To what extent have religious differences shaped the ongoing conflict in Kashmir? (from ABC-Clio – online data base – Reuel Hanks).

The region of Kashmir is at the center of an ongoing dispute between the Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan and the Hindu-majority nation of India, revolving around the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Most of Jammu and Kashmir's people are also practicing Muslims, and debate has raged around whether Jammu and Kashmir should be allowed to join Pakistan or pursue its independence from both India and Pakistan. The issue is hardly simple, particularly when considering Kashmir's physical location: geographically situated between both nations, Kashmir's strategic significance cannot be ignored.

The Kashmiri Conflict is Religious in Nature

The religious differences between the Muslim majority in Kashmir and the Hindu-dominated government in New Delhi lie at the very heart of the ongoing conflict in that region. From the partition of British India in 1947 onward, the basis of the recurrent strife and violence in Kashmir has been the same that brought forth two separate countries in the first place: fears of the Muslim minority over domination and discrimination by the Hindu majority. The cause of the conflict over Kashmir remains the same today as in 1947: the refusal of a Muslim-populated territory to be absorbed into a state controlled by Hindus.

The contemporary political geography of South Asia reflects the religious animosity and strife that have plagued the region for centuries. Upon partition in 1947, the region's political boundaries abruptly aligned with its religious boundaries, as two massive states emerged: Muslim-dominated Pakistan, split into a western and an eastern section; and India, a multireligious country, albeit largely controlled by the Hindu majority. In Kashmir however, the pairing of religious and political landscapes was disrupted, as the predominantly Muslim population of that region was absorbed into India.
absorbed these states by the end of 1948.

In Kashmir, where fully two-thirds of the population was Muslim, the Hindu maharaja refused to commit to either Pakistan's or India's domain. This was interpreted by some radical Muslims in Kashmir as a delaying tactic, designed to prevent Kashmir from joining Pakistan; and an armed revolt, aided by Muslim militia who crossed the border from Pakistan, erupted in southern Kashmir in late 1947. The Hindu leader, Hari Singh, promptly acceded to India and requested military assistance, thus initiating the first of three wars fought over the Kashmiri state.

This war, and all subsequent conflicts, was fought not over control of resources or geopolitical strategy, but because of religious differences.

Currently, approximately 13% of India's population is Muslim, and in almost all cases, the Muslim population is dispersed throughout the country. Only two of India's 35 states and union territories hold a population that is mostly Muslim: Jammu and Kashmir and tiny Lakshadweep (the latter a small cluster of islands in the Arabian Sea with a population of only 60,000). To many of the Islamic believers in Kashmir, this distinction alone highlights what they see as the injustice of Indian control. Since India felt it proper to absorb the Muslim-led territories of Hyderabad and Junagadh because they contained a Hindu majority, it would follow that it would be just as proper for Kashmir—a territory with a Muslim majority—to either join Pakistan or stand as an independent Muslim state.

Moreover, as Stanley Wolpert states in *A New History of India*, Lord Mountbatten—the British official who presided over the partition—suggested that a plebiscite (a general vote of the population) be held to determine the "will of the people" in Kashmir as early as 1947, but such a vote has never been held in the 60 years since partition. For Muslims in Kashmir, and especially among the more radicalized and militant fringes, India's refusal to allow a vote on self-determination in Kashmir confirms all the fears that brought about partition in the first place: Muslims will always be second-class citizens in a country controlled by Hindus.

As elucidated by Ranbir Vohra in his text, *The Making of India*, the Kashmiri conflict is in reality an extension of the "communalism" that has plagued the political development of India from the early days of the Indian independence movement. Communalism is the tendency of religious communities in India to protect their own interests, rather than to coalesce and form a common identity as "Indians." The strength of communalism in the region was the mechanism for both partition and the political geography we find there today: a predominantly Hindu state flanked by two predominantly Muslim countries.

In Kashmir however, communalism was not allowed to reach its logical conclusion—the process was blocked and did not result in the majority community there (Muslims) achieving self-determination. In one of the few public opinion polls ever conducted in
Kashmir (see Jha, 1995), more than 70% of those polled favored independence and another 20% wished to join Pakistan; only 3% favored greater autonomy within India.

The point to consider, then, is: why would a large majority of Kashmiris prefer independence in a land-locked, resource-poor country over remaining with India—one of the world's largest democracies and one of Asia's most rapidly expanding economies? For many in Kashmir, the answer is azadi—freedom. If the long-delayed plebiscite were held today, it seems clear that a majority in Kashmir would indeed choose azadi and independence from India—and the reason they would do so is that they are Muslims, and India is a land of Hindus.