CHAPTER FIVE

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN IRAN AND LEBANON

The previous chapter analyzed the correlates of religious fundamentalism among young Muslims in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It focused on the sources of epistemic authority and a comprehensive set of social, political and psychological variables. This chapter turns our attention to Iranian and Lebanese adults and advances a similar analysis in order to assess the significance of these variables in predicting fundamentalism in these two countries. Although resting on a common theoretical framework, as will be noted, several of the variables examined here were not operationalized in the same manner as in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Every attempt was made, however, to preserve their meaning and relevance for elucidating the role of fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes in the social, political and historical context of Iran and Lebanon.

CORRELATES OF RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM

Epistemic Authority

The national surveys in Iran and Lebanon did not include the same questions on the sources of epistemic authority that were used in the youth survey in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the present analysis employs several other ways to gauge respondents' confidence in similar sources, such as confidence in religious institutions and the media. Also obtained in Iran and Lebanon was the extent of respondents' access to sources of news, including such digital sources of information and news as the Internet and email as well as the frequency of using personal computers. These variables are considered proxy measures of epistemic authority and are examined for their association with religious fundamentalism.

To assess the respondents' confidence in different sources of information, they were asked to provide their level of confidence (1 = “none at all,” 2 = “not very much,” 3 = “quite a lot,” 4 = “a great deal of confidence”) in religious institutions, the press, and television. In the Lebanon survey,
the last item was divided into two questions: one about the level of confidence in Lebanese television and the other in non-Lebanese television. For the other set of items related to access to sources of information, respondents were prompted as follows: “People use different sources to learn what is going on in their country and the world. For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you used it last week or did not use it last week to obtain information.” The sources were: daily newspaper, news broadcasts on radio or TV, books, Internet/email, and talks with friends or colleagues. Another item assessed how often they used a personal computer (1 = “never,” 2 = “occasionally,” 3 = “frequently”). Descriptive statistics for each of these variables are shown in Table 5.1, which differentiates religious groups in Lebanon (Christians, Shi’is, and Sunnis) in addition to comparisons with Iran.

As this table shows, Iranians on average indicated having greater confidence in religious institutions and TV than did Lebanese, but lower confidence in the press. While they are similar in their use of daily paper, radio and TV and books, a much higher proportion of Lebanese reported to have used the Internet or email, used personal computers, or talked with friends or colleagues than did Iranians. There is also some variation between different Lebanese sects. For example, Christians reported having less confidence in their religious institutions than did members of the other two sects, whereas the Shi’is had less confidence in the press and TV than did the other two religious sects and were also less likely to read a newspaper. Christians indicated using the Internet or email and personal computers more often than did the Shi’is or Sunnis.

Table 5.2 presents the correlations of the confidence in and access to these sources with fundamentalism, separately for respondents in Iran (below the diagonal) and Lebanon (above the diagonal). The results reveal an interesting pattern of similarities and differences in the linkages between the sources of epistemic authority and fundamentalism among Iranians and Lebanese. First, except for talking to friends/colleagues as well as the use of radio and TV in Lebanon, all other sources of epistemic authority are significantly linked to fundamentalism. Confidence in the religious institutions has the strongest positive correlation and the frequency of using personal computers the strongest negative correlation with fundamentalism in both countries. Confidence in the press and TV is related to fundamentalist beliefs and attitudes in both countries as well. The use of radio and TV as a source of information is positively linked to fundamentalism among Iranians only. This is understandable given that these sources of information are controlled by