

Ideological Extremism among Syrian Refugees Is Negatively Related to Intentions to Migrate to
the West

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IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Abstract

The conflict in Syria created a dire humanitarian situation, as nations around the world struggled with how best to deal with the more than 6.6 million Syrian refugees that fled their homes to escape aggression. Resistance to granting refugee status to individuals often originates in the belief that the influx of refugees endangers national security because of the presumably extremist religious and political beliefs refugees hold. The present research surveyed Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq ($N = 1,000$). The results revealed that the majority of surveyed refugees did not intend to migrate to the West and would rather return to their home country. More importantly, refugees most interested in moving to Western countries were the least likely to subscribe to Islamic extremism, or to harbor negative sentiment toward the West. Theoretical and practical implications for addressing the current refugee crisis are discussed.

Keywords: ideological extremism, migration intentions, Syrian refugees

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Statement of Relevance

The conflict in Syria has resulted in the displacement of 6.6 million refugees. Denizens of Western countries have been reluctant to accept Syrian refugees, in part, because of the perception that these individuals hold extremist religious or political views. We surveyed 1000 Syrian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. The results show that the refugees most motivated to migrate to Western countries are those that are least likely to endorse extreme tenets of their religion or harbor anti-Western sentiment. On the other hand, those refugees who are more ideologically extreme do not want to migrate to Western countries and choose to move back to their home country instead.

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Ideological Extremism among Syrian Refugees is Negatively Related to Intentions to Migrate to the West

The number of individuals forcibly displaced worldwide reached 79.5 million by the end of 2019 (UNHCR, 2020). The ongoing conflict in Syria represents one of the largest contributors to these numbers, with nearly 15 million Syrians estimated to have been displaced. This includes 6.6 million Syrian refugees that have been hosted by 120+ countries around the globe, although most have resettled in neighboring countries. Between 2017 and 2019, less than 400,000 Syrians were able to return home.

The migration of masses of people is difficult for all parties involved. Many of the refugees are psychologically vulnerable and lack the material and psychological resources necessary for survival needs (UNHCR, 2018). The communities required to host the refugees also face concrete difficulties that include a lack of space, facilities, peoplepower, or finances to offer the refugees adequate assistance. Similarly profound, however, are the psychological apprehensions stemming from the fear of strangers (Bansak, Hainmueller, & Hangartner, 2016). This invites uncertainty surrounding refugees' relocation motives, and their intentions post-arrival in the host countries.

Fueled by these apprehensions, refugees are often portrayed in Western countries as enemies who hold hostile beliefs that threaten the security of the nations to which they wish to relocate (Galantino, 2020). For instance, public opinion polls in the United States (Smith, 2017) and across Europe showed that the majority of respondents feared that Syrian refugees would increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016), and wished that their country would take in zero refugees (Esipova & Ray, 2017). Also widespread

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

are the concerns that refugees threaten the cultural cohesion of the host communities (Landmann, Gaschler, & Rohmann, 2019).

The popularity of such narratives says more about the psychology of those who endorse them rather than about the refugees themselves, given that little evidence supports their validity. Admittedly, an analysis of refugee-related violence found an association between streams of refugees and terrorism within the hosting nations, but violence against refugees (Gineste & Savun, 2019) and the aid workers assisting them (Choi & Salehyan, 2013) outpaced violence perpetrated by refugees. Research has yet to address why these few refugees have engaged in political violence. It could be that they held extremist views prior to migration (which could have determined or been inconsequential to their decisions to migrate), or their extreme views could have been instilled in them after their arrival. These issues cannot be addressed only by surveying individuals who are already residing in host communities.

Most research on refugees' migration focuses on the conditions in refugees' country of origin that motivated a decision to leave. It demonstrates that refugee streams are more likely when violence is present in refugees' countries of origin (e.g., Adhikari, 2013; Balcilar & Nugent, 2019; Moore & Shellman, 2004). This is unsurprising as, by definition, refugees are escaping threats to their safety in their home country. Presently, however, Syrian refugees are traveling through relatively safe neighboring countries. The question, therefore, is what instills in them the desire to migrate further? One argument is that in such a situation, refugees are similar to other migrant populations and they choose to reside in locations that best afford the fulfillment of various economic (Constant & Massey, 2012) or relational (Constant & Zimmermann, 2003) needs. This research has largely neglected the role that ideological and political beliefs have in this process. Thus, although this work has advanced our understanding of the dynamics of

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

migration, it is possible that it has examined an incomplete set of motivational factors, some that could possibly supersede the importance of those that have already been studied.

Research on the importance of homophily suggests that political beliefs should play an important role in these decisions. People generally prefer to distance themselves from those who do not share their norms and values (Howells, 1966). Indeed, this tendency toward homophily is strengthened among people with strong attachment to norms and values of the ingroup, and has been shown to result in spatial and social segregation of peoples with differing values (Schelling, 1971; Semyonov, Glikman, & Krysan, 2007). Moreover, people avoid intergroup contact when they wish to protect important values from cultural dilution (Waterman & Kosmin, 1988) and when they predict that contact with strangers will result in anxiety (Landmann et al., 2019). Most relevant to migration decisions, past research found that the perceived ideological fit between one's personal political beliefs and the political beliefs of one's community impacts the desire to relocate within one's country (Motyl, Iyer, Oishi, Trawalter, & Nosek, 2014).

We built on this literature by examining if the political attitudes held by Syrian refugees were systematically related to their intentions to migrate to the West or their intentions to migrate to another country. Rather than study the role of general political attitudes (i.e., conservative vs. liberal) we measured endorsement of extreme beliefs, namely, strong commitment to an absolutist version of one's religion and willingness to make large sacrifices for it, support for violence to advance ideological goals, and hostility toward the outgroup (i.e., Western countries). Given that such attitudes might predispose individuals to conflicting intergroup relations (Atran & Ginges, 2012), understanding their connection to migration intentions might be also practically important.

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

We therefore suggest that refugees with extreme political and religious beliefs should be less willing to immigrate to Western countries, whose occupants do not share their worldviews. Such individuals likely expect difficulties adapting to a new cultural context and a negative reception from the locals should they decide to migrate. They should be more motivated to return to their home country instead. In contrast, refugees who express attitudes and beliefs that are sympathetic to the population in which they wish to embed themselves (i.e., Western culture), should be more willing to migrate to the West. Whereas these predictions are in line with past findings on intergroup contact, to our knowledge they have not been examined in the context of long-term, possibly even lifelong, decisions about relocating to a different country.

Method

We first explored these ideas in Jordan in 2016. We recruited Syrian refugees from outside refugee camps, given that around 90% of Syrian refugees did not live in camps at this time (UNHCR, 2019). To replicate these findings, we expanded our sample to Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq in 2016 and 2017. In those countries we also recruited refugees who resided in refugee camps, although this effort was less successful in Turkey. We also revised the surveys used in Jordan to better capture our constructs of interest. In what follows, we describe our samples, measures, and main results. The details of the materials and additional analyses are presented in Supplemental Online Materials (SOM).

Open Practices Statement. Datasets and analyses scripts for all studies are available at https://osf.io/86tbg/?view_only=9b2c2dbb5eae414e97d48ab2866d6ad2. Due to potential concerns with violating the privacy and anonymity of our participants, who represent a sensitive group, demographic information has been removed from datasets. However, whether the demographic variables were included in the analyses or not, the results for the focal variables did

not differ. In SOM we present the correlations between the focal variables and the demographics. Studies were not preregistered.

Jordan

Participants. We recruited 250 Syrian refugees in Jordan, which gave us at least 0.80 power to detect a small to medium correlation ($r = .20$). Moreover, sample of this size should allow for stable correlation estimates (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). Participants consented verbally to increase their confidence that their responses would be private and would be in no way linked to them personally. They were also informed that the research was conducted independently from local governments, and that participants' responses would not be shared with those governments, and hence would not impact their migration decisions. An independent research organization (free from governmental or university affiliation) was responsible for the recruitment of participants. The company had extensive past experience conducting research with refugees in Jordan in partnership with local and international organizations (e.g., United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR). Participants were recruited in two ways. First, potential participants were identified by publicly available registry information and contacted to participate by trained Arabic-speaking research associates. Second, potential participants were identified by a local NGO from their lists of individuals who have received their services, and recruited by the same NGO to participate in the study. Gender and ethnicity-matched interviewers collected data using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Specifically, one interviewer read each question and answer options aloud to one participant at a time, and filled in responses. The company in collaboration with researchers was also responsible for translating the survey from English to Arabic and then from Arabic back into English.

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Six non-Muslim participants were excluded from analyses because one measure of ideological extremism was directly related to religious belief (i.e., Islamist ideology) and it was not relevant to non-Muslim participants. More importantly, the non-Muslim group was too small to allow for meaningful comparisons on other measures. The remaining sample included 244 individuals (122 females, 122 males, $M_{age} = 35.80$, $SD = 12.47$). Due to missing values on some variables (defined as more than 50% of items left unanswered) the sample sizes differed per analysis. Because the results obtained using listwise deletion were not different from those using pairwise deletion, to avoid reducing power we present the latter analyses. The demographic details of the samples are presented in Table 1 in SOM.

Measures.

Migration intentions. Two items measured participants' willingness to relocate to a Western country: "How much would you like to move to a Western country?" and "Do you intend to move to a Western country?". Responses were given on a scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Very much so), ($r = .93$, $p < .001$). The same two items were asked regarding migration back to Syria ($r = .53$, $p < .001$).

Ideological extremism. Since there is no one agreed upon measure of political extremism, we used several scales to test the generalizability of results. Those scales included measures of 1) Islamist ideology, 2) willingness to sacrifice for one's religion, and 3) willingness to sacrifice for a political cause.

Islamist ideology was operationalized as commitment to fundamental tenets of Islam (e.g., "I think it is important to establish an Islamic state in my country"), including support for religiously motivated violence (e.g., "Armed Jihad is a personal obligation of all Muslims today"). It was measured using a 15-item scale created in conjunction with Muslim clerics in

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Singapore and used in past research (Jasko et al., 2020; Webber et al., 2018). Two reverse-coded items were excluded because they did not correlate with the scale (“There are many different ways of interpreting Islam” and “Under no circumstances does Islam support the killing of civilians”). We averaged the remaining 13 items ($\alpha = .87$).

The extent to which refugees were willing to engage in violent and non-violent forms of *sacrifice for religion* was measured with six items (e.g., “I would be willing to give away all my belongings to defend my religion,” $\alpha = .87$). We used the same set of items to measure *sacrifice for a political cause*, namely in service of defending the rights of immigrants in Western countries ($\alpha = .94$).

Socio-demographic variables. We measured the following variables: age, gender, education, socioeconomic status in Jordan and in Syria, and whether participants had family living in the United States, European Union, Syria, and Jordan. More than 90% of participants had family in Syria and Jordan.

Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq

Participants. In order to replicate the findings of the first study in a larger sample, two hundred fifty Syrian refugees were surveyed in each of the three countries: Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. In these countries, to recruit participants we collaborated with a different company but the procedure was similar.

As in Study 1, 28 non-Muslim participants were excluded from analyses (23 in Lebanon, 3 in Turkey, and 2 in Iraq). The remaining sample included 722 individuals (347 females [48.1%], 375 males, $M_{age} = 36.57$, $SD_{age} = 13.17$), of which 246 refugees lived in the refugee camps. Due to different access, the group of refugees living in the camps was unevenly distributed across countries (119 in Lebanon, 29 in Turkey, and 98 in Iraq).

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Measures. Some measures were slightly refined and revised from those used with the Jordan sample (see SOM for the full list of questions).

Migration intentions were measured with the same items as in Jordan.

Political extremism scales. The measure of *Islamist ideology* was expanded to capture endorsement of both extreme ideology and extreme violence. Thus, eighteen items were used to measure both aspects of Islamic extremism.

One item was added to the scales measuring *willingness to sacrifice for religion* and *willingness to sacrifice for political rights*. The items measuring the latter variable used in Jordan asked participants about *immigrants'* rights. In Study 2, those items were rephrased to ask about *refugees'* rights to be more relevant to participants (i.e., "I would be willing to give my life if it prevented the oppression of refugees in Western countries").

Finally, two other scales of political extremism were added to capture political attitudes and beliefs regarding the West. A 5-item scale measured the *willingness to support violence toward the West* ($\alpha = .91_{\text{Lebanon}}, .86_{\text{Turkey}}, .99_{\text{Iraq}}$). Sample items include: "I would support Syrian people fighting against the West" and "I would support my friends and family if they were fighting against the West". Another 5-item scale measured general *negative attitudes toward the West* (e.g., "Western cultures are generally immoral," "Western countries often violate other people's human rights around the world" $\alpha = .92_{\text{Lebanon}}, .79_{\text{Turkey}}, .97_{\text{Iraq}}$).

Socio-demographic variables. In addition to variables used in Jordan, we also controlled for whether an interview was conducted inside vs. outside of a refugee camp.

Results

The Jordan sample did not include refugees living inside refugee camps, but the remaining three samples did. Controlling for this factor did not change the results for Lebanon

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

and Turkey, but it did change the results in Iraq, where we obtained large differences between refugees living in and out of camps. Therefore, in Iraq we report correlations separately for participants surveyed in the camp and outside of camps. The correlations split by camp for Lebanon are presented in SOM. The number of refugees living inside camps in Turkey was too small to allow for meaningful comparisons.

Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations of all variables of interest are provided in Table 1. Distributions for the migration intention variables and the Islamist ideology are depicted in Figure 2. Due to space limitations, the distributions for remaining variables are presented in SOM.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics (Means and SD).

	<i>Jordan</i>	<i>Lebanon</i>	<i>Turkey</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	
				<i>Camp</i>	<i>Outside Camp</i>
<i>Migration Intentions</i>					
Migrate West	3.54 (2.50)	2.99 (2.40)	2.93 (2.08)	3.89 (1.22)	5.03 (1.35)
Go back to Syria	5.01 (2.10)	5.93 (1.59)	4.79 (1.97)	2.97 (1.18)	5.54 (1.01)
<i>Political Extremism</i>					
Islamist Ideology	4.63	3.70	3.44	2.10	4.51

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

	(1.30)	(1.09)	(1.09)	(0.27)	(0.56)
Sacrifice for Religion	4.86	3.85	4.34	4.20	4.85
	(1.72)	(1.44)	(1.52)	(0.94)	(0.74)
Sacrifice for Political	2.72	2.80	3.24	3.47	5.61
Rights	(1.76)	(1.25)	(1.32)	(0.97)	(0.35)
Fighting West	-	2.87	2.43	1.04	5.69
		(1.53)	(1.26)	(0.20)	(0.56)
Negative Attitudes		2.87	3.12	1.95	5.90
toward West	-	(1.68)	(1.28)	(0.84)	(0.46)

Note. Scale for all variables range from 1 to 7.

Migration intentions. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, participants expressed little interest in migrating West, as demonstrated by mean levels of intentions that were below the midpoint of the scale. As depicted in Figure 2, the mode of responses was a 1 in all three of these samples. This means that the most frequent pattern of responding was such that participants answered both questions about Western migration (i.e., “would like” and “intend” to move to a Western country) using the lowest option on the scale, “not at all.” For intentions to return to Syria, participants in all three locations expressed a much stronger motivation to return. Opposite to intentions to migrate West, the mode of the responses in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey was a 7, indicating that many participants responded to both questions with the highest scale option of “Very much so.” In Iraq, differences between refugees in camps and outside of camps emerged. Specifically, refugees living outside of camps declared stronger intentions to migrate to the West but they also wanted to go back to Syria.

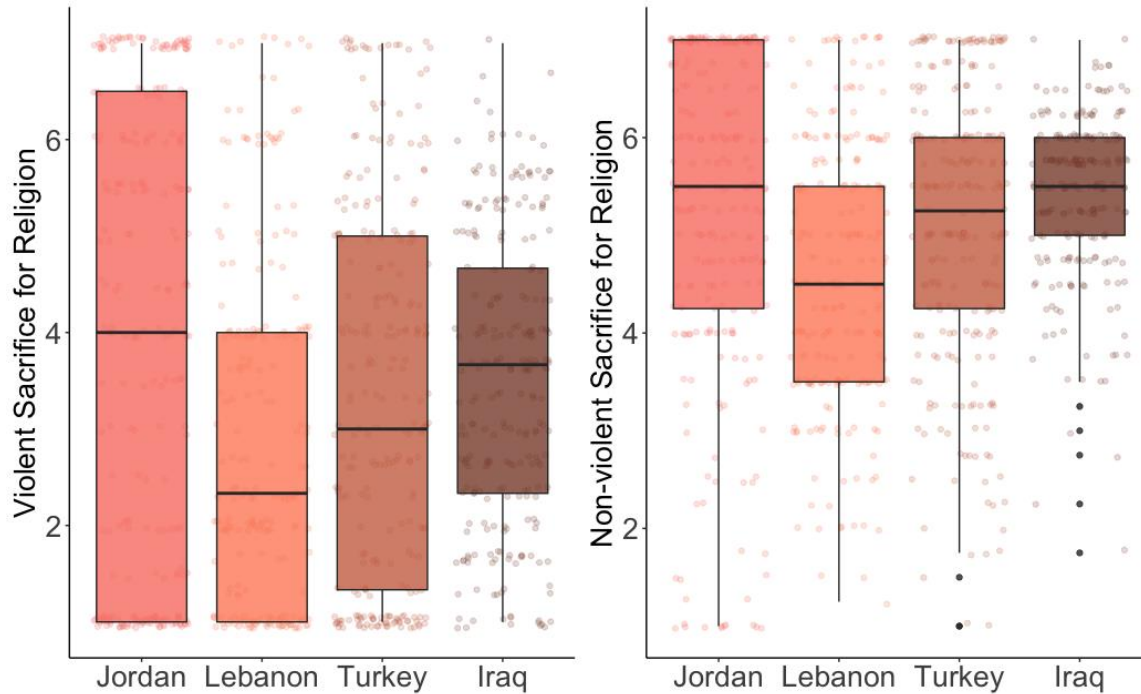
IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

Ideological extremism. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, mean responses on most of the ideological extremism variables were around or below the midpoint of the scales, indicating an overall low level of political extremism among refugees. Two patterns are worth highlighting. First, higher means were observed on scales assessing religious views (i.e., Islamist ideology and willingness to sacrifice for the religion) relative to the more political and Western-focused scales (i.e., willingness to sacrifice for political rights, fighting against the West, negative attitudes toward the West). Second, we examined the responses on scales measuring religious extremism at the individual items level. This is informative, because some of the questions directly mentioned violence (e.g., “I would be willing to attack police or security forces to defend my religion”), whereas others did not (e.g., “I would be willing to give away all my belongings to defend my religion.”). The overall level of agreement with the items that referred to violence was lower than agreement with the items that did not mention violence (see Fig. 1 for the sacrifice for the religion variable). Overall, non-violent sacrifice for religion and commitment to fundamentalist religious ideals seem to resonate the most with participants, whereas support for violence in general and aggressive tendencies toward the West in particular evoked low agreement.

In Iraq, there were large differences between refugees living inside and outside camps. Refugees living inside of camps reported low levels of Islamic ideology, less negative attitudes toward the West, and lower support for fighting against the West. In contrast, refugees living in Iraq outside of camps held the most negative views toward the West out of all samples.

Figure 1.

Violent and Non-violent Sacrifice for Religion.



Bivariate Analyses

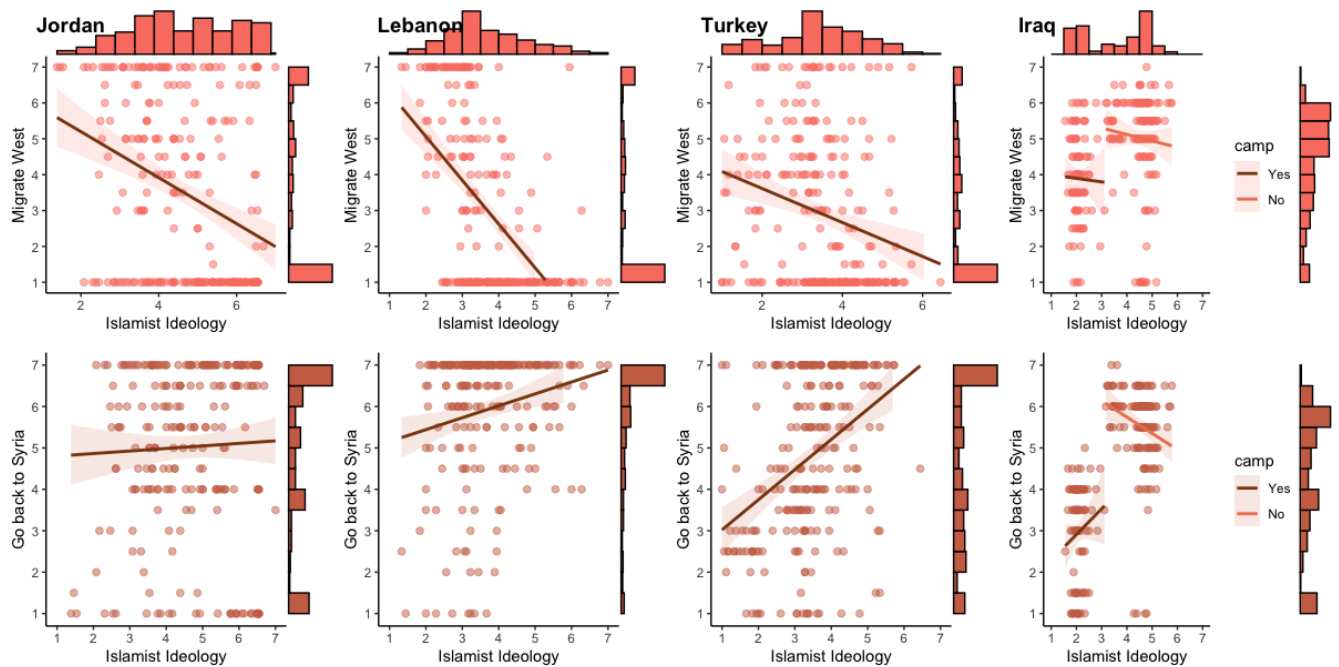
Political extremism and migration intentions. To test our main hypotheses, we next examined correlations between migration intentions (i.e., willingness to migrate to the West and willingness to go back to Syria) and different measures of political extremism (see Table 2). Given that migration intentions and some of extremism variables did not follow a normal distribution, we used Spearman's correlation. The results for Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey remained the same when analyzed using Pearson's correlation. In the text, we briefly summarize the relations between migration intentions and all measures of extremism to provide information about the consistency of findings across measures. Due to space limitation Figure 2 presents

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

scatterplots only in regards to Islamist ideology. The remaining plots are presented in full in the SOM.

Figure 2.

Relationship between Islamist Ideology and Migration Intentions.



We first examined intention to migrate to Western countries. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, endorsement of Islamist ideology was negatively correlated with the intention to migrate to the West, as depicted in Figure 2. More generally, willingness to migrate to the West was significantly and negatively related to all measures of political and religious extremism in Jordan and Lebanon. In Turkey, it was negatively related to all but one measure of extremism. Relative to the other locations, the correlations found in Iraq were generally weaker and the pattern of

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

correlations was less consistent across measures. This applied to refugees living outside and inside camps.

Examination of intentions to return to Syria revealed a different pattern, with some measures of political extremism being positively correlated with intentions to return and others being unrelated to willingness to go back to Syria. In Jordan, the significant correlation was found with willingness to sacrifice for political rights, whereas in Lebanon, Islamic extremism was related to return intentions. In Turkey four out of five extremism variables were positively related to willingness to go back to Syria. Again, the pattern of results in Iraq was inconsistent.

Together, these findings reveal a pattern of results (albeit less so in Iraq) where refugees who are more politically extreme are less interested in relocating to Western countries, and, if anything, are more interested in returning to their homeland.

Table 2

Spearman's Correlations between Ideological Extremism and Migration Intentions.

	<i>Jordan</i>	<i>Lebanon</i>	<i>Turkey</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	
				<i>Camp</i>	<i>Outside Camp</i>
					<i>Migrate West</i>
Islamist Ideology	-.32***	-.59***	-.30***	-.04	-.05
Sacrifice for Religion	-.28***	-.41***	-.18*	-.32*	.04
Sacrifice for Political Rights	-.20**	-.26***	-.04	-.32*	.23**
Fighting West	-	-.43***	-.21**	.18	.23**
Negative Attitudes toward	-	-.64***	-.19*	.27**	.04

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

West

	<i>Go back to Syria</i>				
Islamist Ideology	.06	.15	.42***	.10	-.31*
Sacrifice for Religion	.05	.25***	.42***	-.37**	-.15
Sacrifice for Political Rights	.31***	-.03	.23**	-.22	.37***
Fighting West	-	.06	-.0001	.36**	.14
Negative Attitudes toward West	-	.11	.23**	.52***	.06

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Additional Analyses

Political extremism and negative expectations toward the West. To help illuminate why politically extreme individuals would be hesitant to migrate to Western countries, we explored the correlations between political extremism and refugees’ expectations toward the West. Specifically, we anticipated that more politically extreme refugees would expect they would not be accepted in Western countries and they would receive negative treatment. This should be reflected in expectations that their various psychological needs (both higher-order needs for respect and more basic concerns like safety and employment) would not be met living in the West.

Our surveys contained items tapping these perceptions. Specifically, a series of items (13 in Jordan and 12 in the other locations) measured the extent to which refugees felt their basic needs (e.g., physical security, access to food, healthcare, opportunities for employment) would be frustrated (or satisfied) should they move to a Western country. Another series of 10 items measured the extent to which participants felt their higher-order needs would not be satisfied

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

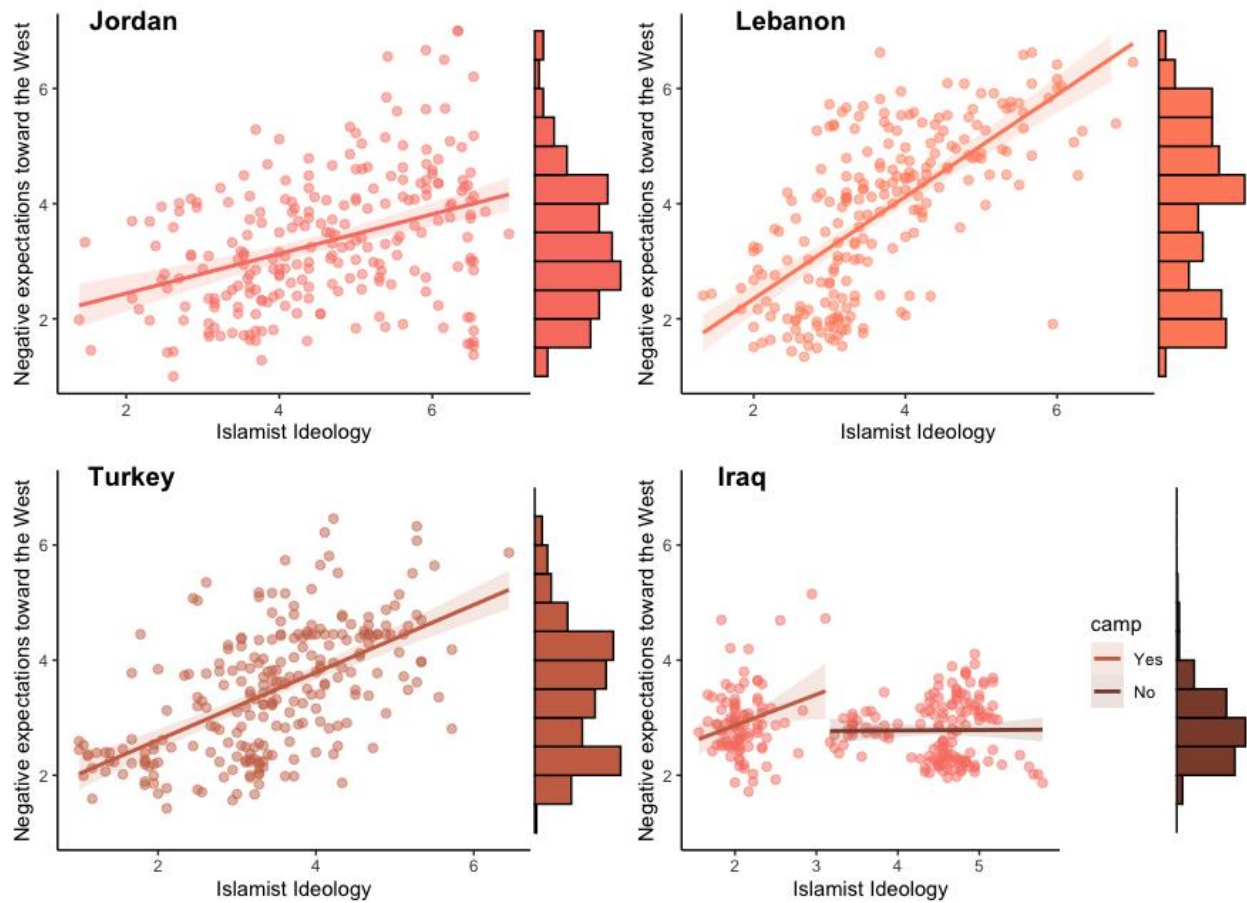
upon moving to a Western country (e.g., they would experience humiliation, respect (reverse-coded), acceptance (reverse-coded)). We averaged across those two sets of items to form one index of *negative expectations toward the West*. Analyses conducted separately for basic needs and higher-order needs are available in SOM and the differences between correlations are small or non-existent.

The analysis of correlations between expected needs frustration and political extremism supported the predictions. In Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey we found that all measures of ideological extremism were consistently and significantly correlated with negative expectations toward the West (Jordan: $.37 \geq r_s \geq .23$; Lebanon: $.77 \geq r_s \geq .43$; Turkey: $.59 \geq r_s \geq .30$). In other words, refugees who were more ideologically extreme expected to experience greater frustration of both their lower- and higher-order needs upon moving to the West. To provide insight into those results, correlations between Islamist ideology and negative expectations are depicted in Figure 3. All correlations can be found in SOM. In Iraq, the pattern of results again differed from the other three locations and it differed between camps and outside of camps. In short, the results in three locations supported the idea that more extreme beliefs are related to more negative expectations toward the treatment the refugees might encounter in the West.

Figure 3.

Relationship between Islamist Ideology and Negative Expectations toward the West.

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES



Desirability concerns. Due to the sensitive character of our study and the sample, the potential effects of desirability concerns should be considered. Specifically, refugees who were motivated to migrate to the West may have been more likely to provide less extreme responses to questions about their ideology and attitudes toward the West if they believed that their true, and possibly more extreme, responses could hurt their migration chances. We were aware of these concerns and designed consenting procedures to reduce this likelihood. Still, in this section we present several additional analyses, some of which relied on additional variables included in our study but not pertinent to the main analyses, conducted to examine if possible desirability concerns impacted the results. All questions included in our surveys are listed in the SOM.

Sacrifice for an ideological cause vs. sacrifice for family's safety. First, if refugees down-adjusted their endorsement of violence because they were afraid that it could impact their chances of getting asylum, they should have done so consistently across different measures of aggressive intentions. Instead, we found a rather nuanced pattern of results. Our survey included three scales that measured willingness to support and engage in extreme actions (e.g., willingness to attack police or security force). Two of those scales were related to a political and religious cause (i.e., sacrifice for religion and sacrifice for political rights) and were described earlier. The third scale was related to the goal 'keeping one's family safe', which we assumed would be higher among refugees and was included to verify that participants respond to questions in a discriminating way.

Thus, participants responded to the same set of 'extreme' items as for religious and political cause but with regard to the issue of the safety of their family. Responses to all three scales were positively correlated with each other across the samples (Iraq was the exception with non-significant relationships between the scales) and indeed the willingness to sacrifice for one's family's safety was the strongest of all three. They were, nonetheless, differentially related to migration intentions when included in one model. While willingness to sacrifice for religion was *negatively* related to migration intentions to the West (the result that was reported earlier in the main analyses), willingness to sacrifice for the safety of one's family through extreme measures was *positively* related to migration intentions in Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq ($.22^{**} \geq \beta \geq .15^*$) and it was unrelated to migration intentions in Jordan. In other words, refugees who were more motivated to seek safety for their family and were willing to do whatever it takes to achieve this goal (including intentions to engage in violent and sacrificial actions) were at the same time more interested in migrating to the West. While this is not a surprising result in itself, it suggests

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

that participants shared their true opinions even when those opinions expressed support for extreme actions.

Violent vs. non-violent extremism. Second, we separately analyzed the responses to questions that explicitly mentioned violence (vs. did not). As reported earlier, the mean level of endorsement of those question was different. Importantly however, responses to violent and non-violent (but still extreme) items correlated strongly with each other and correlated to a similar extent with migration intentions. This suggests that even when social desirability concerns were less likely to influence the responses to some questions (as indicated by higher levels of agreement with those items), those questions nonetheless show the same pattern of results as questions that would be more likely influenced by social desirability. These analyses are available in SOM.

Political extremism and NFC. Finally, the validity of participants' responses would be reinforced if these responses correlated in a theoretically meaningful way with other variables unlikely to be influenced by desirability concerns. To test this possibility, we examined the correlation between our extremism items and the need for cognitive closure (NFC; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). The NFC captures individuals' desire for certainty and predictability. Past research found positive associations between NFC and ideological extremism (Webber et al., 2018) and intergroup hostility (cf. Roets et al., 2015). Thus, if refugees answered truthfully the questions measuring ideological extremism we should have obtained correlations between those measures and NFC since they had no reasons to adjust their responses on the latter scale whose content nor placement in the survey (it was the first scale to which participants responded) gave any reason for suspicion. As theoretically expected, this scale was positively and significantly correlated with a majority of extremism measures including Islamist ideology, willingness to

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

sacrifice for religion, and negative attitudes toward the West across all samples (see SOM for details). These findings that replicate previously found relations between NFC and extremism suggest that our participants responses were authentic rather than reflecting social desirability,

In short, even though we cannot completely rule out the possibility that participants in our studies who were more motivated to go to the West modified somewhat their answers to questions about political or religious extremism, we believe that the additional analyses presented above attest to the validity of our findings.

Results in Iraq. Given the inconsistent pattern of results obtained in the Iraqi sample, in May 2017 we collected data from another 250 refugees living in Iraq using the same survey. The goal was to verify whether the results from the first sample could be attributed to sampling variability or whether there was something unique and replicable about Syrian refugees in Iraq. After excluding one non-Muslim participant the sample consisted of 99 refugees living in camps and 150 refugees living outside of camps. Again, there were large differences between camps and outside of camps. Notably, this time refugees living outside of camps were less extreme and less motivated to go to the West than in the sample reported earlier. The bivariate results across samples and measures were also inconsistent. However, the types of inconsistencies found in the first sample were not replicated in the second sample so we refrain from conclusions regarding the correlations between migration intentions and extremism in this group. One point deserves mention: After collecting data we realized that participants in Iraq differed from refugees in other countries in that they all identified as Kurds. We suspect this might have played a role in their responses given the history of this minority group both in Syria and in Iraq and its ambivalent relationship to Western countries. We included a detailed comparison of both waves of our Iraqi data collection in the SOM.

Discussion

The findings of our studies help clarify the migration decisions of refugees who, after managing to escape the ravages of conflict in their home countries, are temporarily residing elsewhere. Refugees in this situation might consider staying put, returning home, or migrating to yet another country. We studied these decisions with refugees from the Syrian conflict. In contrast to past studies that focused largely on safety concerns or material needs of asylum seekers as predictors of their migration intentions, we focused on refugees' social and political attitudes, because there is virtually no empirical evidence on this topic.

The first result worth highlighting is that the majority of participants did not intend to migrate to the West and would rather return to their home country. These findings replicate surveys conducted by UNHCR (2020) with Syrian refugees living in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. In a similar vein, the majority of participants in our samples did not support political violence, particularly when the questions about its use referred to the Western context. This finding is also consistent with other research on political violence (Jasko, Webber, & Kruglanski, 2020), which shows that majorities of people reject ideologically-motivated violence.

Arguably the most important finding is that the refugees most interested in moving to the West are less likely to endorse tenets of Islamic extremism, do not wish to engage in costly sacrifice or violence for their beliefs, and harbor no negative sentiment toward Western countries. Additional analyses suggested that this might occur because those who hold such beliefs recognize that their strong commitment to their cultural and political values would lead to their being outcast as deviants in a Western society. In contrast, the ideological concerns of politically extreme refugees may appear to be best served by returning to their homeland where the issues they care about are a salient priority. Indeed, those refugees in our samples who are

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

more committed to extreme version of their ideology seemed to be more motivated to go back home to Syria, although this relationship was less consistent across measures of extremism. This could be due to the immense uncertainty that surrounds the possibility to return, and what the country would look like upon return.

Taken together, these results have important implications. On a theoretical level, we hope to extend the literature on migration decisions by incorporating ideological factors, which have not been tested in this context before. If migration indicates a willingness to break ties with one's country of origin and to immerse oneself in a different culture, socio-political attitudes should be related to those decisions. Our data are consistent with this contention. Past research has predominantly focused on social beliefs of immigrants and refugees who had already resettled in their host countries (e.g., research on acculturation patterns), accordingly, more research on the underpinnings of migration intentions is needed. Our findings suggest that treating political and social attitudes as predictors of migration intentions is a promising new direction for such research.

From a practical perspective, our findings paint a picture of refugees who want to travel West as holding less extreme political and religious views and as being more positive toward Western countries than those refugees who do not want to leave the region. Importantly, they are not only less extreme in relative terms, but examination of the distribution of responses show that their absolute levels of extremism were low. Still, these results run counter to the views of some Western publics that are wary of accepting large numbers of refugees into their countries due to the hostile views that they attribute to the strangers, a view that is historically rather common (Krogstad & Radford, 2017).

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

The present results build on the limited existing literature to suggest that concerns regarding the security threat posed by incoming Syrian refugees may be overblown. Whereas the refugees themselves may pose little security threat upon migration, the process of migration is still a concern that needs to be addressed. Perhaps because of the fears held by people in countries hosting refugees, an influx of refugees is related to increased violence by extremists *against refugees* (Gineste & Savun, 2019). Moreover, organizations with nefarious intentions may (and have) exploit migration streams into Western countries as a means of importing violence. For instance, although the perpetrators of the Paris attacks in 2015 were European nationals, some of them posed as refugees and used migration streams as a means of traveling to and from Middle Eastern countries (Wihtol de Wenden, 2015). And finally, our data only speak to political views prior to migration. It is possible that after migrating to Western countries refugees' political views may become more extreme. This scenario is most likely if refugees are met with hostility and experience alienation in the host countries. One potentially fruitful avenue is to use the findings of the present study as an intervention to reduce intergroup hostility—i.e., providing members of host nations with these results may increase positive attitudes toward integration of refugees. Past research, while scarce, suggests that correcting inaccurate meta-perception about the outgroup might be effective way of reducing intergroup conflict (e.g., for metahumanization see Kteily et al., 2016; for correcting beliefs about group polarization see Lees & Cikara, 2020).

Although the present research contains important findings, it is not without its limitations. In addition to desirability concerns that we addressed earlier, we also acknowledge that the findings in Iraq were to inconsistent with the findings in other locations. These inconsistencies were at least partially driven by stark differences between individuals residing in and outside of

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

refugee camps. Moreover, as noted earlier the refugees in Iraq self-identified as Kurds. It is possible that this unique context changed both the way our participants interpreted the surveys, and their underlying attitudes toward migration and their current location, as well as toward the West.

Second, we measured only intentions to migrate and we cannot be sure that those intentions will translate into actual decisions. For instance, past research showed that while partisans differ in their residential preferences, they do not necessarily act on their preferences (e.g., Mummolo & Nall, 2016) and one reason for that is that alternative concerns common for all ideological groups override the impact of ideological fit. We suspect that competing goals also play a role in refugees' migration decisions. Assessment of the relative impact of different needs in migration would be a fruitful direction for future research.

Finally, our results present only correlational data and therefore the precise causal process underlying these relationships is unclear. We were also agnostic as to the relationship between different extreme attitudes. Whereas it is possible to hypothesize causal paths between the various measures of extremism that we included (e.g., endorsement of ideological extremism might lead to an increased willingness to sacrifice for those goals) our goal was simpler: to test the robustness of the main effect over different operationalizations of extremism present in the literature. We hope that the consistent pattern we found will facilitate future research that will disentangle the underlying processes.

These limitations notwithstanding, the pros of this research outweigh potential cons. Unfortunately, the research on Syrian refugees (and refugees in general) mimics the media coverage—people speak about them rather than allowing them to speak for themselves (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Thus, the literature on refugees predominantly involves surveys

IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMISM AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS OF REFUGEES

carried out with members of the host country and inquire into their perspective on refugees, or analyzes of country-level data to predict migration streams (Neumann, 2004). Research conducted with the refugees themselves tends to survey individuals who have already migrated to the West (Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, & Cabral, 2008), and/or focuses primarily on the traumas that this move entailed (Lustig et al., 2004; Steel et al., 2009). The present research is the first to our knowledge that surveys actual refugees as to their migration intentions and the anchorage of these intentions in individuals' social and political attitudes. Making a decision about migration is one of the most impactful moments in people's lives, particularly when one decides to relocate to a culturally distant country. We hope that the present findings contribute to a better understanding of refugee intentions, and in so doing further the scientific study of the fast growing migration phenomenon.

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