

Social Dominance Orientation, Authoritarianism, Religious Identification  
and Support for Terrorism in the Middle East

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## Abstract

We tested three hypotheses concerning support for the attack on the World Trade Center, support for “terrorist” organizations and support for “anti-terrorist” violence using a sample of Muslim and Christian Lebanese university students. First, consistent with expectations, support for “terrorism” increased with increasing religious identification among Muslims and decreased with increasing religious identification among Christians. Second, as expected, authoritarianism was positively associated with support for “terrorism.” Finally, while authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (SDO) were positively correlated, SDO showed the theoretically expected negative association with “terrorism” support. Thus, higher levels of SDO were associated with decreased support for “terrorist” violence, and increased support for “anti-terrorist” violence. All together, these results suggest that the present “terrorism” conflict has overtones of a “holy war” among both Christians and Muslims alike, and that in the Middle East, “terrorism” is viewed as a project of counter-dominance.

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The world was not the same on September 11, 2001 as it was the day before. Among other things, the “terrorist” attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon resulted in the toppling of governments, geo-political realignments, world-wide manhunts for “terrorists,” and the temporary destruction of the American sense of invulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

The kind of “terrorism” employed in the attacks of September 11 begs an explanation. Although the word “terrorism” has become infused with highly charged images of extremism, fanaticism, and arbitrariness, we suspected support for the September 11 “terrorist” attacks takes root not in psychological deficiencies or abnormalities, but in more common social psychological processes. As such, we sought to understand the “terrorist” attacks of September 11 through support for the use of violence to accomplish political goals (cf. Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Not surprisingly, religion is one central meaning system that has been used to interpret the events of September 11. In response to the idea that those attacks represent Islamic jihad, or “holy war,” a number of American policy makers and Islamic clergy claim that the invocation of religion for the purpose of “terrorist” mobilization is an egregious distortion of Islam (e.g. Bush, 2001a). Yet Christian religious metaphors (e.g., “crusade”) have also been invoked to frame the American responses to the September 11 attacks (Bush, 2001b; Press, 2002). The events have also been interpreted as a kind of cultural power struggle; for example, as a “clash of civilizations” (Beres, 2001; Huntington, 1993), an outbreak of “Occidentalism” (i.e., generalized hatred of the West; Margalit & Buruma, 2002), an expression of cultural authoritarianism (Kuran, 1998), or a counter-reaction to American imperialism (Johnson, 2001). We endeavored

to use social psychological theory and research to examine how people caught in the political aftermath of September 11 view these events. Given the significance of religiosity as a salient intergroup cleavage in the Middle East and the central geo-political struggle being waged there, we feel it is important to examine both religiosity and international power struggles in how people interpret the attacks of September 11 and the American policy response. For this reason, we conducted the present study in one of the most religiously mixed contexts of the Middle East, namely Beirut.

We relied on three major theories of political attitudes to form our hypotheses: social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986), authoritarianism personality theory (e.g., Altemeyer, 1986), and social dominance theory (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). First, we examined the role of religious identification in support for “terrorism.” We reasoned that if “terrorist” campaigns against the West are an expression of conflict between religious identities (i.e., Muslim v. Christian), Muslims should not oppose “terrorist” organizations as much as Christians do. Consistent with the idea that psychological identification with the group, and not just group membership, is a crucial predictor of intergroup discrimination, we also expected that the more Christians and Muslims identify with their religious communities, the more their attitudes toward “terrorism” should diverge. Thus, we expected that support for “terrorism” among Muslims should increase with increasing identification with the Muslim community, whereas opposition to “terrorism” should increase with increasing identification with the Christian community. This was Hypothesis 1.

We further expected support for both “terrorism” and for policies designed to counter “terrorism” to relate to psychological correlates of intergroup prejudice, but not in simple ways. A consistent body of literature shows that two variables, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and

social dominance orientation (SDO), are powerfully and independently associated with many forms of prejudice and intergroup aggression, while being only weakly related to one another (Altemeyer, 1998; Nelson & Milburn, 1999; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Wagner, van Dick, & Zick, 2001; Wang, 1999; Whitley, 1999; Whitley & Aegisdottir, 2000; Whitley & Lee, 2000). As authoritarianism so robustly predicts prejudice against outgroups (see e.g., Tiban & Blumberg, 1999), and is consistently related to religiosity (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988; Hunsberger, 1995; 1996; Leak & Randall, 1995), we expected authoritarianism to be positively associated with support for “terrorism” and the attacks on the World Trade Center (Hypothesis 2).

Although in Western research SDO and RWA show similar associations with prejudice, in the Middle East there is theoretical reason to be skeptical that a positive association between SDO and support for “terrorism” would obtain. SDO reflects the degree to which people desire (or oppose) hegemonic relationships between social groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Thus, SDO is positively associated with support for practices that help maintain hierarchical relationships between dominant and subordinate groups (e.g., militarism, law and order; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, when social policies or forms of intergroup aggression are directed at destabilizing or counteracting hegemonic group relationships, SDO should be negatively rather than positively related to support for such practices. Inasmuch as sub-national actors (e.g., Palestinian “terrorists”) usually do not have access to massive military force compared to dominant nations, they may conceive of “terrorist” attack as a weapon of the weak against the strong. From this perspective, antipathy towards the United States is fueled by reactions to American hegemony, perceived American indifference to Arab suffering, and the suppression of Arab rights (e.g., Beyer, 2001; Lewis, 1990), and thus “terrorism” against American power can be thought of as an act of “counter-dominance” by Arabs. If participants’

view “terrorism” and “terrorist” organizations as “counter-dominance,” then support for these should be negatively rather than positively associated with social dominance orientation (Hypothesis 3).

As we designed the present study to be administered only four weeks after the shocking events of September 11, we needed to select a nearby, sizable sample that would represent in microcosm the politics of Lebanese society. Although American college students are not at present very politically active, and hold attitudes that are often weak and unstable (Sears, 1986), in Lebanon, college campuses are currently hotbeds of political activity that shape broader national politics in the way that certain campuses in the United States did during the 1960s (Faour, 1998). For these reasons, we elected to sample college students in Lebanon.

## Method

### Respondents

A questionnaire assessing reactions to the September 11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center and attitudes toward “terrorist” organizations was distributed to a random sample of 596 out of 5808 possible graduate and undergraduate student mailboxes at the American University of Beirut in the fall of 2001. The cover letter indicated that the study was part of an international assessment of student reactions to the events of September 11, and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. One hundred forty-five questionnaires were completed, composing 24% of those who were initially targeted. Response rates for mail-in questionnaires typically range from 10% to 50% (Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1996).

The analyses were restricted to members of the two largest religious communities: Christians (N= 61; 27 females and 34 males) and Muslims (N= 63; 39 females and 24 males), comprising a final sample size of 124.

## Measures

Support for terrorism. Two kinds of support for “terrorism” were measured: 1) support for “terrorist” organizations and 2) support for the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the World Trade Center. Support for “terrorist” organizations was the average support for four organizations categorized as “terrorist” by the United States Department of State as of February, 2002, namely a) Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), b) Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), c) Islamic Jihad (al-Jihad), and d) Hizballah (Party of God). Ratings ranged from “1-Strongly oppose” to “7-Strongly support” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .93$ ). Support for WTC attack was assessed by asking the respondents how much they felt that the attack on the World Trade Center was justified, rated from “1-Not at all justified” to “7-Very much justified.”

In this study, we were interested in the respondents’ reactions to the use of “terror” as a way of specifically handling Middle East and Arab issues. As such we focused on groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and events such as the World Trade Center attacks, because the aim of these groups and events has been to foment change in the Arab world.

Support for “anti-terrorist” violence. Support for “anti-terrorist” violence consisted of support for military action carried out by the United States and Israel and targeted against “terrorists” and their organizations. There were eight items comprising this “anti-terrorism” scale: 1) “Osama bin Laden should be found by the U.S. military, arrested and tried in the U.S.,” 2) “Afghanistan should be invaded or bombed until they surrender bin Laden,” 3) “The U.S. has no right to bomb Afghanistan,” (reverse coded), 4) “Israel should stop targeted assassinations of Palestinians,” (reverse coded), 5) “Military action in response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> should be led by the U.S.,” 6) “The U.S. should not engage in any military action that will kill civilians, no matter how few,” (reverse coded), 7) “The U.S. should cease bombing Afghanistan

and offer to negotiate,” (reverse coded), and 8) “Osama bin Laden must be stopped by any means necessary,” ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

Religious identification. After classifying themselves into a religious community (i.e., Maronite, Catholic, Orthodox, Sunni Muslim, Shiite Muslim), respondents indicated their degree of identification with that community by answering four questions: a) “How strongly do you identify with other members of your religious community?” b) “How important is your religion to your identity?” c) “How often do you think of yourself in terms of your religious beliefs?” and d) “How close do you feel toward other members of your religious community?” The responses were given on a 7-point scale (“1-Not at all” to “7-Very strongly/Very important/Very often/Very close”;  $\alpha = .88$ ).

Social dominance orientation (SDO). Social dominance orientation (SDO) was measured with the full 16-item SDO<sub>6</sub> scale (Pratto et al, 1994), which was at the end of the questionnaire ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Construct validity for the SDO scale in this context is evidenced by the fact that the higher status group within Lebanese society, namely Christians (see Seaver, 2000), had significantly higher SDO scores ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) than the lower status group, Muslims ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .94$ ),  $F(1,112) = 5.08$ ,  $p < .03$ .

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). This construct was measured by the 20-item RWA scale (see Altemeyer, 1981), which was given just before the SDO Scale ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

Demographic variables. We assessed respondents’ age, their own and their parents’ educational level (varying from “1-Less than six years of formal education” to “8-Post-graduate education”), and their socioeconomic class (i.e., upper class, upper-middle class, middle-class, lower-middle class and poor).

## Results

### Terrorism, Religious Community and Religious Identification

As shown in Table 1, the participants in the sample generally have a strong religious identification, for both Muslims ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) and Christians ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). We did not predict a difference in strength of religious identification for Muslims versus Christians, and indeed the means were not statistically different. Likewise, there were no other reliable demographic differences between these two religious groups (see means and test statistics in Table 1).

We found the expected differences in “terrorism” attitudes between Christians and Muslims. Although both groups were generally unsupportive of the attack on the World Trade Center, Christians were even less supportive than Muslims ( $p < .05$ ;  $\eta^2 = .18$ ). In contrast, Muslims were substantially more supportive of “terrorist” organizations than Christians ( $p < .01$ ;  $\eta^2 = .59$ ), while Christians were substantially more supportive of “anti-terrorist” violence than Muslims ( $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .46$ ).

Table 2 shows that participants’ degree of religious identification was related to only one of the “terrorism” measures, showing that the greater one’s identification with one’s religious community, the more favorably disposed one was to “terrorist” organizations ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, Hypothesis 1 posits that this association between religious identification and support for “terrorism” should be qualitatively different between the Christian and Muslim communities. To test this hypothesis, we examined the interaction between religious community and religious identification by performing multiple regressions on each of the three “terrorism” attitudes. In these analyses we used the demographic variables, religious community, the degree of religious identification, the product of religious community and religious identification, RWA, and SDO as independent variables. The religious community variable was coded such that Muslims = 1,

Christians = 0. The variables were also centered in order to produce relatively invariant regression coefficients across interaction models (see Aiken & West, 1991).

The multiple regression results in Table 3 show that although there was no differential effect of religious identification within the Muslim and Christian communities with respect to the WTC attack ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $t(96) = 1.34$ ,  $p > .10$ ), there was clear evidence of such an interaction with respect to support for “terrorist” organizations ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(90) = 3.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and support for “anti-terrorist” measures ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $t(98) = -3.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These interactions indicated that support for “terrorist” organizations tended to decrease with increasing religious identification among Christians ( $b = -.20$ , n.s.), whereas support for “terrorist” organizations increased with increasing religious identification among Muslims ( $b = .56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conversely, support for “anti-terrorist” violence increased with increasing religious identification among Christians ( $b = .33$ ,  $p < .05$ ), while tending to decrease with increasing religious identification among Muslims ( $b = -.15$ , n.s.).

#### Terrorism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, Table 2 shows that, for two of the three “terrorism” indices, support for “terrorism” increased with RWA (WTC attack:  $r = .22$ ,  $p < .05$ ; support of “terrorist” organizations:  $r = .26$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

However, authoritarianism is known to correlate with religiosity (see Altemeyer, 1988; Tibon & Blumberg, 1999), and Table 2 shows that there was a very strong relationship between RWA and the degree of religious identification ( $r = .66$ ,  $p < .01$ ). To test whether the effect of RWA on “terrorism” attitudes held even after religious identification and the other variables were held constant, we performed three-stage hierarchical regression analyses in which the effects of RWA were considered while also considering the effects of: 1) demographic variables,

2) religious identification and 3) SDO, in that order. The results showed that considering the effects of demographic variables and religious identification did not eliminate the effects of RWA on WTC attitudes ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(101) = 1.77$ ,  $p < .10$ ), but religious identification did reduce the effect of RWA on support for “terrorist” organizations to below standards of statistical significance ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t(95) = 1.37$ , n.s.). After the effects of SDO were also considered, RWA no longer had a unique effect upon any of the “terrorism” variables (see Table 3).

We also considered the interaction of religious community and RWA to determine its effect on support for “terror,” because the effect of RWA might depend on whether one is a Christian or a Muslim in Lebanon. However, just as there was no main effect for RWA in the context of the multiple regression analyses shown in Table 3, there was also no effect for the interaction between RWA and participants’ religious community on any of the measures of support for “terror” or “anti-terror.”

#### Terrorism and Social Dominance Orientation

The results in Table 2 are generally consistent with Hypothesis 3. While support for “terrorism” was positively associated with authoritarianism, as expected, support for “terrorism” was negatively correlated with SDO. Thus, the greater participants’ desire to establish group-based social hierarchy, the less they supported the attack on the WTC ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ), the less they supported “terrorist” organizations ( $r = -.30$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and the more they supported “anti-terrorist” violence ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, the multiple regression results in Table 3 show that the effects of SDO on all three “terrorism” indices hold even after considering the small, positive correlation between RWA and SDO ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ ), all of the demographic variables, and religious identification.

If Christians and Muslims differ in their levels of social dominance orientation, it is also possible that the two groups may differ in the importance of the role SDO plays in determining “terrorism” support. Therefore, we tested for an effect of the interaction of religious community and SDO on support for “terrorism.” However, in the context of the multiple regression analyses, there was no statistically significant interaction for any of the three dependent variables. While the data failed to show any significant interaction between religious community and SDO, a closer look at the data suggests that the negative relationship between SDO and support for “terrorism” was somewhat stronger among Muslims than among Christians (i.e., WTC Attack:  $b = -.86$ ,  $p < .05$  versus  $b = -.09$ , n.s.; “terrorist” organizations:  $b = -.61$ ,  $p < .01$  versus  $b = -.43$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively), while the relationship between SDO and “anti-terrorist” violence tended to be stronger among Christians than among Muslims ( $b = .31$ ,  $p < .05$  versus  $b = .09$ , n.s., respectively).

### Discussion

The results of this study support three major conclusions. First, there was consistent evidence that religious identification intersects with support for “terrorism” in different ways within the Christian and Muslim communities. With variations depending upon the measure of support for violence, in general religious identification tended to be positively connected to support for “terrorism” among Muslims and to violent opposition to “terrorism” among Christians. In other words, despite certain public rhetoric to the contrary, the present conflict (namely “terrorism” against the West and the West’s “war against terrorism”) has clear overtones of a religious war, implicating the religious identities of both Christians and Muslims.

Second, as predicted, support for “terrorism” did increase with authoritarianism. Prior research on RWA suggests that there is a strong religious component to authoritarianism

(Altemeyer, 1998), and this was reflected in our study by the strong correlation between RWA and religiosity, and by the fact that the association between RWA and “terrorism” support could largely (although not entirely) be accounted for when religiosity was considered. In particular this last finding implies that “terrorist” aggression is likely to be directed against those who are perceived to violate religious norms (see also Margalit & Buruma, 2002).

The third theoretically predicted, but counterintuitive finding is that SDO is negatively associated with support for “terrorism” where RWA is positively correlated with it. In most studies that have considered both SDO and RWA, results have shown that high levels of SDO and RWA lead to similar outcomes on a variety of political attitudes including conservatism, racism, and sexism (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), which is also reflected by the small to modest positive correlation typically seen between SDO and RWA (Sidanius & Pratto, 1995). In this study, there was also a modest positive relationship between SDO and RWA, but their effects on support for “terror” work in opposite directions, which can inform us particularly about social dominance orientation and the dynamics of intergroup relations. Those who prefer the maintenance of group-based hierarchy were opposed to “terrorist” violence of the weak (e.g., Muslims & Arabs) against the strong (e.g., the USA and Israel) and generally in favor of “anti-terrorist” violence of the strong (e.g., the U.S. and its allies) against the weak (e.g., Afghanistan). As we have argued previously (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), SDO is not simply an index of one’s willingness to commit acts of aggression against outgroups. Rather, it indicates support for many forms of activity (including violence) directed at maintaining group-based hegemony. Thus, our data suggest that the present conflict is not only a conflict between religious identities, but is also a contest over whether current hegemonic group relations will be maintained or altered.

One important potential criticism of the present study is that some of the predictor variables, namely participants' religious community and their ingroup or outgroup status vis-à-vis "terrorist" groups, their social status as linked to religious community, and their social dominance orientation levels, are often so closely related that it might seem difficult to tease them apart in predicting attitudes toward the use of "terrorism" or "anti-terror." For example, Muslims could be more likely to support "terrorist" organizations because they share group membership (most, if not all, "terrorist" organizations in the Middle East have strong Muslim origins) or because "terrorist" groups serve as a means to decrease the status gap between Muslims and Christians / Jews in the Middle East (Muslims, generally, are perceived to have lower status). Although these variables are closely connected to one another, through the use of multiple regression analyses we were able to statistically parse the unique variance that each of these variables contributes to support or for "terror" or "anti-terror" in the Middle East. Take as an example the finding that SDO is negatively related to support for "terror," and positively related to support for "anti-terror," as shown in Table 3. The beta weights for SDO remain consistently strong despite the fact we control for group membership (Muslim v. Christian). This suggests that social dominance orientation has a unique contribution to attitudes toward "terror" that transcends group membership. Presumably, given these results, even a Christian with low SDO would be more likely to support "terror" efforts than a Christian with high SDO. Further, the lack of an interaction between Muslim v. Christian group membership and SDO in Table 3 suggests that the effect of SDO is not moderated by such ingroup membership.

In conclusion, these results illuminate the roles played by religiosity, authoritarianism, and social dominance in determining political attitudes relevant to intergroup relations. In Beirut, a city that has long served as a gateway between cultures, both Muslims and Christians

are strongly pushed and pulled by tensions that exist between the Middle East and the West.

How Muslims and Christians are affected by the conflict depends not just on the strength of their connectedness to their religion, but on their beliefs about the arrangement of group hierarchies in society. Although understanding these processes is important for theoretical interest, ultimately they may be necessary as part of determining how to best direct conflict resolution among those who are so closely and persistently affected by it.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Major Variables For Christians and Muslims and the TotalSample

Variables	Christians		Muslims		p-value of Mean Differences	Total Sample	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
SES Class	3.50	.62	3.54	.64	n.s.	3.52	.63
Age	20.36	2.35	20.65	2.75	n.s.	20.51	2.55
Education	5.25	1.09	5.54	1.12	n.s.	5.40	1.11
Parents' education	5.35	1.49	5.04	1.48	n.s.	5.19	1.48
RWA	3.94	.69	4.16	1.12	n.s.	4.06	.94
SDO	2.92	1.00	2.51	.94	.03	2.71	.98
Religious identification	4.58	1.45	4.45	1.88	n.s.	4.51	1.67
Support WTC attack	2.53	1.84	3.23	2.09	.05	2.88	1.99
Favor "terrorist" organizations	2.03	1.10	4.18	1.75	.001	3.15	1.82
Support "Anti-terrorism"	3.26	1.28	2.14	.89	.001	2.69	1.23

Table 2

Correlations Among Major Variables

	RWA	SDO	Support WTC attack	Support for “terrorist” organizations	Support for “anti- terrorist” violence
Religious ID	.66**	.13	.13	.21**	.16
RWA		.20*	.22*	.26**	.03
SDO			-.21*	-.30**	.32**
Support WTC attack				.48**	-.36**
Support for “terrorist” organizations					-.49**

Note: Higher numbers indicate greater levels of the construct.\* p< .05, \*\* p< .01.

Table 3

Pro- and Anti-terrorism Attitudes Regressed on Demographic Variables, SDO, RWA and Religious Identification

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables		
	WTC Attack Justified	Support of “terrorist” organizations	Support for “anti-terrorist” violence
<i>Demographic Variables</i>			
Sex	.00	.00	-.00
Age	-.14	.17+	.03
Education	.08	-.18*	-.10
Parents’ Education	-.11	-.01	.00
SES Class	.02	-.00	-.02
<i>Main Effects</i>			
Muslim	.11	.55**	-.43**
SDO	-.22*	-.22**	.19*
RWA	.17	-.00	.03
Religious ID	-.07	.19*	.19+
<i>Interactions</i>			
Muslim x Religious ID	.16	.31**	-.31**
Muslim x RWA	.06	.01	.04
Muslim x SDO	-.15	-.01	-.06
R <sup>2</sup> <sub>adj.</sub>	.09+	.48**	.32**

Entries are standardized multiple regression coefficients.

The variable “Muslim” is dummy-coded such that Muslim =1, Christian = 0.

+ p< .10 , \* p< .05, \*\* p< .01.

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Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Although most Americans view the attacks of September 11 as an extremely negative act, there is a substantial contingent who would view the attacks as a positive event for whatever cause they may be championing (e.g., anti-Americanism”). Because the word “terrorist” has such negative connotations, this contingent would likely prefer other terms to describe the same event, such as “resistance activity.” We chose to use the word “terrorist” in keeping with the definition of terrorism as violence to accomplish political goals, but place it within quotes throughout the text to acknowledge that people in some parts of the world would take strong offense to this choice.