

The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Mainstream vs. Radical 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 “radical” 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.”

Political Radicals vs. the Mainstream Masses

In order to investigate characteristics that distinguish Muslim world residents who are potentially prone to radical views, we divided respondents from the region into two groups. Classified as the “politically radicalized” 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 “mainstream.” The politically radicalized group represents about 7% of the total population across the 10 countries included in the study.

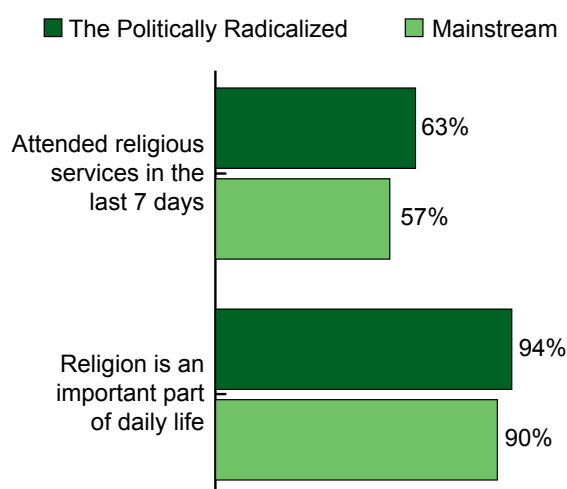
Comparing the two groups produces a number of key insights:

- 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, the politically radicalized were, on average, slightly more educated and more affluent than mainstream respondents, 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 politically radicalized group are more likely than those in the mainstream group 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 politically radicalized group.

Muslim radicalism: 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 politically radicalized group was somewhat more likely to do so than the mainstream masses. The politically radicalized 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.

The Politically Radicalized 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 the politically radicalized was “occupation/U.S. domination,” while among mainstream respondents, it was concern about economic issues.

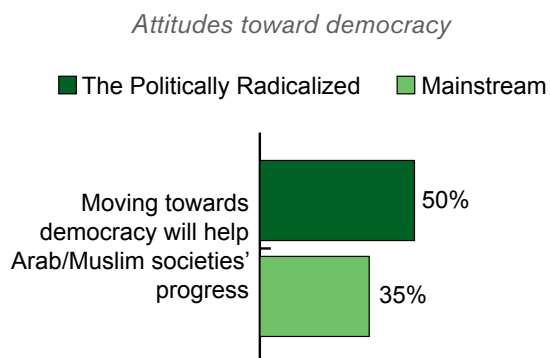
This sense of Western encroachment seemed to extend beyond political domination to religious and cultural identity. While mainstream respondents and the politically radicalized both feel that Islam is disrespected by the West (only 16% of mainstream respondents and 12% of the politically radicalized associated “respecting Islamic values” with Western nations), the politically radicalized appear more likely to feel that Islam is not only degraded, but threatened. Among the politically radicalized 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 mainstream respondents also express this sentiment, but it is a bit more muted and surpassed by a request for more basic needs such as economic development.

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Feeling politically and culturally at risk, the politically radicalized 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 the politically radicalized agree with this statement vs. 44% among mainstream respondents).

However, it’s important to note that the politically radicalized were also more likely than mainstream respondents 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 politically radicalized 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, the politically radicalized are

far more likely than mainstream respondents to say it is “completely justifiable” to sacrifice one’s life for a cause one believes in.

On the other hand, the politically radicalized were no less likely than mainstream respondents to say that better relations with the West concerned them. And while the politically radicalized had (by definition) unfavorable opinions of the United States, they had relatively neutral to favorable opinions of Germany and France. This again suggests that radical 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 the politically radicalized, however, reflect less optimism than those of mainstream respondents that improved relations between the Western world and the Muslim world are on the horizon. The politically radicalized 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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