

The Changing Religious Demographics of the United Nations Security Council

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Data from the World Religion Database indicate that the religious makeup of UN Security Council member nations often differs significantly from the global religious makeup.¹ Using 2015 population figures as a basis, Muslims constitute 12.6% of the combined populations of 2012 Council members, falling to 6.6% for 2014 Council members.² By comparison, Muslims constitute 23.3% of the world's population in 2015. This raises the question of how closely the religious makeup of the Council should—or could—reflect the religious makeup of the world in order to best fulfill the Council's role.

Religion	Globe	Security Council Members			
	2015	2012	2013	2014	2015
Christians	2,419,220,597	828,615,398	691,737,850	776,282,992	791,285,227
Christian %	33.03%	22.21%	29.05%	33.00%	33.53%
Muslims	1,703,145,610	470,150,368	280,206,976	154,260,804	171,095,181
Muslim %	23.25%	12.60%	11.77%	6.56%	7.25%
Hindus	984,532,493	933,970,817	4,911,186	2,465,596	4,307,931
Hindu %	13.44%	25.03%	0.21%	0.10%	0.18%
Buddhists	520,001,696	237,101,813	240,494,485	240,399,502	229,309,713
Buddhist %	7.10%	6.35%	10.10%	10.22%	9.72%
Chinese Folk	453,867,727	425,965,636	425,848,042	425,852,305	431,415,797
CF %	6.20%	11.42%	17.88%	18.10%	18.28%
Agnostics	694,823,384	559,693,040	528,809,822	530,731,662	528,653,180
Agnostic %	9.49%	15.00%	22.20%	22.56%	22.40%

In the case of Muslim representation, the highest recent value (12.6%) is found for 2012 Council members, when India's 187 million Muslims are included with Pakistan's 181 million. The Muslim percentage drops only slightly for 2013 Council members (India's term having ended), to 11.8%, thanks in large part to the continuing presence of Pakistan and two other Muslim-majority countries, Azerbaijan and Morocco.³ Saudi Arabia's declining of Council membership for 2014–15 and its

¹ "Security Councils over time", <http://www.worldreligiondatabase.org/esweb.asp?WCI=Results&Query=2633> (Accessed January 2015).

² These figures were obtained using the 2015 Muslim populations for the 2012 and 2014 Council members, not the populations in the indicated years. The use of 2015, rather than year-specific, data has only a modest effect on the populations and percentages reported.

³ The three countries' combined Muslim populations of 224 million represent 80% of the total Muslim population of the 2013 Security Council members; the five permanent members account for another 19%. The loss of India's 181 million Muslims (40% of 2012 Council members' combined Muslim populations) is offset by the corresponding loss of its total population (39% of 2012 Council members' combined total populations).

replacement with Jordan,⁴ combined with Pakistan's term ending, results in the 2014 Council's representation of Muslims falling to 6.6%. In 2015 the addition to the Council of Malaysia, with a Muslim population of 17 million, raises the Muslim percentage to 7.3%.⁵

The largest contingent of Muslims in the 2014 and 2015 councils, however, comes through Nigeria (2014–2015 member), with 84.5 million Muslims in 2015, followed by China (permanent member), with 23.1 million. The question might therefore be raised as to how well Nigeria (with its Christian-Muslim divisions) and China (with its overwhelmingly non-Muslim majority) represent their respective Muslim populations, not to mention the global Muslim population, in their considerations on the Security Council. In practice governments deal with any world security issue in various measures of the interests of the world as a whole, of their nation's interest, or even of the interest of one part of their nation.

But even if an equitable spread of religious makeup were desirable, the dominance of China's and India's populations over all other countries' makes it impossible to achieve, short of expanding the Council to include almost every nation. With 1.4 billion people, China will always dominate the five permanent members; the United States, the next largest with 325 million in 2015, has less than one quarter of China's population. Thus the religious makeup of China will likewise always dominate the UN Security council whenever India (1.3 billion in 2015) is not a member.

India has been a member for seven (7) two-year terms (ending in 1951, 1968, 1973, 1978, 1985, 1992, and 2012).⁶ Looking at the religious makeup of the 2012 Security Council shows that when India is a member, both Christians and Muslims are under-represented (by almost 11 percentage points each), while Hindus are over-represented (by nearly 12 percentage points). In fact, when both China and India are members, Christians and Muslims can never be over-represented. Similarly, China's permanent membership means that agnostics and Chinese Folk-religionists will always be over-represented compared to their global percentages.

Did the Council deal any better—or worse, for that matter—with global issues in 2012 (when the four largest combined populations of religious adherents in member states were Hindus, Christians, Agnostics, and Muslims) than in 2013 (when the four largest were Christians, Agnostics, Chinese folk-religionists, and Muslims) or in 2014 (Christians, Agnostics, Chinese folk-religionists, and Buddhists)? If not, perhaps the population dominance of the five permanent members serves to minimize the effects (positive or negative) of the religious composition of the rotating non-permanent members.

⁴ Michelle Nichols and Louis Charbonneau, "Jordan elected to take Saudi seat on U.N. Security Council", Reuters U.S. Edition, December 6, 2013 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/06/us-un-council-jordan-idUSBRE9B500720131206>); (accessed 16 December 2014).

⁵ Substituting the Muslim and total populations of Saudi Arabia for those of Jordan would raise the Muslim percentages of Security Council members to 7.4% for 2014 and 8.0% for 2015. Unless Indonesia (the country with the largest Muslim population) had replaced Pakistan on the 2014 Council, however, a drop in the Muslim percentage was unavoidable.

⁶ United Nations Security Council, "Countries Elected Members of the Security Council", <http://www.un.org/en/sc/members/elected.asp> (Accessed 16 December 2014).

The question for each government, therefore, is not only what a country might achieve by being a member, but what the Security Council might achieve by having that country as a member. Rather than asking, for example, “What did Australia achieve in its two-year term on the Security Council?”, a more important question is “What did the Council achieve as a result of Australia’s membership?” More difficult to answer are questions such as “What opportunities were missed as a result of Australia’s membership?” and “Would the Council have been any more effective had Saudi Arabia, rather than its replacement Jordan, taken up membership in 2014?”

This analysis illustrates how changes in the religious makeup of the countries in the United Nations Security Council might be tracked and interpreted.