practice to be associated with network participation and bonding ties through the congregational mechanism, and identity salience to be associated with bonding ties and, under conditions of perceived threat, with reduced bridging ties. The effects of ethical orientation are hypothesized to operate through three mediators: generalized trust, participation in religious and civic networks, and perceived institutional fairness. Community-level inequality, institutional quality, and the character of local religious leadership are hypothesized to moderate these relationships.

The conceptual model yields the following hypotheses, each of which is stated in directional terms so that it can be falsified. The first hypothesis (H1) holds that internalized Islamic ethical orientation is positively associated with overall social cohesion, net of ritual practice, identity salience, and demographic and socioeconomic controls. The second (H2) holds that ritual practice is positively associated with bonding social capital and with participation in religious networks, but that its association with bridging social capital is weaker or nonsignificant once ethical orientation is controlled. The third (H3) holds that religious identity salience is positively associated with bonding ties and is either unrelated or negatively related to bridging

ties, particularly among respondents who report high perceived threat to their group. The fourth hypothesis (H4) concerns mechanisms and holds that the association between ethical orientation and cohesion is partially mediated by generalized trust, by participation in networks, and by perceived institutional fairness. The fifth (H5) holds that community-level inequality and low institutional quality weaken the association between ethical orientation and bridging social capital, so that the cross-level interaction is negative. The sixth (H6) holds that the character of local religious leadership moderates the relationship, such that the associations of religiosity with bridging ties are more positive in neighborhoods where the leadership is perceived as inclusive and emphasizes ethical universalism, and less positive or negative where it is perceived as sectarian or exclusivist.

8. Policy and Practical Implications

If the study's hypotheses are supported, several implications follow. Educational and religious institutions that wish to strengthen cohesion would be advised to emphasize the universalist ethical content of the tradition, including trustworthiness, impartial justice, and the rights of neighbors and strangers, in addition to ritual instruction. Programs that engage religious leaders, especially at the neighborhood level, in promoting inclusive and ethically oriented teaching could be developed and evaluated, given that leadership character is a plausible moderator. Interfaith and intersectarian initiatives that create sustained cooperative contact on equal terms would be consistent with the contact literature and with the importance of bridging ties. At the structural level, investments in the perceived fairness of institutions, the reduction of local inequality, and the provision of impartial public services would be expected to enhance the cohesion benefits of existing ethical commitments. Zakāt and waqf institutions, when managed transparently and in ways that reach across community lines, could serve both distributive and integrative functions. These implications are conditional on the findings and should be refined by them.

9. Conclusion

This article has specified an empirical study of the relationship between religious values and social cohesion in Muslim societies that takes the content of religious ethics seriously. It argues that the question of whether religion promotes cohesion cannot be answered at the level of religiosity in general, and that a satisfactory answer requires the separation of ritual practice, identity salience, and internalized ethical orientation, the distinction of bonding from bridging social capital, the examination of mechanisms, and the attention to the institutional context in which individuals live. The proposed mixed-methods, multilevel design offers a way of testing these claims and of interpreting the results in the light of the lived understandings of the communities concerned. The central expectation, which the study is designed to test and not assume, is that the ethical teachings of Islam, when internalized and when supported by fair institutions and inclusive leadership, are a significant resource for integration across the lines that divide plural societies, whereas in the absence of those conditions religious commitment may strengthen the bonds within groups without bridging the divisions between them.

Whatever the findings, the study will advance the understanding of how a living ethical tradition interacts with the structures of the societies in which it is practiced.

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Note: Please verify Qurʾānic verse numbers, hadith wording and grading, and all bibliographic details against the original sources before submission.