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Political Violence and Activism in Iraq: A Defence Mechanism Against Personal Uncertainty?

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Abstract

In October of 2019, mass protests erupted throughout Iraq and continue to lead to clashes between activist groups and state security forces. While specific demands and actors change over time, unrest is not a new phenomenon in a country that has been exposed to decades of extreme political violence and conflict.

What motivates people to engage in such behaviour? Despite a sense of urgency among policymakers, research so far offers inconclusive explanations and studies in particularly affected regions are rare. A series of field experiments was conducted throughout Iraq in order to examine whether psychological factors can cause increased readiness to participate in different forms of political action. Results from 274 participants show that especially violent and illegal activism may in part be a reaction to feelings of personal uncertainty.

Building on established theory and practices from the field, these novel findings offer actionable insights for policymakers to prevent and counter violent extremism in Iraq and beyond.

Keywords: Political violence, radical activism, self-affirmation theory, mortality salience, personal uncertainty, Iraq.

1. Introduction

Following the US-led military invasion in 2003 and the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, sectarian and political tensions discharged into increasingly extreme violence by non-state actors. For the next fourteen years, the country consistently ranked first on the Global Terrorism Index, recording 66,573 related deaths.[1] Moreover, incidents of unrest occur over three times more often in Iraq than in any other country; violent crime is only more frequent in Mexico.[2]

On a global scale, political violence is declining after peaking in 2014, corresponding to the winding down of conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. On closer inspection however, there is little cause for optimism. The general decrease in Islamist violence is accompanied by a rise in right-wing extremism and white supremacy movements in developed countries. Meanwhile, violent incidents remain regionally concentrated, most notably in Central Asia[3] and the Middle East. In this context, Iraq continues to be a hot spot for activist groups and violence, as observed during the ongoing popular protests that began in 2019.

For many societies today, politically motivated violence represents a pressing security policy issue. This is because in addition to immediate physical harm to victims, acts of terrorism and unrest frequently cause severe damage to economic stability, mental health and public infrastructure. On the other hand, engaging in such behaviour also involves serious risks for the perpetrators themselves, for example injuries, death, criminal prosecution or loss of personal life opportunities. Why is it, then, that so many people are willing to accept these grim prospects and decide to participate in violent campaigns?

Attempts to explain the motivations behind political violence have been made from across social science disciplines and received significant public attention. However, despite recent improvements, research so far remains largely theoretical with questionable empirical validity. Moreover, those populations witnessing the highest presence of political violence are only sparsely represented in studies. As a result, policy programmes aiming to prevent violent extremism often lack robust scientific grounding and are criticised for targeting communities based on personal characteristics.

The author, with the support of the Syria/Iraq office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, implemented a series of field experiments throughtout Iraq in order to address existing shortcomings in the literature and contribute to robust policy discussions on the issue. Building on psychological research in other contexts, this study examines whether self-related uncertainty, personality traits and attachment to different social groups are relevant factors for intentions to engage in activism behaviour in Iraq.

Throughout the rest of this paper, a clear distinction is maintained between 'radical activism' such as joining violent protests or actively supporting illegal political organisations; and 'moderate activism' referring to legal and non-violent advocacy efforts, which are usually seen as important elements of democratic civil societies. Beyond potential relevance for moral evaluations, this distinction is important as previous research indicates that they represent two distinct dimensions of political expression — in other words, there appear to be fundamental differences between the motivations for becoming a peaceful activist or resorting to violence.[4] The experimental data collected from a broad sample of the general Iraqi population is analysed statistically to formulate practical insights and suggestions for policymakers and further research projects.

2. Why do people turn to violent activism?

As part of the effort to understand the causes and drivers of engagement in political violence and (in extreme cases) terrorist organisations, various theories and models have been proposed from a wide range of social science disciplines. While actors are often assumed to be believers in 'the cause' or an ideology, some experts conclude that "the popular image of the terrorist as an individual motivated exclusively by deep and intransigent political commitment obscures a more complex reality".[5] This reality is that reasons to commit political violence may vary within groups, and across different forms of engagement — and they may change over time.

Although policymakers are ultimately oriented towards the search for effective countermeasures and deterrents, they depend on robust studies and scientific findings to inform their decisions. Against this background, known shortcomings of existing research pose serious challenges to an adequate political handling of the issue. The interdisciplinary nature of the field with contributions from psychology, economics, sociology and political sciences has created a large portfolio of contradicting theories, none of which appears to provide a conclusive explanation for people's willingness to engage in political violence at large. This dilemma is exacerbated by a general lack of empirical validation, which would help to increase confidence in hypotheses. Although field studies do

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[1] This figure represents fatalities of terrorist attacks only, excluding e.g. casualties of war or violent unrest. Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2019".
[2] Control Risks, "CORE report Q1 2020".
[3] Afghanistan accounts for almost half of global terrorism fatalities. Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2019".
[4] Moskalenko, and McCauley, "Measuring political mobilization".
[5] Crenshaw, "Theories of terrorism", 19.

exist — and have become more common in recent years — they are often limited to unrepresentative samples (such as students) from Western countries and suffer from methodological bias. For instance, interviews with convicted terrorists might discover that a common characteristic of violent actors is their background from, say, a low socio-economic status[6]. Yet, such findings have the potential to seriously mislead the discussion, as they ignore the fact that the overwhelming majority of people in the same circumstances will never become extremists in their lives.

In the following, this section provides a brief introduction to the main directions of previous research in the field of political violence.

The terrorist as an individual

Early literature throughout the 20th century was characterised by a focus on the psychology of terrorism and intrinsic motivations of people. In this domain, psychologists suggested that perpetrators of political violence share a distinct profile of mental illnesses or personality disorders, causing them to develop an 'outlaw identity' and violate social norms.[7] Similar theories pointed to narcisissm or parent-child conflicts as sources of aggressive behaviour that can later result in extreme political action. While the idea of a 'terrorist syndrome' is still sometimes discussed, it is generally dismissed as unreliable today. Instead, psychological research has shifted towards identifying potential contributing factors and vulnerabilities, such as the role of emotions and personality traits[8] — however, empirical tests in the context of activism behaviour and political violence is scarce.

Over time, researchers began exploring alternative explanations. Building on central tenets of economic theory, some political economists viewed violent activists and terrorists as rational actors, and the decision to engage as the outcome of internal cost-benefit calculations. According to this framework, individuals are solely driven by the perceived risks and rewards of engagement, such as financial incentives and social status as a member of the movement or group. Other scholars developed a theory of 'devoted actors', for which rational reasons against becoming a violent activist are overridden by their belief in 'sacred values'.[9] Although the theory refers most directly to religious ideologies, these values can also be interpreted in secular ways such as most "-isms" and group identities; they represent poweful, non-negotiable preferences that when challenged, ought to be defended by any means.

Context matters: The power of our social environment

With the turn of the millenium, prominent terror attacks in the United States and Europe brought terrorism to the forefront of public attention. In light of this seemingly 'new threat', the research landscape around political violence drastically changed as legislative efforts and security policy considerations led to increased resources and demand for more comprehensive insights into the matter.

The new understanding was that "in the wrong circumstances most people could either come to support a terrorist group or possibly even consider joining one".[10] For advocates of relative deprivation theory, such circumstances arise primarily from a lack of socio-economic resources and perceived inequality, especially compared to peer groups. By contrast, other research found no causal effect of economic conditions on criminal behaviour and support for terrorism.[11]

In one of the most influential studies in the field, Marc Sageman[12] analysed a large number of interview transcripts of alleged al-Qaeda members. His research emphasises the importance of social attachment — bonds of friendship, family, religion or educational — in determining participation in violent jihadism. Similar studies also connected 'interpersonal ties' with recruitment into organisations carrying out political violence.[13] The concept of network-based, 'leaderless jihad' has since attracted strong interest from policymakers and academics, although several scholars suspect bias in the data.[14]

With the increasing interest in high-profile extremist organisations, research also began modelling pathways into (and out of) membership in such groups. The concept of 'radicalisation' became an umbrella term for process-based theories of how people alienate from social norms and embrace extreme worldviews, potentially even becoming active themselves. In a rare case of empirical field research, Quintan Wiktorowicz[15] studied the London-based Salafist

[6] Note that the role of economic context is highly controversial among researchers. Krueger, and Maleckova, "Education, poverty, political violence and terrorism".
[7] Cooper, "Psychopath as terrorist".
[8] Curtin, Steward, and Duncan, "What makes the political personal?".
[9] Atran, "The devoted actor".
[10] Silke, "Becoming a terrorist",
[11] Krueger, and Maleckova, "Education, poverty, political violence and terrorism".
[12] Sageman, "Understanding terror networks".
[13] della Porta, "Recruitment processes in clandestine political organizations"; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson, "Social networks and social movements".
[14] In particular, the interviews which formed the basis for Sageman's research were conducted by US intelligence agencies, which likely produced biased information and recordings.
[15] Wiktorowicz, "Joining the cause".

organisation al-Muhajiroun, which was later banned for promoting violent jihad and terrorism. Based on established theories of social movements, he developed a descriptive model in which targeted manipulation methods are used to progressively alter the value system of potential recruits and align them with the goals of the 'radicalising' organisation. At the end of this four-stage process, individuals reject mainstream norms and accept the organisation as a legitimate authority. While the Wiktorowicz model has had significant policy impact in Western societies, its scientific accuracy and generalisability is questioned by experts in the field due to methodological inaccuracies and a limited focus on the UK.

In general, the debate suffers from broad definitional ambiguity: For instance, what distinguishes political violence from non-political violent crime? Similarly, levels of engagement need to be understood as continuous. Only few people will actually carry out violent attacks, but what about those who provide logistical, material or moral support to the cause? While such complexities are unlikely to be resolved soon, research continues to play a pivotal role. In order to substantiate policy decisions in affected societies and regions, further studies with a particular focus on collecting unbiased, primary data from the field are necessary.

3. Political violence and activism in Iraq

As outlined earlier, Iraq looks back on a volatile history and has been particularly exposed to conflicts and activism in various forms. Understanding the phenomenon of political violence in this context requires a review of developments over the last two decades.

Prior to 2003, levels of non-state political violence had been low. The country's destabilisation brought about a steady increase in violent unrest and attacks in the form of bombings and shootings motivated by sectarian clashes between Shi'a and Sunnis as well as Kurdish independence efforts in the north; this surge peaked in 2007 and then decreased with the deployment of further US troops.[16] A second, more intense escalation wave began in 2011 amidst protests inspired by revolutionary movements in Egypt and Tunisia. Throughout major Iraqi cities and the Kurdistan Region, people demanded changes in the handling of government corruption and access to public services. Between clashes with state security forces and spillover from the emerging Syrian civil war, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) would dominate the security situation of the region for the following years. By 2014, the group controlled significant territories and unleashed a campaign of unprecedented violence against minorities and opposing citizens. Although attacks became less frequent as ISIL focused on building internal structures, terrorism levels remained high until the group lost most of its territorial claims in 2018.

Later that year, popular protests erupted again across central and southern Iraqi cities (most notably in Najaf, Basra and Baghdad) over economic and political frustrations. A continuation of smaller unrests since 2012, these protests were significantly larger in scale, often formed spontaneously and included the burning of tires, storming of government buildings and several cases of activists being killed by security forces. Protests then escalated in October 2019 following a series of unpopular decisions by Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who was forced to resign several weeks later. As of 2020, peaceful protests and violent unrest over high levels of unemployment and corruption continue.

In a recent publication[17], the Syria/Iraq office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation provides an in-depth study of the current mass protests, exploring the circumstances surrounding their outbreak as well as dynamics going forward. While the conflict-ridden history of Iraq has been shaped by specific events and policy decisions, a large catalyst of political violence in the country is its ethnically fragmented society. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, Iraqis are broadly divided between Kurds in the north, Shias in the south and Sunni Arabs in central regions. Various religious minorities such as Christian sects exist but have decreased significantly in recent years as many have fled the violent conflicts.[18] Importantly, while distinguishing between ethnic groups can provide an indication of shared cultural values, religious beliefs or political affiliations, the reality is that people do not sort strictly into such categories. Instead, individual attitudes and sense of belonging, alongside popular support or disapproval of policies are likely to manifest in a complicated fabric of overlapping group identities. The cultural diversity in Iraq continues to act as an accelerant for conflict based on deeply entrenched differences and resentment.

Iraq's exposure to political violence has two important implications for studies in this field. First, it illustrates again the paradox that arguably the regions highest in demand for robust empirical findings have so far been underrepresented in scientific investigations. Second, it is likely that years of conflict have uniquely influenced perceptions about actors, engagement and forms of political violence. These circumstances create a highly relevant context for this research.

[16] Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2017".
[17] Jaecke, Labude, and Frieser, "Youth Revolution or Identity-Forming Movement?".
[18] Oehring, "Christians and Yazidis in Iraq".

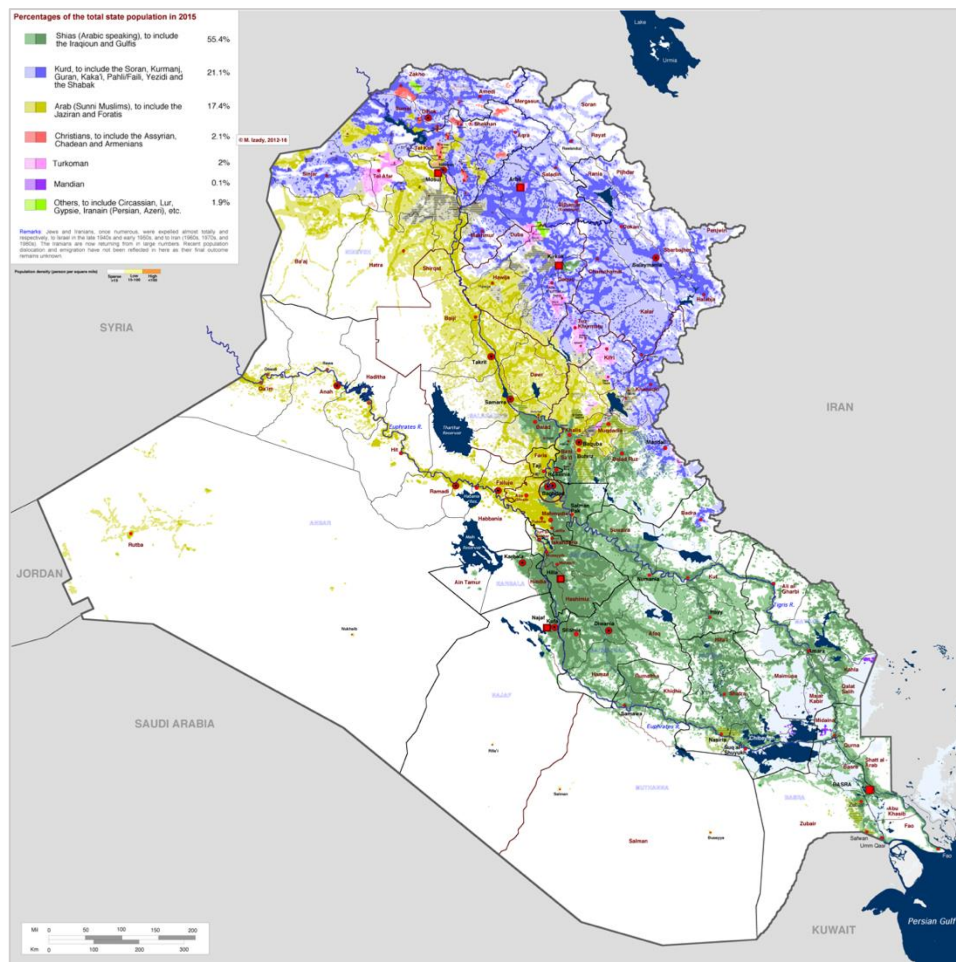

Figure 1: Ethno-demographic map of Iraq (Izadi, 2018).

4. Policy responses to political violence

Just as diverse as existing theories are the strategic approaches adopted by governments, international organisations and other stakeholders in attempts to prevent and counter violent extremism (PCVE). On a global scale, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism promotes a range of PCVE measures among member states including educational programmes, skill trainings and strategic communication to counter the spread of radical narratives. The European Commision and its Radicalisation Awareness Network are similarly focused on preventing extremist ideologies, with a particular emphasis on online content and the role of social media.

At the national level, governments have made significant efforts to limit the potential for radicalisation and violent activism behaviour. However, experts remain sceptical regarding the success of existing strategies. For instance, the sheer amount of new counterterrorism legislation in countries like the United Kingdom and United States since 2001 showcases the struggle to reach societal consensus on what exactly the problem is and how to address it. 'Prevent', the UK's core strategy to stop people from joining extremist organisations, has recently drawn controversy for targeting specific social groups based on personal and religious characteristics — referrals into the programme significantly overrepresent suspected cases of Islamism compared to e.g. right-wing extremism. Meanwhile, US authorities adopted theoretical models of process-based radicalisation into law enforcement practices. In addition to a stunning lack of empirical support, such methods carry substantial risk of promoting discrimination against citizens into 'suspect communities'.[19] Furthermore, behavioural psychologists have raised concerns about their effectiveness in preventing violent extremism in the first place.[20]

Paradoxically, while the largest and most aggressive policy responses have so far originated from Western Europe and the

[19] Hillyard, "Suspect community".

[20] Warrel, "Inside Prevent".

United States, the issue of political violence is disproportionally affecting societies in the Middle East and Central Asia. Nonetheless, efforts have also been made in these regions, and several programmes were implemented in Iraq with the goal of fighting extremism and preventing political violence. As one example, a 2018-2019 programme by UNESCO provided primary school teachers in Mosul with specialised training and psychological support to incorporate PCVE measures into school practices. Similarly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) throughout the region have engaged with particularly affected minorities, prison inmates or youth communities to raise awareness and reduce violent extremism potential.

A noticable aspect of recent programmes is their strong tendency towards educational approaches. PCVE efforts from multilateral organisations, NGOs and government agencies (where available) now usually take the form of either providing information to people directly, or are designed as 'training of trainers' programmes. The underlying rationale is that increasing people's knowledge about political structures and extremist ideologies will build behavioural resilience against radicalisation through developing a critical mindset, and embracing values such as tolerance and diversity. However, the emphasis on education as a defence against extremism is the subject of ongoing debate among professionals. Critics argue that while the positive overtones of resilience-based PCVE methods may be appealing to those who want to avoid more drastic policy responses, they inherently lead to a securitisation of the educational sector in societies and put the responsibility of detecting and countering radicalisation on teachers.[21] Furthermore, the scope of such programmes is argued to be too broad to have a meaningful impact on vulnerable individuals. It remains questionable whether 'educating people out of extremism' is a sufficient PCVE strategy in regions of protracted conflict, and additional approaches should be explored.

Meanwhile, the central government in Baghdad has responded to the recent unrests primarily through military force, similar to its approach in the fight against terrorism from ISIL and affiliated groups that posed immediate threats to national security. Following the territorial collapse of the self-proclaimed caliphate, criminal prosecutions of detained ISIL members began and frequently resulted in capital punishment. International organisations have since criticised these trials, which reportedly were held without proper investigations and often lasted less than ten minutes before a verdict was reached. Putting aside the legal ramifications of such proceedings, it may prove counter-productive in preventing future conflicts. For instance, a disproportional treatment of people with unconfirmed affiliations to ISIL could stoke new resentment among parts of the population. Looking back, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism concludes that "a predominantly military solution against [ISIL's] predecessors was not sufficient in resolving the root grievances" among Sunni communities after the so-called 'de-Baathification' in 2003.[22]

Various efforts have been undertaken over the years in order to contain the spread of extremism and readiness to engage in violent activism in Iraq. However, as showcased by recent history, existing approaches need to be critically re-evaluated in order to prevent radicalisation more effectively going forward. Policymakers in Iraq and internationally are calling for more robust research on potential drivers of violent activism and actionable suggestions to address them.

5. Research approach

Through a series of field experiments, this study contributes to a more robust understanding of activism and political violence in Iraq. Existing theories regarding the role of social attachment and socio-demographic circumstances are tested empirically by collecting primary data from a general population sample. Even more importantly, this study takes a novel approach by examining whether intentions to engage in activism behaviour and political violence may be influenced by feelings of uncertainty, building on insights from psychological research in other fields.

Self-affirmation theory

Uncertainty is known to influence many different behaviours from making health decisions to investing. In 2001, social psychologist Ian McGregor published experimental findings that when being exposed to feelings of uncertainty, people respond by hardening their political attitudes and worldviews on controversial topics such as capital punishment or abortion rights. Further experiments revealed that participants also exhibited stronger intergroup bias, characterised by more sympathy towards like-minded people and contempt for people with opposing opinions.

The theory behind these observations is predicated on the concept of 'self-affirmation', which argues that people have a fundamental drive to maintain an image of themselves as being competent, moral and stable. When this image is challenged and feelings of uncertainty surface, people will try to reduce this discomfort by intensifying another aspect of their self, even if it is unrelated to the original threat. Such

[21] Stephens, and Sieckelinck, "Being resilient to radicalisation in PVE policy".

[22] van den Berge, "Countering Violent Extremism in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq".

'fluid compensation' represents a defence mechanism against uncertainty, and an alternative to more direct psychological reactions such as denial or avoidance.

McGregor's research confirms the self-affirmation hypothesis in two ways. First, participants indeed reported lower levels of uncertainty after 'going to extremes' on policy issues, suggesting that attitudinal hardening and group-based discrimination effectively restored their sense of self. Additionally, when given an alternative self-affirmation opportunity such as writing about important personal values, political attitudes and intergroup bias did not intensify since the uncertainty threat had already been eliminated.

Although these findings are limited to attitudes and do not imply any effects on actual behaviour, they may be conceptually relevant to engagement in political violence, which often occurs in the form of group-based activism. Amplifying one's convictions about cultural and political values, coupled with favourable views on like-minded people and unfavourable views on opposing people, could create the motivational basis for participation in radical activism behaviour. However, the extent to which self-affirmation theory applies in the context of political violence has yet to be investigated empirically.

Based on the above considerations, this study is guided by the following research questions:

Q1: Do people turn to radical activism in response to uncertainty?

Q2: Can self-affirmation opportunities reduce the effect of uncertainty on radical activism intentions?

Q3: Do personal characteristics or socio-demographic backgrounds determine intentions to engage in radical activism?

6. Experimental design

A total study sample of 274 participants from Iraq was recruited in cooperation with 10 NGOs and universities from the large network of KAS partner organisations in the region. Due to public health measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all experimental materials were accessed in a digital format using unique URLs. The materials were presented in Modern Standard Arabic.

Great care was taken to recruit a regionally and socially diverse sample in order to maximise representativeness of the study. The selected partner organisations are based in all three major ethnic regions and seven cities, including the most populated urban areas Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. Moreover, NGO outreach extends to citizens from the general population across regions and social backgrounds. Further steps taken to minimise the risk of selection bias included the measurement of observable socio-demographic characteristics, which were accounted for in the subsequent data analysis.

Personality and social attachment

Participants first completed a short questionnaire measuring two of the widely established 'Big Five' personality traits: agreeableness, a marker for compassion and politeness, and neuroticism, a marker for volatility and withdrawal. The questions follow the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP-50), a prominent inventory for personality testing, and were answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. An Arabic translation of IPIP-50 has been developed and empirically verified by other researchers[23], and was used for the relevant items.

Next, participants rated their social attachment to different groups on a visual scale of perceived closeness between oneself and a placeholder 'X', as shown in **Figure 2**. Following suggestions from existing literature, 'X' was respectively replaced with 'family', 'the state', 'the people' and 'friends' and answered from 1 (lowest attachment) to 7 (highest attachment).

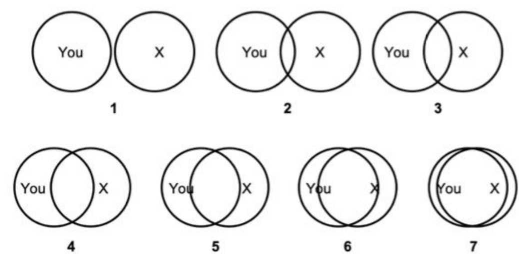

Figure 2: Measurement of social attachment.[24]

Treatment phase

This study is primarily concerned with the effect of personal uncertainty on intentions to engage in radical activism behaviour. Mortality salience, a psychological state of thinking about the inevitability of death, is a frequently used method to evoke feelings of uncertainty in experimental research.[25] Participants were randomly allocated into three equally sized groups, two of which answered open-ended questions on what they believe will happen to them physically upon death and the emotions that the thought of their own death arouses in them.[26] In the remaining control group, participants completed structurally equivalent questions on the neutral subject of watching a movie.

[23] Almaghbashy, "Translation and adaption of Goldbergs IPIP-BFM-50 scale of personality".
[24] Aron, Aron, and Smollan, "Inclusion of other in the self scale."
[25] see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski, "Terror management theory of self-esteem and cultural worldviews".
[26] Ibid.

Similar to previously used experimental designs, it was then tested whether providing a self-affirmation opportunity after the uncertainty induction reduces intentions to engage in radical activism behaviour. This is because by the time of measurement, participants' self-image would have already been restored by affirming another aspect of the self. To maintain comparability of results, a self-affirmation exercise was administered in only one of the two groups where participants had previously received the mortality salience questions. Participants first selected which personal value they rate most important from the following list: 'business, economics and money-making'; 'art, music and theater'; 'science and the pursuit of knowledge'; 'social life and relationships'; 'social action and helping others'; and 'religion and spirituality'. They then wrote a short paragraph about why this value is important to them personally and a time where it has been particularly useful in their lives. In the remaining two groups, participants completed a neutral task by selecting their least important value and writing about how it could be important to others.

'Moderate' and 'radical' activism intentions

Following their respective treatments, all participants completed the Activism and Radicalism Intentions Scales.[27] Across eight questions, the scales measure individual readiness to engage in different activities that either constitute moderate or radical activism behaviour. Participants answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree':

Moderate activism

1. I would **join/belong to an organization** that fights for my group's political and legal rights.
2. I would **donate money** to an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights.
3. I would **volunteer my time** working (i.e. write petitions, distribute flyers, recruit people, etc.) for an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights.
4. I would **travel for one hour** to join in a public rally, protest, or demonstration in support of my group.

Radical activism

5. I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights **even if the organization sometimes breaks the law**.
6. I would continue to support an organization that fights for my group's political and legal rights **even if the organization sometimes resorts to violence**.
7. I would participate in a public protest against oppression of my group **even if I thought the protest might turn violent**.
8. I would **attack police or security forces** if I saw them beating members of my group.

Socio-demographic background

Finally, a short questionnaire measured the following socio-demographic characteristics in order to examine their relationship with activism intentions, and to account for them in the analysis: gender, age group, nationality, displacement status[28], occupation, education level, and monthly income.

7. Results

To examine the effects of uncertainty and the self-affirmation exercise, moderate and radical activism intentions are first compared between the three experimental groups, as visualised in **Figure 3**. To recall, in the first group (*Control*), participants completed the neutral tasks for both treatments. As such, the values here serve as the default readiness to engage in both forms of activism. The second group (*Mortality salience*) received only the uncertainty treatment; in line with previous research as discussed earlier, it is expected that participants respond to the uncertainty by expressing stronger intentions to engage. Finally, participants in the third group (*Mortality salience + self-affirmation*) were given the opportunity to affirm personal values after the uncertainty induction; consequentially, intentions are expected to be lower compared to the *Mortality salience* group.

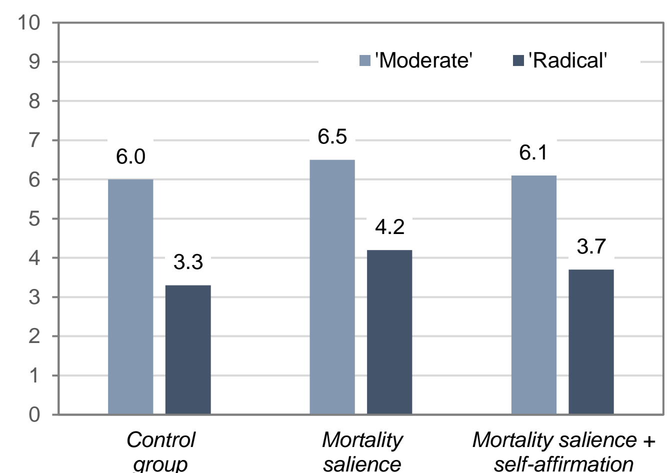

Figure 3: Average activism intentions per experimental group, fitted to a scale from 0 to 10 to visualise group differences.

For both forms of behaviour, measurements were lowest in the *Control* group and highest in the *Mortality salience* group, with *Mortality salience + self-affirmation* group values scoring in between. Moderate activism intentions were

[27] Moskalenko, and McCauley, "Measuring political mobilization".

[28] Experiences either as an internally displaced person (IDP) or as a refugee abroad.

consistently higher compared to radical activism, which appears plausible given that the latter by definition represents a more extreme form of political expression.

It was expected that reminders of mortality would evoke feelings of uncertainty, causing participants to try and restore their self-image by signalling a higher readiness to take political action, even involving violent or illegal behaviours. This effect should not occur, however, when an alternative self-affirmation opportunity is provided — in this case, through reflecting on important personal values. These results on group level provide initial support for both hypotheses.

Next, more accurate and statistically robust methods are employed. Following a number of variable transformations and data preparation steps[29], regression analysis is used to examine the relationship between activism intentions and the two experimental treatments, as well as the other measured characteristics — personality traits, social attachment and socio-demographic background.

Mortality salience is found to have a small to medium-sized effect on moderate activism intentions. This effect was significantly stronger (approximately 50% more intense) for radical activism intentions, where participants reported higher intentions to engage in violent and/or illegal behaviour in response to uncertainty. Meanwhile, the self-affirmation opportunity successfully lowered moderate activism intentions back to normal levels, but only partially reduced the uncertainty effect on radical intentions. In both cases, it should also be noted that this mitigating effect of affirming personal values was only marginally statistically significant.

As outlined earlier, this study was also used as an opportunity to empirically test other potential contributing factors based on previous research on political violence. In particular, the two personality traits agreeableness and neuroticism were measured alongside social attachment to ‘family’, ‘the state’, ‘the people’ and ‘friends’, as well as socio-demographic background information.

Regression analysis showed no substantial predictive power of the two personality traits on moderate activism intentions, especially when accounting for socio-demographic differences between the participants. However, both agreeableness and neuroticism were weakly but statistically significantly related to radical activism intentions, with agreeableness (a marker for compassion and politeness) predicting lower readiness to engage in this form of political action, and neuroticism (a marker for withdrawal and volatility) having a positive association.

Perceived social attachment to ‘family’, ‘the people’ and ‘friends’ did not predict either outcome by a noticeable amount except for small negative associations of attachment to ‘family’ and ‘friends’ with radical activism intentions; however, these relationships are not statistically significant when accounting for socio-demographic differences between participants.

By contrast, social attachment to ‘the state’ had a small but highly significant, positive relationship with readiness to engage in moderate activism behaviour that is unaffected by controlling for socio-demographic background. Although only to a small extent, feeling closer to one’s state predicts a higher readiness to become a peaceful/legal activist, but not a violent/illegal activist.

In a more detailed analysis, it was revealed that while not being strong predictors themselves, personal characteristics may play a role in determining how effective the main mechanisms of uncertainty and self-affirmation are. In particular, results indicate that the effects on radical intentions were stronger for participants who scored high on neuroticism, indicating that volatile-withdrawn personalities are more responsive to the assumed mechanisms and more easily ‘go to extremes’ when feeling uncertain. Meanwhile, the effects on moderate intentions were stronger among those participants who felt more attached to their family. One possible explanation is that this group of people may be more oriented towards communal values and thus willing to participate in activist groups, while still being grounded in social norms that prevent them from becoming radical activists. However, both of these findings should be interpreted with caution since an adequate statistical analysis of multi-dimensional relationships would require significantly larger samples.

8. New approaches to political violence in Iraq

Most people are creatures of habit. We like to be in control, anticipate future events and maintain a distinct self-image. But when our perspectives are challenged, it can leave us feeling uncomfortable and anxious about ourselves.

Psychology helps to understand the different ways in which people react to uncertainty. For instance, traditional explanations include outright denial or adjusting one’s behaviour. By contrast, self-affirmation theory argues that people may attempt to intensify other aspects of their self. As research has shown, such compensatory reactions can manifest in ‘going to extremes’ by hardening political views and discriminating against other groups.

[29] For a technical paper discussing the full experimental design, statistical methods and results in depth, please contact the author directly at n.u.mallock@alumni.lse.ac.uk

Inspired by these insights, this study finds that in addition to changing attitudes, uncertainty may be a contributing factor for engagement in political violence in Iraq. When being reminded of their mortality, participants expressed a higher readiness to enage in activism behaviour, particularly for radical forms of political expression such as joining a violent protest or attacking security forces. This effect was partially mitigated when participants were given an opportunity to reflect on important personal life values.

A key limitation needs to be considered when interpreting these results. Instead of observing actual behaviour during protests, readiness to engage was only measured as self-reported activism intentions. Consequentially, there is a risk that for some participants the true likelihood to become an activist, whether moderate or radical, is lower than what has been stated in the experiment — for example, because the risks involved in such behaviour are only realised when facing the decision to actually engage or not. Alternatively, participants may not be able to accurately predict how they would act in the scenarios featured in the questions asked, or deliberately report lower intentions in order to hide their true attitudes. On the other hand, the chosen study design has the advantage of collecting primary data in an experimental setting, allowing for the controlled testing of hypotheses which would not be possible in observational research. Additionally, full anonymity was provided to participants in order to maximise accuracy of responses.

Re-thinking the prevention of violent extremism

As outlined previously, recent PCVE strategies by international organisations, NGOs and governments have generally focused on broad educational programmes to promote cultural or political values and build behavioural resilience against radicalisation. Given a variety of challenges from defining appropriate target groups to evaluating the effectiveness of measures, many experts call for additional research and a critical re-evaluation of existing approaches.

The results of this study can contribute to this discussion in a number of ways. First, primary data from experimental field research in Iraq is rare, particularly in the specific context of political violence. Furthermore, a large study sample was recruited from across the country and a diverse range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, thus not falling victim to key shortcomings of previous research (e.g., selection bias). Even though representativeness can not be conclusively determined in the absence of reliable national statistics, the sample is considered diverse enough to allow generalisations to the overall Iraqi population.

More importantly however, the findings of this study offer a fundamentally new perspective on understanding and preventing political violence in Iraq. Policymakers should consider these insights and incorporate them into existing PCVE efforts.

Since uncertainty was found to be a relevant factor for people's willingness to engage in radical activism, an initial response could be to try and limit the general amount of uncertainty that people are exposed to. For instance, frequently reported sources of personal uncertainty are related to the economy and financial stability. Therefore, policies could be oriented towards protecting individuals from unexpected economic shocks by establishing comprehensive social security systems, providing unemployment support or fiscal stimuli. The reduced potential for uncertainty among the general public should then in theory lead to fewer people 'going to extremes' on their political attitudes, group discrimination and behavioural intentions to become violent activists.

However, it should be noted that both uncertainty and self-affirmation effects were not exclusive to radical activism behaviour, but also affected readiness to engage in legal and non-violent activism, albeit to a lesser degree. Interventions aiming at mitigating uncertainty-driven radicalism would thus likely also influence behaviour that is usually seen as a core element of democratic civil society — for instance, joining peaceful protests and advocating for social change. Overall, such blanket measures would have little chance of success in practice — not only in light of the political climate in Iraq, but also because the idea of effectively protecting people from all uncertainty in their lives would clearly be a hopeless endeavour. In reality, feelings of uncertainty and challenges to our self-perception are inherent and frequent parts of our lives.

Instead, a more appropriate interpretation of the findings in this study is to understand the self-affirmation mechanism as one risk factor for radicalisation, and focus on counteracting it on the individual level. Measures in this context could be facilitated in two ways. First, existing PCVE programmes by the government or NGOs can be extended to include workshops on developing a generally more rational and calm mindset. Statistical analysis of the data suggests that being volatile (for instance, having frequent mood swings) can amplify the risk of uncertainty-driven activism intentions. While neuroticism as a personality trait is considered relatively stable over time and is thus unlikely to change dramatically, raising awareness of how emotions can influence our actions may help reduce unfavourable reactions to uncertainty. The second option is to focus on providing alternative self-affirmation opportunities, which were shown to be at least partially effective as a countermeasure against uncertainty-driven intentions to engage in radical activism. In practice, policymakers should consider ways to help people

sharpen their individual self-image and 'be themselves' — for example by encouraging individualism in society and thus reducing people's dependency on group identities and a sense of belonging. Youth outreach programmes can be implemented to consciously plan and discuss individual life goals, and support citizens in their own character development. At the same time, PCVE initiatives should continue to promote openness to diverging opinions, both to counter the potential for social tension and to prevent unconscious discrimination against individuals.

Some immediate policy implications can be drawn regarding the role of personality traits, social attachment and socio-demographic background. In the search for 'root causes' of terrorism, scientific approaches as well as policy programmes in the past have repeatedly suggested propensities to violence and vulnerability based on such characteristics, either as psychological features or in the form of social context. However, within the scope of this study none of the measured characteristics were found to be substantial predictors of readiness to participate in activism behaviour in Iraq, particularly not for radical forms of engagement. Although the motives underlying political violence may be influenced by a complex mix of circumstantial and individual factors, this study concludes that characteristics alone do not serve as accurate differentiators. Policies and PCVE programmes targeting specific communities or 'terrorist profiles' should thus be critically re-evaluated in light of weak empirical support and risks of marginalising groups.

Future research suggestions

Several questions remain unanswered by this research. Further controlled testing is recommended to reach a more comprehensive understanding of uncertainty effects in the context of activism and political violence. Research should extend on these findings and validate the observed uncertainty effect using alternative threats to people's self-image. Researchers may also explore whether self-affirmation opportunities can effectively lower radical activism intentions even without a previous uncertainty induction.

Another possibility for future studies is examining context-dependency of the observed mechanisms. Does the cause or ideology of a specific movement matter for the influence of uncertainty on people's readiness to take action? Similarly, studies could investigate the observed self-affirmation mechanism in the context of other forms of activism and political violence to contribute further to the debate.

Finally, the somewhat exploratory nature of conducting field research in Iraq highlights opportunities for implementing similar experiments in other countries in the Middle East and beyond. As one example, replicating this study with a Western European study population would provide highly interesting insights into the generalisability of uncertainty as a determinant for activism intentions.

9. Conclusion

Strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism remain at the heart of modern foreign and security policy around the globe. While the threat of terrorist attacks seems to create fear particularly among societies in Western Europe and the United States, incidents of violent unrest continue to occur most frequently in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Iraq has arguably been the country most affected by politically motivated violence over the last two decades. Amidst changing governments, internal power struggles and long-lasting cultural tensions among its diverse society, Iraqis have witnessed war, terrorism and protest movements that frequently escalate into violent clashes to this day. Various efforts by international organisations, NGOs and policymakers have so far not been able to find conclusive solutions. Furthermore, a lack of robust empirical research, especially in the regional context of Iraq, complicates the search for effective prevention and countermeasures against political violence.

In cooperation with partner organisations of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation across Iraq, the author conducted this study to address the knowledge gaps and provide actionable insights for future PCVE strategies. Building on psychological research, results indicate that engagement in activism — especially in violent and illegal forms — may be a defence mechanism against feelings of personal uncertainty. Participants throughout a series of field experiments reported higher readiness for radical activism behaviour when their self-perception was threatened by uncertainty. However, this effect could partially be eliminated by an opportunity to re-affirm values that participants considered important in their lives. A range of measured personality traits, social attachment measures and socio-demographic context was, by and large, not found to be significantly predictive of both moderate and radical activism intentions, confirming criticism of theories and practices that emphasise community risk factors and 'profile'-based models.

Going forward, these findings can be utilised in order to enhance effectiveness of PCVE efforts in Iraq. Beyond existing educational programmes, uncertainty and self-affirmation represent promising new approaches to limit the risk of radicalisation and could even provide feasible countermeasures. Further research and testing in the field will contribute to a more robust understanding of political violence in Iraq, and thereby support the fight against it.

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