What Causes Extremist Attitudes Among Sunni and Shia Youth?
Evidence from Northern India

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About the Author

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

1. Introduction

Recent terrorist attacks in the developing and developed world underscore the importance of scientific research aimed at identifying the causes of religious extremism. Scholars have proposed a range of hypotheses that seek to explain why some individuals become religious extremists. At the individual level of analysis, the terrorism studies literature is replete with arguments that emphasize causes ranging from political and economic grievances (Pargeter 2009) and psychological factors, (Silke 2008; Altier et al. 2014) to factors related to religious identity (Tessler 1998; Sidanius 2004) and social networks (Della Porta 2006; Sageman 2004).

This study seeks to advance scientific knowledge about the causes of extremist attitudes via a survey of 480 Sunni and Shia young men in northern India. The survey, conducted in March 2016, covered a random sample from the most violence-prone district in Lucknow, the capital city of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh. This city of four million inhabitants has the highest levels of Sunni-Shia conflict among all Indian cities. The study jointly tests eight prominent hypotheses from existing literature on religious extremism. It builds on hypothesis generation, conducted in a separate work by the author (Rink & Sharma 2016).

In doing so, the study uses an approach that overcomes three major limitations in existing empirical research. The first is that most research solely focuses on samples of convicted terrorists or activists who publicize their extremist viewpoints in mainstream or social media (Ilardi 2013; Gill 2013; Harris 2013). The fundamental issue here is inferential: even if one were to conduct rigorous work on common factors among terrorists or radicalizers, such work still would not be able to make a valid inference about whether such factors *separate* extremists from non-extremists. Consider the following example: if one hypothetically conducted a study of 100 known terrorists native to a particular city in the developing world and found that most of the sample was politically marginalized and outwardly religious, it would be imprecise to conclude that these factors *caused* these individuals to become terrorists. It could very well be the case that these individuals were no more politically marginalized or outwardly religious than a random sample of their non-terrorist peers in the same city.

A second limitation is that very few studies[1] jointly test a range of competing hypotheses from political science and social psychology. The ability to run statistical models that include all of these variables advances the estimation of the relative effect of each individual variable while accounting for the effects of the others. Finally, the study confronts the third limitation by using face-to-face surveys from a violence-prone district and a demographic of prime interest, young adult men. The use of local enumerators to conduct these surveys offers a more fine-grained analysis than most existing studies on the topic.

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[1] Some of the more comprehensive approaches include (Fair et al. 2006; Blair et al. 2013) although neither test psychological or network-related factors.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I examine the concept of religious extremism and explain the definition used in this study. Section 3 introduces the conflict setting of Lucknow's Old City and briefly describes the dynamics that led to the current sectarian violence in the city. Section 4 presents and categorizes the 10 hypotheses that I empirically test, while section 5 discusses the sampling approach, descriptive statistics, and the main results of the analysis. The final section rounds out the paper with a concluding discussion of the main findings and their relevance for policymakers.

2. Defining Religious Extremism

In this study, the single dependent variable is the extent to which individuals hold religious extremist attitudes. Though extremism often refers to the end result of a process (Crossett 2010), the paper's objective is to empirically test leading hypotheses on extremism and determine whether they can explain variation in extremist attitudes.

The term "religious extremism" is hotly debated and defined differently by scholars, practitioners, and governments around the world (Schmid 2013; Veldhuis 2009). Of equal note are the many studies critiquing the entire concept of "religious extremism" or "religious radicalization." Critics have rightly pointed out that these terms have been used by policy advisers to highlight individual-level "red flags" in ways that significantly distract from the importance of macro-level factors motivating violence, including foreign policy and structural grievances within society (Kundnani 2012). Borum (2011) highlights concerns about whether or not individuals with extremist attitudes may be misguided insofar as attitudes themselves may not cause, or even correlate with, individuals engaging in violent behavior.

I address these concerns in two ways. First, I examine a wide, though by no means exhaustive, range of hypotheses in the extremism literature, including macro-level factors involving political and economic grievances held by individuals. Policymakers should be aware of and respond to the role of macro-level grievances in motivating religious extremism. Regarding the second critique, I state upfront that my study is limited to the study of the causes of extremist attitudes, and not of extremist behavior. The study adopts an approach articulated by Neumann (2013), who argues that "cognitive" and "behavioral" extremism are inter-related and that the study of one enhances the understanding of the other, as well as of the full process of radicalization. Even if extremist attitudes do not directly cause extremist violence, the mere presence of such attitudes create social environments that polarize communities and potentially prevent pro-tolerant individuals, groups, and institutions from emerging for fear of potential retribution by those who hold extremist attitudes. The prevalence of extremist attitudes in a particular town, by definition, results in a population of individuals sympathetic to terrorist violence. It increases the operating space and expected audience effect of militant groups, for which extremist attitudes deserve investigation in and of themselves.

In this study, religious extremism is defined as the extent of support for the use of violence against outgroup members on the basis of their religious affiliation in order to achieve a religio-political objective. My definition follows prominent approaches in

political science (Gurr 1990). Moreover, it resembles conceptualizations in related fields.[2] Psychologists (McCauley et al. 2008: 415) define radicalization as the "increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup." Similarly, social scientists (Wilner 2010: 418), in their definition of the phenomenon, emphasize that radicalization represents a process "where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of violence."

My definition of religious extremism is best understood as the extent of support for violence at a given point in time. From a scientific measurement perspective, this definition is consistent with conventional social science studies that measure support for terrorism and other types of violence (Blair et al. 2013). From a practical perspective, it acknowledges the reality that individuals do not necessarily fully accept or fully reject violence in certain cases, but rather, can support such violence to varying degrees.

Lastly, my measurement approach of religious extremist attitudes contextualized by my area of study, which is extremism within the Sunni and Shia communities within the Sunni-Shia conflict setting of Lucknow. My dependent variable seeks to capture the degree to which Sunni subjects support violence toward Shia Muslims, and vice versa. The measure was created by averaging four questions in the survey instrument, which I refer to as the *Religious Extremism Index*, to create a single variable for each respondent. After administering survey questions to measure the main variables, enumerators read a hypothetical scenario to subjects describing an outgroup religious leader provoking their sect. Subjects were then asked to imagine a co-sectarian peer possibly responding to the provocation with one of four violent actions toward outgroup members. Subjects rated their level of support for each hypothetical violent reaction on a 7-point Likert scale. The final variable, ranging from 1 to 7, was then normalized to a scale ranging from 0 to 1 to facilitate the final analysis.

Sunni subjects were given a provocative scenario involving a Shia religious leader and asked about their support for violent actions by a hypothetical Sunni peer against Shia individuals in Lucknow, and vice versa for Shia subjects. I used the same hypothetical provocative scenario and hypothetical violent reactions to maintain consistency in the outcome for both Sunni and Shia subjects.

The hypothetical provocative scenario read to Sunni respondents was: "Imagine that it is Muharram in Lucknow and that a Shia *maulana* (sheikh) has just criticized Sunnis. Now, imagine that a Sunni man is considering responding in one of the following ways." Subjects then rated their support for the following four scenarios from 1 to 7, with a brief explanation of their decision:

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[2] The U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group defines radicalization as the process whereby an individual goes from legal political participation to "the use or support of violence for political purposes."

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1. The Sunni man uses a megaphone to call the Shia a *kafir* (non-Muslim);
2. The Sunni man throws a stone at a Shia procession;
3. The Sunni man attacks his Shia friend for his anti-Sunni post on Facebook; and
4. The Sunni man attacks a Shia store.

The scenarios were based on the types of violent actions conducted by extremists from both Sunni and Shia communities in Lucknow. Finally, for each question, subjects were read the meaning of the 7-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating increasing levels of religious extremism: 1 ("I strongly oppose this action"); 2 ("I oppose this action, but only a little bit"); 3 ("I oppose this action"); 4 ("Neutral"); 5 ("I support this action, but only a little bit"); 6 ("I support this action"); and 7 ("I strongly support this action").

3. Conflict Background

Violence between members of the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam is salient in the politics of many countries around the world. India, the world's largest democracy, is often showcased as a model for secular governance and intergroup peace. However, Sunni-Shia violence continues to define the central political conflict in Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh. Religious violence perpetrated by marginalized male youth from both sects undermines the core democratic value of political tolerance in what is arguably India's second most important political center.

In the past century, Lucknow has witnessed more Sunni-Shia violence than any other city in India. Interestingly, the city has never experienced a major act of Hindu-Muslim violence for at least the past century (Sinha 1987: 1841). The city's Sunni-Shia violence is a relatively recent phenomenon; the first riot only occurred in 1905 (Ahmad 1983: 340). Since then, sectarian violence has almost exclusively coincided with particular Muslim holy periods when Sunni and Shia public rituals direct attention toward contentious religious traditions. Most sectarian violence in Lucknow takes place during Muharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar lasting for either 68 or 69 days in South Asia. As in many parts of the Muslim world, Muharram heightens the salience of Sunni-Shia political divisions in Lucknow given the month's historical significance to the Shia faith, and the way in which its rituals are violently exploited by some Sunni and Shi'i locals for political aims.

During Muharram, sectarian violence usually occurs when extremist Sunni and Shia groups engage in highly contentious rituals that are considered explicitly offensive by one another. Extremist Sunni clerics in Lucknow organize rituals (Urdu: *madh-e-sahaba* processions) to praise the first three caliphs of Islam while excluding the fourth, Ali. *Madh-e-sahaba* rituals can take place on the street in response to a Shia Muharram procession or at a Sunni mosque, and draw ire from many local Shia. For their part, extremist Shia clerics in Lucknow organize public chants to emphasize their rejection of the first three caliphs (Urdu: *tabarra*, meaning 'disassociation'). Such chants often involve phrases that many Sunni Muslims find offensive. Ever since Lucknow's 1905 Sunni-Shia riot, the Sunni practice of reciting *madh-e-sahaba* and the Shia response of

retaliating with *tabarra* has been a proximate cause of violence between the two sides (Hasan 1998: 351-353).

For approximately five months, I conducted field research in Lucknow regarding the city's Sunni-Shia conflict and extremism among members of both sects. As part of the research, I conducted Hindi- and Urdu-language semi-structured interviews with over 65 subjects, including, but not limited to: Sunni and Shia *maulanas*, riot police officers, local politicians, violent young adults, NGO officers, and academics. Three points from my broader research project on Lucknow provide greater clarity on the present conflict dynamics in Lucknow. First, virtually all Sunni-Shia violence in the city takes place in the Old City, the city's most impoverished district inhabited by some one million. In general, the violence takes the form of riots involving several hundred participants that tend to occur during Shia (and to a far lesser extent, Sunni) religious processions. Smaller skirmishes targeting members either sect also tend to occur. Second, while the overall number of riots and skirmishes is less than those in active war zones, my survey work clearly demonstrates that the level of support for violence against members of the other sect is relatively high. Third, there is a process whereby extremist elites frame religious norms and economic interests in an attempt to persuade followers to support outgroup violence. I detail how such persuasion involves the use of religious processions, press conferences, and sectarian publications to motivate religious extremism.

Prior to delving into the study's hypotheses, I would like to present a justification for my case selection. First, I conducted my research in a specific conflict setting and demographic in order to hold constant macro-factors such as conflict dynamics, social life, economic development, and historical factors. The focus on a single setting allows me to conduct a fine-grained observational study among a relatively comparable sample of young adult men, thereby increasing confidence in the validity of my findings regarding certain variables. Second, I chose to study the causes of Sunni and Shia extremism due to the relevance of the topic in recent years.

Third, I sought to examine the conflict in India, a country that has received little study by scholars of religious extremism. I selected Lucknow due to its status as a city of four million with the highest level of Sunni-Shia violence in the entire country. Data obtained from a Lucknow government office suggest the city has experienced less than 10 unique violent incidents related to Sunni-Shia violence per year over the past 15 years, but this figure alone provides insight into the degree of intergroup conflict in the city. Violence tends to occur in mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhoods in the Old City, a district where most live in unmixed neighborhoods as a means of avoiding conflict. Polarizing, pro-violent sectarian political speech is an ever-present reality in Lucknow, often directly invoking external events in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to justify violent retaliatory responses in Lucknow. Political parties frequently exploit sectarian differences for electoral gains as part of their campaigns. Fourth, Lucknow's Old City is an accessible conflict setting in which one can obtain a random sample of young men exhibiting varying degrees of extremist attitudes and intolerant behavior. Implementing such a sensitive survey in the Old City was made possible through developing a support network with local religious leaders and police officials.

4. Hypotheses

4.1 Marginalization-Based Explanations

A prominent hypothesis that informs a range of international counter-extremism programming is that political or economic grievances motivate religious extremism. World leaders have suggested the same. Pope Francis recently proclaimed that terrorism is "born of poverty and frustration" ([Los Angeles Times](#)). Other leaders have argued that poverty itself may not be the culprit, but rather that another grievance—dim economic prospects—may drive extremism. Such logic was offered by U.S. President Barack Obama when he spoke at the February 2015 White House CVE Summit, stating that "poverty alone does not cause a person to become a terrorist," but "impoverished communities" in which young people have "no path for advancement" may cause extremism ([White House CVE Summit](#)).

What does the academic literature say about the relationship between marginalization and extremism? To facilitate the discussion, I divide the section into economic and political marginalization.

The literature on economic marginalization offers mixed findings. Mousseau (2011) analyzes survey data from 14 Muslim-majority countries and concludes that the urban poor are the most supportive of terrorist violence, a finding contested to some extent by Chiozza (2011). Chiozza analyzes Pew survey data and finds that only in Jordan is there a positive correlation between poverty and support for terrorism, a result that does not hold for five other Muslim-majority countries. Other empirical research using survey data from Muslims in South and Southeast Asia appears to come to a different conclusion. Blair et al. (2014) use a survey experiment among a nationally representative sample of 7,000 Pakistanis and find that middle-income Pakistanis are more likely than low-income Pakistanis to support militant groups. Similarly, Jo (2012) finds that personal economic frustration does not explain varying levels of support for Osama bin Laden among Pakistani and Indonesian Muslims.

Given the mixed results, I chose to test the version of this relationship that is most prominent in popular accounts. I analyze economic grievances as economic marginalization, operationalized in this study as a subject's response to a multiple-choice question regarding his chances of upward economic mobility in India.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with higher levels of economic marginalization exhibit higher levels of extremist attitudes and intolerant behavior.

The second hypothesis in this section concerns political marginalization. In a study of religious extremism in Saudi Arabia, Hegghammer (2006: 43-44) presents qualitative evidence to the effect that "certain tribes suffer political marginalization…that makes them prone to Islamist radicalism." In a study based in Morocco, Pargeter (2009) concludes that political marginalization, even at a town-level, increases the chance that the town will have religious extremists. Consistent with these findings, but at the level of

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the individual, Lombardi (2014) finds that politically marginalized individuals may become anti-state extremists due a lack of trust in local security services and politicians. In the context of Lucknow's Old City, my 30 semi-structured interviews with young Sunni and Shia men suggest that political marginalization likely plays a small yet significant role in motivating extremist attitudes and behavior. Subjects from both sects who openly supported violence also frequently expressed that they did not feel represented by the state government. In light of these claims, I measure political marginalization through a survey question asking individuals to rate the extent to which they felt that the state government represented their interests.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals with higher levels of political marginalization exhibit stronger extremist attitudes.

4.2 Religious Identity-Related Hypotheses

This section discusses a group of hypotheses that relate to an individual's religious identity. In an approach that goes beyond existing empirical research, I examine the relationship between four specific aspects of religious identity that are prominent in the Lucknow context.

The vast majority of studies on religious identity in the context of religious extremism focus on prayer attendance, but the theoretical basis for testing this particular variable is rarely discussed in detail. In this section, I take a broader approach in which prayer attendance is one of several ways in which religious identity may affect religious extremism. Specifically, the hypotheses relate to the following: prayer attendance, participation in extremist religious rituals, years of religious education, and the priority of one's sectarian identity.

4.2.1 Public Religious Practices

I begin with the literature on prayer attendance and religious extremism, which offers mixed findings. In one prominent study, Tessler (1998) finds that prayer attendance among Muslims in five Arab countries does not predict support for violence toward Israel. A similar finding results from a study of Pakistani Sunni Muslims (Fair 2012). In contrast, however, a study of Palestinian Muslims by a group of psychologists finds that prayer attendance strongly predicts support for suicide attacks (Ginges et al. 2009) I test the hypothesis that prayer attendance increases extremist attitudes and intolerant behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals with higher levels of prayer attendance exhibit stronger extremist attitudes.

4.2.2 Contentious Ritual Participation

Next, I examine the relationship between an individual's participation in contentious rituals and extremism. To my knowledge, this relationship has not been tested in any empirical study of extremism to date. I follow Blake (2016) in defining a contentious ritual as a "symbolic action that makes contested political claims." Contentious rituals are a salient form of public religious practice and take place in various contexts, and as explained in the Conflict Background section, contentious rituals play an important role in Sunni and Shia communities around the world, especially Lucknow. My interviews show that, for Sunni Muslims, the decision to participate in the *madh-e-sahaba* procession indicated an individual's preference to be associated with a hardline religious position that directly contested the Shia faith. The interviews suggest a different logic for Shia Muslims, however, in relation to their participation in processions during the Muslim holy month of Muharram, which is especially sacred to the Shia. Many Shia Muslims expressed their decision to participate in the Muharram rituals in terms of a collective mourning ritual on behalf of Imam Ali and his sons, Imam Husain and Hassan. Among the Shia youth that I interviewed, few expressed their decision to participate in a Muharram *jaloos* (procession) in terms of signaling an anti-Sunni stance. I thus test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: For Sunni Muslims, higher rates of participation in contentious rituals will strengthen extremist attitudes. For Shia Muslims, higher rates of participation in contentious rituals will not increase extremist attitudes.

The variable was scored as a continuous variable by asking subjects the approximate number of times that they had participated in either a *madh-e-sahaba* ritual (for Sunni subjects) or Muharram *jaloos* (for Shia subjects) throughout their life.

4.2.3 Religious Education

A third explanation relates to participation in religious education. Regarding the Islamic world, a common argument made by experts and journalists in media circles is that religious education is a driver of extremism. Journalistic accounts have sought to make the case that Saudi influence on religious institutions and educational curricula has increased extremism in both the developed (Choksky 2015) and the developing world (Gall 2016). Some analysts have gone further. In a *Wall Street Journal* commentary, one expert argues that the problem goes beyond a specific subset of mosques, writing that extremism "is occurring in mainstream and leading mosques worldwide," including the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, which is "one of the most important religious institutions in Islam" (Stalinsky 2016). These accounts claim that Islamic religious education increases narrow-mindedness and susceptibility to extremism, and sometimes, it even directly transmits extremist arguments to students. Such is the emphasis on religious education that some right wing parties in Europe (*New York Times* 2015) have called for the closure of mosques believed to be facilitating religious extremism.

In Lucknow, Sunni and Shia Muslims often enroll in religious education courses in their early youth. Anecdotal accounts from my interviews with religious leaders and NGO officers suggest that Sunni Muslims in Lucknow's Old City are far more likely to enroll in religious education courses, chiefly to learn and memorize the Qur'an. In this study, I test the hypothesis for both groups as it is frequently articled in popular accounts. The variable was coded by asking all subjects to report the approximate number of years that they attended Quran lessons in their life.

Hypothesis 5: Additional years of religious education strengthen extremist attitudes.

4.2.4 Sectarian Identification

The fourth and final religious identity-related explanation I consider relates to religious identification, which I define as the level of attachment that one holds toward one's religious identity relative to other identity categories. My approach is motivated by a literature in social psychology research. Ysseldyk et al. (2010) explain, "Religious identification can be fundamental to the promotion of individual well-being while simultaneously serving as a basis for seemingly intractable intergroup conflicts." On one hand, religious identification may reduce extremism since it provides positive coping mechanisms (Haslam 2006). On the other, it may lead to confrontational tendencies, thereby increasing extremism (Mackie 2000).

Given that my study examines extremism in Sunni and Shia communities in terms of attitudes and behavior regarding outgroup violence, I examine the variable of sectarian identification rather than identification with the Muslim religion. As noted by Ysseldyk et al. (2010), a careful measurement approach of religious (or here, sectarian) identification should take into account that "any number of social groups may shape the self-concept." I thus measure sectarian identification as whether or not an individual most identifies with his or her sectarian group over a list of salient alternative identity categories. In Lucknow, I identified the following categories: Sunni or Shia sectarian identity (the sectarian identification measure), Muslim identity, nationality, age group, and working class identity.

There is an ongoing debate among scholars of religious identification and violence. In the United Kingdom, a Tausch et al. (2010) study of 1,000 British Muslims concludes that greater attachment to British identity predicts lower support for the July 7, 2005 terrorist attacks in London, but that greater attachment to a Muslim identity does not predict higher support for the attacks. In lab experiments within Germany, Fischer (2007) uncovers that higher religious identification reduces German Muslim subjects' support for hypothetical terrorist acts committed by German Christians, but that it does not increase support for hypothetical terrorist acts committed by Muslims. Other studies find opposite patterns. A study in Lebanon found that Muslim identification correlated with support for the 9/11 terror attacks (Sidanius 2004). Similarly, in a study among a small sample of British Muslims, researchers found that subjects who rated their primary identity as Muslim (as opposed to British) were more likely to support martyrdom and terrorist actions (Cinnirella 2010). I therefore test the following:

Hypothesis 6: Rating one's sectarian identity over alternate salient categories will strengthen extremist attitudes.

4.3 Social Network Hypotheses

In this section, I analyze two hypotheses related to social networks and religious extremism.

4.3.1 Outgroup Peers

The first hypothesis I test relates to intergroup contact and extremism. In social psychology, the prominent intergroup contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) suggests that under certain conditions, higher contact with outgroup members can reduce anti-outgroup attitudes and behavior. A meta-analysis of 515 studies on the contact hypothesis found robust evidence for the proposition that intergroup contact reduces anti-outgroup sentiment (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006). There is little evidence, however, about whether lower outgroup contact is associated with higher extremist attitudes and behaviors toward the outgroup.

In Lucknow, I observed that although most Sunni and Shia inhabitants reside in neighborhoods dominated by their co-sectarians, there are numerous venues that facilitate intergroup contact and friendships with outgroup members. On a daily basis, Sunni and Shia young adult men peacefully interact side-by-side in small cafés, restaurants, and shops in the Old City. I encountered several dozen youth from both sects who proudly pointed to their outgroup friends as evidence that they were different from the "extremists" in their sects. I also encountered many Sunni and Shia who, despite being proud to embrace their outgroup friends, detailed their support for violence toward outgroup members who instigated attacks. In my study, I chose to measure outgroup contact in terms of outgroup peer relationships. Consequently, study subjects were asked to state the approximate number of outgroup members they considered their friends. I tested the following contact hypothesis with the following articulation:

Hypothesis 7: As the number of a subject's outgroup peer relationships increases, his extremist attitudes will strengthen.

4.3.2 Violent Peers

The second hypothesis concerns an individual's connection to peers who have participated in extremist violence. The basis for this hypothesis comes from literature in criminology and terrorism studies. One group of scientists in Europe found that when an individual's peers engaged in illegal political activity, the individual was more likely to engage in it as well (Dahl et al. 2014). In radicalization and terrorism literature, studies examining extremist movements in Europe (Della Porta 2006) and Israel (Munson 2008) have collected ample qualitative evidence on the importance of peer relationships to an individual's decision to support and partake in extremist violence. In another study,

Sageman (2004) argues that social networks facilitated the processes that socialized individuals into taking an active role in clandestine terrorist operations.

Many riot police officers and youth activists in Lucknow suggested that individuals sympathetic to local extremist causes are often embedded in groups of like-minded individuals. I interviewed several Sunni and Shia youth who fit that profile, and on several occasions, these interviews occurred in the presence of a few of their close friends who either made the case for, or against, anti-outgroup behavior. I measured radical social networks by asking individuals to approximate the number of their in-group peers who had previously participated in Sunni-Shia violence.[3] I thus test the following:

Hypothesis 8: Subjects who have more in-group peers who have previously engaged in Sunni-Shia violence will have stronger extremist attitudes.

4.4 Psychological Explanations

The final family of hypotheses I examine concerns psychological explanations of extremism.

4.4.1 Negative Catalyst Events

Within the psychology literature, a prominent hypothesis concerns the effect of experiencing negative life events that may catalyze the extremism process. Such "negative catalyst events," as I refer to them, are typically rare and traumatic events that rupture part of an individual's social, political, economic, or spiritual well-being. Such experiences include the death of a family member or peer, or even the loss of a job. In a study of 34 Chechen suicide bombers, using interviews with their family and close friends, Speckhard (2005) found that 47% of the suicide terrorists had more than one of their family members killed. The authors' interviews revealed that 28 of the 34 suicide terrorists were apparently "secular Muslims prior to their experiences of trauma." Other studies similarly find that suicide bombers or failed suicide bombers had experienced violent negative catalyst events prior to their action (Kushner 1996; Al Lami 2009). Kruglanski et al. (2009) further explain that individuals who experience negative catalyst events may become religious extremists as a means of "significance restoration" after experiencing "significance loss."

In Lucknow, I designed a question to measure negative life events based on a range of semi-structured interviews with NGO program managers, Sunni and Shia elders, and marginalized youth. After asking subjects to state how many of the events on a list they had experienced in the past year, I test the following:

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[3] A shortcoming of this approach is that it relies on self-reported data on social networks, which runs the risk of obtaining inaccurate data. The measurement is thus best considered a conservative test of the "lower bound" of the effect of radical social networks.

Hypothesis 9: An individual who experiences more negative catalyst events will have stronger extremist attitudes.

4.4.2 Troubled Social Relations

The second psychological hypothesis I examine argues that troubled relations with one's family and friends can increase the likelihood of becoming an extremist. Akhtar (1999) and Borum (2004) explain the mechanisms by which distressed relations with one's parents or peers may weaken one's stability and provide an opening for them to project their weakness on an outside enemy.

Scholars have emphasized the role of problematic relationships in motivating extremism in numerous cases, though the lack of a systematic test for such a hypothesis remains a shortcoming—particularly after controlling for a broad range of other potentially powerful explanatory variables. In an older study from Germany, Claessens (1982) analyzed a sample of 227 left-wing extremists from the 2 June Movement and found that the vast majority had hostile relationships with their fathers, as well as highly conflictual relations with their families. I test the following hypothesis, formulated after asking subjects to rate how pleased they are with the level of respect they receive from friends and family:

Hypothesis 10: Individuals with a history of troubled social relations will have stronger extremist attitudes.

5. Survey and Sampling

The survey was conducted in early 2016 in Lucknow's Old City. Enumerators, whom I trained in accordance with U.S. federal regulations governing human subjects research, were first covered under the Columbia University Institutional Review Board. For sensitivity reasons, and per the advice of other local experts, Sunni and Shia enumerators were instructed to only survey individuals who shared their sectarian affiliation. In concert with local experts knowledgeable about the Old City's neighborhoods, enumerators were instructed to visit neighborhoods with varying levels of sectarian balance (mostly Sunni residents, mostly Shia residents, or mixed) and of prior sectarian violence. Enumerators were further instructed to only sample men ranging from 18 to 35 years old.

I used a survey sampling approach known as uniform sampling by random walk. Enumerators began each day with a randomly selected coordinate in the Old City. They proceeded to walk down the street in an attempt to survey every third young adult man that they passed on their right-hand side. To reduce social desirability bias, enumerators were instructed to terminate surveys in the event that they drew spectators and begin surveys in a new location. All subjects were told that their individual identity and specific responses would never be made public, and would only be used for research purposes. With this approach, I obtained a random, representative sample of 240 Sunni young adult men and 240 Shia young adult men, yielding an overall sample size of 480 subjects.

5.1 Descriptive Results

This section provides the descriptive statistics of the full sample size for the variables examined in this paper.

To begin, the mean Sunni age within the sample was 24.9 years while the mean Shia age was 24.3 years. Most members of both samples had jobs, with 78% and 55% of the Sunni and Shia sample employed, respectively. Regarding grievances, the results indicate that the average Sunni subject was more economically marginalized (3.3 on a 7-point scale) than the average Shia subject (1.6). Sunni subjects were also more politically marginalized on average (4.5 on a 7-point scale) than Shia subjects (3.2).

Regarding religious identity, Sunni and Shia subjects had similar averages (5.1 times and 5.8 times, respectively) for attending prayers at a local mosque. Participation in extremist religious rituals was recorded as a continuous variable and then normalized so that the variable ranged from 0 to 1. Interestingly, the average participation level of both Sunni and Shia subjects in such rituals was equivalent at 0.18. On average, however, Shias were far more likely to exhibit sectarian identification (0.42) than Sunnis were (0.075). With respect to religious education, Sunni subjects on average participated in a total of 2.4 years of religious education, as opposed to a Shia average of 3.6 years.

Regarding network-related variables, Sunnis reported an average of 1.1 Shia friends while Shias reported an average of 10.6 Sunni friends, a result partially explained by the fact that there are more Sunni than Shia in Lucknow. The violent peers variable, which delved into co-sectarians with records of participating in Sunni-Shia violence, demonstrates that the average Shia subject had 5.8 Shia peers who had engaged in violence, whereas the average Sunni subject had just 1.3 Sunni friends who had done so too.

The final set of variables concerns psychological factors. Descriptive results indicate that the average Sunni experienced 1.7 negative catalyst events in the past year, versus 3.7 events for the average Shia. Lastly, the group averages for troubled social relations were comparable. To reiterate, higher values indicate less satisfaction with respect received from one's family and friends. The average Sunni subject reported 1.55 on a 5-point scale, and the average Shia subject reported a slightly lower 1.06.

5.2 Main Results

This section addresses the main findings of the paper. The basic approach for testing the 10 hypotheses involves the use of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to test for the effect of each variable on the *Religious Extremism Index*. The index was normalized to range from 0 to 1. Table rows begin by noting a particular independent variable of interest and its effect size on the index, with the variable's standard error enclosed in parentheses. The exponential star notation is used to indicate the significance level of the variable. One star indicates that there is less than a 10% likelihood that the result could have been obtained by random chance. Three stars indicate that there is less than a 1%

likelihood, and denotes the greatest level of confidence in the result for this particular study. Variables with no stars have significance levels greater than 10%, and therefore are not considered to be significant predictors of the outcome variable, the *Religious Extremism Index*. Table columns indicate the particular sample to which the regression was restricted: the first column presents results restricted to the Sunni sample, the second presents results restricted to the Shia sample, and the third presents results for the full sample.

Table 3: Predictors of Religious Extremist Attitudes

	Support for Violence on Normalized Scale (0-1)		
	Results of OLS Regression		
	Sunni	Shia	Full
Econ Marg.	0.020**	0.005	0.028***
	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.007)
Pol. Marg.	0.006	0.024***	0.022***
	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.007)
Prayer Freq.	−0.008***	−0.013***	−0.009***
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.002)
Extremist Ritual Part.	0.568***	0.011	0.255***
	(0.133)	(0.082)	(0.068)
Sectarian Identification	−0.052	0.082**	0.042
	(0.062)	(0.034)	(0.032)
Yrs. Quran Lessons	−0.002	−0.004	−0.005
	(0.008)	(0.005)	(0.004)
Numb. Outgroup Friends	−0.012	−0.001	−0.006***
	(0.008)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Numb. Violent Peers	−0.013	0.0003	−0.002
	(0.009)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Negative Catalyst Events	0.003	0.002	0.003
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.005)
Troubled Social Relations	0.048***	0.082	0.074***
	(0.017)	(0.053)	(0.016)
Controls for Age, Employment?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.597***	0.195*	0.242***
	(0.135)	(0.116)	(0.085)
Observations	221	196	417
Adjusted R^2	0.262	0.372	0.340

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Grievance-Related Explanations. We begin with the first hypothesis, which anticipated a positive effect of economic marginalization on extremist attitudes. The results indicate support for the hypothesis among the Sunni sample, with a one-point increase on the 7-point scale corresponding to a 2% increase in the *Religious Extremist Index*. Economic marginalization was not a significant cause of extremist attitudes for the Shia sample, but did have an overall significant effect for the full sample, with a one-point increase on the scale corresponding to a 2.8% increase in religious extremism. We thus find support for the first hypothesis, but note that it did not hold for the Shia sample. The second hypothesis related to political marginalization, where we expected a positive effect of political marginalization on the index. While the results indicate no significant effect for the Sunni sample, they do indicate support for the hypothesis among the Shia sample and the full sample. A one-point increase on the 7-point marginalization index corresponds to approximately a 2.2% and 2.4% increase in extremist attitudes among the full sample and the Shia sample, respectively.

Religious Identity-Related Explanations. The third hypothesis expected attending more prayers at local mosques to have a positive effect on extremist attitudes. Surprisingly, we find the opposite effect for both subsamples and the full sample. For Sunnis, attending an additional prayer at a mosque per week *reduces* the index by 0.8%. Attending 10 additional prayers per week, therefore, reduces extremist attitudes by 8%. For Shia, the effect is even larger. An additional prayer attendance corresponds to an average drop in the index by 0.013 points, which means that attending10 prayers is associated with a 13% reduction in the index. Running contrary to the hypothesis, the effect also holds for the full sample, and will be discussed in greater detail in the final concluding section.

Hypothesis four anticipated a positive effect of participating in extremist religious rituals for Sunni subjects but expected no effect of participating in extremist rituals for Shia subjects. The results support the both expectations. For Sunni subjects, the effect of participation in the *madh-e-sahaba* ritual is significant at the 99% level, with a one standard deviation increase in ritual participation increasing extremist attitudes by 0.568 points. I find no such relationship for the Shia subjects. The effect nonetheless holds for the full sample, but is driven by the Sunni sample. Hypothesis five expects a positive effect of more years of religious education on extremism. The results did not support this hypothesis for the Sunni, Shia, or the full sample.

Hypothesis six expected a positive, extremism-inducing effect on rating one's sectarian identity as the most important over four alternative identity categories. Results indicate that this relationship held for the Shia sample, but not for the Sunni sample or the full sample. Among Shia subjects, rating one's Shia identity as more important than one's Muslim identity, Indian identity, young adult identity, or working-class identity was associated with an 8.2% increase in the index.

Social Network Explanations. The seventh hypothesis anticipates a negative, extremism-reducing effect of having more outgroup friends. The results indicate important support for this hypothesis among the full sample, with an additional 10 outgroup friends corresponding to a reduction of .06 points on the 1-point extremism index. This suggests

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that the lack of results for each subsample resulted from a lack of sufficient observations. Hypothesis eight anticipated a positive effect on one's religious extremism as a result of having more in-group peers who have participated in religious violence, but I find no support for this hypothesis. Although the effect of the variable is negative, the lack of significance of the results means that is incorrect to infer that more in-group violent peers reduces extremist attitudes.

Psychology Explanations. The final set of hypotheses examines two prominent psychological explanations of extremism. Hypothesis nine expected a positive effect of negative catalyst events on extremist attitudes. I find no support for this hypothesis within the Sunni, Shia, or full sample. Hypothesis 10 expected a positive effect of troubled social relations on extremism. The results support this hypothesis among the Sunni sample, with an additional 1-point increase on a 5-point scale measuring a lack of satisfaction received from family and friends corresponding to a 4.8% age point increase in the *Religious Extremism Index*. Although the result is not significant for the Shia sample, the significance level of the variable is at 11%, meaning that it is just under the conventional threshold for being considered significant and may well be so if using a larger sample size. In tandem with the observation that the significance holds for the full sample, the results indicate support for the final hypothesis.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I sought to conduct a systematic and empirical test of the most prominent hypotheses in religious extremism literature. The decision to investigate such hypotheses in the context of Sunni-Shia violence in Lucknow's Old City advances a literature whose findings are often drawn from qualitative accounts of samples from different countries and time periods. The study's objective was to provide a granular analysis of these hypotheses among marginalized young adult men, thus offering new insight on a demographic of prime interest to senior policymakers and academics of religious extremism.

Taken together, the results challenge several claims and findings in the literature and in mainstream media across the four families of explanations tested in this paper: grievances, religious identity-related factors, social network-related factors, and psychological factors.

Both economic and political grievances, operationalized here as marginalization, have a significant extremism-inducing effect for the full sample and challenge findings that economic grievances (Blair et al. 2013, Jo 2012, Chiozza 2011) do not cause extremism. Economic marginalization increased extremism for the Sunnis but not for the Shia, perhaps owing to the lower mean level of economic marginalization in that group. The result thus falls in line with other studies (e.g. Mousseau 2011) that find a positive effect of economic grievances on religious extremism. Higher political marginalization increased extremism for the full sample and the Sunni sample, but not for the Shia sample. The reason for this discrepancy may relate to the fact that Sunni Muslims in Lucknow express far lower levels of political marginalization as compared to Lucknavi

Shia, a difference evident in the descriptive statistics. Sunnis may feel less politically marginalized than the Shia because there are significantly more Sunni than Shia representatives elected at the municipal and state levels. This finding provides micro-level evidence that relates to results in Hegghammer (2006) and Pargeter (2009). From a policy perspective, these results support CVE policies as well as programs that aim to increase economic prospects for economically marginalized communities, and increase political representation of politically marginalized communities.

Two overarching findings stem from the results regarding religious-identity factors. First, and most crucially, the results demonstrate across-the-board evidence that participation in religious prayers at a mosque has a *negative* effect on religious extremist attitudes. These results sharply question findings in the literature that find an opposite effect (Ginges et al. 2009), and instead fit patterns found in other studies (Tessler 1998; Fair et al. 2012). More broadly, these results question the basis of rhetoric used by some politicians in the United States and Europe, who argue that ritual attendance is a mosque is a "red flag," or an indicator of the variety of close-mindedness that facilitates extremism.

Second, the study suggests that politicians and community leaders should move beyond the dichotomous stance that religion "is" or "is not" related to extremism. Instead, practitioners must understand local contexts in order to glean reasonable insight as to what particular factors, relating to religious identity, may increase religious extremism. The finding that participation in extremist religious rituals increases extremist attitudes exclusively holds for Sunnis in Lucknow is a case in point: understanding the difference between the Sunni ritual and Shia ritual in question would lead one to expect that the result should not hold for Lucknow Shias, which it in fact did not. Other findings, such as the fact that the extremism-inducing effect of prioritizing one's sectarian identity held only for the Shia community, may be harder to infer with high confidence from qualitative approaches. Qualitative approaches can, however, help contextualize the statistical results we obtained. This paper suggests one explanation for why the pattern only held for Shia subjects: Sunni Muslims may consider their sectarian identity far less important than their Muslim identity (an alternative option presented to all subjects), and thus we should only expect greater variability in the Shia sample. Descriptive results support this view: only 18 of the 240 Sunni subjects rated their sectarian identity as their most important as opposed to 102 of 240 Shia subjects. Shia subjects who rated their sect as their most important identity—more so than their Muslim one—may be more likely to emphasize their division from the Sunni, a sentiment that may reasonably be expected to increase extremist attitudes toward Lucknow Sunnis.

The third main implication of the results relates to social networks. The finding that having more outgroup peers has a near across-the-board effect of reducing religious extremism suggests a potentially important avenue for CVE programming. Programs that seek to induce genuine and enduring friendships with outgroup members may be remarkably more effective in reducing extremist attitudes. Similarly, the study challenges work that suggests that having more violent peers increases one's own extremist attitudes (Della Porta 2006; Sageman 2004). The results here indicate no such phenomenon. More broadly, the statistics suggest that even marginalized young adult men with many violent

peers may have other characteristics that prevent them from gravitating in the direction of those particular peers. Future research on this should consider not just individuals who became extremists via violent peers, but instead the net effects of an individual's full social network, including other "nodes" that may counter or overpower the possible extremism-inducing effect of having violent peers.

The fourth and final result covers psychological factors. For the Sunni and full samples, extremism increases when individuals have more troubled social relations, defined as the extent to which an individual feels a lack of respect from family and friends. This finding would also likely hold for the Shia sample, given a greater sample size. It provides micro-evidence of the importance family and peer structures have in the global phenomenon of religious extremism, making it a particularly sensitive and difficult factor in CVE programming. At a minimum, practitioners and researchers should give greater attention to family and extracurricular programs striving to increase individuals' sentiments of respect from family and friends. Notably, the finding also places a greater burden on parents and friends of neglected individuals to take steps to reach out to, help integrate, and respect those individuals. Contrasting the effect of troubled social relations with another prominent variable—negative catalyst events—further elucidates this phenomenon. The conclusion that such events significantly affect extremism for either subsample or the full sample suggests that individuals may be able to suffer ruptures in their personal lives without resorting to extremism, but that they tend to not be able to overcome obstacles posed by a lack of respect from those closest to them. The null result on negative catalyst events challenges multiple accounts finding the opposite result (Al Lami 2009; Kushner 1996). Negative catalyst events, though salient in the sample, did not predict extremist attitudes: Sunni and Shia subjects experienced such events in the year prior to the survey on averages of 1.76 events and 3.71 events, respectively. It may be the case that such events have a more acute effect in active war zones like Iraq and Chechnya, the respective locations of two studies that find results contrary to my own (Al Lami 2009; Kushner 1996).

Taken together, these four points underscore the potential importance of widening the spectrum of CVE research and programs spanning grievances, religious identity, peer networks, and psychological factors. That being said, future research should aim to overcome three important limitations of this study. First, governments and institutions should invest in similar studies that seek to systematically test these and other hypotheses. Redirecting funds to such ventures will allow researchers to obtain evidence that is more expansive in terms of geography and conflict settings, as well as help facilitate the process of determining whether—and to what degree—the results shown here also hold in other contexts. Second, future research should go beyond the study of extremist attitudes, sometimes considered part of the process of "cognitive radicalization" (Neumann 2013), and examine the causes of extremist behavior. Such studies will be most effective to the extent that they can obtain a random, representative sample of young adults who exhibit variation in their engagement with violent extremist behavior. Finally, future research can advance our understanding of the causes of extremism by sampling both men and women (see, for instance, Rink & Sharma 2016). Such approaches, though often difficult in sensitive global conflict settings, will help unearth

which factors are common, and unique to, patterns of extremism within male and female demographics. In a world where young women are playing what appears to be an increasingly important role in extremism and terrorist operations, such insights will be of the utmost urgency.