15% of respondents find Muslims threatening

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More than 70 per cent of Singaporeans feel that people of different faiths can get along when living close together, but some 15 per cent find Muslims threatening, a report on religion in Singapore has found.

Researchers found that those who dwell in private housing were more likely to think that Muslims are threats, compared with those who dwell in Housing Board flats.

Muslims were viewed most positively by Buddhists and Hindus, but about one in five Catholics, Christians and those with no religion said that Muslims were either very or somewhat threatening.

"There is little question that global terror and how it has often been associated with Muslims has fed into the minds of a small group of Singaporeans, who thus feel that Muslims are threatening," Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) senior research fellow Mathew Mathews told The Straits Times. "The lack of exposure to and opportunities for learning about Muslims might have left some of their fears unchallenged."

The findings from the survey, part of a global study, were captured in a report published yesterday by IPS, part of the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It was written by Dr Mathews, research associate Leonard Lim and research assistant Shanthini Selvarajan.

A random sample of 1,800 residents were asked a range of questions, including whether they considered those from six groups - Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, as well as atheists and non-believers - threatening or not.

Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and atheists and non-believers were viewed as the least threatening.

Christians were found threatening by 6.5 per cent of respondents. Around 10 per cent of those with no religion and 8.9 per cent of Buddhists thought so, compared with 5.4 per cent of Catholics and 3.4 per cent of Muslims.

The report said: "The majority of respondents from each religious group viewed those from other communities positively and not as a threat. However, our results suggest there may be possible tensions between some people from specific communities."

It added that while there is a base of religious harmony, there are challenges and threats emerging.

Nominated MP Mohamed Irshad, who founded inter-religious group Roses of Peace, felt the 15 per cent minority who found Muslims threatening "is still a significant number".

"It is big enough to rile up anti-Muslim sentiments. We need to figure out how we can improve social mixing," he said.

Dr Mathews noted that Islamophobia can lead to varying levels of hatred, which can be explosive.

Islamophobic material online radicalised a 28-year-old Australian, who this month carried out a terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch that killed 50 people and injured 42.

Mr Mohamed Irshad said schools and workplaces can create spaces for meaningful dialogue on religion. "Actively preventing violent extremism is as important as countering it. Getting to know each other's faith beyond the surface can be a first step."

Madam Riza Yacob of local group Creative Malay Arts and Culture was sad to learn that some still see Muslims as threatening. "The 15 per cent should be a motivating factor for Muslims and non-Muslims to reach out and promote an inclusive mindset," she said.

An instance of such inclusivity was seen when New Zealanders here visited mosques following the Christchurch attack in a show of solidarity. Many other faith groups also condemned the attack and reached out to Muslim leaders here.

Madam Riza's group will hold a three-day event at Geylang Serai from today for people to pen condolence messages to New Zealand and, among other things, remind Singaporeans of the need to stand united against all forms of extremism.