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Factors Associated with Violent Extremism (version 1.4)

CSO conducted a **literature review** of over 50 empirical studies by leading experts on terrorism and violent extremism (VE). This summary captures some of the most significant findings. It is important to note that there is no consensus on any one set of factors explaining an individual's participation in VE or the prevalence of VE within a country. Furthermore, VE is very context-specific, so the factors that are linked to VE in one country may not hold in another; moreover, the factors associated with VE globally do not necessarily apply to a specific context and vice versa. Nevertheless, our review reveals that some of the conventional wisdom regarding what causes terrorism (poverty, income inequality, unemployment, madrassa education) has not been validated by empirical studies. **Factors for which there is empirical evidence of a link to violent extremism include state repression; an absence of civil liberties; and, for Muslims, the perception that Islam is under threat.** These findings should inform our diplomatic and programmatic approaches to preventing and countering VE; however, further research and analysis into the context-specific drivers of VE in specific locations are necessary in order to ensure these efforts are tailored appropriately.

Factors Associated with an Individual's Participation in VE

- **Common Social Networks:** Social bonds play a more important role in the emergence of the global Salafi jihad than ideology or the radical vigor of a group's theology.
- **Heavy-Handed Security Practices:** Terrorism is more likely to emerge in repressive states.
 - According to a survey of Kenyan al-Shabaab members, 65% cited the government's harsh CT tactics as the most important VE factor.
- **Perception of Threat to Religion:** According to several studies, those who believe Islam is under threat are more likely to support terrorism.

Note: Empirical studies have not validated the link between an individual's involvement in VE and the following factors:

- **Low Socioeconomic Status:** Terrorists are at least as likely to come from economically advantaged families and have a high level of education as to come from poor and uneducated backgrounds.
- **Education in Madrassas:** According to a review of major terrorist attacks, all master-minders had university degrees and none had attended a madrassa; only 11% of terrorists attended madrassas.

- **Distrust in Government:** Muslim terrorists are not more likely to distrust government, be outraged by Western foreign policy, or perceive discrimination than non-violent radicals or Muslim youth.

Factors Associated with Societies Experiencing VE

- **Absence of Civil Liberties:** Countries that restrict and suppress civil liberties appear to be more exposed to risks of terrorist attacks.
- **Intermediate Levels of Political Freedom:** Countries with intermediate or transitioning levels of political freedom are more prone to experiencing terrorism than highly democratic or highly authoritarian regimes.
- **State-Sponsored Violence:** High levels of terrorism are more commonly found in countries experiencing state-sponsored violence (extrajudicial killings, political terror, and gross human rights violations).
- **Youth Bulge:** Large youth cohorts are associated with a significantly increased risk of terrorism.

Note: **Income inequality** is not associated with a society's increased likelihood of experiencing VE, but **economic discrimination of minorities** is.

Factors Associated with Countries of Origin of Transnational Terrorism

- **Absence of Civil Liberties:** Nationals of countries with lower civil liberties have a higher participation rate in transnational terrorism.
- **Democracy:** The presence of democratic institutions significantly reduces the probability that a country will produce transnational terrorists.

Note: A country's **GDP** is not correlated with its likelihood of producing transnational terrorists.

Factors Associated with Popular Support for VE

- **Perception of Threat to Religion:** Those who believe Islam is under threat are more likely to support terrorism.

Note: **Poverty** is not correlated with public support for VE. [Very poor respondents in Muslim countries were less likely to support terrorism.]

Author attributions for the above findings, as well as additional findings on factors associated with VE, are contained in the matrix that follows.

Table: Factors Associated with Violent Extremism

Key: This chart is divided into four sections, corresponding to the literature's broad categories of factors associated with VE: 1) an individual's participation in VE; 2) a society experiencing VE; 3) societies being a source of VE in other countries; and 4) public support for VE. **The left-hand column lists** those factors for which there is empirical evidence whereas **the right-hand column lists** those factors that are disputed by empirical evidence.

The arrow that precedes each entry signals the direction of the correlation with the VE. For example, the first entry in the top left box signifies that recent urban migrants and first in family university graduates are believed to be more susceptible to VE. Conversely, the willingness to engage in critical thinking (see the fifth entry in the same box) is associated with less susceptibility to VE. After the factor is listed, **the study populations** are called out to flag whether the author is claiming a generalizable result or a country-specific result.

This chart requires two important caveats. First, given the proliferation of terrorism research and the imprecision of data used in this research, for virtually every factor there are studies that on the one hand, assert the validity of the factor, and studies on the other hand, that dispute the validity of the factor. This chart lists some of the more influential studies in the field but there is no consensus on any one set of factors explaining participation in, or the incidence of, VE. Second, most of these studies look at the phenomenon of terrorism and not VE per se. The two phenomena are close enough that we believe many of the factors associated with terrorism are likely applicable to VE as well. But this is an assumption and our reason for relying on terrorism research is simply that it has generated much more attention than the related phenomenon of VE.

Participation in Violent Extremism	
Factors Supported by Empirical Evidence	Factors Disputed by Empirical Evidence
↑ Recent urban migrants and first in family university graduates (Egypt) "[The militants] were born in villages or small towns and were recent arrivals in big cities... The educational and occupational attainment of the members themselves was decidedly higher than that of their parents." (Ibrahim) ↑ Common social networks (Global) "social bonds play a more important role in the emergence of the global Salafi jihad than ideology." (Sageman) ↑ Territorial control (Colombia) "We find that a powerful predictor of joining the FARC is exclusive FARC rule and territorial control" (Arjona & Kalyvas) ↑ State repression (Algeria, Egypt, Kenya) "Muslim rebellions...are a defensive reaction to predatory state repression that threatens the organizational resources and lives of political Islamists." (Hafez); "When asked to identify the single most important factor that drove respondents to al-Shabaab, 65 percent specifically referred to government's counterterrorism strategy." (Botha) ↑ Perception of Threat to Religion (Kenya) "97 percent of [al-Shabaab members in Kenya interviewed] considered their religion to be under threat." (Botha) ↑ Injustice (Somalia, Afghanistan, Colombia): The principal drivers of political violence (including terrorism and VE) are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of	↑ Low socioeconomic status (Israel, Palestine, Lebanon) "Members of Hezbollah's militant wing or Palestinian suicide bombers are at least as likely to come from economically advantaged families and have a relatively high level of education as to come from the ranks of the economically disadvantaged and uneducated." (Krueger & Malečková) ↑ Education in Madrassas (Muslim World) "All of those credited with masterminding the five terrorist attacks had university degrees, and none of them had attended a madrassa. Within our entire sample, only 11% of the terrorists had attended madrassas." (Bergen & Pandey) ↑ Distrust in government, opposition to Western foreign policy, and social discrimination (Muslims in the West): "Many non-violent radicals felt a strong, cynical distrust of government...deep outrage with Western foreign policy was almost unanimous. Non-violent groups shared a keen perception of social discrimination..." (Bartlett & Miller) ↓ Cultural integration in adopted society (Muslims in UK): "Little evidence to show that cultural or social difference among Muslims is causing violent radicalization." (Githens-Mazer & Lambert)

injustice: discrimination, corruption and abuse by security forces. (Mercy Corps)

↑ **Family Consent (Pakistan):** Family consent is a key factor to consider in areas at risk of VE; the decision to join is not just individual or caused by recruiting by organizations. (Asal, Fair, & Shellman)

↑ **Family Connections (Somalia, Kenya, Nigeria, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq):** Women join VE groups for same reasons as men but are more likely to become involved because of family connections. Once in, they find it harder to leave. (Ladbury)

↓ **Employment (Somalia and Afghanistan):** In Somalia, “youth surveys found no relationship between job status and support for – or willingness to participate in – political violence.” In Afghanistan, increases in employment and income did not lead to significant changes in youth support for armed opposition groups. (Mercy Corps)

↓ **Civic Engagement (Somalia):** Of participants in a youth engagement training program, more civically minded youth are more likely to have engaged in political violence. (Mercy Corps)

Society Experiencing Violent Extremism

Factors Supported by Empirical Evidence	Factors Disputed by Empirical Evidence
↑ Competition between VEOs for public support (Palestine, Global), “The suicide bombings have become bases of mobilization over which Hamas and Islamic Jihad compete for leadership by capturing the Palestinian imagination.” (Bloom); “the main motivation for terrorist attacks in democracies is intergroup dynamics, with terrorist groups of various ideologies competing with one another for limited political influence. (Chenoweth) ↑ Absence of civil liberties (Global) “Our finding that terrorists are more likely to spring from countries that lack civil rights, if it holds up, is further support for the view that terrorism is a political, not economic, phenomenon.” (Kreuger & Malečková); “countries that restrict and suppress civil liberties appear to be more exposed to risks of terrorist attacks.” (Kurrild-Klitgaard & Klemmensen) ↑ Intermediate levels of political freedom (Global) “Countries with intermediate levels of political freedom are shown to be more prone to terrorism than countries with high levels of political freedom or countries with highly authoritarian regimes... transitions from an authoritarian regime to a democracy may be accompanied by temporary increases in terrorism.” (Abadie) ↑ Youth bulges (Global) “relatively large youth cohorts are associated with a significantly increased risk of domestic armed conflict, terrorism and riots/violent demonstrations.” (Urdal) ↓ Open Trade Regime (Global but for transnational terrorism only) “There are consistent, negative associations between how trade-oriented a society is and the probability that it will experience transnational terrorism or generate transnational terrorism.” (Kurrild-Klitgaard & Klemmensen) ↓ Fiscal decentralization (Global but for transnational terrorism only) “Fiscal decentralization is negatively associated with the occurrence of transnational terror events.” (Dreher & Fischer) ↑ State-Sponsored Violence (Global): Higher levels of terrorism are more commonly found in countries experiencing state-sponsored violence such as extrajudicial killings, political terror, and gross human rights violations. (Global Terrorism Index) ↑ Greater social hostilities (Global): Higher levels of terrorism are more commonly found in countries with greater social hostilities between ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, lack of intergroup cohesion, and high levels of group grievances. (Global Terrorism Index) ↑ Lack of State Legitimacy Combined with Intergroup Conflict (Global): Only political	↑ Authoritarianism “highly authoritarian countries...experience lower terrorist risk than countries in some intermediate range of political rights.” (Abadie) ↑ Income Inequality (Global) “The probability that a country will experience terrorist events is...not statistically significantly related to the level of inequality” (Kurrild-Klitgaard & Klemmensen) ↓ Political Autonomy (Global but for transnational terrorism only) “Our findings contradict the hypothesis that more political autonomy deters terrorism.” (Dreher & Fischer) ↓ Economic and Human Development (Global): There is no systematic link between terrorism and economic indicators (such as GDP growth) or economic development (such as the Human Development Index or its subcomponents (ie, mean years of schooling, life expectancy). (Global Terrorism Index) ↓ Radicalness of VE ideology (Global) Where governments and economies function poorly, sects often become major suppliers of social services, political action, and coercive force; their success as suppliers is not due to their theology but to the advantages of their organizational structure. (Iannaccone, Berman)

stability, state legitimacy, and intergroup cohesion (not economic or general violence indicators) are significantly related to terrorism. (Global Terrorism Index)

Society Exporting Violent Extremism (Countries of Origin of Transnational Terrorism)

Factors Supported by Empirical Evidence	Factors Disputed by Empirical Evidence
↑ Absence of civil liberties (Global but for transnational terrorism only) "A country's degree of civil liberties...is associated with participation in terrorism: countries with a lower level of civil liberties have a higher participation rate in terrorism...." (Kreuger & Laitin) ↓ Democracy (Global but for transnational terrorism only): "The presence of democratic institutions in a source country significantly reduces terrorism." (Blomberg & Hess); "The relationship between the extent of democracy in a country and the probability that a transnational terrorist will have his origin in that country is strongly negative." (Kurrild-Klitgaard & Klemmensen) ↓ Open Trade Regime (Global but for transnational terrorism only) "There are consistent, negative associations between how trade-oriented a society is and the probability that it will experience transnational terrorism or generate transnational terrorism." (Kurrild-Klitgaard & Klemmensen)	↓ Income (Global but for transnational terrorism only): "A country's GDP is unrelated to the number of terrorists originating from that country." (Kreuger & Laitin); "And neither is it poor countries that transnational terrorists stem from." (Kurrild-Klitgaard & Klemmensen)

Public Support for Violent Extremism

Factors Supported by Empirical Evidence	Factors Disputed by Empirical Evidence
↑ Diaspora populations (Arab Diaspora), A higher percentage of Arabic speaking Twitter users posting from N. America and Europe supported ISIL as compared to Twitter users posting from "front-line" Arab states facing ISIL in Syria and Iraq (University of Milan) ↑ Perception of threat to Religion (Muslim Countries) "Those who believe Islam is under threat are more likely to support terrorism" (Fair & Shepherd) ↑ Belief that Jihad Is an External Militarized Struggle (Pakistan) Pakistanis who believe jihad is an external militarized struggle that can be waged by individuals are more supportive of violent groups than those who believe it is an internal struggle for righteousness. (Shapiro, Fair, Malhotra)	↑ Poverty (Muslim Countries) "Very poor respondents ...are less likely to support terrorism than others." (Fair & Shepherd). ↑ Poverty and Relative Deprivation (Pakistan) Poor Pakistanis dislike militants <u>more</u> than middle-class citizens do; this dislike is strongest among the urban poor, particularly in violent districts, suggesting that exposure to terrorist attacks reduces support. (Blair, Shapiro, Fair, Malhotra) Feelings of relative deprivation are negatively related to support for violent action. (Shapiro, Fair, Littman, Malhotra) ↓ Support for democratic values (Pakistan) Strong supporters of democratic values are actually more supportive of militant groups; this relationship is strongest among those who believe that Muslim rights are being violated in

	Kashmir. (Shapiro, Fair, Malhotra) ↑Religiosity (Pakistan) Neither personal piety nor support for political Islam is related to support for militant groups. (Shapiro, Fair, Malhotra)
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