

## Why is Contemporary Religious Terrorism Predominantly Linked to Islam? Four Possible Psychosocial Factors

by Joshua D. Wright

### Abstract

*This article explores four psychosocial religious factors that may help researchers conceptualize and explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamic. Empirical work supports a link between individual differences in fundamentalism and out-group hostility. Combined with significantly higher self-reported fundamentalism among Muslims compared to adherents of other major religious groups, Muslims may be more susceptible to religious appeals to violence. This may be especially true when these appeals are minimally counterintuitive. Religious involvement has been suggested to cause coalitional commitment, which may relate to more hostile behavior to outsiders; however, religious involvement does not appear significantly higher in Muslims than among other religious believers. Religious commitment may relate to a stronger desire to protect one's religious group through enhancing perceptions of threat. This has importance in the Islamic world due to the possibility of higher average religious commitment compared to other religious groups and the current political environment that often challenges the self-concept of Islamic believers. Finally, homogenization of Islamic beliefs is considered as an intergroup difference that may enhance social-psychological processes of intergroup conflict. Together, a broader emphasis on psychosocial religious factors may help explain the current rise of Islamic terrorism within the current political context of Islamic-West relations.*

**Keywords:** terrorism; religion and terrorism; religion and violence; religious violence; religious conflict; Islamic terrorism; Islamist terrorism; jihad.

### Introduction

**T**errorism has been a major concern since the attacks on September 11, 2001 in the United States. This surge in terrorist activity, beginning in 1998 with Osama Bin Laden's declaration of war against the United States, has taken a predominantly religious form [1]. Upal [2] argues that the rise of Islamist terrorism stems from a long history of decline following the Muslim cultural and material dominance in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. He argues that the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, followed by colonialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has led to a revival of anti-Western sentiment and a belief in a need for stricter adherence to the law of Allah. Some Muslim clerics believe that liberal adherence to Sharia law caused the decline of Islamic empires, which were once culturally, politically, and technological more advanced than Western empires [3]. Likewise, some clerics believe that stricter adherence to Sharia law will bring about a resurgence of Islam's superiority [4]. While historical decline of the Islamic empires may have enhanced a homogenized anti-western sentiment and a push for religious law, other factors need to be taken into consideration to explain why religious terrorism has taken a predominantly Islamic form, despite secular pressures also threatening other major religious groups.

A note of caution is in place at the outset to clarify misperceptions. The majority of targets of Islamist terrorism are Muslims, rather than Westerners, and the majority of Islamist terrorist attacks occur in the Middle East, rather than in the West [5]. The concern with religious terrorism is not its base rate, nor its primary target. The concern with religious terrorism in general is that religious terrorism is more deadly than other forms of terrorism [6] and more difficult to defeat than other forms of terrorism [7, 8]. Islamist terrorism makes up the majority of religious terrorism, is the most deadly form of religious terrorism, and

is the primary concern of Western governments [9]. In addition, some data suggest that Islamic civilization is the most conflict prone, constituting over 25% of all wars in the post-Cold War period [10]. This article concerns itself with the overrepresentation of Islamism within religious terrorism and uses a social-psychological perspective to explore possible mechanisms that may have explanatory value.

Attempting to explain the rise of modern extremism in Islam, factors such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education do not appear explanatory [11,12, 13]. In fact, the majority of terrorists are employed and live in middle-income countries [14, 15]. Further, religious terrorists appear to be motivated by moral sentiment rather than by instrumental reasoning [16]. This article adds to the literature on Islamist terrorism by examining four possible psychosocial religious factors that may help explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamic: (i) the fundamentalist nature of Islam, (ii) religious involvement that forms coalitional commitment, (iii) religious commitment that results in increased perceptions of threat from secularization, and (iv) the homogenization of Islam compared to other religious groups.

### **(i) Fundamentalism**

Probably the term most linked with religious extremism, and terrorism in particular, is *fundamentalism*. Broadly speaking, it refers to a strict adherence to a belief system. This has elsewhere been referred to as scripturalism [17]. Alternatively, fundamentalism has been defined in terms of a reaction toward changing contexts that threaten particular beliefs. Emerson and Hartman [18] emphasize this contextual nature of fundamentalism within a modernizing and secularizing world. Colloquially, the term fundamentalism has a negative connotation, primarily being used to denote radical and violent movements; however, the use of fundamentalism in empirical research is closer to scripturalism. We also must differentiate those with absolute personal beliefs (i.e., scripturalism) from those who desire to enforce personal beliefs on a collective system.

This article adopts a definition of religious fundamentalism from the social psychological literature. Borrowing from Altemeyer and Hunsberger, fundamentalism is defined as,

*“the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity” [19]*

This definition adequately addresses important assumptions. First, not all religious believers are fundamentalists. Second, advocating for a particular belief system within the collective sphere is distinct from the current, usually violent, fundamentalist movement. Thus fundamentalism, as an individual difference variable, can be perfectly acceptable if advocating beliefs is done through politically acceptable means (e.g., through democratic processes), rather than violence. However, fundamentalists may be more susceptible to calls to violent action through traditional media, religious scholars, and social media campaigns.

While some argue that religious factors are not the predominant cause of the rise of fundamentalist Islam [20, 21], there is reason to believe that Islam is more easily connected to violent fundamentalist movements and terrorism than other religious groups. This may help explain why the majority of religious terrorism is in the form of Islamist terrorism, pursuing the “lesser” jihad, and why religious terrorism predominates in Muslim dominated regions [22].

While I differentiate fundamentalism as an individual difference variable from the violent fundamentalist movements, fundamentalist beliefs may be one factor that helps explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist. Religious fundamentalism, as an individual difference variable, has been implicated in racial prejudice [23], hostility toward value violating out-groups [24, 25], and support for violence against out-groups [26]. In addition, in a Shiite Muslim sample, Rothschild, Abdollahi and Pyszczynski [27] demonstrated that religious fundamentalism is positively related to anti-Western attitudes. With the connection between fundamentalist beliefs and out-group hostility established, it seems useful to compare religious groups on the degree to which groups' believers hold these fundamentalist beliefs. If, in fact, fundamentalist beliefs are implicated in the disparity between Islamist terrorist violence compared to religious terrorism from other religious groups, this should reveal itself through evaluating levels of fundamentalism among believers of different faiths.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger [28] collected data on religious fundamentalist beliefs from multiple religious groups within the United States, finding that Muslims scored highest in a standard measure of religious fundamentalism ( $M = 112.3, SD = 40.3$ ) compared to Christians ( $M = 85.0, SD = 33.0$ ), Hindus ( $M = 84.5, SD = 31.5$ ) and Jews ( $M = 48.3, SD = 21.1$ ). To reexamine this finding, I evaluated data previously collected from a sample of both Muslim ( $N = 198$ ) and Christian ( $N = 167$ ) students from a Canadian university. Muslims scored significantly higher on religious fundamentalism ( $M = 50.04, SD = 19.44$ ) compared to Christians ( $M = 43.70, SD = 16.93$ ),  $t(363) = 3.29, p = .001$ . (Note that these two datasets use different scoring for the fundamentalism scale. Thus scores are not directly comparable between these two studies; however, the scores are comparable across religious groups within each study and thus are an accurate reflection of the increased adherence to religious fundamentalism in Muslims.) This evidence suggests that Muslims, on average, tend to adhere to a more fundamentalist interpretation of religious doctrine than do people from other major religious groups.

Because these samples are taken from two Western countries, and thus limited in generalizability, the 6<sup>th</sup> wave of the World Values Survey (WVS-6) [29] was consulted for a more global perspective. First, a fundamentalism measure was created from 4 items ("Whenever science and religion conflict, *religion* is always right", "The only acceptable religion is my religion", "All religions should be taught in our public schools", and "People who belong to different religions are probably just as moral as those who belong to mine"). Participants responded with their agreement to each item on a four-point scale ranging from 1, "strongly agree" to 4 "strongly disagree". For analysis, the scale was reversed so that a higher number indicated stronger agreement with the items and items three and four were reverse scored. The mean of the four items was calculated as representative of one's degree of agreement with fundamentalist beliefs. Table 1 reports the means, sample size, and standard deviations of religious fundamentalism among the world's major religious groups from the WVS-6. These data suggest that Muslims have, on average, higher levels of fundamentalism than other religious groups.

This does not necessarily indicate that those scoring relatively high in religious fundamentalism will necessarily engage in terrorist activity. As Rogers et al. [30] point out, no comparative research on levels of fundamentalism has been carried out among terrorists and non-terrorists. Despite a lack of this type of empirical data, highly fundamentalist beliefs are likely a prerequisite; however, other factors are probably necessary as a bridge to terrorist activity. For example, Pech and Slade [31] argue that contextual, historical, and psychological factors that elicit desires for significance, domination, and legitimation may be necessary for fundamentalism to lead to violence.

Table 1: WVS Religious Fundamentalism by Religious Group

Religious Group	Self-Reported Religious Fundamentalism		
	Sample Size	Mean	SD
No Affiliation	10222	2.18 <sub>b</sub>	.478
Buddhist	2639	2.28 <sub>b</sub>	.420
Hindu	1345	2.28 <sub>b</sub>	.460
Jew	340	2.19 <sub>b</sub>	.446
Muslim	14488	2.81 <sub>a</sub>	.609
Orthodox	5308	2.29 <sub>b</sub>	.507
Other	1397	2.43 <sub>b</sub>	.540
Protestant	4664	2.39 <sub>b</sub>	.493
Catholic	12435	2.31 <sub>b</sub>	.479

Note: 2.5 is the midpoint of the scale.

Key: *a* is significantly different from *b* at  $p < .001$

The evidence that Muslims tend to have more fundamental beliefs than other religious groups suggests that Muslims may be more susceptible to what Pech and Slade [32] term the “terrorist meme”—an ideal expressing selective interpretation of the Quran that is spread throughout the Islamic world. In this way, fundamentalist beliefs may act as a facilitator for religious terrorism. Similarly, describes how the jihadi message successfully motivates Muslims “because it is a natural extension of the dominant narrative in the Islamic world” and “is *minimally counter-intuitive* [sic, italics original] for most Muslims...”[33]. Higher levels of fundamentalism may enhance this acceptance of the jihadi message.

As a final note on fundamentalism: it has been argued that fundamentalism may exist in three stages. The first stage is that of *passive fundamentalism*, in which most believers of strict doctrine would fall. Passive fundamentalists have no quarrel with secular society or other religious groups, preferring to do things their own way and leave others as they see fit. The second stage is *assertive fundamentalism*; assertive fundamentalists do have a desire to exert influence in wider society, but do this through legal political processes. The third stage, *impositional fundamentalism*, is that which can lead to terrorism. Impositional fundamentalists wish to bring about change “by covert or overt interventions, including fomenting revolution or enacting terrorism” [34]. This taxonomy helps to distinguish clearly between fundamentalism as an individual difference variable as held in the social sciences and the violent fundamentalist movements that reflect reactions to perceived threats by outsiders [35]. While no known comparisons have been made between terrorists and non-terrorists on levels of fundamentalism, empirical evidence does suggest that religious fundamentalism is highly related to out-group animosity. This relationship, combined with the presented data suggesting that Muslims hold more fundamentalist beliefs, may help explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist.

While religious fundamentalism can be problematic, there is reason to believe that fundamentalism need always lead to out-group hostility or anti-western sentiment. Rothschild, Abdollahi, and Pyszczynski [36] demonstrated in a sample of Shiite Muslims that the relationship between fundamentalism and anti-Western sentiment could be attenuated by exposing believers to religiously labeled compassionate values (e.g., “Do goodness to others because Allah loves those who do good”). This suggests that the ability to prevent Islamist religious terrorism may be in the hands of the religious power holders, who can emphasize positive aspects of Islam without undermining belief in scripture [37].

While religious fundamentalism may help explain the susceptibility of the Islamic community to religious terrorism in comparison to other religious groups, two other factors are functionally and statistically related to fundamentalism: religious involvement and religious commitment. Religious involvement encourages group belonging, and through what Ginges, Hansen, and Norenzayan [38] term *coalitional commitment*, may lead to out-group hostility. Religious commitment may also enhance the effects of fundamentalist beliefs through enhancing perceptions of threat and increasing retaliatory responses in protection of one's deeply committed beliefs [39, 40, 41].

### **(ii) Religious Involvement**

Religious involvement can incorporate any number of activities related to a religion but most widely consists of religious service attendance, prayer, and reading of scripture. These components are also not particular to any one religious group, allowing for cross-group comparisons. Some empirical evidence suggests that religious involvement can relate to less vengefulness [42], less violent behavior [43], and lower violent crime rates [44]. In a study on belief in violent jihad as a mediator between religious involvement and violence in Indonesia, survey data indicate that religious practice (measured as a function of mandated prayer, optional prayer, fasting, and religious activities) related negatively to belief in violent jihad in a sample of Muslims [45]. However, an alternative perspective related to religious involvement and violence is what Ginges, Hansen, and Norenzayan [46] describe as the *coalitional commitment* hypothesis. These authors suggest that engagement within group activities related to one's religion increases in-group cooperation and commitment to its members. This collective action (i.e., the communal ritual) may lead to increased support for violence against out-groups through what is termed *parochial altruism*—a combination of out-group hostility and in-group sacrifice [47]. It typically exists in the form of suicide terrorism, the primary differentiating factor in religious terrorism [48, 49]. Ginges, Hansen, and Norenzayan [50] provide empirical evidence that frequency of mosque attendance may increase the predictive likelihood of Palestinian Muslims supporting suicide attacks, despite prayer being unrelated.

In support of this conclusion, evidence from large scale survey data suggests that religious service attendance is positively related to agreement that violence against others is justified [51]. If Muslims are, on average, more involved in their religious communities, coalitional commitment may be enhanced in comparison to other religious groups. Thus a greater emphasis on religious involvement may lead to coalitional commitment and a furtherance of support for terrorism and parochial altruism, which may help explain why most religious terrorism is predominately Islamist terrorism.

Do Muslims generally report higher involvement with their religious group or higher attendance at religious services? In order to investigate religious involvement across religious groups, the author's own data collected from a sample of Canadian Muslims was utilized. These data suggest that Muslims ( $N = 202$ ,  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) report significantly higher scores on a religious involvement measure (i.e., frequency of prayer, reading of scripture, and service attendance) compared to Christians ( $N = 171$ ,  $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $t(371) = 2.87$ ,  $p = .004$ . Furthermore, service attendance was investigated independently since it should be more related to coalitional commitment than other forms of religious involvement [52, 53]. However, this revealed that the groups did not differ in frequency of attendance. I further evaluated only the extreme end (i.e., 1 standard deviation above the mean) on frequency of religious service attendance, finding that the most "devout" Muslims did report higher frequency of service attendance compared to the most "devout" Christians (Muslims,  $N = 41$ ,  $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = .807$ , Christians,  $N = 33$ ,  $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = .827$ ),  $t(70) = 5.60$ ,  $p < .001$ . Unfortunately, data for other religious groups was not available in this particular data set for comparison.

To further compare religious involvement across religious groups, I consulted the WVS-6. Comparing Muslims to Protestants, Catholics, Hindu, and Jewish respondents, these data reveal that Muslims reported lower overall service attendance ( $N = 12395, M = 2.77, SD = 1.67$ ) than Jews ( $N = 326, M = 3.88, SD = 1.66, p < .001$ ), Catholics ( $N = 13307, M = 3.00, SD = 1.54, p < .001$ ), and Hindus ( $N = 1618, M = 3.35, SD = 1.50, p < .001$ ), but higher overall attendance than Protestants ( $N = 5277, M = 2.31, SD = 1.51, p < .001$ ). (Scores ranged from 0 (never, practically never) to 6 (more than once per week).) To evaluate these data in only the most devout adherents, I compared the percentage of total sample that had scores greater than 5 (equivalent to more than once per week). Results showed Muslims having a lower percentage of respondents at the extreme end than all other groups except Protestants (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of respondents who self reported religious service attendance greater than once per week.

Religious Group	Self-Reported Religious Service Attendance				
	Hindu	Jew	Catholic	Protestant	Muslim
% > 5	18.66%	32.52%	17.98%	11.79%	13.94%
Sample Size	302	106	2392	622	1,728

Based upon the data presented, there is little evidence to suggest that Muslims engage in more frequent religious activity or have a greater proportion of adherents at the extreme end of religious service attendance that might enhance coalitional commitment compared to other religious groups. The caveat to this is Protestant Christians. This leaves little reason to believe that coalitional commitment is more prevalent or more extreme throughout Islam than other religious groups. This may, however, be different in particular regions [54, 55]. Religious involvement and coalitional commitment may be entirely dependent on contextual factors such as country and denomination or subgroup, or perhaps, may be highly dependent on the content of what it is being promulgated through houses of worship.

The resultant data only suggests that Muslims do not engage in their religious practices more frequently than most other religious groups; however, the data does not undermine the empirical finding that religious involvement may be related to enhanced justification of violence against others [56] or support for suicide attacks against the “other” [57]. Thus, the extent to which Muslims engage in violence compared to other Muslims may still be predicted partially by religious involvement, but the question of more prevalent Islamist terrorism compared to other religious groups likely will not.

Religious community involvement is unlikely to lead to coalitional commitment when power holders emphasize positive aspects of religion to the community of believers (e.g., compassion). However, when power holders emphasize lines of division between believers and outsiders, coalitional commitment may be enhanced. Again, this will likely depend on systematic and contextual factors related to the country, political structure and emphasis of the power-holders within a religious community. Furthermore, the discrepancy between high religious fundamentalism in Muslims but not religious involvement may suggest a problematic aspect—that those with fundamentalist Islamic beliefs may not have formal teaching or training in Islam—education which is necessary for fully understanding the nuances, complexity, and context of religious teaching. [58] Some suggest that radicalized individuals are often recent converts who are not considered devout Muslims [59]. This may leave a high number of Muslims at the mercy of religious power holders for religious teaching and interpretation, which can have negative consequences [60], such as through too easily accepting jihadist messages within the current Islamist narrative [61]. A highly related construct—*religious commitment*—may also be related to tolerance of jihadist movements through the cognitive enhancement of perceptions of threat.

**(iii) Religious Commitment**

Religious commitment refers to the degree to which one's religious beliefs underlie a person's behavior in day to day life [62, 63] and is highly related to both fundamentalism and religious involvement. It is distinct via its practical application to daily life and its implied intrinsic nature. It may have implications for addressing why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist because religious commitment may be related to increased anger and hostility in response to perceptions of threat [64]. While commitment to a group makes acting according to group values and beliefs more likely [65], these values and beliefs may be developed through comparative processes vis-à-vis an out group [66]. In-group norms serve to independently guide behavior when in situations of intergroup conflict [67, 68]. Because people highly committed to their religious group "perceive their group membership as central to their self-concept" [69], more religiously committed people may be more inclined to defend their beliefs when threatened. This has been demonstrated in work by Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman [70], who determined that intrinsic religious orientation positively relates to greater sadness and anger when a threat to religious identity is experienced and this is further associated with confrontational intentions. This has been corroborated in recent work with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish samples [71], in which religious commitment related positively to increased anger and hostility in response to a religious identity threat, when religious identity was salient. This suggests that religious commitment may be enhancing perceptions of threat, which ultimately may lead to violence against out-groups.

Using the author's own data collected from a sample of Canadian Muslims and Christians, Muslims and Christians were compared on self-reported religious commitment. Muslims ( $N = 201$ ,  $M = 28.62$ ,  $SD = 9.67$ ) reported significantly higher scores on religious commitment compared to Christians ( $N = 171$ ,  $M = 26.73$ ,  $SD = 8.60$ ,  $t(370) = 1.97$ ,  $p = .049$ ). Unfortunately, the World Values Survey (WVS-6) does not report on religious commitment and this author knows of no large-scale survey that does report on standard measures of religious commitment, in line with Worthington's [72] definition. This limited evidence that Muslims may be, on average, more committed to their religious group, may have implications for religious terrorism since people highly committed to a set of beliefs may be more likely to respond to perceived threats to those beliefs with increased ardor and hostility [73]. This preliminary evidence of an inter-group difference must be replicated in other samples and across various religious groups for any worthwhile conclusions to be drawn. A final psychosocial religious factor that may help explain the phenomenon of overrepresentation of Islamist terrorism within the confines of religious terrorism is what can be termed the *homogenization of Islam*.

**(iv) Homogenization of Islam**

*Homogenization of Islam* refers to the idea that followers of Islam are more homogenous in their beliefs than are members of other religious groups. While the empirical work regarding this phenomenon is scant, homogenization of Islam can be inferred from two critical pieces of evidence. First is the observation that the majority of the Islamic world identifies with a central authoritative branch of Islam—Sunni Islam. Sunnis makes up approximately 87–90% of all Muslims [74], providing a rather homogenized group with shared beliefs. While Sunni and Shia splits can be further divided into schools of Islamic jurisprudence, this number is rather small in comparison to other religions, such as Christianity [75]. Furthermore, despite these divisions, the four orthodox schools of Sunni law are in agreement about most matters. The second evidence for a relative homogenization of Islam is that central tenets of Islam are almost universally accepted in the Islamic world [76]. This universality does not appear consistent with other religious groups [77].

This homogenization of Islam reflects itself through homogenous support for Sharia law in most regions of the world and through belief in a single interpretation of Sharia [78]. A homogenized Islam leaves little room for dissenters, and rather than accept challenges and disparities in beliefs, Islam has taken a relative “all-or-nothing” approach, perhaps to protect the foundation and sanctity of Islam’s origins. This is likely due to the belief that the Qur’an is the literal, eternally operative word of Allah and Muhammad is viewed as the ideal Muslim whose behavior should be emulated. This is distinct from the Judeo-Christian perspective, in which scriptures are the work of divinely inspired humans. A possible outcome of this is extreme in-group homogeneity, coalitional commitment, parochial altruism, and out-group hostility. When perceptions of threat become enhanced, especially in a highly homogenized group, this may lead to a violent backlash [79]. The concept of homogenization of Islam must be evaluated more fully via empirical data before any conclusions can be drawn as to the explanatory power of homogenization in explaining the prevalence of Islamist terrorism. This brief introduction, it is hoped, might encourage others of the importance of this line of work.

### **Conclusion**

There is a necessity within the field of terrorism studies to more adequately address theoretical perspectives of both the rise of terrorism, the current predominant types of terrorism, and effective preventative measures to reduce terrorism. The rise of Islamist terrorism and the overwhelming position that Islamist terrorism holds within the realm of religious terrorism is currently in need of further exploration. An emphasis on psychosocial factors assists in examining the reasons for Islamist terrorism predominating within religious terrorism. Is Islam more susceptible to religious terrorism than other religions? While the current article does not adequately answer this question, it does enhance our understanding and proposes avenues for further research. First, empirical work evaluating religious fundamentalism is clear in its implications that fundamentalist beliefs are related to racial prejudice [80], hostility toward value violating out-groups [81, 82], support for violence against out-groups [83], and anti-Western sentiment [84]. The data in this article suggest that followers of Islam do, on average, hold more fundamentalist beliefs than do believers from other religious groups. This increased fundamentalism may create more susceptibility to the calls for action from extremist Islamist clerics [85], helping to explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist. This finding also implies that fundamentalist beliefs may be targeted by the religious elite to reduce susceptibility to calls to Jihad [86].

Practically and statistically related to religious fundamentalism are religious involvement and religious commitment. The empirical work on religious involvement is unclear as to the direction of its effect on violence. Some work suggests a negative relationship between religious involvement and violence [87, 88]; however this article concentrated on the possibility of the enhanced coalitional commitment argument for a relationship between religious involvement (specifically religious service attendance) and parochial altruism [89, 90]. The data is inconsistent on whether Muslims engage in more frequent religious service attendance or are generally more involved with their religion than members of other religious groups. A contextual and comparative analysis of the content being promulgated through houses of worship within and between religious groups would likely provide more insight than simplistic evaluations of frequencies.

The empirical basis for religious commitment as a facilitator of hostility, anger, and aggression in response to perceived threats to one’s religious group is theoretically, and to a lesser extent, empirically established [91, 92, 93, 94]. However, the data presented on inter-group differences in religious commitment only weakly support the notion that Muslims are more committed to their religious beliefs than members of other religious groups. The limitations of the dataset prevent a stronger conclusion but do provide important

preliminary support. Other data also suggest that religious commitment might be related to increased support for Sharia law in Muslims [95]. Data comparing religious commitment across more varied religious groups is necessary to investigate this more adequately. The final psychosocial religious factor explored was the relatively homogenized structure of Islam. While large-scale survey data does support the notion that Islam is more homogenized than other religious groups (i.e., membership in one predominant (Sunni) form of Islam; overwhelming acceptance of core beliefs), the direct effect of this homogenization is not clear.

This author knows of no empirical data that specifically connects homogenization of religious beliefs to more out-group hostility; however, the function of in-group homogeneity is solidarity, intra-group support [96], and in-group favoritism [97]. In-group favoritism may be related to out-group hostility, enhancing the effect of perceived out-group dissimilarity in values, although it need not have to [98]. Other evidence suggests that in-group homogeneity can have negative effects through preventing the collection of new, contradictory information, and through preventing experimentation of different viewpoints, opinions, and values [99]. Thus, homogenization of Islam may act to increase extremist beliefs and maintain high levels of fundamentalism in the Islamic community.

Not surprisingly, the most supported psychosocial religious variable that may help explain why religious terrorism is predominantly Islamist is religious fundamentalism, which may make Muslims more susceptible to what Pech and Slade [100] term *the terrorist meme*, or what Upal [101] describes as the jihadist additions to the Islamist narrative. Critical personal study of religious texts [102], religious leaders who frame their messages around positive aspects of religion, such as compassion and forgiveness [103], and who reframe the current acceptability of parochial altruism may go a long way in reducing Islamist terrorism [104].

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## Notes

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