

The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Moderate vs. Extremist Views in the Muslim World

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Vocal extremists spreading religious rhetoric have led many in the West to believe that the Islamic faith itself is a root cause of terrorism. A Washington Post/ABC News poll conducted in March 2006, for example, found that a full third of Americans — 33% — believe mainstream Islam encourages violence against non-Muslims. If that were true, it would follow that widespread religiosity in predominantly Muslim countries implies widespread popular support for terrorist acts, leading to one apparent solution: Actively work to secularize Muslim societies.

However, Gallup data intended to gauge the prevalence of an “extremist” mindset among Muslims debunk the notion that terrorism enjoys widespread support. Not only are those who sympathize with terrorist acts a relatively small minority, but the most frequently cited aspect of the Muslim world that Muslims themselves say they admire least is “narrow-minded fanaticism and violent extremism.”

Radicals vs. the Moderate Masses

In order to investigate characteristics that distinguish Muslim world residents who are potentially prone to extremist views, we divided respondents from the region into two groups. Classified as political radicals were those who met the following criteria: 1) they felt the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were “completely justified”, and 2) they indicate that they have an “unfavorable” or “very unfavorable” opinion of the United States. Those who did not say the attacks were completely justified were termed moderates. The “radical” group represents about 7% of the total population across the 10 countries included in the study.

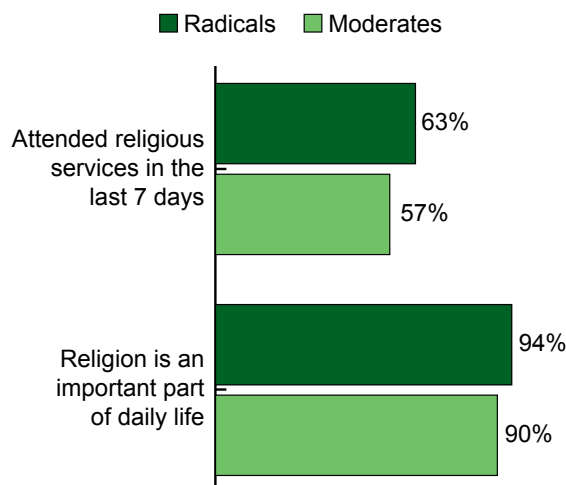
Comparing the two groups produces a number of key insights:

- Perhaps most surprising to many Westerners, the two groups showed little difference in religiosity as measured by the frequency of religious service attendance and the affirmation that religion is an important part of their daily lives.

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- In addition, political radicals were, on average, slightly more educated and more affluent than the moderates, suggesting that the root causes of extremism typically do not include manipulation of the ignorant by religious superstition or promises of economic assistance.
- The responses of the “radical” group are more likely than the “moderates” to indicate a sense of being dominated, even “occupied” by the West. An unfulfilled desire for self-determination appears to be felt more acutely among the radical group.

Muslim extremism: Is religiosity a factor?



Overall, residents of the Muslim countries studied tended to mistrust the intentions of the United States toward their region — but the radical group was somewhat more likely to do so than the moderate masses. The radicals were more likely to feel that the U.S. invasion of Iraq did more harm than good, less likely to agree that the United States was

serious about supporting democracy in the region, and less likely to trust that the United States will allow people in the region to fashion their own political futures.

Radicals More Likely to Feel Threatened

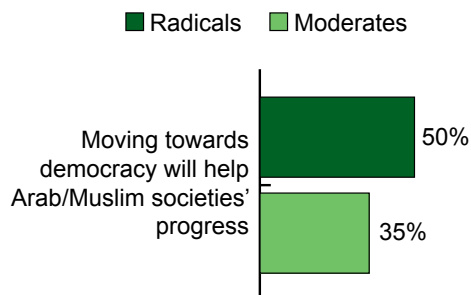
Perhaps most telling is the fact that, in response to the open-ended question, “What is your greatest fear?”, the most frequent response among political radicals was “occupation/U.S. domination,” while among moderates, it was concern about economic issues.

This sense of Western encroachment seemed to extend beyond political domination to religious and cultural identity. While moderates and radicals both feel that Islam is disrespected by the West (only 16% of moderates, and 12% of political radicals associated “respecting Islamic values” with Western nations), political radicals appear more likely to feel that Islam is not only degraded, but threatened. Among the radical group, the idea that Western nations should “refrain from interfering or imposing its beliefs and policies” was a common response to the open-ended question about improving relations with the West, second only to the need for Westerners to “respect Islam.” The moderates also express this sentiment, but it is a bit more muted and surpassed by a request for more basic needs such as economic development.

Feeling politically and culturally at risk, political radicals are more likely to push for cultural preservation, and to adhere to the idea that “attachment to spiritual and moral values is critical to Arab/Muslim progress” (65% of political radicals agree with this statement vs. 44% among moderates).

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Attitudes toward democracy



However, it's important to note that political radicals were also more likely than moderates to say "moving toward greater democracy will help Arab/Muslim societies' progress." This sentiment may again confirm their heightened desire for political self-determination. At the least it indicates that radicals are not predisposed to feel democratic principles contradict Islamic values.

Generally, the radical group is characterized by a sense of political frustration and the feeling that Muslims are both humiliated and threatened by the West. The result is a greater sense of urgency to protect their cultural identity — and thus, the justification of extremist means as well as a great deal of willingness to make extreme sacrifices. Not surprisingly, political radicals are far more likely than moderates to say it is "completely justifiable" to sacrifice one's life for a cause one believes in.

On the other hand, political radicals were no less likely than moderates to say that better relations with the West concerned them. And while radicals had (by definition) unfavorable opinions of the United States, they had relatively neutral to favorable opinions of Germany and France. This again suggests that extremist views are motivated less by cultural opposition to Western values, and more by specific policies that seem to threaten Islamic ways of life.

The responses of political radicals, however, reflect less optimism than those of moderates that improved relations between the Western world and the Muslim world are on the horizon. Radicals are less likely to feel that better relations with the Muslim world are a concern of the West, and more doubtful that a time of better understanding between the two cultures will ever come, signaling a lack of faith in diplomacy as a means for change.

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