

Examining the, Ideological, Sociopolitical, and Contextual Factors Underlying the Appeal of Extremism

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Abstract. This paper discusses and seeks to synthesize theories regarding the role of ideology and psychosocial contextual factors in shaping motivations and behaviors of individuals within violent extremist movements. To better understand how these factors give birth to and nurture extremist social movements, theory from anthropology, behavioral economics, political science, psychology, and sociology was incorporated into a conceptual model of the drivers associated with terrorist behaviors. This model draws upon empirically supported theoretical notions, such as the violation of socioeconomic and geopolitical expectations, the concept of perceived threat, one's mental construction of the world and group polarization. It also draws upon the importance of one's social identity, sense of belonging, and the perceived "glamour" associated with extremist group behaviors.

Keywords: Extremism, Religious ideology, Terrorist behavior, Violent extremist organizations.

1 Introduction

The 'War on Terror,' 9/11, and more recently the rise of Islamic State (IS), has generated a vast amount of discussion pertaining to the motivations of terrorists' actions and the allure of violent extremist organizations. However, much of this has focused on explanations of behavior that emphasize religious ideology. The intent of this paper is to challenge this assumption as the sole or even the root cause as to why Muslims become terrorists. It is argued here that ideology is often used to explain actions, particularly in extremist organizations, that are in fact influenced by broader socio-cultural-economic factors. That is, ideology may not be best understood as a fixed feature, but rather a fluid set of beliefs that interact with factors such as economic stress, political dysfunction, and inequality. With this in mind, this paper will discuss how socio-political and economic factors interact with beliefs and attitudes and other psychological and sociological factors to influence individuals' movement towards violent extremism. This work is based on an effort being undertaken by the US De-

partment of Energy's Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) in collaboration with the UK Ministry of Defence's Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl).

Considering the factors mentioned above, a multi-disciplinary approach is taken to explore common factors associated with the rise of violent extremist organizations (VEO) and how they can transform and re-align as a result of internal and external pressures. In doing so, we have drawn upon and sought to integrate theory from anthropology, behavioral economics, political science, psychology, and sociology to better understand how these factors give birth to and nurture extremist social movements. This discussion draws upon empirically supported theoretical notions, such as the violation of socioeconomic and geopolitical expectations, the concept of perceived threat, one's mental construction of the world and group polarization. It also draws upon the importance of one's social identity, sense of belonging, and the perceived "glamour" associated with VEOs. These notions are influenced by broader external factors that can affect the support, and thus the strength and influence of extremist organizations. Ultimately, this paper seeks to provide a greater theoretical understanding of the terrorist phenomenon by integrating the concepts discussed above into a more unified conceptual model.

2 The Role of Ideology in Extremist Behaviors

As stated previously, the influence of certain ideologies, specifically certain religious ideologies, has been attributed to the rise in militant extremism of specific individuals. According to the Oxford dictionary, an ideology is defined as "a system of ideas and ideals, especially one that forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy" where context is defined as "the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed" [1]. An ideology can also be thought of as a specific way of conceptualizing beliefs and attitudes, which can be shared within societies. Thus, in a societal sense, ideology can underlie a common belief about the world and how individuals should behave in it. Ideologies have also been associated with the underlying attitudes of individuals towards other, non-conforming ideologies and those who hold it [2].

Within societies, a dominant ideology can serve as a common point of reference where other ideologies are compared, often negatively. Consequently, a dominant ideology can have the effect of marginalizing other, less dominant ideologies. This is especially true in societies that are less accustomed to differing views. Although competing ideologies are often cited as a key factor in the rise of extremism [3], it can also simplify a complex debate and ignore the broader socio-cultural factors effecting individual involvement in VEOs. That is, although ideology can inform our perception of the world, it is also shaped and influenced by external dynamics which can alter our beliefs, attitudes and view of others. One example of this is how countries use ideology and norms to forge cultural and political boundaries between followers of different groups [2]. The identification of groups whose beliefs and attitudes may differ from the dominant ideology enables majoritarian discourse to stigmatize minority groups as problem communities. The 'otherisation' of minority populations is not only a divisive mechanism which contributes to binary constructions of 'us' and 'them,' but can also marginalize these populations from wider society. The larger role

of the state in the institutionalization of stereotypes has also sanctioned other institutions as well as the wider population to do the same. This is a general notion that is applicable across many societies.

It is argued here that these types of external dynamics, such as institutionally divisive practices, more often than ideology on its own, influences individuals to join extremist organizations. For example, McDermott found in his study of the September 11 terrorists, that the ringleader, Atta, came from "an ambitious, not overtly religious middle-class household in Egypt." Hani Hanjour, the Saudi who piloted the American Airlines flight 77 into the Pentagon, "had lived in the United States off and on throughout the 1990s, mostly in Arizona." He was considered "intelligent, friendly, and 'very courteous.'" Ziad Jarrah, the Palestinian who piloted the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania, was "the only son of an industrious, middle-class family in Beirut," a "secular Muslim" family that "was easygoing" [4]. These and other examples suggest that while religious ideology can play an important role in shaping certain beliefs and practices, other factors can also have a prominent role in influencing the actual commission of extremist behaviors [5].

3 The Confluence of Psychosocial and Structural Factors

3.1 Identity and Belonging

Within a global context of heightened concern about Islamic extremism and terrorism more broadly, discursive constructions of identity and belonging, particularly discourses of race, religion and nation, permeate societal institutions, beliefs and behavior. This is problematic as it brings citizenship, identity and belonging to the forefront of the debate which in turn can push individuals towards VEOs due to feelings of exclusion. Citizenship expresses universal human rights and duties, while identity implies particularism and group membership. Although it has been argued that citizenship and identity are exclusionary categories, this paper emphasizes the relationship between them as well as how they both can generate a sense of belonging. Brubaker has asserted that citizenship is about inclusion and exclusion, for individuals who are citizens, their status is ascribed, they are 'insiders,' but for many ethnic minorities, despite having an official citizenship status they are considered 'outsiders' [6]. Citizenship is considered central to an individual's self-understanding and assertions of who they are [7]. This sense of difference as an outsider is enforced by racism and discrimination, which in turn can have an important influence on a young person's identity construction, self-identification and sense of belonging.

The significant role of ideology and religion in the construction of one's identity and sense of belonging brings into question how individuals within minority populations negotiate and respond to being seen as fundamentally 'different' to the majority. For example, the ascription of non-western ways of life to minorities, particularly Muslims, as something inherently negative, defines what is considered acceptable difference (disability, sexuality) and unacceptable difference (Islam) [8]. The mainstream dichotomy has turned religious experience into political categories, 'good Muslim;' moderate Islam, the genuine Islam and 'bad Muslims;' political 'extremists' [9]. As a result, religious belonging has become a symbol of racial difference. The

focus on ‘manufacturing homogeneity’ and ‘managing difference’ in order to regulate the threat of heterogeneity is central to the idea of maintaining a dominant ideology [10]. Differences in beliefs and attitudes within the context of religion and racial identity are often interpreted as a ‘clash of identity’ [11]. As a result normative Muslim thought, behavior and culture are increasingly challenged and questioned as being opposed to Western lifestyle and values. This has led to Muslim identity being defined in terms of negativity, disadvantage and alienation, serving only to stigmatize the Muslim population further [12]. An individual’s interpretation of their identity, citizenship and sense of belonging within a social context that is perceived as unjust, unfair and/or marginalizing can influence their decision making to seek out groups (including VEOs) that can alleviate this.

The environment that an individual is situated will also help frame the socio-cultural context of that individual and in turn their identity and sense of belonging. These context effects can be both highly salient and/or very subtle, and are highly subjective, given the history of the individual. That is, contexts are “mental constructs of participants; they are individually variable interpretations of the ongoing social situation. Thus, they may be biased, feature personal opinions, and for these reasons also embody the opinions of the participants as members of groups” [13, p. 7]. As a consequence, these effects can affect the individual’s perceived quality of life and sense of fairness and trust. According to Johns, context can be perceived as “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables” [14, p. 386]. That is, the environment that an individual is situated will help frame the socio-cultural context of that individual. Examples of contextual effects could be the rise in social strains caused by changes in the status quo, the more apparent unequal distribution of wealth, and a lack of accountability by the government and marginalization of society, as well as many other factors.

3.2 The Sense of Loss and Grievance

The feeling of social dissatisfaction typically begins with a perceived sense of loss or some form of grievance. The sense of loss can include recent events or events that might have occurred generations ago. These events can be, and often are, distorted through time to favor some form of narrative. Examples include loss of territory, sovereignty (e.g., perceived Palestinian loss of territory), hegemony and lives (e.g., massacres against Jewish people). Grievances may stem from these losses and are considered to be a root cause for collective political action [15]. A grievance is “an individual’s belief that he or she (or a group or organization) is entitled to a resource which someone else may grant or deny” [16, p. 52]. A dispute exists when the purported perpetrator of the grievance rejects this claim. Grievances are typically associated with perceptions of inequality, relative deprivation, injustice, or some form of moral indignation [17]. As the number of people who share the same grievance grows, a sense of social solidarity can grow as well, which not only multiplies the effect of the grievance, but also strengthens one’s sense of identity and belonging to that leader/group [18]. Thus, the strength of the perceived grievance can be leveraged for a leader and/or group to cause blame and frame the situation to incite a social movement, then serves as a catalyst for a social uprising.

3.3 The Violation of Expectations

When one thinks of the causes of social uprisings, a common assertion is that the people associated with the uprising are those who have little to lose, those on the margins of society. However, in examining social movements, and leaders associated with them, one typically finds that the frustration that is felt begins with people who can address both their basic physiological needs and have time (perhaps unemployed) to generate the type of frustration that leads to actionable behaviors. Thus, a person who is weakened by extreme poverty is less likely to think about higher ideological needs [19]. For example, studies have found that terrorists tend to be from higher educated and wealthier families than the average population [20]. This could stem from a desire for power and authority above what they were raised in, or for purpose outside of wealth. Accordingly, frustration tends to come less from an absolute standard of deprivation than from the perception of deprivation in comparison to an ideal [21]. The frustration with one's situation can explain the multitude of individuals from different socio-economic and political backgrounds within extremist organizations, as the VEO can provide the 'ideal' (which can vary from individual to individual) that they cannot achieve in their current situation. Interestingly, the discordance between a perceived ideal and reality can come at a time when, in comparison to the past, there is a general rise in the socio-economic and/or political condition of that group, but the expectation of the group rises faster than the perceived rise in change. The idea that collective discontent can develop if there is a significant gap between expected and achieved welfare of the group is outlined in the theory of relative deprivation.

Relative deprivation theory refers to the idea that the perception of deprivation and discontent occurs as a group negatively compares their perceived situation to a desired point of reference, such as with other groups, societies, etc. That is, when a group believes its expectations are legitimate and are being blocked within their society, or by other societies, relative deprivation will occur. This is particularly true for discontent arising from the status of an entire group as compared to a similar, referent group. To achieve greater social satisfaction, members of that group will attempt to reduce this deprivation, often by using actions that highlight their deprivation and discontent. This type of behavior is generally considered to be a chief factor in explaining the desire for and the actions associate within social movements [22]. This deprivation also tends to strengthen a group's collective identity, making them more cohesive [23]. For example, relative deprivation can be perceived between those representing the populous and the government (e.g., Egyptian government dissenting groups with each other and with the various Egyptian government administrations), between religious sects (e.g., Shiite vs. Sunni), and between different socio-religious societies (e.g., Israelis vs. Palestinians) or more broadly, the Middle East vs. the West. In each case, one group compares its standing against the other. This is particularly true for groups that have long-standing conflicts with each other. As with all humans, negative comparisons more psychologically salient than positive ones [24]. Thus, in comparison to another group, any deprivation that the group perceives will be more profound than any positive comparison. This is particularly true if the comparison group is perceived to be a threat. In the examples mentioned above, each group could consider the other group as a threat.

3.4 The Concept of Threat

The perception of threat by some external group can have a strong and lasting effect on both the attitudes and ultimately, behaviors of an internal group. According to social identity theory, group members are motivated to develop and maintain biased intragroup comparisons in order to promote a positive social identity [25]. This may be particularly true if there is a high degree of comparison between groups, which can spawn greater chauvinism between them. Moreover, studies have suggested that changes in the relationship between groups can strengthen this form of chauvinism.

Research suggests there are two major types of threats that can influence attitudes towards an external group. The first is the concept of realistic threat. Realistic threats refers to a perceived threat by an external group that has the potential to significantly affect one's own power, resources, and general welfare. This can take the form of military, economic, and/or other physical or material threats to the group. For example, the rise in prosperity among some states in the Middle East, such as Iran, will influence its relative power within the region, potentially being perceived as a greater realistic threat among states that consider it to be an adversary. This could be offset by an increase in military spending by an adversary state. Of course, this has the potential for a tit-for-tat response, thereby increasing the perceived threat by both states.

The second type of threat, called symbolic threat, concerns the threat to a group's honor, religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy or morality by another group. Here, out-groups that are perceived as having a different worldview can be seen as threatening the cultural identity of the in-group. This threat is particularly strong if the out-group is dominate, which can lead to a heightened fear that the out-group's culture will override the in-group's way of life. These can be perceived threats to a group's religion, belief system, honor, or worldview. The realization of this threat is the loss of the in-group's social identity and honor. Proponents of the concept of symbolic threat have suggested that prejudice is often a result of conflicting values and beliefs—even more so than from material threats [26]. For example, perceived threats to an in-group's values by foreigners were related to increases in negative attitudes toward immigrants [27]. Studies that have measured both realistic and symbolic threats have shown that both types of threats can account for different portions of the variance in attitudes toward out-groups [28]. Concerns around the realistic threat from terrorism has reinforced perceptions of a symbolic threat from Muslim communities, resulting in control practices which reproduce and maintain in-group hegemonic power and perpetuate negative stereotypes and prejudice. Moreover, Riek et al. found that in-group identification had a significant impact on realistic and symbolic threat but the impact was stronger for symbolic threat than realistic threat [29]. In turn, the stronger the identification with the in-group, the stronger the reactions to group esteem threats [30].

3.5 Attraction to the Perceived 'Glamour' of Violent Organizations

It is argued here that the (perceived) 'glamour' of VEOs can be a key driving force in the appeal of VEOs. The Oxford English Dictionary defines glamour as, "the attractive and exciting quality that makes a person, a job or a place seem special, often because of wealth or status" [1]. Thus, glamour can be thought of as not only something

(a quality, commodity, lifestyle etc.) which is desirable, but also something which can provide power, status and respect. The ‘glamour’ of groups is a relatively undeveloped concept, having mainly been used to explore the appeal of sub-cultures, specifically street gangs [31, 32, 33]. Within this context, it is asserted that the perceived external image of a gang being powerful, rich, and glamourous can be an attractive lifestyle to those who have limited access to legitimate means of social and economic success [31].

The concept of ‘glamour’ with respect to VEOs, can be framed within Agnew’s general strain theory [34]. Agnew’s general strain theory argues that individuals engage in ‘deviant’ behavior (defined as actions or behavior which violates social norms [35]) when they experience goal blockage (access to socially approved goals) which results in strain. Specific strains include; failure to achieve positively valued goals (e.g., money or goods), the removal of positively valued stimuli (e.g., loss of valued possession) and the presentation of negatively valued stimuli (e.g., physical abuse). Agnew argued that conditions under which strain may lead to crime are when they are 1) seen as unjust, 2) high in magnitude, 3) associated with low social control and 4) create some incentive to engage in criminal coping [34]. Strain is particularly highlighted when individuals experience long-term unemployment, poverty, marginalization and a comparison to those in higher economic positions. It could be argued that for individuals who experience strain, VEOs may offer an alternative lifestyle that provides an escape from the frustration of their current position. For example, young Muslims in the West who are treated with mistrust, whose voices are rarely listened to, and are subject to racism and labels of ‘terrorist.’ Being part of a VEO allows young people to actively control and win space (in contrast to ‘places’ which are fixed and stable, ‘spaces’ are fluid, they are created by relationships and interactions with our environment [36]) for themselves, while gaining a position within that space [37]. The external image of a VEO as being ‘glamorous,’ rich, and fighting for a cause is also often tied in with notions power and freedom. The VEO becomes something to aspire to, an entity that provides a place to belong, an identity, thus giving individuals the social agency to obtain status, respect and a source of empowerment free from societal constraints and misrepresentations. However, by joining a VEO, it can also result in their ultimate marginalization through arrest, prison or deportation.

3.6 One’s Mental Construction of the World

To make sense of one’s world, individuals create mental models regarding such things as how societies should and do behave, how their world is ordered, the nature and role of justice, as well as the nature and role of men and women. These mental models, often called schemas, provide continuity and predictability to the world [38]. A schema is a type of heuristic that helps to cognitively construct and organize one’s perception of the world. A schema is developed over time and can be very resistant to change. That is, schema inconsistent information tends to be forgotten easily or simply ignored; whereas schema consistent information is typically remembered more easily and incorporated into the schema via assimilation. With regard to ideology, schemas play a large and important role. One aspect is the role of religion in one’s schema. According to McIntosh, “religion is more than a cognitive organization of beliefs. Religion is broader in that it exists outside the person in the form of text,

symbols, and traditions, and it is narrower in that it appears in the form of individuals' rites, habits, and other behaviors" [39, p. 1]. Regarding beliefs, one's schema about God might include the existence, purpose and degree of guidance by God, etc. Associated with these beliefs are the written texts that describe the directions established by God [39].

Moreover, schemas can play a powerful role in the attention and behavior of individuals toward male and female roles. That is, individuals with a high masculine gender schema tend to attend to more masculine behaviors that support their schema [40]. They also tend to react negatively to violations to their gender schema. In highly conservative societies, such as the Middle East, this violation might be the perceived blending of traditional male versus female roles and/or the wearing of western clothing (i.e., not wearing a hijab) for women (which could also violate one's religious schema). The degree to which one reacts negatively to a schema violation is typically a function of one's culture, which often affects how "schematic" (i.e., the degree to which an individual rigidity follows their schema) a person might be across a number of contexts. Thus, behaviors are affected by schemas, which are, in turn, affected by ones culture and context. For example, in the Middle East, certain ideologies have a very set view of the world.

3.7 The Polarization of Groups

In addition to the mental construction of one's social-religious attitudes toward oneself and others, developed via a schema, interactions with others and societal institutions can strengthen this. This concept is called group-induced attitude polarization [41]. Group polarization is said to occur when an initial tendency of group members' attitudes toward a given direction is enhanced following group interactions [42]. This can result in more extreme positions in the same attitude direction over time. For example, Myers and Bishop found that groups with prejudice-leaning individuals became more prejudiced, as a group, over time, while groups with less-prejudice leaning individuals became less prejudice over time [41].

A typically cited reason for this phenomenon involves the idea of information exchange and social comparison. Specifically, when individual group members exchange concurring information, the information can serve to both strengthen and add to each member's beliefs about a specific topic. Also, through dialogue with other members, each member can discern the general group orientation towards the topic and can support the group, and bolster one's position within the group, by taking on positions that further push the position of the group in the same direction [43]. In fact, Myers and Lamm found that the degree to which moderate fundamentalist ideas can morph to more extremist fundamentalist ideas is at least partly due to the group polarization effect [44]. Cultural difference, as discussed above, can also provide a basis for group polarization and can lead to the development and expansion of ethnic and religious boundaries between groups [45].

4 Developing an Integrated Conceptual Model

In attempting to bring the concepts discussed above into a more comprehensive understanding with regard to extremist behavior, a conceptual integrative model was developed (shown in Figure 1). This conceptual model illustrates the role of societal and religious institutions influencing and being influenced by religious and other schemas (such as gender schemas), expectations (and the violations of those expectations) and identity. Aided by societal/religious institutions and one's schema, these factors can intensify the perception of threat from external groups. This can induce a drive towards some type of threat response.

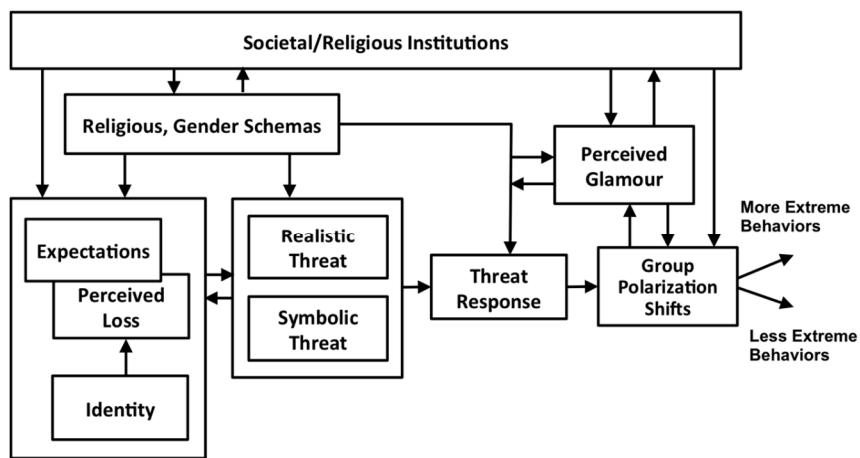


Fig. 1. The proposed integrated conceptual model of extremist behavior

The 'glamour' associated with VEO can help facilitate this response. In fact, VEOs can then prey on these types of individuals to draw them into their organization or at least carry out behaviors that are aligned with the VEO's objectives. If individuals decide to join a VEO, the normative pressures will typically be to increase their level of violence. Alternatively, if individuals receive positive (non-violence) counseling and attention, the behaviors could potentially shift towards less violent actions. However, as discussed above, many factors have the potential to ultimately affect the behavior of these individuals.

The above model demonstrates not only the complexity of issues that need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the appeal of extremisms, but also the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach. Societal and religious institutions play an important role in ordering individuals' lives, internalizing norms and modes of behavior as well as developing one's identity. These institutions also provide socially accepted expectations and goals for citizens, for example, the American dream promises wealth under the premise of meritocracy. However, when individuals cannot achieve this wealth (often due to deep social inequalities), actionable behavior can result from the frustration of having a lack of opportunities. That is, when one's expectations are

being blocked or denied, these can be interpreted as losses and/or grievances, particularly when in comparison to other groups standing. If a number of people share the same grievances, solidarity can grow, strengthening ones identity and sense of belonging to that group. As well as societal institutions, schemas (which are also affected by broader societal factors) also inform ones perception of the world, including how to behave, how society is ordered and ones relationship to other groups.

An individual's identity is created by group perceptions of who we are and how we define ourselves, they are socially bestowed, socially maintained and socially transformed [33]. Thus, once individuals join a VEO, the organization becomes central to their lives, which heavily influences their identity and in turn values, norms, and behaviors. Initial behaviors are internalized so they become part of an individual's self-perception and in turn transform their identity, whereby the group is an extension of the individual and the individual is an extension of the group [46]. This is also important within the context of both realistic and symbolic threat, whereby the threat to one's group not only reinforces ones identification with the group, but also informs their expectations and losses compared to another group.

The perceived 'glamour' of groups has both a push and pull effect on individuals decision to join a VEO. The 'glamour' of a group can be perceived as reputation, status, respect and/or power, which can provide individuals with a sense of fulfillment and access to success (even if this is illegitimate). Societal representations of 'glamour' permeate individual's lives in different guises, for example, wealth, celebrity culture, commodities etc. For those who have been unable to achieve legitimate forms of success, a VEO can offer something to aspire to, either as an entity that can provide wealth, power and/or status or as an entity that allows them to reject the societal value of glamour. Particularly for those who are disenfranchised and/or have experienced perceived losses, the 'glamour' of a VEO can offer an alternative means of success to which mainstream society may have denied them. However, despite offering an alternative empowering lifestyle, joining a VEO can also lead to their ultimate marginalization.

The conceptual model aims to provide a deeper theoretical understanding of the movement of individuals towards VEO beyond explanations, which emphasize religious ideology. Taking into account the broader socio-political and structural factors, this paper used a multi-disciplinary approach to identify and interrogate how influencers such as perceived glamour, threat and ones expectations affect the appeal of VEOs and individual behavior. It aims to demonstrate how societal institutions and individual schemas dynamically influence and inform individual decision making and perception of the world. This model could be used as a foundation to build a more complete picture of the myriad of factors, which influence individuals' decision making to join a VEO.

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