The Prevalence of Extreme Middle-Eastern Ideologies among Some Iranians

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Abstract

The main factor in middle-eastern radicalization process is the prevalence of extremists' ideologies which have come to spread faster than a few decades ago around the world. Previous studies have focused on identification and clarification the factors contributing in expansion of such ideologies. However, there is a need to understand the prevalence of these ideologies among other Middle East nations such as Iran. The participants consisted of 325 Iranian denominations including Muslims, Zoroastrian, Bahia, Ahl-e-Haq and Non-believers who completed the Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale (ATRS). The results demonstrated higher scores on the prevalence of the extreme Middle-Eastern ideologies among the Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, Bahia participants than Non-believers and Ahl-e-Haq participants on the total scale of ATRS. Also there were higher scores on the all subscales of ATRS among Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, Bahia than Non-believers. The results of this study confirmed the higher prevalence of extreme Middle-Eastern beliefs among Iranian religious ideologies than non-believers and Ahl-e-Haqs. This finding suggests prioritizing the future policies on education of all groups and specifically Muslims in Iran to understand and explore the actual consequences of their individual world-views and their ideological orientations.

Keywords: Radicalization; Extreme Ideologies; Middle-Eastern Ideologies; Extreme Religious Worldview; Assessment Tool; Iran

Abbreviations: ATRS: Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale; CA: Coefficient Alphas.

Introduction

In spite of the wide-spread condemnation of terrorist attacks extremist ideologies in the Middle East, and around the world, have come to spread even faster than a few decades ago [1]. Among Muslim leaders, some have even expressed their concerns about religious extremism, suggesting that perhaps the prevalence of extreme religious ideologies that condone violence has paved the way for the outgrowth of extremism and terrorism [2]. It is now established that one of the leading factors in middle-eastern radicalization process is the use of extremist ideologies that are supportive of violence.

Extremist ideologies, religious beliefs and attitudes have been the driving force for the recent extremism and violent actions committed around the world [3,4], suggested that terrorism has been justified based on religious ideology which form the intellectual infrastructures and the foundations of terrorism. extremists' Middle Eastern ideologies has been described as the most important driving force for terrorism because their driving goal is to establish religious governments that govern according to their own interpretation of Islamic law which, these proponents assert, should form the basis for their judgment on every issue [5]; with the eventual goal of replacing western governments with ones that have one leader and follow the caliphate system [6,7]. These ideologies constitute a growing threat and a trend of increased tensions between the Muslim world and the West [8]. They also attempt to intimidate or coerce a government or civilian population to accede to demands supportive of their underlying ideology or cause [9,10].

Religious terrorists are willing to endure much higher human costs than secular terrorists [11]. Therefore, extreme religious ideologies play a central role in radicalizing potential terrorists, and recruiting and indoctrinating them into the world view and goals of the particular terrorist organization [12]. For example, by 2004, 46 percent of terrorist groups in Egypt were religiously based [11]. Results from thirty-five incarcerated Palestinians indicated that their attitude regarding suicide terrorism is related more to religion [13]. Post [14] suggested that the most dangerous terrorist is likely to be a religious terrorist. To emphasize the importance of religion, Hoffman [15] suggested that about half of the most dangerous terrorist groups are primarily motivated by religion; they believe that God commands them to commit terrorism for their (religiously-based) cause. Juergensmeyer [16] suggested that self-destruction is an essential part behind the idea of religion-based terrorism. Because of the importance of religious ideology, half of the training of terrorists is spent on understanding the organization's ideologic tenets and spiritual preparation [17].

However, although the availability of a violent extremist ideology is necessary, it is not sufficient cause for terrorist action [4]. Apparently, scholars in the field are still divided between those who support the causal power of ideology, such as Luciano Pellicani and others, like Donatella Della Porta, who deny that ideology is one of the causes for collective behavior [18]. Thus, other necessary factors must also be present for the committal of terrorism. Besides, terrorist organizations vary hugely in their background, methods, composition, objectives, and social base [19]. Thus, overwhelming evidence rules out significant psychopathology as a feature of terrorists, but suggests that terrorism is the result of a combination of adherence to ideology and the existence of social conditions that predispose individuals to engage in terrorist acts [20]. Extremists/ terrorists try to spread their own ideologies through the politicization of religion [21-27]. Stern [28] referred to activities as religious attempts to purify the world through extremism. In spite of the wide spread condemnation of terrorist attacks extremist ideologies in the Middle East have come to spread even faster than a few decades ago [1] and unfortunately in other parts of the world.

A possible way of prevention of the growth of extreme ideologies and their subsequent terrorist actions is to explore their reasons and understand them. The Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale [29] was designed to measure Middle Eastern attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies supportive of extremists/terrorists practice. Several studies have utilized this measure. Among these studies, Loza et al. administered the ATRS to Australian, Canadian, Egyptian, and South African participants of different religious backgrounds. The findings indicated that Muslims scored significantly higher than other religious groups, regardless of their country of origin or where they lived. In another study the ATRS was administered to new Pakistani immigrants to Canada. Results indicated a wide gap in the degree of extremism between Muslims and Christians with Muslims are scoring higher than the Christians [30]. Similarly, in another study the ATRS was administered to Nigerian participants [31]. This study confirmed previous finding and demonstrated that the prevalence of Middle-Eastern extremist ideologies among Nigerian Muslims was significantly higher than that of Nigerian Christians. These findings from different research locations confirm the reliability and validity of ATRS scale to measure Middle-Eastern extremism.

Most of these studies have been conducted in western or Muslim countries that embrace secularism. One of the countries in the Middle East that has different populations of non-Islamic religions is Iran. Iran has long been a cradle for a variety of religions and different non-Islamic religions. Zoroastrianism, Ahl-e-Haqq (Yarsanism), and Bahaism (Baha'i Faith) have been practiced there despite the Islamic dominance. The goal of this study was to investigate whether the Middle Eastern ideologies are prevalent among Muslim Iranians as indicated in previous research projects. To our knowledge no similar study has been conducted before in Iran. We hypothesized that

similar to previous studies, Muslims will score much higher than non-believers. We could not make any hypothesis about the other religious groups.

Methods

Participants

325 Iranians from different religious groups participated in the study; Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Demographics	Iran Muslim				Zoroastrian		Bahia		Ahl-e-Haqq		Non-believers	
	Sunni		Shia									
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex												
M	43	56.6	28	45.2	34	58.6	18	56.3	37	66.1	21	51.2
F	33	43.4	34	54.8	24	41.4	14	43.8	19	33.9	20	48.8
Marital Status												
Single	30	39.5	20	32.3	18	31	6	18.8	20	35.7	18	43.9
Married	46	60.5	42	67.7	39	67.2	22	68.8	36	64.3	22	53.7
Divorce	0	0	0	0	1	1.7	4	12.6	0	0	1	2.4
Education												
< secondary	6	7.9	1	1.6	2	3.4	4	12.5	14	25	0	0
secondary	17	22.4	12	19.4	15	25.9	7	21.9	29	51.8	4	9.8
University undergraduate	39	51.3	31	50	34	58.6	19	59.4	11	19.6	8	19.5
Graduate studies?	14	18.4	18	29	7	12.1	2	6.3	2	3.6	29	70.7
Occupation												
Student	10	13.2	12	19.4	6	10.3	2	6.3	5	8.9	2	4.9
unemployed	9	11.8	1	1.6	4	6.9	1	3.1	4	7.1	2	4.9
Teacher	21	27.6	22	35.5	0	0	7	21.9	2	3.6	9	22
self employed	8	10.5	6	9.7	15	25.9	5	15.6	10	17.9	3	7.3
professional job	19	25	14	22.6	19	32.8	5	15.6	8	14.3	21	51.2
low-skilled worker	9	11.8	7	11.3	14	24.1	12	37.5	27	48.2	4	9.8

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants.

Iran has been home to various non-Islamic religions, including Zoroastrianism, Yarsanism (Al-Haqq), and Bahaism (Baha'i Faith), and also non-believers through the history. Shia and Sunni are the two main religious groups belonging to Islam in Iran. They share the most fundamental Islamic beliefs; however, they differ in terms of political views. The division of Shia and Sunni dates back to the leadership of the Muslim nation after death of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunni believe that a religious leader should be elected through voting among the Islamic community and that the Prophet Muhammad had no rightful heir. In contrast, Shia is of the belief that only God can select religious leaders, and therefore, all successors must be the Prophet Muhammad's progeny [32,33]. Shia is the predominant religion in Iran. Sunni Muslims only account for about 10 percent of the whole population [34,35].

Zoroastrianism is an ancient religious tradition established by Zarathuštra, the Iranian prophet [36,37]. Zoroastrians believe that Ahura Mazda was the supreme God and so should be worshipped [38]. Robert Hume asserts that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Zoroastrian religion, as compared to all other religions, is the belief in Dualistic Cosmology; that is, there is a virtuous Lord and a sinister Devil fighting against each other. These two poles of power have long existed since the universe came into being and will persist fighting against each other to the end of the universe [39].

Baha'i was founded by Bahá'u'lláh in 1863. Although it originated from the Shia Islamic sect [40-42], they are strikingly different. Bahai is an independent religion, but not a sub sect of Islam [41,43-46]. The Bahá'í Faith underscores the essential worth of all religions, and the unity and equality of all people [47]. Ahl-e-Haqq

(Yarsanism) is mainly practiced by the people living in Iran and Iraq's Kurdistan [48]. Although the most ancient religious texts in Yarsanism date back to the second century on the lunar calendar, its current framework, most revered by its believers, was established by Sultan Sahak in the seventh century of the solar calendar [49]. Ahl-e-Haqq also includes a mixture of other religions' observations such as Manichaeism, Judaism, or even Christianity [48,50].

Measures

The Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale [29]; formally the Belief Diversity Scale, BDS) is a theoretically and empirically validated self-report tool constructed to cover areas commonly reported in the literature as being indicative of and/or related to religious extreme beliefs [29]. The ATRS consists of 33-items, 6 subscales, a total scale score, and a validity scale. The first subscale reflects negative attitudes towards Israel as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is considered to be one of the main drivers for grievances promoted by many extremists [51-53]. The second subscale is Political views, assessing the important political views which are advocated by Middle-Eastern extremists (e.g., opposing secular laws and governments, advocating for the implementation of the Sharia [Islamic] law [53,54]. The third subscale, Women, measures the individual's attitudes toward women. These negative, extreme attitudes are mainly considered repressive from a Western perspective [55].

The fourth subscale, Western Culture, measures negative attitudes toward Western Culture. Some non-Western societies, Middle-Eastern extremists in particular, have been vocal in their rejection of Western culture [53,56,57], claiming that Western civilization is immoral, corrupt [58] and also anti-Islamic [59]. Extremists generally emphasize the prevalent negative attitude in the Muslim countries toward non-Muslim culture [53,60,61]. The fifth subscale investigates participants' commitment to their religion. Extremists mainly rely on religion in order to advocate for their cause and to recruit new pools of extremists [12,22,53,54,57,62,63]. The sixth subscale, Condoning Fighting, assesses views that condone fighting and drive acts of violence as a means for the revival of religion. The goal of condoning fighting is to destroying non-believers and achieving one world under the Islamic religion [12,63]. A final, seventh subscale, is a validity scale indicating whether participants misunderstood the items, answered carelessly, or deliberately concealed their true responses. The total scale score consists of answers to items included in the subscales. The items are

scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate more extreme beliefs. The stages of development of the ARTS and results demonstrating the reliability and validity of the ARTS have been previously documented [3,10,30,64].

Procedure

Data were collected from various provinces. Participants had Iranian nationality and had lived in Iran for a minimum of the last five years. Participants were asked if they were willing to fill a questionnaire about their beliefs to participate in a research project. They were assured of the confidentiality of the data and were asked to indicate their religion, age, gender and marital status, place of birth, race, educational level, and occupation. They were also informed that they could decline their participation at any time. Approximately 18% declined to participate. The responses of all the participants were compared to each other.

Results

The range of Coefficient Alphas (CA) for the ATRS subscales was .71 to .85 (see Table 2, column 4). All items correlated significantly with their respective subscales (see Table 2, column 5). The correlations between ATRS subscale scores and the total score ranged from .65 to .88 (see Table 2, column 6). The correlations among the subscales ranged from .36 to .73 (see Table 3). The comparison of mean scores among the ATRS scores of Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, Bahia, Ahl-e-Haqq and Non-believers participants from Iran are shown in Table 4. Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, Bahia scored higher than Non-believers on all subscales and the total scale. Moreover, Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, Bahia scored higher than Ahl-e-Haqq on all the subscales and the total scale except Attitudes toward women. Furthermore, there were significant differences between Ahl-e-Haqq and Non-believers on Attitudes toward women, Religiosity, Condoning fighting and the total scale.

To investigate the trend of participant responses on the ATRS, participants were grouped into Low (Total scores ≤ 77), Medium (>77 - ≤ 98), and High (>98) scoring groups, approximately 33% of the participants in each group. Table 4 shows that 40.8%, 37.1%, 32.8%, 31.3%, 7.1% and 0.00% of scores obtained from Sunni, Shia, Zoroastrian, Bahia, Ahl-e-Haqq and Non-believers participants, respectively, fell in the High group, while 1.3

%, 12.9%, 31.0%, 3.1%, 30.4% and 65.9% of the scores obtained from Sunni, Shia, Zoroastrian, Bahia, Ahl-e-Haqq and Non-believers participants, respectively, fell in the Low group (Table 2-5).

ATRS Subscales	Sample Means	Sample SDs	Coefficient Alpha	Ranges of Item-to-Subscale Correlations	Total /subscale correlations and Confidence Intervals	
					r	(95% Cl)
Attitude towards Israel	.89	1.229	.84	.48-.81*	0.73	(.67-.78)
Politics views	1.99	2.068	.71	.52-.79*	0.77	(.71-.89)
Attitudes toward women	1.36	1.357	.73	.56-.72*	0.65	(.59-.71)
Attitude towards western culture	1.83	1.578	.72	.60-.72*	0.78	(.72-.83)
Religiosity	2.48	2.132	.76	.67-.72*	0.83	(.79-.91)
Condoning fighting	3.28	2.342	.85	.41-.76*	0.88	(.85-.90)
Total ATRS	11.83	8.496				

* p < .0001.
Table 2: Psychometric Properties of the Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale (ATRS) - n=325.

	Israel	Politics views	women	western culture	Religiosity	fighting	Total ATRS
Israel							
Politics views	.47**						
Women	.36**	.39**					
western culture	.63**	.48**	.42**				
Religiosity	.55**	.58**	.46**	.60**			
Fighting	.56**	.57**	.52**	.60**	.73**		
Total ATRS	.72**	.77**	.64**	.78**	.86**	.87**	

Table 3: Correlations among ATRS Scale and Subscales for the Iranian Study.

Subscales	Iran Muslim			Zoroastrian (n=58)	Ahl-e-Haqq (n=56)	Non-believers (n=41)	F value (df=5,324)	Partial Eta Squared
	Sunni (n=76)	Shia (n=62)	Baha'i (n=32)					
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Attitude towards Israel	.97 (1.24)a	1.35 (1.41)a	1.31 (1.30)a	1.05 (1.29)a	0.45 (.85)b	.10 (.37)b	8.568*	.118
Politics views	2.57 (1.46)a	2.73 (1.73)a	2.28 (.99)a	2.26 (3.51)a	1.27 (1.13)b	.17 (.38)b	12.73*	.166
Attitudes toward women	1.93 (1.18)a	1.24 (1.16)a	1.88 (1.56)a	1.34 (1.49)a	1.21 (1.42)a	.27 (.50)b	10.52*	.142
Attitude towards western culture	2.28 (1.52)a	2.39 (1.65)a	2.56 (1.43)a	1.79 (1.62)a	.95 (1.24)b	.88 (.92)b	12.53*	.164
Religiosity	3.59 (1.77)a	3.10 (2.10)a	2.97 (1.40)a	2.53 (2.17)a	1.63 (2.08)b	.20 (.60)c	22.20*	.258
Condoning fighting	4.37 (1.82)a	3.63 (2.13)a	3.66 (2.50)a	3.48 (2.82)a	2.59 (2.04)b	1.10 (1.04)c	14.35*	.184
Total ATRS	15.71 (6.66)a	14.44 (8.55)a	14.66 (7.29)a	12.47 (10.02)a	8.09 (6.03)b	2.71 (2.06)c	22.21*	.258

* P< .0001
Table 4: Comparisons Between the scores of Muslims (Shia, Sunni), Zoroaster, Baha'i, Ahl-e-Haqq and Nonbelievers the Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale (ATRS).

a, b and c. Schaffer's pairs of groups comparisons. Same letters indicate that means of these groups are not significantly different at the .05 level.

ATRS Group	Iran Muslim		Zoroastrian (n = 58)	Bahia (n = 32)	Ahl-e-Haqq (n = 56)	Non-believers (n = 41)
	Sunni (n = 76)	Shia (n = 62)				
Low (≤3; n = 75)	1.3 %	12.9%	31.0%	3.1%	30.4%	65.9%
Medium (≥3 to ≤17; n = 187)	57.9%	50.0%	36.2%	65.6%	62.5%	34.1%
High (≥17; n = 99)	40.8%	37.1%	32.8%	31.3%	7.1%	0.00%

Table 5: Percentage of Religion Groups on the Low, Medium, and High Scores of the ATRS (n = 325).

Taken together, there were no significant differences between AL-e-Haqq, Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, or Bahia participants on the subscale of Attitudes toward women. On the contrary, there came to be significant differences between Ahl-e-Haqq and Non-believers on their attitudes toward women, religiosity, condoning fighting and the total scale of ATRS. It was also found that 40.8% and 37.1% of the scores of the Muslim participants (Sunni and Shia, respectively) fell into the "High" group on the ATRS. While 32.8% of Zoroastrian scores and 31.3% of Baha'i participant scores fell into the "High" group, the bulk of the scores of Ahl-e-Haqq and Non-believing participants fall into the "Medium" and "Low".

Discussion

The results of this study confirmed the prevalence of extreme Middle-Eastern ideologies among some Iranian religious groups. The scores obtained were found to be higher on the prevalence of the extreme Middle-Eastern ideologies among Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, and Bahia participants relative to those of Non-believers and Ahl-e-Haqq on the total scale of ATRS. The study also indicated higher scores on all subscales of ATRS among Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Zoroastrian, and Bahia as compared to Non-believers.

In general, non-believers and Ahl-e-Haqq participants were found to be less receptive towards extreme Middle-East ideologies. The results can be interpreted from a psycho-socio-historical perspective. According to the Iranian Constitution, Shi'i Islam is the formal religion practiced. Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism are recognized as the other true religions. These three minority faiths are legitimized by the Constitution and accorded certain legal and political rights.

Past research indicates that Muslims tend to have a higher level of extremist ideology than non-Muslims [3,30,31,64]. However, this study is significant for the exploration of the same results for both Shia and Sunni as the two mainstream sects of Islam. Although they seem to differ in

terms of political views, Shia and Sunni share the most essential Islamic beliefs [32,33]. New in this study is the finding that there was no significant difference between Baha'i and Muslim participants in terms of level of extremist ideology. A possible explanation of this is that, although it was founded in 1863, Baha'i originated from the Shia Islamic sect [40-42]. From a modern perspective, fundamentalism is, in effect, derived from specific social and cultural structures. It is associated with exercising political actions through an authority apparatus. The Baha'i share such a structure.

Also, new and surprising was the finding that there were no significant differences between the responses of the Zoroastrians and Muslims. One explanation for this finding is that the followers of Zarathustra have heavily been affected by the Shia Islamic government. According to Althusser [65], the dominant ideology reproduces its values and norms through communicative media and school curricula both explicitly and implicitly. A comparative study of Zoroastrianism and Islam shows that Zoroastrian beliefs have had direct and indirect influences on Islamic rituals and beliefs [66,67]. Accordingly, it has many similarities to Islam, especially the Shia religion. For instance, like Islam, Zoroastrians views about the Hijab is one of the principles of the Zoroastrian religion [68]. The high scores on the ATRS for both Zoroastrian and Muslim participants may have resulted from similar orientations towards fundamentalism. As the findings of this study showed, Ahl-e-Haqq participants scored lower on all sub-scales, with the exception of the attitudes toward women sub-scale. This could be attributable to the rules of this ancient tradition, which does not promote a belief in absolute truth [69]. To the followers of Ahl-e-Haqq, the truth is always in relation to the earth and man, not the theology [48]. In the religion of Ahl-e-Haqq, light and darkness, Ahriman and Ahura are innate, and both come from within. Hence, no indication of the ideological dogmatic approach of Ahl-e-Haqq followers has been reported at any time. Even their way of life has always been to deny power. Historical-sociological data tells us that it is logical to have deployed political organizations in the Guran

period on the territory of the Sovereigns, but this has not happened in spite of their comprehensive presence in this region.

Similar to the previously studies, the results of this study confirms the low level of dogmatism among non-believers. As previously reported by Loza, Bhawanie, Nussbaum, and Maximenco [30], (i.e., that that Atheists scored significantly lower on the ATRS than participants of the Muslim faith. In another study, Loza [3], indicated that the scores of none-believer participants are significantly different than the scores of other groups on the majority of the subscales and on the total BDS. Most of the non-believers scores fell in the low group.

The current research support the previous findings as reported above of the existence of Middle Eastern ideologies among Muslims that are not present in other religions or denominations. It also highlights the importance of investigating ideologies when assessing extremists and potential terrorists. One of the limitations of this study is related to the Iranians understanding of religious and political issues which are influenced by the dominant political and social context of the Islamic republic government. Thus, individual Iranians in a western context belonging to the groups in this study may not show the same results.

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Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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