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## Assessing the Prevalence of Middle Eastern Extreme Ideologies among some Iranians

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## **Assessing the Prevalence of Middle Eastern Extreme Ideologies among some Iranians**

### **Abstract**

This article investigates the prevalence of the extreme Middle Eastern ideologies among Iranians. Using the Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale (ATRS) on a sample of Iranian participants, the authors collected from 138 Iranian Muslims. The authors compared this data with data previously collected from other parts of the world that included Atheists, Christians, and Muslims. The ATRS is a scale for measuring quantitatively Middle Eastern extremist ideologies on risk areas as reported in the literature. Similar to previous results, the current results indicated that Iranian Muslims scored significantly higher than the sampled Christians and Atheists. However, the score of total ATRS and its subscale for Muslims of Iran was significantly less than from Muslims in other parts of the world.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Extremism and violent acts motivated by religious beliefs are not a new phenomenon, and are not restricted to one religion or one region of the world. However, religious fundamentalism has increasingly become a main concern for people throughout the world over the recent decades. Religious dogmatism is considered a serious threat to human peace following the events in the United States on September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> Ideology plays a crucial role in the terrorists' target selection, supplying terrorists with an initial motive for action and providing a prism through which they view events and the actions of others.<sup>2</sup> Hence, many researchers are now more motivated to investigate the potential factors which intensifies tensions in Middle East tensions. They concluded that fundamentalist ideological teachings in the Middle East are one of the most influential factors evoking violent thoughts and actions, and that extremists try to spread their own ideologies through the politicization of religion.<sup>3</sup> Religious extremists are willing to murder because they embrace theologies that sanction violence in the service of God.<sup>4</sup>

Several scholars reported on the magnitude and extent of ideologically Based Terrorism post 9/11. For example, in 2006, it was estimated that over 1,000 terrorist organizations were active in more than one hundred countries.<sup>5</sup> From 2001 to 2007 terrorists have attempted over thirty attacks against European Union countries.<sup>6</sup> From 2002 to 2005, an average of four terrorist attacks occurred annually in different countries, killing an average of 214 people each year.<sup>7</sup> In Canada, there were forty groups listed as terrorist entities in 2008.<sup>8</sup> Further, it is estimated that since 9/11, terrorists having Middle Eastern religious ideologies are responsible for killing over 26,000 and wounding 50,000 in attacks in over fifty countries. Examples of terrorist acts committed before 9/11 are those that occurred in Algeria, killing thousands of people, and those in Kenya, and Tanzania, Beirut, Israel, and Mumbai.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in 2005 and 2006 respectively, Australian, and Canadian security agencies thwarted plans to assassinate members of government, parliament, and the destruction of important buildings, such as government buildings, parliaments, the stock exchange, broadcasting buildings, and the opera house. Terrorists were also planning to behead the Prime Minister of Canada (in 2006).

The results of several research projects demonstrate the prevalence of Middle Eastern extreme ideologies among some Muslims around the world. For example, in an opinion poll of one thousand US Muslims conducted in 2007, eight percent believed that suicide attacks on civilian targets are sometimes or often justified in order to defend their religion.<sup>10</sup> Another survey conducted in 2006 involving Muslims in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain indicated that 7 to 16 percent of participants felt that suicide attacks are sometimes or often justified.<sup>11</sup> In addition, 5 percent of

US Muslims were favorable towards al-Qaida, and 8 percent justified suicide attacks. This translates to 70,000 adult US Muslims with radicalized opinions in relation to the war on terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, British Muslims who reported their primary identity as being Muslim held more positive views towards jihad, and martyrdom than their fellow Muslim citizens who reported their dominant identity as British.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, 13 percent of British Muslims believe the persons who bombed the London subway system in July 2005 were martyrs for Islam, and 49 percent believe US military actions in Iraq are an attack against Islam.<sup>14</sup> Recently, Chiaramonte reported two studies which found that the deadly toll of terrorism around the globe has jumped nearly 800 percent in the past five years; An average of nearly 30,000 people per year have been killed by terrorists between 2010 and the end of 2015.<sup>15</sup> Chiaramonte also reported an article that indicated that

“While the Islamic State is responsible for at least 10,780 deaths since 2013, the rise of other extremist groups like Boko Haram, and Al Shabbab in Africa has accounted for tens of thousands of terror deaths in the past five years.”<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Kassam reported findings from seven different surveys results.<sup>17</sup> These findings are summarized as followed. The first, an ICM poll from 2006 indicated that 20 percent of British Muslims sympathized with the 7/7/2005 London bombers who participated in the killing of 52 and injuring hundreds, and thirty-one percent of younger British Muslims endorsed or excused these bombings. According to NOP Research there are roughly three quarters of a million terror-sympathizing people in the UK. Twenty-seven percent of those polled in the United Kingdom say they had sympathy with the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, with 78 percent supporting punishment for the publication of cartoons featuring Muhammed, and 68 percent supporting the arrest and prosecution of British people who “insult Islam.” The second, according to World Public Opinion conducted in 2009 at the University of Maryland, states that 61 percent of Egyptians, 32 percent of Indonesians, 41 percent of Pakistanis, 38 percent of Moroccans, 83 percent of Palestinians, 62 percent of Jordanians, and 42 percent of Turks appear to endorse or sympathize with attacks on Americans. The third, a 2013 study, found that 16 percent of young Muslims in Belgium believed that state terrorism is "acceptable," while 12 percent of young Muslims in Britain said that there were ways to justify suicide attacks against civilians in Britain. The fourth, Pew Research from 2007, found that 26 percent of young Muslims in America believed suicide bombings are justified, with 35 percent in Britain, 42 percent in France, 22 percent in Germany, and 29 percent in Spain feeling the same. The fifth survey proves Muslims who are more devout or dedicated to Islam are three times more likely to believe that suicide bombings are justified. The sixth finding shows that while just five percent

of UK Muslims said they would not report a terror attack being planned, the number increased to 18 percent amongst young British Muslims. The seventh finding, from the BBC, found that 36 percent of 16- to 24-year old Muslims believe that if a Muslim converts to another religion they deserve punishment by death.

Another research survey on a sample of Canadian Muslims from Ottawa indicated that 19percent approve of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, and 9percent agree that all governments would be better if they were ruled under the Caliphate.<sup>18</sup> Also, Rusin reported that Muslims in Canada indicated their support for punishing people who deserted Islam.<sup>19</sup> Consistent with these research findings, Canadian research indicates the prevalence of Middle Eastern extremist ideologies among samples from western, and nonwestern countries.<sup>20</sup> Consistent with these findings, Fatah reported that the problem of radicalization is widely entrenched, and embedded among Somali, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani Canadians. Unfortunately, the prevalence of these ideologies may have contributed to the home-grown terrorism that we have seen of late on members of the RCMP and parliament.<sup>21</sup>

A possible way to reduce the growth of extreme ideologies and their subsequent terrorist actions is to explore the potential of threats that the followers of different religions may show in their attitudes toward extremism. To this end, the Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale (ATRS) was designed to measure Middle Eastern attitudes, beliefs, and ideologies supportive of extremists/terrorists practice.<sup>22</sup> The findings from different research locations confirm the reliability and validity of ATRS scale to measure Middle Eastern extremism. Several studies, where the ATRS was utilized were conducted by different scholars from different countries (Australia, Canada, Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, and South African).<sup>23</sup> The majority of these scholars were university affiliated in the fields of psychiatry or psychology. Participants were from different religious backgrounds. The first international study had participants from Australia, Canada, Egypt, and south Africa.<sup>24</sup> The findings have indicated that Muslims scored significantly higher than other religious groups, regardless of their country of origin or where they are living. Another study administered the ATRS among new Pakistani immigrants to Canada.<sup>25</sup> The results indicated a significant difference between the responses of Muslims, and Christians, with Muslims scoring higher than the Christians do. Similarly, another study administered the ATRS to Nigerian participants.<sup>26</sup> Results indicated that the prevalence of Middle Eastern extremist ideologies among Nigerian Muslims is significantly higher than that of Nigerian Christians.

In a more recent study Karimi, Loza, and Loza investigated the prevalence of extreme Middle Eastern ideologies among some Iranians.<sup>27</sup> The results of this study confirmed the higher prevalence of extreme Middle Eastern

beliefs among Iranian Muslims than non-believers. The goal of the current article was to investigate the prevalence of the extreme Middle Eastern ideologies among a sample of Iranian participants.

The authors here compared the responses of a sample of Iranian Muslim with previously collected samples of Atheists, Christians, and Muslims from some other parts of the world. It was hypothesized that Iranian Muslims will score significantly higher than samples of Christians, and Atheists around the world, but not significantly different from samples of Muslims from other countries.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Involved in this study were Iranian Muslims, and Atheists as well as Christians, and Muslims from other parts of the world Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of the participants. The Iranian participants were all from Tehran, and resided in Iran at the time of data collection. The participants from other parts of the world were non-Iranians. The participants were selected using convenience rather than random sampling. Thus, participants who agreed to participate in this study were included regardless of their demographic backgrounds.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Muslims of Iran (n=138)</b> Frequency (%)	<b>Christians of parts of the world (n=443)</b> Frequency (%)	<b>Non Iranian Muslims (n=294)</b> Frequency (%)	<b>Atheists: Iran &amp; other parts the world (n=200)</b> Frequency (%)
<b>Age M(SD)</b>	33.09 (10.15)	35.21 (11.77)	29.04 (11.03)	35.62 (10.63)
<b>Sex</b>				
<b>M</b>	51.45	45.43	50.68	49.24
<b>F</b>	48.55	54.57	49.32	50.76
<b>Education</b>				
<b>&lt; Secondary</b>	5.11	5.71	11.68	-
<b>Secondary</b>	20.44	12.33	11	16.84
<b>College</b>	-	36.76	30.24	30.1
<b>University</b>	51.09	30.82	38.83	19.9
<b>Grad</b>	23.36	14.38	8.25	33.16
<b>Occupation</b>				
<b>Police Officer</b>	-	6.73	-	2.51

<b>Student</b>	16.3	21.63	48.85	12.06
<b>Social Work</b>	-	20.91	2.69	21.61
<b>Youth Works</b>	-	4.09	0.38	5.03
<b>Unemployed</b>	7.41	11.06	41.92	16.58
<b>Teacher</b>	31.85	4.57	0.77	7.54
<b>Professional Job</b>	23.7	24.76	5	30.65
<b>Self-Employment</b>	10.37	2.64	0.38	2.01
<b>Unprofessional</b>	10.37	3.61	-	2.01

Source: Authors.

### *Measures*

The ATRS consists of six subscales, with each subscale designed to tap into a prominent ideological theme. The first subscale (4 items) reflects negative Attitudes toward Israel. Many extremists considered the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as one of the central sources of grievance promotion.<sup>28</sup> The following is an example of this subscale: “The solution to the Middle East problems is to eradicate Israel.” The second subscale (five items) is Political Views, which measures the important political views that are advocated by Middle Eastern extremists (for example opposing secular laws and governments, and advocating for the implementation of the Sharia [Islamic] law).<sup>29</sup> An example of this subscale is “The laws that are made by man should be replaced by God’s mandated laws.” The third subscale (5 items) assesses participants’ Attitudes toward Women. These current, extreme attitudes are mainly repressive, were generally foreign to most Middle Eastern countries, and were not promoted prior to the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> The following is an example of this subscale: “Women should always have a male companion from her immediate family when they are traveling.” The fourth subscale (5 items) measures negative Attitudes towards Western Culture. Middle Eastern extremists have been vocal in their rejection of Western culture.<sup>31</sup> They claim that Western civilization is corrupt and that the West is trying to undermine their religion.<sup>32</sup> Extremists generally emphasize the prevalence of negative attitudes in the Muslim countries toward non-Muslim cultures.<sup>33</sup> An example for this subscale is “Because of its values, it is hard for believers to integrate in a Western culture.” The fifth subscale (6 items), Religiosity, assesses the respondents’ commitment to their religion. Extremists use religion to advocate for their cause and to recruit new pools of extremists.<sup>34</sup> Some questions in this subscale tap into extreme religious views that are common in the Middle East. An example of this subscale is “Our loyalty should be more to our religion than to the country flags or citizenship.”

The sixth subscale (8 items), *Condoning Fighting*, measures views that condone fighting, and promote acts of violence as a means for the revival of religion with the goal of destroying infidels, (for example atheists, and nonbelievers in Islam) and achieving one world under the Islamic religion.<sup>35</sup> An example of this subscale is “I support fighting against the nonbelievers of God.” A final, seventh, subscale is a validity scale that indicates whether participants misunderstood the items, answered carelessly, or deliberately attempted to conceal their true answers. Items included in this subscale are additional to the 33 items of the ATRS. The total score consists of the answers to the items included in the first six subscales (items included in the validity subscale are not included in the total scale score). The ATRS underwent four stages of development that have been described in detail in previous articles.<sup>36</sup>

### Procedure

Iranian participants were Muslims. The authors asked them if they were willing to participate in this research project, and fill out a questionnaire (the ATRS) about their beliefs. The participants were workers, casual workers, students, and individuals’ university courses, seminars, or upgrading workshops.

The authors assured the participants about the confidentiality of their responses. They also informed them that they could decline their participation at any time. Approximately 10 percent declined to participate. The authors compared the responses of Muslims of Iran with data previously collected from Atheists, Christians, and Muslims from other countries.

### Results

We conducted a t-test to compare ATRS among Iran’s Muslim, Christians from other parts of the world, and Atheists from other parts the world. Tables 2, 3 and 4 show the results.

**Table 2: Comparing Muslims of Iran vs. Christians from Other Parts of the World in ATRS**

Subscales	Muslims of Iran (n=138)	Christians (n=443)	t value (df=579)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
<b>Attitude Towards Israel</b>	1.14 (1.33)	0.76 (1.14)	3.32**
<b>Political Views</b>	2.63(1.59)	1.90(2.11)	3.75***
<b>Attitude Towards Women</b>	1.62(1.22)	1.00(1.71)	3.98***



<b>Attitude Toward Western Culture</b>	2.33(1.58)	1.60(1.75)	4.37***
<b>Fighting</b>	4.04(1.99)	2.66(2.98)	5.08***
<b>Religiosity</b>	3.37(1.94)	2.87(2.69)	2.03*
<b>Total ATRS</b>	15.13(7.57)	10.78(10.83)	4.39***

Source: Authors.

df= Degrees of Freedom  
 \* P< .05, \*\* P< .001, \*\*\* P< .0001

The results in Table 2 indicates that there were significant differences in the total, and subscale scores of the ARTS between Iranian Muslims, and the Christian of some parts of the world on the total scale, and subscales scores.

**Table 3: Comparing Muslims of Iran vs. Muslims from Other Parts of the World in ATRS**

Subscales	Muslims of Iran (n=138)	Non Iranian Muslims (n=294)	t value (df=430)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
<b>Attitude Towards Israel</b>	1.14 (1.33)	3.27 (2.11)	10.83**
<b>Political Views</b>	2.63(1.59)	5.99(3.59)	10.50**
<b>Attitude Towards Women</b>	1.62(1.22)	5.22(4.58)	9.06**
<b>Attitude Toward Western Culture</b>	2.33(1.58)	5.70(4.14)	9.27**
<b>Fighting</b>	4.04(1.99)	9.48(7.73)	8.14**
<b>Religiosity</b>	3.37(1.94)	8.66(1.94)	10.51**
<b>Total ATRS</b>	15.13(7.57)	38.30(26.98)	9.90**

Source: Authors.

\*\* P< .0001

The results in Table 3 indicate that there were significant differences in total, and subscales of ATRS scores between Muslims from other parts of the world, and Iranian Muslims with non-Iranian Muslims scoring significantly higher than Iranian Muslims from. The total ATRS subscale designed to tap into extremists' prominent ideological theme. Thus, according to the current results the Iranian Muslims hold less extreme religion views than non-Iranian Muslims.

**Table 4: Comparing Muslims of Iran vs. Atheists from Other Parts of the World in ATRS**

Subscales	Muslims of Iran (n=138)	Atheists (n=200)	t value (df=336)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	
<b>Attitude Towards Israel</b>	1.14 (1.33)	0.34 (0.85)	6.77**
<b>Political Views</b>	2.63(1.59)	0.55(1.06)	14.42**
<b>Attitude Towards Women</b>	1.62(1.22)	0.42(0.84)	10.73**
<b>Attitude Toward Western Culture</b>	2.33(1.58)	1.09(1.24)	8.01**
<b>Fighting</b>	4.04(1.99)	1.22(1.68)	14.02**
<b>Religiosity</b>	3.37(1.94)	0.76(1.38)	14.46**
<b>Total ATRS</b>	15.13(7.57)	4.37(5.38)	15.26**

Source: Authors.

\*\* P < .0001

Table 4 demonstrates that Iranian Muslims had higher scores on the total, and subscales score of the ATRS (M=15.13, SD = 7.57) than those Atheists from other parts of the World.

## Discussion

Consistent with previous results, the current results indicated that scores of total ATRS, and its subscales among Iranian Muslims were significantly higher than Christians of some parts of the world. Iranian Muslims also, had higher scores than Iranian Atheists, and Atheists from other parts of the world. New finding from this research indicates that the scores of the total ATRS, and its subscale for Muslims of Iran were significantly less than Muslims from other parts of the world.

The prevalence of the extreme Middle Eastern ideologies among Iranian Muslims was demonstrated by the finding that participants of the Muslim faith scored significantly higher on the ATRS than their Christian, and Atheists counterparts. Unexpectedly, however, was the finding that Iranian Muslims scored significantly less than the Muslims from other parts of the world. It is our opinion that the following explains this finding best. First, although the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime, and the governance of Islamic regime, the idealistic promises of the Islamist spectrum have not yet been realized, including themes such as establishing a justice system, and reduction of class contradictions. Today it seems that the Iranian government is

witnessing the resistance of many people, especially the youth, against the government-supported Islamic identity.

Second, the majority of Iranian Muslims are Shia while the majority of Islamic fundamentalism emerged from Sunni populations utilizing extreme ideologies prevalent in Muslim societies in the Middle East. One can claim that the Muslim Sunni world was subjected to more colonial influence than the Shia Muslims in Iran.

Third, unlike the Arab and Sunni living in other parts of the world—mostly under secular governments—Iran has lived with an Islamic government since 1979. Suffering for decades from the oppressive rule of Republic Islamic, Iranian Shia seems to be more skeptical about political Islam. Moreover, quite contrary to fundamental Sunnis who have constructed the Christianity as its “Other,” the fundamental Shias’ “Other” appears to be Sunni Muslim. Its dynamic is related more to Sunni Muslim rather than Western Christianity. Thus, while the increase of the influence, and presence of Western powers in the Middle East provokes fundamental Sunnis, it has not influenced Shias as powerfully, and remain almost indifferent to Western pressures.

Fourth, the majority of Iranian society are followers of Shia, and they are much more open to Sufism school than those who have accepted the tenant of the Sunni religion. These followers of Sufism partly are against fundamentalist orientations.<sup>37</sup> Sufism is not accepted by Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>38</sup> Fifth, the majority of Sunni minorities (about 15 percent of Iran's population) are Kurds, whose priority is not Islam. Rather, they mostly adhere to their Kurdish nationality. This ethnic nationalism of Kurds is more consistent with secular narratives.

Beside the above reported findings, the present article lends further support for the value of using the ARTS to assess Muslim extremists. As reported in previous reports, ATRS has several advantages. First, because the ATRS is a self-report scale, it ensures maximal objectivity by avoiding possible misinterpretation of participants’ responses, and reduces the possibility of assessor biases, which is important in this sensitive area of assessment.

Second, the ATRS is more convenient and economical to use than lengthy interviews. Participants simply provide numeric responses indicating agreement or disagreement with the items, with the scale usually taking only a few minutes to complete. Scoring the test is straightforward, as the basic interpretation requires minimal professional time. A third advantage of the ATRS is the large proportion of dynamic statements that we can use to measure the effect of any changes over time or after any intervention. A fourth advantage is that we can subsequently use individuals’ responses as part of an individualized intervention plan. For example, extreme

erroneous thoughts indicated by the endorsement of particular statements could be challenged during treatment. Finally, the ATRS has other practical uses such as in joint administration with other methods used for screening and identifying applicants with extreme Middle Eastern views.<sup>3939</sup>

The current article has the following limitations: First, participants were selected using convenience rather than randomized sampling, and collateral important data about the participants. Second, it is impossible to further assess concurrent validity of the ATRS due to the lack of other available assessment measures. To our knowledge, the ARTS is the first, and only measure designed to measure quantitatively extremist Middle East ideology. Thus, there is a need to further research the concurrent validity of ATRS. Third, the use of the current data for future predictive studies is not possible because of the difficulties in accessing participants who committed terrorist acts.

## Conclusion

The goal of the present article was to investigate the prevalence of the extreme Middle Eastern ideologies among Iranians. To achieve this goal, the Assessment and Treatment of Radicalization Scale (ATRS) was utilized, designed to measure quantitatively Middle Eastern extremist ideologies. Data collected from Iranian participants was compared to data previously collected from other parts of the world that included Atheists, Christians, and Muslims. As hypothesized, the Iranian Muslims scored significantly higher than samples of Christians, and Atheists around the world, but not significantly different from samples of Muslims from other countries. The results of the present article add some support to the previous studies regarding the utilization of the ATRS as a tool for measuring the prevalence of Middle Eastern extremist ideologies among Muslim populations. Future research utilizing the ATRS on different countries that have Muslim majorities, or even countries that have minority Muslim populations, may add to our understanding of the prevalence of the extreme Middle Eastern ideologies around the world.

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