

Overview of key findings

It is important to note that the terms 'extremism' and 'terrorism' are not interchangeable; the former does not necessarily involve violent or criminal acts, as terrorism does, but focuses on radically changing society based on an absolutist vision. In addition, the term 'radicalisation' should be understood as denoting socialisation processes into a range of thinking and action, from intolerance to operational terrorism. Radicalisation, extremism and terrorism currently occur in a number of countries across the world and the case studies below, while of great strategic interest, offer only a selective snapshot of the issues. This brief overview pulls together the key findings from a series of recent GSDRC helpdesk research reports on extremism and radicalisation.

There is little consensus on what the key drivers of radicalisation and extremism are. Some analysts argue that an absence of participatory democracy and a legitimate arena to channel discontent contributes to extremism. However, others have found no causal connection between authoritarianism and extremism. It is argued that countries transitioning to democratic norms are more susceptible to extremism than are both consolidated democracies and authoritarian states.

There is also divergence of opinion over the role of economic conditions. Absolute poverty is not considered a key driver, but it can constitute an enabling factor. The more important driver is 'relative deprivation' – i.e. disparities among groups and regions regarding economic prosperity, service delivery, educational and employment opportunities and infrastructure. This situation is also likely to vary greatly between countries and it is argued that hypotheses should be tested at the country and, furthermore, at the sub-national level. For example, the existence of less developed areas within a country – such as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan and Upper Egypt - can foment instability and extremism. Therefore, research rooted in local, historical, economic and anthropological analysis which looks at poverty, social exclusion, and religion alongside other variables, would allow a much more nuanced picture of the complex interactions that contribute to radicalisation to emerge. In Bangladesh, for example, key drivers are considered to be political underdevelopment and poor governance; rampant violence, criminality and corruption; the lack of employment and other economic opportunities; and non-state service provision by Islamist groups, particularly in education with the expansion of madaris (religious schools).

The role of the madaris has received particular attention in the context of Pakistan. In the aftermath of 9/11 it was widely assumed that these schools were largely responsible for encouraging hatred of the West, inciting youth to violence and providing militant training. Subsequent research has shown that the role of madaris has been much exaggerated, and they may account for less than 3% of all student enrolment in Pakistan. The vast majority of students are educated in the dysfunctional state-run public education system and there is some evidence that while madrassah students are less tolerant than those of public or private schools, public school students also show high levels of support for violence. Therefore, commentators argue that Pakistan's entire education system needs reform in order to address increasing class inequalities, the polarisation of society, and divisions along sectarian and ethnic lines. In Bangladesh, it is the lack of employment opportunities for graduates of the private madaris that is considered the primary problem. Their traditional non-secular Islamic education does not provide students with skills for the job market; and as a result, graduates often remain unemployed or obtain jobs in mosques and madaris.

Grievances, primarily over Western foreign policy and ongoing conflicts, particularly the war in Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are also commonly recognised as causes of extremism. A particular use of information, and its reduction to a narrow narrative by Western and Islamist extremist leaders have contributed to polarised views. Further, a sense of

humiliation – through perceived cultural domination; or specific demeaning acts regularly directed at members of a particular group – are also considered key drivers.

For a summary of some of the best literature available on these issues, see the following GSDRC helpdesk reports

- [Drivers of extremism](#)
- [Under-development and Radicalisation in Pakistan](#)
- [Under-development and Radicalisation in Bangladesh](#)

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