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Perpetual Systematic Violence and Perennial Violence in the Muslim Crescent: Palestinians, Bangladeshis, and Rohingyas

"If you want to see where the main state and human security threats in the future will be, look at the Muslim crescent, not the South China Sea."

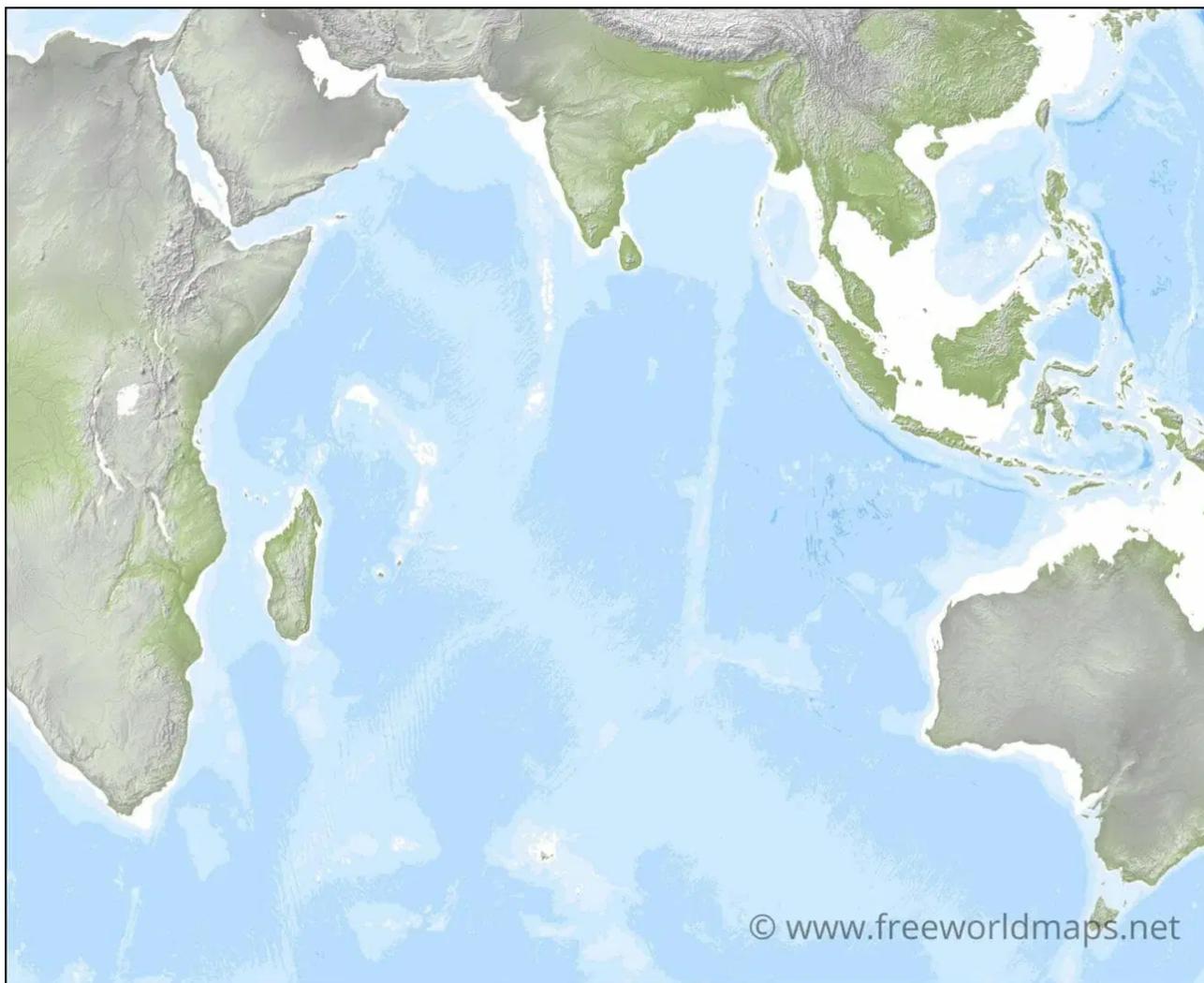


Michael Charney on November 15, 2023

Whether the news media swings one way or the other on focusing mostly on Israel or mostly on Gaza, largely dependent on whether the media is Western and Indian in the first case or based in the Middle East in the latter, audiences are treated with these events not so much as new, but local and complex. Indeed, they are. However, there is something oddly familiar with other events in both neighbouring and distant countries, but always in the Global South and mostly in areas once colonised by Britain. A militant Muslim group strikes out against a system of systematic violence using asymmetrical warfare according to them, but terror according to the governments of the countries under attack. Whether the causalities are few or many, the response is overwhelmingly larger and more violent, with the deaths incurred by state forces larger by a factor of ten, twenty, or even thirty. The collateral damage inflicted is huge and indiscriminate. The state response is accompanied by a flood of social media vitriol fed regardless of which country is being attacked, by trolls based in or from India, Israel, and Myanmar, for whom attacks by Muslims anywhere are a threat to all and for whom inflicting pain upon Muslims appears to be a common cause.

Three major factors keep Muslims on the receiving end of the violence across the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, admittedly often with the agency of violent organisations created in the name of their cause. First, as an othered minority community in five increasingly anti-Muslim societies (there are many, but the major players are the US, Israel, India, Myanmar, and, arguably, a growing segment of France), where religious extremists have used “the Muslim threat,” to further their political goals, Muslims are easily securitised. The politics of intertextuality is certainly at work.¹ For half a century, entertainment media, whether in film or in print, has gifted the world a wealth of negative images and stereotypes of Muslims as backward, violent, and irrational. More generally, as Edward Said revealed so clearly in *Orientalism*, this is how Western knowledge has been constructed about the Middle East in general, making it impossible to see Arabs in any other way, more easily enabling the region to be dominated by the West.² Arguably, this is true not just of the Middle East, but the Muslim world as whole.

Second, in three of the major Asian cases in the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, Muslims suffer from the “newcomer curse.” Whether in truth or in fiction, Muslims are depicted as later arrivals and not true sons of the soil. Israel, India, and Myanmar depend upon origin myths that stress that the dominant ethno-religious are the genuine and sole sons of the soil. This is the main reason why it is so vitally important to these states in these societies and their partisans to protect these myths from intellectual challenge. Within these societies, these origin myths, not international law, guides how the majoritarian populations view the legitimacy of the continued presence of Muslim minorities in their lands. In such a case, treatment of Muslim minorities is a revolving problem of changing policy, rather than hard and fast observance of international legal frameworks.



The Indian Ocean

Third, all these cases, Israel, India, and Myanmar were former British colonies and arguably Britain did not do very well when it came to the partitions of 1947-48 across the Muslim crescent, the northern rim of the Indian Ocean. This may be partly at fault, but these problems became much worse after colonial rule ended. The main culprit is a global world order, built around the Western view of the world, of Muslims in particular, and of the acceptability of structural violence, without which global capitalism could not function. Many Muslims in these societies suffer from the denial of citizenship exist in a legal limbo of perpetual refugee or illegal migrant status. Western, Indian, and Myanmar media usually ignore their daily plight within a system of structural violence, in which they have no control over their own lives or options and precisely because of their ethno-religious identities are systematically kept in poverty. Although it has been over a half century since Johan Galtung, in identifying systematic violence as the invisible twin of interpersonal violence, most Western audiences seem to pay attention only to the latter.³ Thus, when militant, extremist organisations engage in violent acts against the mainstays of this system, these acts draw scrutiny and condemnation, as they should, but what gets ignored is the mass systematic suffering that goes on every day in these Muslim “zones of invisibility” at the hands of non-Muslim states.⁴ It takes the ignorance of the other side of this cycle of violence, that makes it a perpetual cycle.

These problems will only worsen, if the light is not shined soon on the suffering due to structural violence experienced daily by so many in the Muslim crescent. The policies of the governments involved will only get more extreme, the desperation that feeds extremist organizations will only worsen, and the areas discussed here are those that will be the first to experience the ravages of climate change, which as a threat multiplier, will turn structural violence into existential crisis for many. If you want to see where the main state and human security threats in the future will be, look at the Muslim crescent, not the South China Sea.

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Banner image of refugee camp in the region. Photo Michael W. Charney

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1. Holger Stritzel, "Securitization, Power, Intertextuality: Discourse Theory and the Translations of Organized Crime," *Security Dialogue* 43.6 (2012): pp. 549–67. ↩
2. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1979). ↩
3. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): pp. 167–91. ↩
4. I draw here from Timothy Brennan's idea of "zones of invisibility," in Timothy Brennan, "The Economic Image-Function of the Periphery," in Teoksessa Loomba, Ania, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton & Jed Esty (eds.), *Postcolonialism and Beyond* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006): 101–122. ↩

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