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Islamist violent extremist organisations' use of corruption narratives

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Violent extremism is a complex phenomenon that is shaped by numerous ideological, social, economic, and political factors. Violent extremist organisations attempt to exploit existing grievances to frame their ideology as the solution to complex problems faced by individuals or communities. This propaganda is most effective where it reflects local lived experiences and appears to make sense of personal or societal crises.

Corruption can both push and pull individuals and groups towards violent extremist organisations. The abuse of power can generate feelings of anger, a sense of alienation and a loss of empowerment and dignity. By emphasising government corruption as a malady inherent to the political status quo, extremist organisations can position themselves as viable alternatives. This is often accompanied by narratives that portray violent extremist groups as defenders of purity, as a force that fights against an unjust system, as an avenue for political and personal transformation as well as a way out of poverty. Such narratives can attract people who feel politically, economically or socially marginalised, and who are looking for opportunities to overturn perceived injustices, seek empowerment or even take revenge.

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Query

Please provide an overview of how Islamist violent extremist organisations deploy narratives of corruption.

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Caveat

This Helpdesk Answer considers the use of corruption narratives by Islamist extremist organisations. Violent extremist groups – either Islamist or non-Islamist - are present in most societies around the world, intersecting in complex ways with philosophies on both the left and right of politics.[1] Many non-Islamist violent extremists also deploy narratives of corruption to recruit followers.

The ideological development of Islamist violent extremism is complex and charting its trajectory

MAIN POINTS

- Recruitment by Islamist violent extremist organisations can draw on ideological factors (such as the notion that Islam is a complete and pure political, social and economic system) as well as concrete social, political and/or economic issues.
- Islamist violent extremism offers a radically different vision of society, which can be attractive to some people who desire a recasting of the socio-political order.
- Perceived corruption – often understood more broadly as injustice or ungodliness by the populace – can play a significant role in increasing dissatisfaction with existing governance structures.
- In practice, corruption – in the sense of the abuse of entrusted power for private gain – also fuels many of the forms of misrule and maladministration that leave groups and individuals more susceptible to the revolutionary messages of violent extremist organisations.
- Violent extremists often tailor their messages to local conditions and individual predicaments to exploit people's underlying grievances. These material grievances tend to be at least as important as ideological factors.

1 Although violent political ideologies in different parts of the world are rooted in distinct historical and cultural traditions, according to Spach (2018), they tend to be authoritarian and supremacist in nature and rely on a politics of victimhood.

falls beyond the scope of this Helpdesk Answer. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of how Islamist violent extremist organisations use narratives related to government corruption in their propaganda and recruitment practices.

Introduction

There is no universal agreement of what constitutes "corruption"; the word can denote various meanings and connotations for different people. As such, Gephart (2012) contends that corruption is a concept that is animated by people who talk about it, each of whom can have their own very different ideas of what corruption is and why it is a problem that needs addressing. This has clear implications for their prescriptions on how to tackle this problem.

Indeed, specific narratives of corruption can be deployed strategically to achieve certain political objectives. Stories about what corruption is can therefore shift over time in response to changing incentives, ideas and material conditions (Jenkins 2014).

Historically, the term corruption was often used to describe a society or polity that had fallen into state of moral decay or impurity (Friedrich 1972). In modern international policy and academic discourse, corruption has come to be understood as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain" that characterises specific types of dishonest behaviour, such as bribery or embezzlement (Transparency International 2023).

Yet this meaning continues to be contested in other spheres, including by many religious and popular movements around the world, which strongly associate the term corruption with moral disapproval. In an Islamic context, it is rare to encounter a clear distinction between the moral and descriptive elements of corruption. According to Ahmed (2018), for instance, the 20th century Islamic scholar ibn Ashur "defines fasād[2] [corruption] as every act dispraised by the Sharī'ah (Islamic law)." The Qur'an uses the word fasād in both religious contexts (such as disbelief) as well as non-religious settings (including stealing and gang activity).[3]

In this respect, debates over the definition of corruption resemble definitional controversies over other terms – such as "terrorism" and "democracy" – that are sometimes used as "neutral" descriptors but are terms that also connote moral judgement (Stephenson, n.d.).

Like corruption, the term "violent extremism" is also contested. It is both ambiguous and somewhat subjective. As International Crisis Group (2016) puts it:

> *Casting "violent extremism", a term often ill-defined and open to misuse, as a main threat to stability risks downplaying other sources of fragility, delegitimising political grievances and stigmatising communities as potential extremist.*

At the same time, it has also been argued that the term denotes a real phenomenon that is different from terms such as "radicalisation" (a mental

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2 Ahmed (2018) writes that "the Arabic word fasād in its general sense, is commonly translated in English as corruption [...] in its literal sense, the term fasād conveys several meanings including mouldiness, harm, spoiling, confusion and disorder. Fasād also denotes any actions that cause disruption and direct or indirect physical or spiritual harm to an individual, society or the environment".

3 For a detailed description of the meaning and scope of corruption in Islamic texts, see Ahmed (2018).

process) and "terrorism" (a specific act). Various definitions of violent extremism have been proposed, most of which underscore its inherently totalitarian, intolerant and aggressive nature, and emphasise how adherents of violent extremist ideologies seek to both destroy old and build new institutions.

Berger (2018: 46), for instance, describes violent extremism in the following terms:

> *the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for violent action against an out-group (as opposed to less harmful acts such as discrimination or shunning).*

This Helpdesk Answer adopts a similar working definition initially proposed by Bak et al. (2019: 8):

> *a violent type of mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group, while excluding or dominating its "others" based on markers, such as gender, religion, culture and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions and supplant them with alternative governance structures that work according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology.*

This paper's preference for the version proposed by Bak et al (2019) relates to its emphasis on alternative governance structures designed to challenge and ultimately replace existing power arrangements. This allows a tighter focus on how corruption in extant political systems is referenced by violent extremist organisations in their propaganda and recruitment drives.

Ideologues associated with violent Islamist extremism have often employed the term "corruption" to describe a generalised form of decay encompassing moral, social or political impurity from which the Muslim community (ummah) needs to break free. The term corruption has frequently been used by extremist Islamist thinkers interchangeably with terms such as Jāhilīyah, which in its most literal sense means "state of ignorance" but also denotes a social order underpinned by corruption.

For example, Sayyid Qutb (1964), a prominent and influential 20th century Islamist activist, framed the politics of the Islamic world as a struggle between Islam and the condition of pre-Islamic era obscurity, Jāhilīyah. Under the state of Jāhilīyah, there is no distinction between good and evil, and despots and tyrants dominate the economic and political system and abuse their power for their own advantage.

Qutb (1964: 50) asserts that God has given Muslims not only the *right* to use violence but *commanded* them to do so; violent jihad should be waged "so that the earth may be cleansed of corruption". In the fight against Jāhilīyah, Islam will need a vanguard – a group of believers who will convert the apostate world to Islam (Qutb 1964).

Later jihadists have developed and operationalised some of the ideas espoused by Qutb. For instance, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the Jordanian extremist theologian, built on Qutb's ideas to advocate for his theory of loyalty and disavowal, preaching the need to remain loyal to God by disavowing the polytheists and infidel political order through violent jihad (Wagemakers 2008; Byman 2022).

The polytheists and infidels to be disavowed were, first and foremost, the so-called near enemies, in other words, the political regimes of the Muslim world. According to Hassan (2019), Al-Maqdisi's books were allegedly read extensively by Abu Ali al-Anbari, a significant figure in the rise of ISIS.

How Islamist violent extremist organisations have used narratives of corruption

ISIS

ISIS has made heavy use of the theme of corruption in its propaganda and recruitment narratives. ISIS has often depicted governments in Muslim majority countries as corrupt, tyrannical and anti-Islamic. According to the narratives furthered by ISIS, apostate governments have failed to serve their citizens and have exposed them to practices such as bribery (Cafferky et al. 2017). Particularly on social media, ISIS has regularly referred to various forms of corruption, including grand corruption, perpetuated by apostate governments. ISIS has also drawn upon popular anger over corruption, nepotism and abuse of power within the judiciary and the security sector (Cafferky et al. 2017: 2).

In almost every case, it uses these denunciations to position itself as the solution to these issues, portraying itself as a just entity that acts with integrity, efficiency and purity. (Cafferky et al. 2017: 2).

By contrasting itself with the corruption of secular and apostate governments, ISIS has attempted to demonstrate its ability to provide justice for all. Whereas the world of Jahiliyya is full of insecurity, violence and abusive security services, its so-called Caliphate was a safe haven for Muslims. And while it alleged that the secular governments of the Middle East were crumbling under the weight of their maladministration, the caliphate claimed to manage state duties with efficiency and order (Cafferky et al. 2017: 5).

Arguably, ISIS' narratives spoke to some very real issues regarding service delivery gaps in areas such as health care, infrastructure and education that people in Iraq and Syria consistently pointed to as being among their chief concerns. ISIS often posted propaganda showing it delivering public services by, for instance, posting footage of it building new power stations, restoring run-down public buildings, cleaning pollution or providing social security to marginalised people (Cafferky et al. 2017: 6-8). In some cases, it published propaganda claiming that this was a direct result of better oversight of public finances than that provide by the political regimes it had replaced (Cafferky et al. 2017: 7). For instance, the following paragraph in the ISIS magazine Dabiq claimed that ISIS has successfully eliminated corruption (cited in Cafferky et al. 2017: 18):

> *For the first time in years, Muslims are living in security and their businesses are doing a roaring trade… Sharīʻah courts are established in every city and are judging by the laws of Islam. Corruption, before an unavoidable fact of life in both Iraq and Syria, has been cut to virtually nil while crime rates have considerably tumbled.*

Cafferky et al. (2017: 12) argue that ISIS was able to craft messages that were well received among a wider audience:

> *Perhaps what is most concerning about the group is not its fanaticism, but its ability to unite fanaticism with messages that resonate with a frustrated public, to violent ends.*

Particularly in its earlier stages, ISIS was also very effective in capitalising on the nexus between sectarianism and corruption that characterised Iraq's Shia dominated government and the feeling of victimhood, disenfranchisement and

discrimination this generated within some sections of the Sunni population (Al-Nidawi 2014; Haddad 2016). The language of ISIS placed great emphasis on giving a religious meaning to communities' experiences of suffering (UNDP 2022: 31). Perhaps this helps explain why journalists present in Mosul during the takeover of ISIS reported that some segments of the population initially appeared to welcome the ISIS takeover of Mosul (Wilgenburg 2014).

ISIS also portrayed itself as the guarantor of moral and social order and a bulwark against moral decay and infidel influence (Vice News 2014). By showcasing their strict enforcement of Sharīʿah law, ISIS attempted to demonstrate that it could restore Islamic values and install a pure Islamic form of government.

The Taliban

During the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021) the Taliban effectively exploited widespread dissatisfaction with the Afghan government and their international backers to present themselves as a more legitimate alternative (Doronsoro 2009: 12).

As far back as the 2009, analysts were warning that the Taliban was winning the information war in Afghanistan (Motlagh 2009). A major factor was its ability to capitalise on a growing sense of alienation, fed in large part by a feeling that the Afghan government was corrupt, ineffective and predatory. By contrasting itself with the inability of the government or the international coalition to address endemic corruption, the Taliban sought to undermine governmental legitimacy and present itself as a more reliable and just governing force (Doronsoro 2009).

There was a kernel of truth behind this propaganda. Weigand (2017:16) suggests that the justice system operated by the Taliban in the areas under its control was perceived by a significant proportion of the Afghan population as more reliable and less prone to corruption. In many provinces, the Taliban provided more accessible conflict resolution mechanisms and went to considerable effort to ensure citizens perceived it as a legitimate entity (Weigand 2017). Particularly in rural areas, many Afghans sought judicial services and dispute mechanisms via legal channels operated by the Taliban (Doronsoro 2009: 14).

Another corruption related factor that the Taliban exploited were the grievances stemming from corruption fuelled by large-scale international development aid inflows, combined with limited coordination. Inflows of development assistance led to the emergence a class of rent-seekers who rapidly accumulated wealth. This inflamed social tensions, increased inequality between communities and undermined the positive effect that this development assistance could have generated (Doronsoro 2009:17).

Sarah Chayes (2016) writes that:

> *Out of a hundred Taliban, elders would tell me, fewer than a quarter were 'real'. The rest had taken up arms in disgust with the government.*

In local politics, Chayes reports that distrust and even disgust with the coalition backed Kabul government was widespread. While many people battled extreme poverty, government officials were perceived as living in huge palaces, enjoying a conspicuous lifestyle. Among the people Chayes talked to during her time living in Kandahar, more people cited government corruption than any explicit religious reason when explaining their motivation for supporting the Taliban (Chayes 2016). A 2012 leaked document which showed a "compilation of opinions expressed by Taliban

detainees" showed that NATO officials had similar concerns (Sarwary 2012).

While the evidence is insufficient to conclude with precision the extent to which corruption was explicitly used in Taliban recruitment narratives, corruption appears to have been a key push mechanism that enabled the group to frame itself as a legitimate alternative to the coalition backed Kabul government.

Al-Shabaab

According to the International Crisis Group (2016), al-Shabaab is adept at exploiting fragility in the Horn of Africa and is known to exercise some state attributes such as providing services and taxing citizens. Botha (2021) likewise notes the group's proto-state characteristics, and considers it relatively effective in providing judicial services such as dispute settlement mechanisms.

Al-Shabaab runs a strong propaganda apparatus that is reportedly effective in targeting both domestic and international audiences (Anzalone 2016). It produces propaganda in a wide variety of media formats, including social media and small documentary style films that portray the Somali federal government as an "apostate" entity backed by an international conspiracy of crusaders. Movies also show many clips that expose the corruption of the alleged apostate entity, such as images of Somali army soldiers robbing civilians. (Anzalone 2016: 10). In contrast, it portrays its own order as just, safe and idyllic (Anzalone 2016: 10). The films it has produced have tended to contain a strong call to action, highlighting that it is the duty of every Muslim to fight injustice (Anzalone 2016: 12).

Later propaganda material (created after al-Shabaab conquered significant amounts of territory) promoted it as a state-like entity built on Islamic principles. In doing so, al-Shabaab portrayed itself as an entity that was simultaneously more religiously legitimate and better at fulfilling the duties of statehood (Anzalone 2016: 14). This was done by highlighting how it enforced an extremely strict form of Sharī'ah, how it punished crimes, but also by showing footage of its charity activities (zakat), how it was performing Eid al-fitr and Eid al-Adha and how it was undertaking infrastructure construction projects and social services (Anzalone 2016: 14). Meanwhile, it contrasted itself with the federal government of Somalia, whose corruption, clan politics and security sector mismanagement it frequently has claimed to "expose" (Anzalone 2016: 16).

Al-Shabaab has also engaged international audiences, including those in the United States. For instance, in 2019, the group's leader released a video critiquing US society. In the video, al-Shabaab argues that US politicians waste the American taxpayers' money by fighting Muslims in countries such as Somalia. The groups frames challenges in the US such as unemployment, poverty, school shootings and homelessness as the result of a broken system that prioritised wars abroad over issues at home (Anzalone 2020).

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is another example of a violent extremist group that has sought to capitalise on widespread popular anger over corruption and injustice.

According to Thurston (2016: 5), Boko Haram's ideology is a combination of hardline Islamic chauvinism and a "politics of victimhood". Boko Haram fiercely castigates practices that it alleges are "western constructs", such as democracy and education. At the same time, it exploits socio-economic and political grievances felt in the regions in which it operates (Thurston 2016). It does so, for instance, by highlighting malpractices and abuse by security sector actors, claiming that

this would not happen in a truly Islamic society (TI Defence & Security 2021: 6)

Its founder, Muhammad Yusuf, is said to have drawn on thinkers such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Ibn Taymiyya, who viewed Islam as a complete system to govern both society's worldly and religious affairs (Thurston 2016: 12). Thurston (2016: 5) asserts that in this view, any government that rules by other methods than those given by God must be destroyed.

Boko Haram portrays itself as a righteous platform for Muslims who have been victims of the Nigerian government. In a lecture Muhammad Yusuf delivered in 2009, he claimed that "the government of Nigeria has not been built to do justice…It has been built to attack Islam and kill Muslims." (Thurston 2016: 17). While Yusuf was killed shortly afterwards, this narrative has endured.

Chayes (2016) writes that corrupt practices in Nigeria, particularly in the judiciary, may have perpetuated narratives of victimhood and humiliation. As an example, she points out that sextortion happens at a significant scale in northern Nigeria and is often perpetrated by government officials. This type of abuse is perceived to be profoundly humiliating. Chayes (2016) points to an illustrative case of how abuses by the state apparatus drives people into the arms of violent extremists, reporting that, after a girl was abducted and raped by government forces, her brother was so determined to extract revenge on the perpetrators that he joined Boko Haram.

Unlike some of the other groups discussed in this Helpdesk Answer, it is unclear the extent to which Boko Haram has attempted to build legitimacy by replacing the state's role in service provision or developed other proto-state characteristics (Cooke & Sanderson 2016). Its media messaging tends to be mostly related to the groups' attacks, threats, shows of strength and various forms of anti-Christian hate speech, rather than attempts to emphasise its own legitimacy (Mutsvairo 2017: 9).

Corruption related push and pull factors contributing to violent extremism

What makes recruitment narratives and practices effective?

As illustrated in the previous section, recruitment practices employed by violent extremist groups have adjusted to local conditions and specific grievances and are not necessarily driven by purely ideological factors. The circumstances of those targeted by violent extremist groups' recruitment narratives therefore need to be taken into account (Ritzmann n.d.).

This is because, while propaganda can shape an individual's mindset and push them towards violent extremist groups, it only becomes truly effective when it resonates with the experiences of their target audiences (Ritzmann n.d.). Ferguson (2016: 9-10) points out that there is little evidence to support the notion that consuming violent and/or extremist ideas alone will lead to an individual actually perpetrating acts of violence.

Given that for most people, narratives and ideology alone are not sufficient conditions to join a violent extremist group, Ferguson (2016) argues that simply creating and disseminating counter-narratives without tackling other material drivers of extremism will be insufficient to tackle the problem.

Survey evidence supports this view. In UNDP's second Journey to Extremism survey, which interviewed 2,196 persons and over 800 former

members of violent extremist groups across Africa, only 17% of interviewees reported that religion was a primary factor in their recruitment into violent extremist groups (UNDP 2023). Even then, the study finds that religious ideology tends to be significantly more critical when interacting with other factors, such as a perception that one's faith is under threat. Moreover, men are more likely than women to cite religion as a primary factor in their involvement with violent extremist groups (UNDP 2022: 16).

A radicalisation process towards violent extremist mobilisation is typically a gradual process that often happens in contexts of personal or societal crises. Extremist ideology and propaganda often seek to manipulate and frame these crises so that violent extremist ideology appears to provide a sense of clarity and purpose (Ritzmann n.d.).

One way of understanding what makes individuals engage in violent extremism is to analyse some of the push and pull mechanisms that either drive people towards (push) or attract them to (pull) violent extremist groups.

Push factors

Group based marginalisation

Corruption and group-based discrimination exist in a strong, mutually reinforcing relationship (McDonald et al. 2021: 6). High levels of corruption may lead to forms of discrimination that exclude certain groups from political influence and economic development (McDonald et al. 2021: 9). Corruption can thus both enable and perpetuate group-based exclusion and/or marginalisation. Inter-group inequality and corruption exist in a vicious cycle (McDonald et al. 2021: 13)

Discrimination or marginalisation of certain segments of society does not itself generate violent extremism. However, perceived, or real experiences of discrimination, exclusion or lack of opportunities for one's group is one of the most cited and researched drivers of conflict in the literature. The link between corruption, horizontal inequality and conflict is well-researched (see Stewart 2008; Cederman et al. 2011).

In many places across the world, poverty and fragility is not a product of insufficient capacity but rather of a system designed to privilege elite interests (UNDP 2022: 8). To maximise and cement their positions of power, elites exploit, manipulate and weaponise group identities (UNDP 2022: 8).

Violent extremist organisations can capitalise on individuals' perception of being excluded and unfairly targeted based on some identity marker. They can also exploit fear and insecurity, framing their cause as a struggle for group survival.

The previous section considered how groups like Boko Haram and ISIS have used identity politics to emphasise real or imagined victimisation of groups, such as Sunnis in Iraq or Muslims in northern Nigeria. UNDP (2022) provides further examples, including in Mali, where violent extremist groups have recruited based on ethnicity (a sense of discrimination against Fulani people) as well as alleged discrimination against a specific type of livelihood (such as pastoralists). In Mozambique, violent extremists have effectively aligned their messaging with a popular perception that Muslims are doing economically worse than Christians (UNDP 2022: 35).

Corruption and state predation

Another push mechanism that lends credibility to violent extremist ideology and narratives are popular perceptions of state-sponsored injustice, corruption and impunity (Chayes 2016).

In contexts in which accessing many social services requires a bribe, facilitation payment or another illicit payment, economically marginalised citizens can accumulate multiple negative encounters with the state apparatus. This may feed into a sense of anger and despair as well as a perception that the state is essentially a predatory entity (IRI 2016: 11).

Negative encounters with state agents may not themselves lead to involvement in violent extremism. However, when non-violent extremist means of action, such as peaceful protest or collective action, are impossible and there are no officially sanctioned means of addressing abuses of power, then people may look for alternative avenues for justice, including those offered by violent extremist organisations (IRI 2016: 11). Chayes (2016) points out that when those who claim to be the guarantors of justice are the perpetrators of injustice and when those who plunder public resources also control the guns and the courts, individuals are more likely to look to insurgent actors for justice and restitution.

At the individual level, state predation and the feeling of impunity when state actors perpetuate injustice can provoke strong emotional responses from those who experience it (Chayes 2016). In UNDP's 2017 iteration of the Journey to Violent Extremism report series, 71% of respondents reported "government action" when asked the question "What specific thing happened that finally motivated you to join the organisation?"

Among these 71%, the most frequent replies were related to the killing or arrest of a family member or a friend (UNDP 2017: 73). When asked what emotion a person felt when deciding to join a violent extremist group, 34% of males report "anger" as the primary emotion (UNDP 2017: 74).

A particular important form of state predation is that which is perpetrated by actors from the state security sector. UNDP (2017: 65) found that among recruits of violent extremist organisations operating in Africa, security sector agencies, such as the military, police and intelligence services, were the most widely distrusted state institutions.

Poverty, unemployment and underemployment

Poverty can contribute to violent extremist recruitment by creating an environment of vulnerability, desperation, and frustration that extremist recruiters can exploit (IRI 2016). While poverty alone may not generally be a sufficient explanatory factor for recruitment, it is important not to overlook economic incentives. Individuals living in poverty or experiencing unemployment or underemployment may be open to recruitment for purely financial gain (IRI 2016).

Moreover, poverty could also potentially influence how receptive individuals are to violent extremist narratives. Violent extremist organisations will typically direct messages of victimhood towards people living in precarious conditions and combine this with a claim that the political status quo has been unable to provide them with adequate economic opportunities (UNDP 2022: 72).

A study by the International Republic Institute (2016), shows that the feeling of having agency is a critical element for being resilient to violent extremism. The study found that individuals who have rejected advances from violent extremist recruiters often report more optimistic outlooks on life than those who accept these overtures (IRI 2016: 12). Socio-economic factors, such as unemployment, tend to be most powerful when there is a pervasive feeling of injustice, corruption and a sense that those who have the power to change the status quo are either hostile or indifferent (IRI 2016).

The study found that violent extremist recruiters preyed upon this feeling of hopelessness, predation and powerlessness. They offered a range of "incentives", including being an outlet for

grievances, but also offered money and a "sense of identity". In many cases, the financial incentives turn out to be a critical factor (IRI 2016: 11).

Personal factors and identity

Research shows that personal psychological challenges or trauma can be a major factor in pushing individuals towards extremist ideologies that offer a new identity or cause. Childhood unhappiness, for instance, has been shown to be a significant factor in raising an individual's risk of violent extremist recruitment; individuals who have not received parental attention are much more likely to join violent extremist groups later in life (UNDP 2022: 18).

Violent extremist recruiters often demonstrate great empathy with individuals they are grooming for recruitment. Ritzmann (n.d.) notes that they will often listen intently and provide clear-cut answers and solutions to problems, seeking to exploit any the "cognitive openings" that emerge as a result of emotional insecurity.

Pull factors

Sense of belonging, agency and sex

A strong pull mechanism for violent extremist organisations is that these groups can provide individuals with a sense of community and identity, which can be appealing to individuals who feel lonely and excluded from mainstream society. As discussed above, the process of marginalisation is something that can be exacerbated by corruption, which often leaves it victims feeling disempowered and frustrated (McDonald et al. 2021: 13).

The ability of violent extremist groups to provide "a sense of belonging" has been found to be one of the most frequently cited reasons for joining. In the survey for the 2023 Journey to Extremism report, 35% of captured fighters reported their primary reason for joining a violent extremist organisation was that it provided a sense of belonging (UNDP 2023: 20). In the 2017 edition of the Journey to Extremism report, 72% of formerly voluntary recruits to violent extremist organisations responded that they did not think they "belonged" in their country (UNDP 2017: 63). Violent extremist groups often intentionally seek to cater to this desire by fostering a strong sense of camaraderie by using words such as "brotherhood" to describe themselves (Dier & Baldwin 2022: 4).

Violent extremist groups may offer individuals a form of power that they do not have prior to joining, as well as tap into a latent desire to exercise a "warrior" mentality. This can be particularly appealing for individuals who feel limited agency in their lives because, for instance, they lack employment opportunities or feel disenfranchised (Dier & Baldwin 2022).

Violent extremist groups may also offer sex as an incentive for male recruitment (Dier & Baldwin 2022: 3). For instance, this can be done by permitting or even encouraging recruits to sexually abuse people (usually women) who have been captured during conquest, kidnapped or trafficked.

Financial incentives and promises of social mobility

Extremist groups may offer various material benefits to their recruits, including salaries and possibly even housing. This can be attractive, particularly to people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

In IRI's study of violent extremist recruitment in Tunisia, financial incentives turned out to be a critical factor in determining whether people join violent extremist groups (IRI 2016: 11). Likewise, according to the 2023 edition of UNDP's Journey to Extremism report, 25% of those respondents

who joined voluntarily cited employment opportunities as a primary motive for choosing to join such organisations.

Revenge and retribution

For those who have experienced abuse, predatory behaviour or other forms of personal injustices, a violent extremist group may offer opportunities for revenge or retribution. According to UNDP (2023: 116), 32% of those fighters from violent extremist organisations that had been captured, cited "wanting to seek justice" as their primary reason for joining their former organisation. This was the second-most cited reason for joining.

High production value of propaganda

As outlined in the section above, organisations such as ISIS and al-Shabaab run efficient propaganda machines that are capable of producing content in a wide variety of forms and media. Much of this propaganda employs high production value techniques and canny use of social media to attract attention among its target audience.

The professionalism with which an organisation such as ISIS was producing its content has led Wallace (2014) to believe that some of its producers may have been media professionals prior to their engagement in the caliphate. Over time, by highlighting extreme acts of violence, ISIS was able to gain notoriety through shock value while projecting a fearsome and powerful image of itself (Rose 2014). Exactly how effective such propaganda tools are can be difficult to ascertain. However, Ferguson (2016) argues that there is limited evidence to suggest that interaction with violent extremist media content alone leads to engagement in violent extremist organisations.

The search for a more just form of society

Violent extremist groups point to abuse of power by state authorities, both to radicalise individuals and convey the sense that the government is fundamentally corrupt. Not only do they effectively frame their opponents (typically governments) as dishonest, but they situate themselves and their political agenda as the antidote (Cafferky et al. 2017: 2).

Conclusion

While they may highlight themselves as champions of purity and justice, violent extremists have a track record of engaging in the same types of systemic corruption and criminality that they claim to fight.

ISIS has been heavily involved in numerous cases of bribery (such as a recent case involving the Swedish company Ericsson) and has financed itself partly by trafficking human beings, narcotics and other contraband. ISIS members have also engaged in conspicuous consumption, for instance, by driving luxury cars (Cafferky et al. 2017: 2).

Senior actors in the Taliban, too, have been accused of extensive involvement in the value chains for various narcotics, including heroin and methamphetamines. In addition, environmental crimes such as illicit logging and human trafficking reportedly flourish under Taliban rule (Sharifi 2023).

It is also important to highlight the resistance that violent extremists have been met with from within the territories they control. Civilians who lived under the rule of ISIS, for instance, resisted its repression through creative acts of disobedience and non-violent resistance such as by writing anti-jihadist graffiti, distributing prohibited music or by occupying public squares in which punishments

were scheduled to be carried out (Svensson et al. 2023).

An interesting question for researchers is whether despite the purity narratives peddled by violent extremist groups, the socio-economic dynamics of these organisations and the in-group identities they foster actually strengthen social norms that drive corrupt practices such as nepotism, patronage and clientelism. Many violent extremist groups explicitly reject the distinction between the public and private sphere, between the common good and their own interests, and between secular and religious authorities. Furthermore, the leadership of such organisations is usually deeply antagonistic to any checks or balances that may inhibit the implementation of their political projects. The literature is unequivocal that these are not conducive conditions to reduce levels of corruption (Kukutschka 2018; Kukutschka & Vrushi 2022; Vrushi 2019).

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