



Economic underpinnings of violent extremism: A cross country exploration of repeated survey data

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to identify the economic underpinnings of the support for acts of violent extremism (VE). We explore some demographic and economic characteristics of individuals who express support for acts of violent extremism (VE) by using an extensive cross-country multi-year survey dataset ranging from 2007 to 2014. A growing body of empirical research has focused on examining the various socio-economic underpinnings of violent extremism. The results have been inconclusive, at times contradictory and often based on limited set of case studies or smaller single time period cross-section datasets. In this study we use information on a little over forty-eight thousand individuals in 12 countries to evaluate the connections between socio-economic status and support for extremism. While the impact of the socio-economic characteristics on support for violence remains inconclusive in this analysis, we do find interesting and significant results when we interact individual economic status variables with the overall economic growth of the country. Unemployment status and having lower levels of education have significant impacts on the likelihood of support for VE when interacted with country level growth rate. We conclude that inequality or a feeling of being left out-being unemployed, in higher growth countries might be the key to understanding the economic underpinnings of violent extremism.

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1. Introduction

The threat of extremist violence has become one of the primary focus areas of foreign policy in many countries particularly since September 11th, 2001. Though a consensus on the precise definition of extremist violence remains elusive due to the contentious issues involved in defining the intentions of the violent actors. As [Krueger and Maleckova \(2002\)](#) note, one man's freedom fighter is often another man's terrorist. In addition, some forms of extremist violence have also been state sponsored. However, for the purposes of empirical research into factors that sustain support for violent extremism among the larger populace, the focus is more on non-state actors. There is also a further distinction to be made between actual incidence of extremist violence and the ideology of violent extremism. The former is often referred to as acts or terror or terrorism. A general guiding definition used by the United States Department of State defines terrorism as

Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents,

usually intended to influence an audience [United States Department of State, 2016](#)

Different from the actual perpetration of violence is the ideology of violence or violent extremism. As [Striegher's \(2015\)](#) clarifies, the latter is pure ideology or a belief system about the use of violence for achieving goals that are generally political or religious in nature. However violent extremism (VE) is not the act of violence itself. It could lead some proponents to perpetrate actual violence or terrorist acts to further their political ideology. Though some others who adhere to VE may not never commit any violence. Given this distinction, there has been some debate about whether those who adhere to the political goals of extremism but are largely not violent can be viewed as non-violent extremists. However, [Schmid \(2014\)](#) has argued this distinction is not really a valid one. Those who adhere to the goals of advancing a particular extremist religious or political ideology to the exclusion of all other perspectives can become violent based on the context.

In the post 9/11 era extremist violence and violent extremism has been most often studied at a cross-country level within the context of Islam. Increasingly there has been a discussion of the failure of current policies in disrupting the growth of and support for terrorist organizations in the Middle East ([Intriligator, 2010](#)) and in other countries with a sizeable Muslim population. The long

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standing focus on purely military strategies have not succeeded in removing the threat of violence. It is also debatable whether it has succeeded in reducing the support for VE. This has sparked interest in understanding other deeper frustrations that drive both the violence and the larger ideology of violent extremism beyond the immediate stated political or religious message. One area of increasing research focus is the economic underpinnings of support for VE. The perception that such violence and particularly the violent actors often originate from less developed nations has led to policy interest in understanding the connections between economic deprivation and the support for and participation in acts of extremist violence. The empirical evidence for linking extremist violence and VE to economic deprivation however remains inconclusive. In this literature terrorism or the acts of violence and the ideology of VE are at times looked at interchangeably. Early research studies like [Krueger and Maleckova \(2002\)](#) looked at case studies related to specific incidence of violence, particularly in the Middle East. They forcefully concluded that economic factors do not have a role to play in motivating acts of terror. Looking at case studies from the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Lebanon, they in fact find that violent actors tend to be educated and more often than not belong to relatively higher economic strata. Based on this, they argue that it is not economic frustrations but more political repression and long standing feelings of indignity that are the basis of both terrorism and VE.

In a later study the same author ([Krueger & Laitin, 2008](#)) finds that there is no significant relationship between incidence of violence and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in a cross-country macro level analysis. This leads them to conclude once again that political frustrations rather than economic disaffection are the basis for VE. [Abadie \(2006\)](#) also reach similar conclusions in a cross-country macro level evaluation of 156 countries. Other macro studies however have found that GDP, particularly among less developed countries, has a statistically significant negative impact on the rates of extremist violence ([Blomberg, Hess, 2008](#); [Blomberg, Hess, & Weerapana, 2004](#); [Enders & Hoover, 2012](#); [Freytag, Krüger, Meierrieks, & Schneider, 2011](#)). These macro level studies suggest that among low and middle income countries, higher levels of GDP are associated with lower incidence of violence. They also find that inequality measured by gini-coefficient had a statistically significant impact, with higher levels of inequality associated with higher incidence of violence. Given these diverse findings, a definitive link between economic factors and the incidence of extremist violence is yet to be established at least at the macro level.

At the micro level, besides the individual case studies, primarily of countries in the middle-east, there are not many cross-country studies. These micro-level country specific studies tend to focus on the larger ideological context of VE rather than merely acts of violence. [Haddad \(2004\)](#) examine survey data from Lebanon to assess public views about suicide bombings and find that support for such attacks is more prevalent among people with lower-incomes and those facing economic hardships. However, using survey data from Pakistan [Blair, Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro \(2013\)](#) find that the reverse is true. They find that poorer Pakistani's are more likely to have a negative view of terrorist attacks since they are more likely to be exposed to the negative consequences of those attacks. [Benmelech, Claude and Estaban \(2010\)](#) look at biographical information of Palestinian Suicide Bombers on Israelis targets between 2000 and 2006. They find that though the violent actors themselves were educated and came from higher socio-economic backgrounds, the prevailing weak economic conditions made it easier to recruitment. That is, they found that the overall recessionary economic circumstances of a region had an impact on promoting VE even if this is not reflected in the economic circumstances of the individual actors. [Fair and Shepherd \(2006\)](#) use data from the [Pew Global Research Center Global Attitudes](#)

[and Trends Survey](#) to analyze support for VE in a cross-section of 14 countries. Their primary focus is on a particular question in the Pew data set regarding support for VE. The specific question is:

“Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?”

As the authors acknowledge the way the question is phrased limits the context of VE to Islam. However, it allows them to study individual level information from a cross-section of 14 different countries. The level of variation among the individuals in such large cross-country surveys can provide more detailed information about larger trends that might be missed in the previous case-study oriented micro studies or the macro level studies. The study once again does not find very conclusive evidence for linking socio-economic status variables to support for violence. This study uses data from only a single year (2002) of the Pew data survey. So far we have found only one micro level cross-country study that examines the economic underpinnings of support for VE across several years. [Kiendrebeogo and Ianchovichina \(2016\)](#) use several years of Gallup survey data to examine attitudes towards violence in a cross-section of countries. Contrary to some of the others, these authors find that support for contention that violent extremism is more common among the young, unemployed and relatively uneducated. Since these findings currently are one of a kind, we feel it is useful to contrast them with an analysis of the repeated years of the Pew Global Attitudes data. As mentioned before, the Fair and Shephard only use one year of the Pew data. The combined dataset from the different years we feel can contribute useful additional perspective on the so far inconclusive question of whether there are economic underpinnings to VE.

In this study we are able to pool together several years of the Pew Global Attitudes and Trends survey to generate a large sample of over 48,000 individuals across 12 countries. This expanded dataset provides a large amount of individual level variability to explore the social economic status of those who express support for VE and compare it to those who do not support VE. We do not find support for the hypothesis that lower socio-economic status might be associated with a higher likelihood of support for VE. A person's unemployment status, level of education and difficulty in accessing food are not statistically significant predictors of support for VE. However, we are able to see a more nuanced link between economic factors and support for VE. It is the relative economic status of an individual, that is an individual's status compared to the overall economic performance of the country, that has the strongest link to support for VE. When individual economic status variables are interacted with the economic growth rate of the country, we find that the unemployed are more likely to support VE in the higher growth rate countries. Similarly, in the interaction models, individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to support VE in high growth rate countries. This suggests that it is economic inequality that is the primary driver of support for VE rather than merely over all economic performance of a country or income levels of individuals. While some macro level studies have shown a link between higher inequality and incidence of violent extremism, here we are able to establish a specific link between an individual's relative deprivation in education and unemployment status and support for VE. These findings have important policy implications in emphasizing the importance of not just overall economic growth but more equitable growth. It also suggests that pockets of support for VE might exist and in fact

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