

How Pro-Peace Elite Messaging and Bottom-Up Counterarguments Affect Extremism:

Experimental Evidence from Northern India

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Abstract

Can pro-peace persuasion by religious or economic elites reduce religious extremism? Will such effects survive counterarguments by youth? This study uses an audio recording experiment to examine these questions in the context of religious extremism in northern India. Sunni and Shia young adult men were randomly assigned to listen to an audio message recorded by a real in-group cleric emphasizing norms discouraging violence or a real in-group shopkeeper emphasizing material considerations discouraging violence. Another treatment—listening to a counterargument to the peace message by an in-group member—tests countermessaging. Results indicate a surprising pattern: religious persuasion increases extremism the Shia sample and reduces extremism for the Sunni sample. Although these effects do not reach statistical significance within each sample, the difference between sects of the marginal effects of religious persuasion and the counterargument message are significant. The results support a novel logic involving group victimization consistent with experimental results and qualitative evidence.

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1. Introduction

To what extent can a pro-peace message from an in-group elite reduce religious extremist attitudes and behavior? Does religious persuasion differ in its effectiveness from economic persuasion? And if elite persuasion reduces extremism, can it sustain in the face of a counterargument to the peace message?

This paper investigates these questions using an audio recording experiment in the context of religious extremism among Sunni and Shia Muslims in northern India. The study was conducted in Lucknow, a city of four million people that is the capital of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, and arguably the country's second most important political center after New Delhi. In Lucknow, the Sunni-Shia conflict constitutes the city's primary ethno-political conflict, a characteristic that stands in contrast to the prevalence of Hindu-Muslim violence in other Indian cities.

The scholarly motivation for the examination of elite persuasion comes from the ethnic conflict literature, where elites play a prominent role in inciting or preventing ethnic extremism. Constructivist theories of ethnic conflict rest on the assumption that elites can successfully persuade their followers to adopt extremist attitudes and behavior toward an outgroup (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 855). Scholarly accounts claim that elites use persuasion to cause extremism and violence across several conflict types, from Sinhalese-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1992) and Hindu-Muslim riots in India (Wilkinson 2006) to civil war in Balkans (Woodward 1995). Elite persuasion is described as a necessary and preliminary step to facilitate the propagation of extremist attitudes and behavior.

Yet little is known about whether elite persuasion actually shifts followers attitudes and behaviors toward—or away from—extremism. This research gap stands in contrast to the extensive literature on persuasion in American politics, where studies have focused on policy contexts unrelated to violence.¹ For scholars of ethnic conflict and the study of religious extremism, the claim that elite persuasion is effective among followers bears scientific and practical importance.

The present study examines elite persuasion in the context of religious extremism using an audio recording experiment embedded in a survey. Religious extremism is defined as the extent of attitudinal or behavioral opposition to peaceful relations with members of another religious group.

2

¹For example, existing studies focus on U.S. domestic policy issues such as government spending (Sniderman and Theriault 2004), U.S. prison reform (Lupia and McCubbins 1998), campaign finance reform (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991), and women's rights (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach and Grube 1984).

²My definition follows prominent approaches in political science, most notably Gurr (1990). Moreover, the definition is similar to other prominent conceptualizations, including by the U.S. military, (Crossett and Spitaletta 2010, 3) and psychologists (mccauley2008mechanisms).

Based on five months of field research by the author persuasion and religious extremism in Lucknow, an experiment was designed to mimic in reverse the process by which elites radicalize non-elites. The manipulations test two types of elite persuasive appeals: an in-group religious elite detailing religious norms that prohibit extremism and an in-group economic elite presenting material considerations that undermine extremism. Original audio content was recorded with real, local religious and economic elites that was similar in content and duration for both Sunni and Shia subjects. Local actors recorded counterarguments to the peace message that provocatively emphasized sectarian differences.

To examine persuasion among the population of interest, the experiment was conducted in Lucknow's Old City, where most of the city's sectarian violence occurs. Enumerators randomly sampled 480 Sunni and Shia subjects on small side streets and shops and delivered the intervention via headphones, with audio content pre-loaded on their cell phones. Subjects were randomly assigned to listen to at most one pro-peace message and one counterargument. Causal effects were estimated on an index of religious extremism that contained both attitudinal and behavioral measures.

The findings contributes to political science research in three ways. First, in examining the cause-and-effect relationship of elite persuasion on attitudes and behavior regarding religious extremism, the study directly assesses to the plausibility of "top-down" models of persuasion to violence that are quite prominent in the literature (Brass 1991; Kaufman 2001; Fearon and Laitin 2000). It also unpacks the difference between two prominent types of persuasion in the literature: elite persuasion by an in-group religious elite emphasizing religious norms discouraging violence or by an in-group economic elite emphasizing material considerations discouraging violence. In doing so, it seeks to advance the study of the conditions under which followers 'follow', an important but understudied question (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 853-4).

Second, the study helps fill an important research gap regarding the role of religion in shaping extremism. An emerging literature on Middle East politics has examined the effect of religious primes and light frames on reducing discrimination (Masoud, Jamal and Nugent 2016; Lazarev and Sharma 2015). Yet to date, political scientists have not investigated whether religious (here: Islamic) norms, sometimes blamed as a cause of religious extremism, can be used to reduce extremist attitudes and behavior. The present study helps to fill this gap. By exposing subjects to 5 or 8 minute-long audio messages, the experiment goes beyond lighter priming interventions prominent in the persuasion literature to examine elite persuasion and counter-messaging. In finding that the difference in effects between sects of religious persuasion is significant, the study suggests conditions under which "hardened" ethnic identities(Kaufmann 1996) can be softened. It thus offers some of the first causal evidence on reducing violent extremism (Atran 2010; Fink, Romaniuk and Barakat 2013).

A third contribution is to analyze the relative strength of elite persuasion. Existing studies on ethnic conflict have not considered how counterarguments by other political actors may alter the effect of elite persuasion. This study analyzes if “top-down” pro-peace persuasion can sustain in the face of “bottom-up” persuasion in the form of a counterargument to the peace message. By exposing subjects to pro-peace elite persuasion as well as providing a counterargument, the design approximates a situation of competing frames (Druckman 2004). It shows that the effects of pro-peace persuasion by an in-group elite are eliminated by exposure to a counterargument message from an in-group youth. The finding challenges constructivist models of ethnic violence (Wilkinson 2006; Brass 1997a), suggesting that elite persuasion is more sensitive than previously understood.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines elite persuasion in the ethnic conflict literature. The following section introduces the case of Lucknow and includes insights from qualitative field research on elite persuasion in Lucknow. Section 4 explains the experimental design and experimental ethics. The fifth section presents the main experimental results. Section 6 presents an explanation of the core result—differential effects of religious persuasion between sects—and offers supporting qualitative evidence. Section 7 concludes.

2. Persuasion: Theoretical Motivation

In the second chapter of *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*, Donald Horowitz argues that constructivist accounts might overstate elite influence over interethnic sentiments Kasfir (1979), Horowitz (2001) argues that the “emotive power” of ethnic identity may constrain elites from shaping extremism among followers. The determinants of variation in “antipathies” and “affinities” among ethnic followers, he concludes, remains an open question (Horowitz 2001, 52). Motivated by this puzzle, this section draws on theoretical insights to illustrate how elites attempt to persuade their followers with regard to violence toward the outgroup. This section outlines the conceptual motivation for examining two types of elite persuasion that are particularly prominent in the ethnic conflict literature³

2.1 Persuasion by Religious Norms

This section argues that elite persuasion by norms plays a central role in constructivist models of ethnic violence. There are two types of social norms (Paluck et al. 2010). A prescriptive

³This study is focuses on real-world persuasion where there is often a symmetry between the speaker’s perceived expertise and the content of the persuasive message. It is not concerned with speaker-versus-content issues.

social norm identifies the desired attitudes and behaviors that group members ought to display. A descriptive social norm identifies the status quo attitudes and behavior of ingroup members. Here, the primary focus is on elites' use of prescriptive religious norms to signal desired attitudes and behavior toward the outgroup. Norms are described as "religious" because they are justified on the basis of explicit references to religious beliefs or practices and are propagated by members of the clergy.

Political scientists have largely studied norms in the international relations context. As Fearon (1999) explain, norms matter in the international arena because of the moral character that they take on, with norm compliance generating praise and norm violation generating some type of sanction. In his reading, a social norm requires that "a shared moral assessment is attached to its observance or non-observance" Fearon (1999, 27). In their prominent study of norm propagation on by state actors, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 895-6) outline a "life cycle" of norms that takes place in three stages: norm emergence; norm cascade; and internalization, when norms acquire a taken-for-granted standing in a social system. The authors describe norm emergence as the process by "norm entrepreneurs" seek to convince "norm leaders"—nation-states, in their case—to accept new norms. In the norm cascade stage that follows, norm leaders "attempt to socialize other states to become norm followers" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895). Within states, norm cascades strongly resemble the manner in which ethnic elites seek to persuade in-group members to adopt particular attitudes and behavior regarding extremism toward the outgroup. Political scientists studying conflict have explicitly or implicitly argued that notions of duty account drive compliance with elite normative appeals, echoing the line of reasoning in Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 912-3) regarding state compliance with norms.

Writing on Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, Brass (1997*b*, 25-6) highlighted persuasion as one of two ways in which Hindu elites cause in-group members to "believe that their problems are due to "the other" and will be solved by the other's humiliation, repression or elimination". Hindu elites propagated religious norms prescribing compliance with an exclusivist Hindu-first society "in which all must take part if they want to be true citizens"(Brass 1997*b*, 283). Wilkinson (2006, 23-4) argued that Hindu elites emphasized "ethnic wedge issues" to push co-ethnics toward extremism, often using religious "symbols and speech" in events to provoke a sense of threat from Muslims. A detailed case study of one such attempt by Hindu elites is provided by ?, 6-13, who showed how the nation-wide *Ekmata Yatra* procession in 1990 sought to shift religious norms toward extremism using symbols with "strong emotional potential". Such messaging, in that account, led to raids and the ultimate demolition by Hindu youth of the famous Babri Mosque in Uttar Pradesh.

Normative persuasion in conflict extends beyond South Asia. In reference to the Yugoslav civil war, Kaufman (2001) demonstrates how ethnic elites fueled ethnic violence by propagating

extremist norms. Kaufman (2001, 199-200) explains how Slobodan Milosevic employed communication using symbols like martyrdom and betrayal to socialize Serbs into extremist norms that included punishment of Albanian. Separately, focusing on Christian-Muslim conflict in northern Nigeria, Hackett (2011, 128) explains how clerics use radio messaging as a means of encouraging or discouraging in-group members to adopt extremism toward the other.

2.2 Persuasion by Material Considerations

A primary feature embedded in several accounts of ethnic violence is that the decision to support or participate in violence has an economic component. In particular, scholars have documented cases in which individuals are driven to violence either by a desire to receive economic gains or to systematically exclude others from enjoying such gains. Importantly, such logic represents an important departure from accounts examining the relationship between poverty *per se* and political violence (Scacco 2010; Krueger and Malečková 2003; Blair and Shapiro 2013; Mousseau 2011; Fair and Shepherd 2006).

Scholarly accounts of the role of material considerations in motivating violence are numerous and cover several conflict settings. In the Indian context, Horowitz (2001, 210-211) sheds light on the role of business rivalries in fomenting violence between Hindus and Muslims who were gaining market share in particular industries. Horowitz (2001, 2011) cites accounts from Indian scholars documenting such cases, including the 1991 attacks in Banaras on Muslim merchants selling the *sari* (a traditional garment worn by Indian women) allegedly motivated by Hindu sari merchants fearful of losing their dominant position in the *sari* trade. Analyzing violence between indigenous Assamese Hindus and Bengali Muslims in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, (Horowitz 2001, 209) explains that an attack on a major oil refinery run by a Bengali was organized by Assamese who were enraged that Bengalis received far higher employment rates at the refinery. Writing on Hindu-Muslim riots in India, Wilkinson (2006, 30) observes that Muslim businesses were often targeted by Hindu rioters in overall patterns that dealt disproportionate blows to Muslim economic welfare as opposed to the costs sustained by Hindu merchants. While neither Horowitz (2001) nor Wilkinson (2006) emphasize business rivalries as a primary cause of violence, their detailed accounts and those of the scholars whom they cite strongly suggest the worthiness of investigating whether expected economic gain motivates ethnic violence.

Other scholars have made a more direct argument that economic considerations drive religious violence. Mitra and Ray (2013) extend the Varshney-Wilkinson dataset on Hindu-Muslim riots in India to consider the period from 1950 to 2000 in which a total of 7,000 deaths were classified as related to such violence. The authors present an economic theory of conflict in which expected economic gains to the in-group or economic costs to the out-group motivate intergroup violence.

Mitra and Ray (2013, 721) find robust evidence that “an increase in the average incomes of the group—controlling for changes in inequality must raise violence perpetrated against that group. In contrast, the effect on violence perpetrated by that group on members of the other group is generally negative.” In their setting, the result means that increases in Muslim per capita expenditures significantly increases religious violence against Muslims whereas no such effect obtains when Hindu per capita expenditures increase.

3. Case Study: Lucknow

3.1 Background

Violence between members of the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam is a salient feature of the politics of many countries around the world. In India, the world’s largest democracy that often showcases itself as a model for secular governance and intergroup peace, Sunni-Shia violence continues to define the central political conflict in Lucknow, the capital city of India’s largest state.⁴ Religious violence, which has mostly been carried out by young adult men from both sects, continues to undermine the quality of the core democratic value of political tolerance in what is arguably India’s most important political center after New Delhi.

The genesis of the Sunni-Shia rift can be traced back to the first Islamic caliphate under the Prophet Muhammad. Upon the Prophet’s death, one faction of his followers (Arabic: *as-sahaba*) argued that the Prophet had wanted be succeeded by members of his bloodline beginning with Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. This faction became known as the Shia. Another more powerful faction, who came to be known as the Sunni, succeeded in installing a different successor to the Prophet. The disagreement over the Prophet’s successor, coupled with the later murder of Ali and his two sons, gave rise to differences in clerical structures and religious jurisprudence that today serve as the contextual basis for sectarian strife across the Islamic world. The Shia faith is defined by the concepts of martyrdom and victimization that attain public light in the Muslim holy month of Muharram, which lasts for 68 or 69 days in South Asia. Muharram rituals in Lucknow have come to exclusively be practiced by the Shia, with major processions featuring mock-coffins, chest-beating with spiked chains (Urdu: *zanjir matam*), and powerful elegies (*marsiyah*). In Lucknow as across the Islamic world, conservative Sunni Muslims view the Shia Muharram rituals and their emphasis on Ali and Hussein as tantamount to “idol-worship” and apostasy by undermining the Islamic tenet of a single united God (?).

⁴Interestingly in the Indian context, the city has never experienced a major act of Hindu-Muslim violence for at least the past century (Sinha 1978, 1841).

The first Sunni-Shia riot in Lucknow broke out in 1906 in response to a Sunni procession praising the first three successors of the Prophet Muhammad but not the fourth, Ali, venerated by the Shia. From that day until the present, extremist rituals This procession, known as the *madh-e-sahaba jaloos*, has become the primary religious act by conservative Sunni Muslims in Lucknow to contest the legitimacy of the Shia faith (Hasan 1998). Ever since the act was first performed, some Shia Muslims have frequently responded via a type of public chant (*tabarra*, which literally means ‘disassociation’) to emphasize their rejection of the first three caliphs, often using phrases that many Sunni find offensive. Such extremist provocations by members of both the Sunni and Shia sects tend to occur and exert maximum effect during religious processions carried out by members of both sects. Historically, nearly all Sunni-Shia violence in Lucknow has taken place in the Old City, the city’s most impoverished district that includes some 1 million inhabitants.

Sectarian violence continues to paralyze Lucknow in Muharram and extremism among the Sunni and Shia presents a primary challenge for elected officials in the city and state of Uttar Pradesh. Although less than ten major violent incidents, including riots, targeted attacks, and skirmishes, have occurred in recent years, extremist violence commands major attention by the Lucknow government. As the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), the top police official in the city, explained to the author, each year the government specifically convenes a peace committee tasked with minimizing the risk of Muharram violence. The committee is assembled of leading religious clerics from both sects, community organizers, and police officers, and manages tasks ranging from encouraging clerics to instruct their followers to remain peaceful to finalizing routes for religious processions. Peace committees are supplemented by riot control police officers stationed during Muharram, as well as Special Police Officers (Hindi: *Vishesh Police Adhikari*), who are un-armed local community members trained to diffuse tensions and report incidents to armed officers. In 2014, government began operating drones in the Old City during Muharram. Extremism is thus a priority for the Lucknow government.

3.2 Case Justification

The decision to examine persuasion and extremism among the Sunni and Shia of Lucknow was based on three main reasons. First, persuasion by religious and economic elites is a salient feature of local conflict in the Old City neighborhood. As the examples in the next section make clear, religious clerics from both sects frequently make normative appeals encouraging or discouraging extremism while small businessmen and shopkeepers tend to concentrate on material arguments against extremism. The presence of both types of messages means that Lucknow’s persuasion dynamics resemble those in many other conflict settings studied by political scientists.

The second reason for the selection of this case is that offers insights into the broader phe-

nomenon of elite construction of conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims throughout the Islamic world. Extremism among Sunni and Shia youth characterizes relations between many Sunni and Shia youth not only in India but in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Although local causes of conflict vary in these different settings, the general problem of support or participation in targeted violence on the basis of sectarian affiliation obtains in all cases. The present study seeks to add insights on these issues as a means of complementing an emerging line of political science research on sectarian politics (Weidmann and Salehyan 2013; Corstange 2012*a,b*).

The final reason for case selection relates to the feasibility of implementing a sensitive experiment. In contrast to other settings of ethnic and religious conflict, the Old City of Lucknow serves as a relatively accessible conflict setting to administer an audio recording experiment. In contrast to other urban settings where militiamen or criminals would pose a substantial threat to enumerators and subjects, Lucknow is largely a stable city where there is a low risk of threats like kidnapping or violence to research staff or experimental participants. These features help establish the Old City as a relatively safe, real-life laboratory in which social scientists can study the general relationship between persuasion and extremism.

A final comment concerns scope conditions. The local government in Lucknow and the federal government in New Delhi are plausibly neutral actors with respect to conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims throughout India. The local government is furthermore relatively strong. Qualitative research conducted by the author in 2014-16 emphasized that the local government uses its law and order powers to prevent and resolve conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This sets an important scope condition on the generalizability of the experimental findings in this study.

3.3 Qualitative Methods Used

This section describes the means by which qualitative work was conducted. Field research was implemented by the author for about five months. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method employed in addition to participant observation. A total of 70 unique interviews were completed with politicians, religious clerics, shopkeepers, police officers, journalists, NGO officers, and academics. Interviews primarily occurred in the Hindi and Urdu languages and at times Persian.

Access to subjects was made possible through a “deep hanging out” approach (Geertz 1998). Significant time was invested to develop a network of contacts in New Delhi and Lucknow. Initial interviews with academics and journalists led to a list of target interviewees in the Old City neighborhood of Lucknow, the specific setting of the present study. Due to the sensitivity of the interview content, the author often repeatedly met with certain religious clerics and police officials

to build trust and offer transparency prior to substantive interviews. Repeated interaction with religious clerics, in particular, played a crucial role in obtaining more fine-grained comments from interviewees.

An important aspect of the qualitative research involved subject confidentiality. Formal interviews started with an establishment of mutually agreed-upon ground rules. Religious clerics often gave permission for their full names to be used in resulting research products. Other subjects insisted on reference to their first name or to their general position in society in exchange for offering sensitive information or provocative opinions.

3.4 Summary of Insights on Persuasion in Lucknow

This section presents a summary of findings from my qualitative research on elite persuasion in Lucknow. These insights motivated theoretical expectations as well as experimental design.

The first main lesson emphasized that although some Sunni and Shia clerics publicly disseminate pro-peace messages referencing in-group religious norms, Old City youth appeared to be rarely familiar with the details of message arguments. In separate interviews, leading Shia *maulanas* such as Maulana Syed Kalbe Sadiq and Sunni *maulanas* like Maulana Khaled Rashid Farangi Mahalli explained how they deploy normative messages to peace in lectures at local schools, mosques, and in personal conversations with youth. Both clerics noted, however, that messages contrary to peace were often made more frequently and with greater resonance by more extremist clerics. The author's interviews with Sunni and Shia young adult men appeared to fall in line with this viewpoint. In both sects, several youth acknowledged to the author their awareness of pro-peace messages by various clerics. Yet upon further questioning, most respondents struggled to offer examples of such arguments with reference to theology. These insights suggested that pro-peace norms have not yet reached the stage of "internalization" in the norm production process (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) among Old City youth.

Second, qualitative evidence highlighted the important economic costs of extremism to both sects, but suggested that many Old City youth often perceive such costs as acceptable by-products of a necessary political struggle. Existing ethnographic research on violence among Sunni and Shia Muslims in Lucknow supports the view that expectations of economic gain can drive violence. 8 explains how the booming real estate industry in Lucknow has fueled violence in many cases by local Sunni strongmen concerned about losing their market share to developers from the minority Shia community. In the author's interviews with riot-control police officers and small businessmen from both sects, a consistent line of commentary focused on how extremism led to physical dam-

age and side-effects like government-imposed curfews that temporarily hobble economic life.⁵ A senior Central Bureau of Investigation official explained that locals “stock-up” on food and other staples during Muharram in anticipation of economic disruption. The Small Business Association, which includes shopkeepers from both sects, frequently protest at the Akbari Gate thoroughfare in the Old City in an effort to dissuade extremists from engaging in violence. Even still, most Sunni and Shia youth respondents held the view that extremism toward the other group did not hurt the economic interests of one’s own group. Upon further conversation, many respondents admitted that they perhaps lacked complete information on the impact of their actions on their own group’s economic life. Such insights informed the experimental design in manipulating exposure to an in-group shopkeeper emphasizing material considerations discouraging violence.

The third main insight is that religious messaging by clerics appeared to be more influential than economic messaging by shopkeepers in shaping youth extremism. Youth respondents frequently emphasized the importance of religious clerics in setting acceptable standards of behavior toward the outgroup. Several noted that clerical injunctions carried normative weight that served as an important potential sanction for noncompliance, noting the costs for instance of not participating in an extremist ritual if asked to do so. In Lucknow, as in many conflict settings, clerical influence has historical roots. One Sunni respondent, Nihal, for instance, drew attention to Lucknow’s status as a center of Sunni learning, with its famed *Nadwatul Ulema* seminar, as an explanation for the power of the Sunni clergy. Shia respondents, too, emphasized the Shia clergy’s influence in leading Shia seminaries established during Lucknow’s status as the capital of a Shia kingdom until 1857. Unlike economic elites, youth respondents pointed out, even moderately-influential religious clerics could use normative appeal to achieve political goals. Shia respondents referenced their clerics’ involvement in bringing the sect together as part of year-long campaign protesting the Islamic State group. Sunni respondents highlighted how their clerics similarly vouched for Muslim political rights at home and served as social guardians who maintained important religious customs.

In contrast, economic elites in Lucknow who advocate for peace appeared to be less influential. Although groups such as the inter-group Lucknow Small Business Association periodically hold rallies to protest the economic costs of extremism, the author’s qualitative research found that such events are scant and tend to resonate little beyond the immediate group of economic elites. Mohammed, a Sunni man who runs a hardware store in the Old City, was abhorred the economic costs he experienced due to riot-related curfews. Yet he expressed frustration at the lack of resonance of the economic message among Sunni youth. A similar sense of powerless was

⁵Shopkeepers lamented that curfews only took an economic toll in the Old City, the locus of sectarian violence in Lucknow, as they were never implemented in the other parts of the city.

echoed by Najmi Sahib, a Shia small businessman in the Old City's Kashmir Mohalla enclave. He protested that businessmen like him could do little to affect violent youth in ways that Shia clerics could. Several other small businessmen held the view that if their arguments were heard by their own youth, it could lead to a reduction in extremism.

Lastly, qualitative research emphasized the prevalence of counter-arguments to peace messaging as a means of reinforcing extremism. In one Shia religious gathering (known as a *majlis*) attended by the author, an extremist Shia cleric moved an audience of some sixty men and children to tears by describing Imam Ali's murder as a terrorist attack akin to ISIS attacks on the Shia in Iraq. Participants later insisted that the sectarian gulf "could not" be bridged by interfaith dialogue. In a separate interview, a Shia youth who proudly described himself as "the first to throw a stone in any riot" argued that he and many others like him could "undo" broad calls to peace by clerics. In a separate interview in the riot-prone Patanala neighborhood of Lucknow, Sunni youth emphasized how those who might be temporarily moved by a clerical calls to unity still return and live in neighborhoods where even a few extremist clerics or their followers dominate local chatter to reinforce hatred. Youth in Belojpura and Chowk districts explained how extremists take to loudspeakers to blast extremist rhetoric in the evenings so as to reverse any effects of calls to peace by clerics earlier in the day.

This study proceeds with the following expectations. First, pro-peace persuasion is expected to reduce religious extremism for both Sunni and Shia subjects. Second, pro-peace persuasion is expected not to reduce religious extremism in the presence of a counterargument to the peace message. Third, pro-peace normative persuasion by an in-group cleric will more effectively reduce extremism than economic persuasion by an in-group shopkeeper.

4. The Experiment: Sampling and Design

4.1 Sampling

I conducted an original survey with an embedded experiment on a random, representative sample of 480 young adult males (240 Sunni and 240 Shia) in Lucknow's Old City. Within the Old City, I sampled the Sunni and Shia subjects from 21 pre-selected neighborhoods (Urdu: *mohalleh*). Neighborhoods were selected with the consultation of local enumerators and local experts in order to obtain variation on pre-existing levels of religious extremism as well as variation in inter-sect demographics population, including both homogenous and heterogenous areas.

Experimental subjects were selected via uniform sampling by a male enumerator who shared the subject's sectarian identity. Following this process, enumerators were instructed to survey every third male adult starting from a random point on streets in each neighborhood. Subjects were

approached in small shops, cafes, and side streets. The decision to use co-sectarian enumerators was made on the basis of my field research in Lucknow that underscored that Sunni and Shia young men generally feel more comfortable expressing sensitive attitudes to members of their own sect.

Each potential respondent was immediately told that their responses to the study questionnaire would be kept confidential and that their identity would never be publicly tied to their individual responses. Respondents were further told that they would receive a chocolate at the conclusion of the survey as compensation for their time.⁶ This approach led to a relatively high response rate of 80 percent among the Shia sample and 75 percent among the Sunni sample. Descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in the appendix (A2).

Randomized assignment to treatment was conducted before the implementation of the survey experiment. Blocking on each enumerator, a list of subject ID numbers was randomly assigned to one of the five experimental groups described below. Enumerators then delivered the appropriate audio recording—or none in the case of the control group—by following their specific pre-made treatment schedule.

4.2 Survey Structure

The survey began with a series of background questions on the respondent's socioeconomic status, years of religious education, in-group peers, out-group peers, religious observance, and identity preferences. These particular questions were included because they capture variables that have been found to predict religious extremism. To obtain a measure of an individual's violent peers, subjects were asked to state the number of their co-sectarian peers who had participated in sectarian violence in the past. To obtain a measure of prior outgroup contact, subjects were also asked to state the number of outgroup members that they consider to be their friends. The questionnaire also included questions on religious observance, specifically, the number of times per week that the subject visits a local mosque to conduct prayers. Other studies have found significant but conflicting relationships between prayer attendance and extremism (Ginges et al. 2009; Fair et al. 2012; Tessler & Nachtwey 1998). Finally, the question asked respondents about their identity preferences: respondents were asked to choose the identity category that best described them from a list of 5 categories – age group, economic group, sectarian group, religious group, and nationality. Previous studies have found religious identification (here: sectarian identification) to be predictive of support for violence toward the outgroup (Sidanius et al. 2004; Fischer, Greitemeyer and Kastenmüller 2007).

⁶Respondents were not financially compensated for their time on the advice of local community members and NGO officers. The concern was that even small financial payments might fuel local suspicions regarding the motives of the survey team, including suspicion of connections to external actors like Iran or Saudi Arabia.

4.3 Experimental Design

After administering the background questions, enumerators administered the intervention to the treatment groups. The intervention was a single audio recording that was pre-loaded on the enumerators' cell phones and administered to subjects using a set of sterile headphones. The design features five distinct experimental conditions. Subjects were assigned to listen to at most one pro-peace message (religious or economic) and among the subjects who heard a peace message, some subjects heard a counter-argument to the peace message.⁷

In the pure control condition, subjects received no audio recording and proceeded directly to the outcome measures. In the *Cleric* condition, subjects were assigned to listen to a 5 minute audio recording from a real, local, in-group religious cleric (Urdu: *maulana*) who detailed religious norms discouraging extremism toward the outgroup. In the *Cleric and Counterargument* condition, subjects were assigned to listen to a 8-minute audio recording that contained the 5-minute cleric audio recording and a 3-minute recording from an in-group young adult male who made a counterargument to peace message. In the *Shopkeeper* condition, subjects were assigned to hear a 5-minute audio recording from a local in-group shopkeeper who detailed material considerations discouraging extremism toward the outgroup. In the *Shopkeeper and Counterargument* condition, subjects were assigned to hear an 8-minute recording that featured the 5-minute shopkeeper recording and the same 3-minute counterargument audio used in the *Cleric and Counterargument* condition. As mentioned earlier, different audio recordings were created for the Sunni and Shia samples.

Table 1 shows the experimental setup by for the pooled sample. The setup for each religious sect sample is the same as for the pooled sample, with the exception of the number of subjects in each condition. In each of the Sunni and Shia samples, the total N was 240 and the number of subjects assigned to each condition was precisely half of the number of subjects assigned to each condition in the pooled sample.

Overall, this design takes the form of a $(2 * 2 + 1) * 2$ design.

⁷For subjects who heard a peace message and the counterargument, the order of the messages was randomized in order to address “recency and primacy” effects.

Table 1: Basic Experimental Setup: Pooled Sample

	Cleric Shopkeeper None		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
(A) Without CA	60	120	
(B) With CA	60	120	
(C) Control			120

$N = 480$

4.4 Outcome Measures

In all five experimental conditions, the intervention was followed by three sets of questions: [1] four questions on hypothetical extremist behavior measured using 7-point Likert scales; [2] seven social distance questions measured as binary variables; and [3] three behavioral tasks designed to measure public, tolerant behavior toward the outgroup that were measured as binary variables. An individual-level *Composite Index* of religious extremism was made by averaging the values of each of the three standardized indexes and re-standardizing the new index in order to allay multiple comparisons concerns.⁸

First, the four attitudinal measures comprised a single *Extremist Attitudes Index* that was standardized. The same questions were used for Sunni and Shia respondents with the only change being that the words “Sunni” and “Shia” were used appropriately for each respective sample’s survey. Enumerators preceded the administration of the *Hypothetical Behavior Index* questions by reading subjects a one-sentence scenario that respondents were told to imagine as a hypothetical scenario: “*Imagine that it is Muharram and a Sunni man in Lucknow heard that a Shia maulana has insulted Sunnis.*”

Respondents were then asked how much they would support an in-group member who responded to this hypothetical provocation by one of the following violent extremist behaviors: [1] throwing a stone at a Shia religious procession; [2] attacking a Shia friend for issuing an anti-Sunni Facebook post; [3] using a street loudspeaker to call the Shia non-Muslims; and [4] attack a Shia store. The hypothetical scenario and associated vignettes were crafted to correspond to real

⁸The basis for also including attitudinal measures stems from Neumann (2013), who argues that “cognitive” and “behavioral” extremism are inter-related and that the study of one enhances the understanding of the other as well as the full process of radicalization.

life scenarios uncovered by qualitative field research. Subjects were asked to state their support for a violent action taken by an ingroup member⁹ using a 7-point Likert scale, with higher values indicating higher extremism.¹⁰ To maintain consistency in the outcome measure for both Sunni and Shia subjects, I used the same exact hypothetical provocative scenario and four hypothetical violent reactions for the Sunni and Shia subjects.

Second, respondents were asked a battery of seven questions to gauge social distance to the out-group. These questions employed binary measures of seven items from the standard BOGARDUS social distance scale. The survey concluded with three behavioral tasks to measure a respondent's willingness to conduct real-world behaviors that supported non-violence toward the out-group. Pro-peace measures were employed due to the ethical problem of asking subjects to engage in extremist behaviors. The decision to not complete a behavioral task in a pro-peace direction is thus interpreted as extremist behavior. The first item measured if the subject signed a Hindi-language petition presented to the subject that condemns those who create sectarian violence in Lucknow.¹¹ The second measure recorded if the respondent purchased a 5-rupee (about 5 U.S. cents) wristband stating "Sunni-Shia Unity" in Urdu and pledged to wear it.¹² Purchasing and wearing the wristband thus included a small but not insignificant financial cost as well as the expected cost of being seen wearing the wristband by extremists. The third measure asked respondents to provide the phone number of an in-group peer to receive an SMS invite to a pro-peace meeting. Each behavioral measure was scored as a binary variable, with a value of 1 indicating the refusal to endorse non-violence toward the outgroup, i.e., extremist behavior. For analysis purposes, the *Hypothetical Behavior Index*, *Social Distance Index*, and *True Behavior Index* were each standardized.

4.5 Designing the Intervention

The author worked with message speakers to design audio content. Following message design, the message speakers recorded their audio messages. Each speaker provided their consent for their recording to be disseminated for study purposes among local youth. Each cleric and shopkeeper stated his full name and clerical status, and the counterargument speakers used pseudonyms that signaled their respective sects. Section A1 in the Appendix contains the English-language transcripts of each message. Appendix A3 provides a full discussion of the steps taken to address

⁹For ethical and security reasons, respondents were asked about their support for an in-group member's extremist response rather than their personal inclination.

¹⁰The scale is: 1 ("I strongly oppose this action"); 2 ("I oppose this action, but only a little bit."); 3 ("I oppose this action."); 4 ("Neutral"); 5 ("I support this action, but only a little bit."); 6 ("I support this action."); and 7 ("I strongly support this action").

¹¹Subjects were told that their responses would not be made public.

¹²Respondents were told that proceeds wristband sales would be donated to a local inter-group peace NGO.

ethical considerations in the experiment.

First, the Sunni and Shia clerical messages were crafted to contain similar content. Both messages emphasized the Quran as the primary source of unity between the sects; religious prohibitions against violence; and the examples of the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali in showing restraint and compassion even in the face of provocation or conspiracy. In order to maintain realistic differences in messaging styles, the Sunni and Shia clerics at times made references to in-group religious norms to build their case. Both speakers employed comparable tones and styles in their message delivery, with a total duration of 5 minutes for each message.

Second, a similar approach was taken for the shopkeeper messages. The Sunni and Shia shopkeepers briefly described their industry and then detailed examples of how riots had hurt their business by disrupting supply chains, affecting employee attendance, and temporarily suspending store hours. Both speakers made references to the in-group economic costs of the 2013 riots. Finally, each message explicitly called listeners to strongly consider the economic costs to the in-group of engaging in violence against the outgroup. Practicing peace, speakers argued, would lead to greater economic opportunities for in-group members. Each message was 5 minutes in duration.

Lastly, a counterargument to the peace message was recorded with a local actor from each sect. Counterarguments were designed for dissemination to in-group members, and in other words, functioned as a type of reminder of the presence of in-group extremists seeking to oppose unity. For ethical reasons, message content featured provocative but commonly repeated criticisms of the out-group. Both messages focused on well-known disagreements over prayer style; the validity of the first three (Sunni) caliphs after the Prophet Muhammad; and the false rumor that the Shia use a different Quran than the Sunni. Stylistically, these differences were exaggerated and presented as roadblocks to peace in the manner done by extremist entrepreneurs in the Old City. For ethical reasons, all subjects exposed to a counterargument in the intervention were debriefed at the end of the experiment's second endline and told that the message was made by a local, pro-tolerant individual who was acting for the purpose of the academic study.

5. Experimental Results

The main objective is to analyze the average treatment effects of the interventions on the dependent variable, the *Composite Index* of religious extremism, which is a standardized index. The inclusion of these three sub-indexes into the *Composite Index* is supported by the sufficiently high Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the full sample ($\alpha = 0.6989$).

Descriptive statistics for the sample are presented in the Appendix in Table A1. Section 5.1 presents experimental results within the Sunni and Shia samples without covariate adjustment. Section 5.2 presents experimental results between the two samples and as well as results with

covariate adjustment.

5.1 Average Treatment Effects By Sample

Table 2 presents a factorial analysis of average treatment effects for the pooled sample, the Sunni sample, and the Shia sample using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. Specifications in Table 2 do not include covariate adjustment or *Sampling Area* fixed effects. Missingness in the dependent variable resulted in the construction of *Composite Index* of religious extremism for 219 Sunni subjects and 179 Shia subjects.

To help facilitate the interpretation of average treatment effects, I created three treatment dummy variables that were demeaned. Point estimates are thus interpreted as the marginal effect of a particular treatment dummy averaged over the effects of the other treatments. Higher values in the dependent variable indicate higher religious extremism. Negative point estimates thus indicate a reduction of extremism.

Table 2: Average Treatment Effects: Pooled Sample and By Sect

	<i>DV: Composite Index, Standardized</i>		
	Overall	Sunni Sample	Shia Sample
Cleric	0.050 (0.123)	-0.048 (0.151)	0.187 (0.164)
Someargument (SA)	0.083 (0.172)	0.052 (0.207)	0.220 (0.237)
Counterargument(CA)	-0.188 (0.125)	-0.002 (0.154)	-0.344** (0.168)
Cleric*CA	0.139 (0.246)	0.316 (0.302)	-0.043 (0.329)
Constant	-0.012 (0.053)	0.357*** (0.064)	-0.464*** (0.071)
Observations	398	219	179
Adjusted R ²	-0.003	-0.013	0.011
F Statistic	0.713	0.291	1.498

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
2. Standard errors in parentheses.

The treatment dummy *Cleric* is a dichotomous variable scored as 1 if the subject was assigned to an audio recording that contained the cleric as speaker rather than a shopkeeper. Two types of subjects received a score of 1 for *Cleric*: those who were assigned to hear only the pro-peace

cleric message and those who were assigned to hear the pro-peace cleric message and the counterargument. Subjects assigned to hear a shopkeeper or to control were scored as 0. The treatment dummy *Some argument* (SA) is a dichotomous variable scored as 1 if the subject was assigned to hear *some* argument, i.e., not assigned to the pure control condition. The treatment dummy *Counterargument* (CA) is a dichotomous variable scored as 1 for subjects who were assigned to hear a counterargument regardless of whether or not the pro-peace speaker was a cleric or shopkeeper. Lastly, the variable *Cleric*CA* is the product of the demeaned *Cleric* and *Counterargument* variables. As such, a value of 0.5 for *Cleric*CA* indicates that a subject heard a pro-peace argument from an in-group cleric as well as a counterargument to peace.

Three primary findings obtain. First, for the pooled and Sunni sample, there were no significant average treatment effects. Second, for the Shia sample, *Counterargument* significantly reduced ($p < 0.05$) religious extremism by 0.344 standard deviations. This result was contrary to expectations as the counterargument was expected to increase religious extremism. Third, the results show that there were differential effects of pro-peace persuasion and the counterargument message among religious sects. Whereas religious persuasion had a tendency to reduce extremism among the Sunni sample, it increased religious extremism among the Shia sample. Moreover, the counterargument message had an estimated null effect for the Sunni sample whereas it had a strong and negative effect on religious extremism for the Shia sample.

Tables 3 and 4 provide a closer look at the average treatment effects within the Sunni and Shia samples, respectively. Relative to Table 2, these tables reveal greater detail regarding the marginal effect of pro-peace religious persuasion versus economic persuasion as well as well as the differences in treatment effects in the presence or absence of a counterargument. For clarity, rows are tagged as A-F and columns are tagged as 1-4. For example, cell 1A refers to the Sunni sample group mean of the Composite Index for subjects assigned to the “Cleric only” experimental group. Cell 3C refers to the mean value of the Composite Index for Sunni subjects assigned to the “Pure Control” condition.

Effects within the “Cleric Only” or “Cleric and Counterargument” condition are presented in column 1, while column 2 presents such results for the “Shopkeeper Only” condition. Lastly, the bottom section of the table. For ease of interpretation of the marginal effect of the religious norms persuasion condition (“Cleric”) versus the material considerations persuasion condition (“Shopkeeper”), column 4 shows the marginal average treatment effects of “Cleric” versus “Shopkeeper”.

There are three main conclusions. First, I find no support for the first hypothesis: in the absence of a counterargument, neither persuasion by religious norms nor persuasion by material considerations caused a significant effect on the *Composite Index*, as shown in cells 1D and 2D. Next, the counterargument exerted an effect in the opposite direction of both pro-peace messages such that the *Composite Index* approaches zero, especially when paired with the religious norms

Table 3: **Sunni Sample:** Group Means, ATEs, and Marginal ATE of *Cleric*

	<i>Sunni Sample: Effects on Composite Index</i>			
	Cleric (1)	Shopkeeper (2)	None (3)	Marginal ATE of Cleric vs. Shopkeeper (4)
(A) Without CA	0.242 (0.176)	0.447 (0.122)		-0.205 (0.223)
(B) With CA	0.437 (0.118)	0.327 (0.132)		0.110 (0.189)
(C) Control			0.395 (0.110)	
(D) ATE with No CA	-0.153 (0.208)	0.052 (0.165)		-0.205 (0.223)
(E) ATE with CA	0.041 (0.162)	-0.068 (0.172)		0.110 (0.189)
(F) ATE of CA	0.195 (0.228)	-0.120 (0.186)		0.316 (0.294)

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
2. Standard errors in parentheses.

message (cell 1E). The marginal effect of the counterargument is not statistically differentiable in the religious norms condition as compared to the material considerations condition. This provides support for the second hypothesis on the competing frames effect. Lastly, I find no support for the third hypothesis that religious persuasion is more effective in reducing religious extremism than economic persuasion (cell 4D). Importantly, however, there is a tendency for religious persuasion to be marginally more effective in reducing extremism (cell 4D) that may be significant in a study with a larger sample.

Table 4 presents the main results for the Shia sample. Regarding the first hypothesis, the results in cells 1D and 2D suggest a pattern opposite to the one expected: both pro-peace messages increased the *Composite Index* of religious extremism, albeit not significantly. As the outcome variable in both samples is the same and standardized in both cases, it is important to observe that the size of the point estimates in cells 1D and 2D in Table 4 are also about four times larger than the point estimates in the same cells in Table 3.

Regarding the second hypothesis, the counterargument exerted a substantively large effect in the direction opposite the pro-peace message (cells 1F and 2F). However, the direction of the counterargument was opposite the one expected: the inclusion of a counterargument reduced the *Composite Index* regardless of whether the pro-peace message was religious or economic. Al-

Table 4: **Shia Sample:** Group Means, ATEs, and Marginal ATE of *Cleric*

	<i>Shia Sample (N=240): Effects on Composite Index</i>			
	Cleric (1)	Shopkeeper (2)	None (3)	Marginal ATE of Cleric vs. Shopkeeper (4)
(A) Without CA	-0.106 (0.181)	-0.315 (0.170)		0.208 (0.249)
(B) With CA	-0.477 (0.119)	-0.643 (0.110)		0.165 (0.162)
(C) Control			-0.535 (0.107)	
(D) ATE with No CA	0.429 (0.211)	0.220 (0.202)		0.208 (0.249)
(E) ATE with CA	0.057 (0.160)	-0.107 (0.154)		0.165 (0.162)
(F) ATE of CA	-0.371 (0.217)	-0.327 (0.203)		-0.043 (0.297)

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
2. Standard errors in parentheses.

though these results support the second hypothesis on the existing of a competing frames effect, it is notable that they do so with effects from each treatment arm occurring in the directions opposite those expected.

Lastly, I find some support for the third hypothesis but in the direction opposite the one expected. Relative to economic persuasion, religious persuasion has a tendency to be more effective in *increasing* religious extremism (cell 4D). Although this result does not reach statistical significance, it supports the proposition inherent in the third hypothesis that religious elites emphasizing religious norms will be more influential than economic elites emphasizing material considerations. The reasons why this may be the case are discussed in Section 7.

5.2 Differences in Effects Between Religious Sects

Table 5 presents the difference in group means and treatment effects of persuasion between the Shia and Sunni sects for the *Composite Index*. Differences were calculated as *Shia - Sunni*. Once again, higher values in the dependent variable indicate higher religious extremism. Negative point estimates thus indicate a reduction of extremism.

From a descriptive standpoint, cells 1A, 1B, 2A, and 2B contain the difference in sect means of

Table 5: Difference in Group Means and Treatment Effects Between Sects

	Cleric (1)	Shopkeeper (2)	None (3)	Marginal ATE of Cleric Between Samples (4)
(A) Diff. in Sect Means, Without CA	-0.348 (0.253)	-0.763** (0.210)		0.414 (0.372)
(B) Diff. in Sect Means, With CA	-0.915** (0.168)	-0.970** (0.172)		0.055 (0.240)
(C) Diff in Sect Means, Control			-0.931** (0.154)	
(D) Diff. in Effects, Without CA	0.582** (0.296)	0.168 (0.261)		0.414 (0.372)
(E) Diff. in Effects, With CA	0.016 (0.002)	-0.038 (0.231)		0.055 (0.240)
(F) Diff. in Effects of CA	-0.566** (0.228)	-0.207 (0.271)		-0.359 (0.355)

1. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
2. Standard errors in parentheses.

the *Composite Index*. The data indicate that Shia subjects exposed to the religious norms persuasion and the counterargument had significantly lower values of religious extremism than the same subjects in the Sunni sample (cell 1B). The same pattern holds for Shia subjects exposed solely to the material considerations persuasion relative to their Sunni counterparts (cell 2A); Shia subjects exposed to both the material considerations persuasion and the counterargument (cell 2B); and for Shia subjects in the pure control condition compared to their Sunni counterparts (cell 3C).

Next, the results in row E of Table 5 provide further evidence of a competing frames effect that supports the second hypothesis. In particular, the overall between-sample effect of listening to a pro-peace message and a counterargument approaches a point estimate of zero.

Finally, the results indicate that difference in effects of religious persuasion between samples was about 0.414 standard deviations greater than the difference in effects of economic persuasion between samples (cell 4D). Although this marginal effect does not reach statistical significance, it suggests the effect of religious persuasion, in contrast to that of economic persuasion, is especially stark between samples.

Table 6 assists with analyzing the marginal effect of religious persuasion (relative to economic persuasion) between the Sunni and Shia groups. The table contains four models that vary the inclusion of *Sampling Area* fixed effects, *Covariates*, and the interaction of covariates with the

Shia fixed effect. The *Sampling Area* fixed effects were included to account for the fact that the survey experiment took place in a wide range of neighborhoods within Lucknow’s Old City that vary in their existing level of religious extremism. There were 21 sampling areas in total. In models where covariates are included (Models 3 and 4), the covariates are: *Employed*, *Weekly Mosque Prayer Attendance*, *Number of In-Group Violent Peers*, *Sectarian Group Identification*, *Years of Religious Education*, and *Number of Outgroup Friends*. All covariates were measured pre-treatment.¹³

Table 6: Marginal ATE of Religious Persuasion versus Economic Persuasion Between Sects

	<i>DV: Composite Index of Religious Extremism, Standardized</i>			
	Model 1 (1)	Model 2 (2)	Model 3 (3)	Model 4 (4)
(A) Diff. in Effects, Without CA	0.414 (0.329)	0.727* (0.401)	0.958** (0.399)	0.849** (0.389)
(B) Diff. in Effects, With CA	0.055 (0.240)	-0.067 (0.260)	0.048 (0.263)	-0.032 (0.264)
(C) Diff. in Effects of CA	-0.359 (0.355)	-0.746* (0.450)	-0.670 (0.444)	-0.696 (0.438)
Shia FE?	Y	Y	Y	Y
Area FE?	N	Y	Y	Y
Cov?	N	N	Y	Y
Cov*Shia?	N	N	N	Y

Note: **p<0.05

Model 1 presents the results of a difference-in-differences analysis in the absence of *Sampling Area* fixed effects and the *Covariates*. The results in Model 1 are thus the same as the results in column 4 of Table 5, which show that the difference in the marginal effect of religious norms persuasion between sects was not significant. The value in cell 1A also shows that there was a tendency for such persuasion to have a more pro-extremism effect for the Shia sample as compared to the Sunni sample.

Moving from Models 2 to 4, however, the marginal effect of religious norms persuasion reaches statistical significance. Model 2 includes *Sampling Area* fixed effects but does not include the *Covariates*. In the absence of a counterargument, the difference in the marginal effect of religious

¹³I do not impute for missingness in covariates, which was relatively low.

persuasion between sects is significant ($p = 0.098$). Moreover, the difference in marginal effects of the counterargument is significant and negative, showing that the counterargument significantly reduced extremism for the Shia.

Model 3 includes *Sampling Area* fixed effects and the *Covariates* but does not interact the covariates with the *Shia* fixed effect. The difference in the marginal effect of religious persuasion between sects strengthens, with $p < 0.05$. The size of the difference is relatively large, with a point estimate of 0.958 standard deviations in the *Composite Index* of religious extremism. As in the previous two models, the pro-extremism effect of religious persuasion for the Shia sample nearly disappears when a counterargument is included (cell 3B). The result in cell 3C indicates that the counterargument did in fact exert a more negative effect on religious extremism for the Shia sample than the Sunni sample, although the result does not reach $p < 0.01$ in this specification.

Model 4 includes both *Sampling Area* fixed effects, the *Covariates*, and an interaction between the *Shia* fixed effect and the covariates. In Model 4, the religious norms persuasion also exerts a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) effect on the Shia sample that increases extremism (cell 4A). Similar patterns regarding the difference in marginal effects of the counterargument between sects also obtain.

These results demonstrate that the difference in the marginal effect of religious persuasion (as opposed to economic persuasion) between the Sunni and Shia samples was statistically significant. The result increases in statistical significance when using covariate adjustment. It indicates that pro-peace religious persuasion, in particular, caused a more pro-extremism effect for the Shia sample that was distinguishable from the anti-extremism effect for the Sunni sample.

6. Explaining the Puzzle of Differential Effects by Sect

What might explain the differential effect among the Sunni and Shia samples of listening to pro-peace message by an in-group cleric emphasizing religious norms that prohibit violence? In this section, I suggest that the most plausible explanation for this result involves a logic of substitution that governs members of a victimized group in conflict settings. Support for this explanation comes from qualitative and historical evidence from Lucknow.

6.1 The Logic of Substitution

The logic argues that in ethnic conflict settings where one ethnic group perceives itself as victimized by the other, the effectiveness of peace messages from in-group elites among the victimized group will be governed by a substitution effect. On average, members of the victimized group who hear a call to peace by an in-group elite will perceive that call as a signal that the elite is standing

down from the role of defending the group against an external threat. After hearing that the in-group elite is “substituting-out” of violence, the message recipient will “substitute-in” to extremism by retaining or increasing prior levels of extremism defend his co-ethnics from the perceived real threat from the other ethnic group. The message recipient is expected to “substitute-out” of extremism when learning that a fellow in-group member will substitute-in to extremism. Lastly, the extent to which the victimized ingroup member substitutes-in to extremism will increase in the perceived influence of the message speaker among ingroup members.

By contrast, the substitution effect not expected to hold for members the non-victimized group. Since these individuals hold far fewer security concerns with respect to the outgroup, they are not expected to perceive compliance with an in-group peace call as a threat to in-group security. Pro-peace persuasion by in-group elite is thus expected to yield a higher rate of compliance for members of non-victimized groups relative to members of victimized groups. The strength of the pro-peace effect for members of non-victimized groups is expected to increase in the perceived influence of the message speaker among in-group members. By this logic, the main expectation is a differential average rate of compliance to a pro-peace call by an in-group elite among victimized and non-victimized group members.

First, the logic of substitution matches the core experimental result. To begin, consider the positive (and significant) effect of the religious norms persuasion and the positive (though not significant) effect of material considerations persuasion on the religious extremism for the Shia sample (Table 5, cells 1D and 2D). The results reveal the tendency for Shia (but not Sunni) subjects to increase their extremism upon hearing either the pro-peace norms message by the Shia cleric or the pro-peace materials consideration message by the Shia shopkeeper. This tendency is consistent with the notion that when Shia subjects heard an in-group elite “substituting-out” of extremism, they responded by “substituting-in”.

Next, according to the substitution logic, the size of the substitution-in to extremism among the Shia should increase in the perceived influence of the message speaker. To examine how the demographic in the experiment perceives in-group religious elites versus in-group economic elites, a separate survey of Sunni and Shia youth in the Old City was conducted following the experiment. Subjects listened to one of the two pro-peace messages used in the experiment. Results showed that subjects in each sect rated the perceived influence of the in-group cleric significantly higher than that of the shopkeeper ($p < 0.01$).¹⁴ Since clerics are perceived as more influential than the shopkeeper, one should expect that Shia subjects exposed to the pro-peace clerical message will increase their extremism more significantly than when exposed to pro-peace material considera-

¹⁴For Sunni subjects, the difference was 0.733 points and for Shia subjects, the difference was 0.600 points on 3-point scale

tions persuasion. We begin to see such a pattern in Table 5 (cell 1D), where the difference in effects of religious persuasion was significant ($p < 0.05$) and positive for the Shia sample. This is contrast to the difference in effects between sects of material considerations persuasion, which was positive but not significant. When adjusting for *Sampling Area* fixed effects as well as covariates, the difference in the marginal effect of religious persuasion between sects is significant in the absence of a counterargument (Table 6, Models 2-4). The results indicate that, relative to material considerations persuasion, religious norms persuasion increases extremism for the Shia and reduces extremism for the Sunni. The experimental design does not make it possible to unpack the important question as to whether the differential effect of the cleric versus shopkeeper is due to a perceived speaker attribute (such perceived influence) or message content (such as normative or material).

Lastly, the results support the logic of substitution by showing that the message recipient not only substitutes-in to extremism when the in-group cleric substitutes-out, but substitutes-out of extremism when another in-group member substitutes-in. Table 5 (cell 1F) shows that among Sunni and Shia subjects exposed to religious norms persuasion, the difference in effects between sects of the counterargument to the peace message is significant ($p < 0.05$). The negative point estimate indicates that the counterargument exerted a more anti-extremism effect for the Shia and a more pro-extremism effect for the Sunni. A similar pattern is evident in Table 6 (row C), where the difference in effects of the counterargument is negative and substantively large. The difference in effects of the counterargument is significant in Model 2 ($p < 0.10$) and approaches significance in the other specifications. By contrast, when comparing Sunni and Shia subjects exposed to pro-peace persuasion by material considerations, the difference in effects of the counterargument among sects is not significant (Table 5, cell 2F). Lastly, Table 6 (row B) demonstrates that the inclusion of a counterargument nearly eliminates the marginal pro-extremism effect caused by the religious norms persuasion for Shia subjects as compared to Sunni subjects. In other words, and interestingly, the antidote to extremism for Shia subjects was not the pro-peace call they heard from an in-group cleric, which yielded a statistically significant increase in extremism, but rather was driven by the counterargument message.

6.2 Qualitative Evidence

Field notes from the experiment was completed help begin to understand why this pattern may have occurred. Shia enumerators reported that multiple subjects, upon having been debriefed in the second endline about the fictitious nature of the counterargument, relayed that the message conjured images of a “stone-throwing” and “*firqavarana*” (or sectarian) Shia who would “keep us safe”. As was intended in the audio recording preparation process, that the counterargument

succeeded in generating an imaginary proxy of a violent Shia extremist countering the pro-peace Shia cleric. The qualitative insights of subjects' reactions to the audios thus yield a story consistent with a process whereby Shia subjects, upon learning that their in-group leader was "substituting-out" of violence but that their community would be defended by a fellow peer "substituting-in" to violence, reduced their extremism. On the grounds that "someone else has the situation under control", the Shia subjects reduced their pro-violent attitudes and intolerant behavior.

To obtain more rigorous insights, the author organized follow-up interviews by the Shia enumerators with a random subset of 30 original Shia experimental subjects who were treated. Enumerators succeeded in administering the follow-up survey with 24 of these subjects. Subjects were asked to re-listen to the original message to which they were assigned in order to refresh their memories. Afterwards, Shia enumerators administered a structured questionnaire aimed at understanding their perceptions of these different audio recordings.

First, the religious norms message appeared to have a more pro-extremism effect than the material considerations message. Ashu, who heard the same religious norms message, took the view the cleric's call to peace was naive: "it's easier said than done. You cannot protect yourself against such people by just asking them to sit and talk. They invade people's homes and burn and destroy them just for fun. You cannot use non-violence against them". Fahad, a Shia subject originally assigned to the religious norms message, stated that while he thought the religious cleric was entitled to his own opinion, "there is a limit to everything", and that "Sunnis are a global threat to the Shia". Another original experimental subject, Munnu, described how "in the street wars between Sunni and Shia [in Lucknow], there are uncountable threats Shias face from Sunnis", and that this religious cleric was likely "corrupt" for stating otherwise. A follow-up interview with Mubarak found that this Shia subject believed that "being peaceful does not mean that we have to lose our defense. We should always be prepared for the worst", a reply that he did not reject the call to peace *per se* but that there were overriding considerations.

By contrast, subjects originally assigned to the material considerations message appeared to express far less extremist reactions. Most subjects in these conditions who were reached by enumerators for the follow-up survey stated that the recordings reminded them of the personal economic toll of sectarian violence that they had personally witnessed. Ali, a Shia subject from the violence-prone Nakhas neighborhood in Lucknow's Old City, expressed his agreement with the Shia shopkeeper's view, explaining that "even we have a shop in Nakhas market and we know the suffering." Wahdat, another Shia subject, also agreed, explaining that riots cause his family's "savings to go down to nill" and that "we are the ones who suffer most". Asghar, who had a slightly more extreme reaction to the recording, told the enumerator that "worst-case conditions make people change their view" and that looting and murder in riot contexts lead him to feel that "one can surely fight for himself or for his family".

Whether assigned to religious norms or economic considerations, the Shia subjects recontacted for the follow-up survey frequently described themselves as the targets, rather than the initiators of violence. Asghar, who originally was exposed to the material considerations persuasion, explained that “Shias do not follow violence in Muharram. We are the ones who are victim of the riots happening here in Lucknow”. Aman, who was originally exposed to the religious norms and counterargument condition, explained that “the riots usually start from the Sunni side” due to their “extremist nature” and that the cleric’s message “was good but does not apply to a common man’s life.” Ali, who was assigned to hear the religious norms message, explained that if other Shia were to hear the Shia cleric’s call to peace in the tense month of Muharram, that “they will feel unsafe against Sunnis”. Such reactions lay bare the perception of asymmetrical threat held by Shia Muslims in Lucknow’s Old City. As described in the next section, such accounts are highly salient and widespread in the Lucknavi Shia community, and have been for decades.

The follow-up survey also helped to clarify about the apparent role of the counterargument in *reducing* extremism among Shia subjects. Follow-surveys provided anecdotal supporting evidence that Shia subjects perceived the counterargument to be indicative of a violent Shia peer, a perception that would need to be at play for the logic of substitution to be a plausible explanation. One Shia subject, Asghar, for instance, described the counterargument as a “man who sounds like a supporter of Maulana Agha Roohi”, who is widely known to be the most virulent anti-Sunni religious cleric in Lucknow’s Shia establishment. Ali stated that the “Shia man was right in this context”, particularly for noting that the Shia style of prayer was legitimate and began “in the time of Hazrat Ali”, the first Imam in the Shia faith. Ali conveyed that he felt reassured by the voice of the Shia man as he would stand up for Shia principles “at any cost”, suggesting that the counterargument may have functioned via substitution. Aman explained that he thought the religious cleric’s call to peace was out of touch, that he “does not know what happens to common people”, but that he felt less incensed when hearing the counterargument, describing its contents as “strong”. Yet not every Shia subject reacted to the counterargument in these ways. Abbas heard the counterargument and stated that “people should be positive, they shouldn’t invoke violence”, indicating that he did not sympathize with the Shia man making the counterargument and in fact openly disagreed with its provocative suggestions.

Taken together, the follow-up survey yields evidence that, on average, the religious norms persuasion apparently elicited more negative, anti-Sunni sentiments than the material considerations message among the original experimental subjects recontacted. Furthermore, these qualitative accounts also indicate a strong sense of victimization within the Shia community.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the relationship between elite persuasion discouraging extremism and attitudes and behavior among youth. Focusing on extremism between Sunni and Shia youth in Lucknow, the study employed an audio recording experiment used messages recorded with real clerics and shopkeepers among subjects living in the riot-prone Old City neighborhood. Three primary results obtained. First, pro-peace persuasion by an in-group cleric emphasizing religious norms discouraging extremism worked differently for Sunni and Shia subjects. Within each sample, the results show suggestive evidence that this manipulation reduced extremism for Sunni subjects but increased extremism for Shia subjects. Although the within-sample sects do not reach statistical significance, the difference in effects of religious persuasion between sects is significant. Second, the study presents suggestive evidence that listening to a counter-argument to the peace message by an in-group peer increased extremism for Sunni subjects, as expected, but reduced extremism for Shia subjects. Among all subjects exposed to a pro-peace clerical message, the difference in effects of the counterargument was statistically significant. Third, the results did not yield conclusive evidence on whether religious persuasion was more effective in shifting extremism than economic persuasion. They do suggest, however, that religious persuasion exerted larger effects on extremism than economic persuasion. Although statistical power limitations obtained due to the small sample size, these findings offer important implications for future research.

These findings offer three broader lessons for the study of elite persuasion and ethnic conflict. First, the study uses experimental results and qualitative evidence in support of a novel and general theoretical argument on why elite persuasion to peace is expected to function differently for members of victimized as opposed to non-victimized groups. The logic of substitution argues that victimized group members are, on average, expected to substitute-in to extremism by retaining prior extremism levels upon learning that an influential in-group elite is substituting-out of extremism. The motivation to retain extremism relates to the goal of protecting in-group security from the outgroup due to victimization. In doing so, the study lends support for a broader linkage between research on group victimization and extremist attitudes and behaviors. A wide range of ethnic groups have perceived themselves to be victimized at particular periods, from Armenians in Azerbaijan in the 1980s (Kaufman 2001, 60-70) to Palestinians in the West Bank and south Sudanese tribes. Anecdotally, political scientists have argued that victimization can generate threat perceptions causing groups to “at the very least prepare for violent conflict, and may even go so far as to engage in a preemptive strike” (Keller 1998, 277). Qualitative research has found support for this claim in settings as diverse as victimized groups in the Caucasus (Derluguian 2005) and China (Gries 2004). This study shows that victimization also has important implications for the effect of in-group elite persuasion to peace. Its specific finding on this pattern among the Shia

of Lucknow falls in line with other historical research arguing that victimization defines the Shia identity in South Asia (Jones 2011) and abroad (Dabashi 2011).

A second lesson offered by the study relates to the effectiveness of elite persuasion. The study found that religious persuasion exerts a significant effect on extremism between sects. While the present study examines persuasion away from rather than toward extremism, it offers important insights on the general relationship between elite persuasion and extremism. This finding contributes some of the first experimental evidence in support of the constructivist claim that elites affect extremist attitudes and behavior of co-ethnics (Jaffrelot 2009; Wilkinson 2006; Kaufman 2006; Brass 1997*b*). At the same time, the study also presents evidence for an important caveat to this claim. In finding that exposure to a counterargument to the peace message by an in-group peer removed the effect of pro-peace elite persuasion, the study showed that the “competitive framing effect” (Druckman 2004) also obtains in conflict settings. One implication is that “top-down” models of conflict might overstate the role of elites in shaping extremism among youth. To further interrogate this possibility, future studies should examine the survivability of elite persuasion effects in the face of counter-arguments by different elites, youth, or other socially relevant actors.

A third main contribution relates to the literature on religion and extremism. Political scientists have made important contributions as to the determinants of religious extremism among the clergy (Nielsen 2017) and among non-elites.¹⁵ However, far less attention has been given to the question of how to reduce religious extremism. The present study is one of the first to provide direct experimental tests in this regard. It supports a line of thought and practice that employs religious normative persuasion to reduce extremism, while noting why such persuasion may not succeed for victimized group members. By contrast, persuasion by an in-group shopkeeper emphasizing material considerations does not suggest shifts in extremism either within- or between- religious sects.

Two final remarks concern generalizeability and limitations of the present study. First, the study focuses on the general phenomenon of elite persuasion via norms or material considerations with respect to extremism. As such, both the conceptual motivation and theoretical argument are not constrained to the conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Lucknow nor to intra-Islamic conflict more generally. Even still, in the study setting, the local government and police force plays a plausibly neutral role with respect to Sunni-Shia conflict, using its law and order powers to prevent or mitigate conflict. The presence of a neutral government differs from other conflict settings, where the government may be partial to one side (Wilkinson 2006). This places

¹⁵See, for instance, on grievances (Blair and Shapiro 2013; Krueger and Malečková 2003), psychology-related variables (Altier, Thoroughgood and Horgan 2014; Borum 2004; Akhtar 1999), religiosity (Fair, Malhotra and Shapiro 2012; Ginges, Hansen and Norenzayan 2009), social network effects (Della Porta 2006; Sageman 2004).

an important scope condition on the experimental findings here. In future research, scholars can investigate whether similar effects obtain when the government tacitly or directly supports either the victimized or non-victimized group against the other. If extrapolated, the substitution logic would expect that as a government's support to the non-victimized group increases, victimized group members are expected to be more likely to retain or increase extremism when exposed to a pro-peace call by an influential in-group elite. Additional experimental research would be fruitful in examining this expectation.

The last comment relates to the limitations of the present study. Owing to limited sample size, statistical power limitations are a plausible explanation for why average treatment effects within-sect did not reach statistical significance. However, the results offer important evidence of the substitution effect due to the the average treatment effects within sects—which were in opposite directions—and the differences between sects of in-group religious norms persuasion and the counterargument to the peace message—which were statistically significant. In a follow-up experiment conducted by the author in the same setting with 2,100 Sunni and Shia subjects, the results found that in-group clerical persuasion significantly reduced extremism among the Sunni but did not do so among the Shia. This finding gives greater confidence to the pattern found in the present study. Further scientific inquiry can help establish whether the logic of substitution holds in other conflict settings.

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