This paper describes theories that explain why individuals participate in politically violent groups. Some theories suggest that individuals turn to radical means, such as violence, because they possess certain characteristics and/or have undergone particular experiences, which make them more prone to employ political violence. Other theories suggest that an individual’s ideological beliefs, level of education and income affect participation in groups that employ political violence. It is important to note that most of the theories described below are about why individuals participate in extremist organizations. In several instances we highlight findings about why civilians might support but not necessarily participate in a political violence-producing group.

The literature on individual processes of radicalization derives insights from a wide array of academic disciplines. Theories from sociology, economics and political science explore factors such as an individual’s relative position vis-à-vis others in the society, the opportunity cost of soldiering, material and non-material benefits provided by groups, and the presence of resources able to be captured or “rents,” including political power. The literature on criminology suggests that factors such as contextual emotive response and economic opportunities can explain the decision to participate in extreme forms of behavior, such as violence.

One commonality of this literature is that it tends to rely most heavily on surveys and interviews of active or former members of violence-producing groups, as well as biographical data on these individuals. Studies based on these theories are useful in formulating profiles of individuals and groups that employ political violence. However, it is difficult to draw testable conclusions from their findings. Furthermore, as Helmus (2009) notes, studies that explore the characteristics of violence-producing individuals and groups generally do not reveal how they differ from their non-violent counterparts, because counterfactuals are not introduced in most studies.

While rigorous empirical testing is still required, a large portion of this literature has uncovered that common assumptions about what makes an individual likely to participate in extremist organizations are largely unsubstantiated. That is to say, factors like education and religion do not seem to have a straightforward relationship with participation or support. For instance, more educated individuals are, in some cases, more likely to support and possibly participate in terrorism. For development practitioners, these non-findings and nuanced findings are important because they can inform the design of effective programs.

Characteristics and Experiences as Drivers of Political Violence

Theories from psychology suggest that individuals who undertake political violence have identifiable psychological characteristics that predispose them to violence and to joining groups that carry out violence. Theories from sociology propose that individuals employing political violence are shaped by the environments and social circumstances in which they live. Theories of group process, which draw from social psychology, emphasize the role of group dynamics in inducing an individual to employ violence; the concepts of radicalization and deradicalization emanate from these theories. There also are theories suggesting that an individual’s ideological beliefs, level of education, and income affect participation in groups that employ political violence. This section provides an overview of these theories before commenting on their advantages.
and deficiencies from a practitioner’s point of view.

**Theories from Psychology**

In 2005 psychiatrist Jeff Victoroff published an extensive review of theories from psychology and sociology that have been used to explain why individuals employ terrorism. In his study, Victoroff identifies eight theories from the field of psychology and five from the field of sociology, as well as theories of group process which draw from social psychology. Although Victoroff reviews these theories in the context of explaining terrorism, many apply to individuals that employ political violence in general, not terrorism solely. The following section provides an overview of the theories that Victoroff highlights, as well as his primary critiques of each.¹

**Psychopathological Theory:**
Terrorists exhibit behavioral disorders that modern Western psychiatry classifies as either Axis I, which refers to major clinical illnesses such as schizophrenia or major depression, or Axis II, which refers to personality disorders such as antisocial personality disorder. Victoroff finds in regards to Axis I classifications that “very little research has been done involving comprehensive psychiatric examination, and no properly controlled research is found in the open literature.”² In regards to Axis II classifications, Victoroff similarly finds that there is no evidence from empirical study to support the claim that terrorists are sociopaths.³

**Psychoanalytic Psychological Theories**

**Identity Theory:** Participating in political violence is an attractive option for young individuals who lack self-esteem and are seeking to “consolidate their identities” and find self worth. This theory draws from extensive psychological literature on identity formation.⁴ Although some interviews of terrorists appear to support this theory,⁵ Victoroff notes that no empirical study on this subject had been published as of 2005.

**Narcissism Theory:** From the self-psychology theory put forth by Kohut (1972), individuals who are denied maternal empathy when they are young fail to develop identity and morality as adults. These individuals develop a desire to destroy the source of this failing, which materializes into a narcissistic rage that is sometimes projected in the form of terrorism (Crayton 1983; Akhtar 1999). Like identity theory, a narcissism theory of terrorism is based largely on impressions of terrorists rather than on a methodical empirical study.

**Paranoia Theory:** Individuals who suffer psychological damage when they are young grow up with “intolerable internal feelings,” which they project outwardly onto external actors.⁶ These individuals cognitively develop a good self and bad self and attempt to destroy their bad self through violent acts. This theory, developed in Post (1997), is closely related to Kohut’s self psychology theory. Victoroff notes that this theory is intriguing yet requires further research.

**Absolutist/Apocalyptic Theory:** As proposed by Lifton (2000), young adults with weak self identities are drawn to groups that adhere to absolutist or apocalyptic beliefs. These groups allow their members to project violence against the “out group,” which the groups typically believe are trying to destroy them. These groups are generally characterized by a messianic figure that the group reveres and/or a strongly held belief by group members that out-groups are bent on annihilating the in-group. Victoroff’s primary criticism is that this theory is not falsifiable.

**Non-psychoanalytic Psychological Theories**

**Cognitive Theories:** Violent behavior is determined by cognitive capacity and/or cognitive style. Victoroff defines cognitive capacity as “mental functions such as memory, attention, concentration, language, and the so-called ‘executive’ functions, including the capacity to learn and follow rules, to anticipate outcomes, to make sensible inferences, and to perform accurate risk-benefit calculations” and cognitive style as “biases, prejudices, or tendencies to over- or underemphasize factors in decision making.”⁷ Individuals who possess certain cognitive capacities and styles, for example believing that certain individuals or groups have evil intentions, may be more prone to use violence than others.

**Novelty-Seeking Theory:** Some individuals genetically posses needs for “high-level stimulation, risk, and catharsis,” and seek out political violence to fulfill those needs.⁸ Proponents of this theory point to interviews with current and former terrorists during which they highlighted the thrill that accompanied their terrorist activities. In his comprehensive

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to works from other authors in this section are provided in Victoroff (2005).
² Ibid, 12.
³ See also Merari (2006).
⁴ See Erikson (1959) for example.
⁵ See Bollinger (1981) and Crenshaw (1986).
⁶ Victoroff, 24.
study of al-Qaeda-affiliated foreign fighters, Venhaus (2010) finds the desire to seek out excitement and thrills to be a driver of participation. Victoroff suggests that it is plausible that individuals who are novelty-seeking are disproportionately represented in terrorist groups, however he notes that there is no empirical evidence to support this.

**Humiliation-Revenge Theory:** Terrorism is an act of revenge in response to being humiliated. The sources of humiliation can vary widely, from parents in early childhood to the state later in life. In many cases, revenge is viewed as a pro-social, if not altruistic, response. Proponents of this theory highlight the “cycle of oppression and humiliation, followed by violent action in the name of liberation” that is common in the Middle East, a region which has produced many violent non-state groups.9 Victoroff again notes that while this theory is plausible, no empirical measures exist of humiliation, desire for revenge, or satisfaction from carrying out violent actions.

**Theories from Sociology**

**Social Learning Theory:** According to Bandura (1973, 1998), individuals that directly witness aggressive or violent behavior or live in societies that glorify violence will imitate this behavior. Individuals, particularly when they are in their formative years, that are exposed to terrorist messages and propaganda are more prone to engage in terrorist activities than those not similarly exposed. This theory explains why individuals raised in areas in which acts of terrorism and terrorism propaganda are commonplace—such as Palestinian refugee camps, Northern Ireland, or Shia neighborhoods in southern Lebanon—become terrorists as adults.10 This theory is commonly criticized as being too broad in its scope; many individuals grow up exposed to terrorists, but relatively few actually become terrorists.

**Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis:** Political violence, like all violence, directly results from frustration.11 Like Social Learning Theory, this theory is criticized on the grounds that many people face frustration in life, but not all of them undertake political violence. Hence, there must be more causal factors than frustration. A further criticism noted by Victoroff is that terrorism often is not the last resort adopted by frustrated individuals and groups that have exhausted all other options. A related theory to the frustration-aggression hypothesis is the strain theory, which comes from the literature on crime and unemployment.12 This theory states that crime (or anti-social behavior) results from emotional frustrations due to discrepancies between aspirations and expectations.

**Relative Deprivation Theory:** When groups or individuals suffer relative to others or are deprived of something to which they believe they are entitled, they may participate in violence or extremist movements in order to improve their situation.13 This theory has provided the foundation for analysis that attempts to link economic deprivation to terrorism, which will be discussed in a later section.

**Oppression Theory:** Oppression causes individuals and groups to respond with political violence. As Victoroff notes, “particularly in the case of nationalist-separatist or ethnic-sectarian terrorism (e.g., ETA, PIRA, Hamas), actors often cite the injustice of their treatment by governments that rob them of identity, dignity, security, and freedom as the motive for their joining a terrorist group.”14 This theory suffers from the fact that oppression is an ill-defined term, particularly in psychology literature, and no method has been created to measure it. Empirically, not all oppressed people rebel; many use non-violent methods to express their frustrations, so it remains unclear why certain oppressed groups choose violence while others do not.

**National Cultural Theory:** Weinberg and Eubank (1994) argue that individuals from “collectivist” cultures are more likely to undertake terrorism against “out groups,” such as foreigners, whereas individuals from “individualistic” cultures are more likely to employ terrorism against members of their own societies. Victoroff explains that “according to this theory, in collectivist cultures, a person’s identity is primarily derived from…dividing the world strictly according to in-groups and out-groups and linking their personal well-being to the well-being of their group, while in individualist cultures, identity is derived from personal goals.”15 The primary shortcoming of this theory is that it explains who terrorists are likely to target but not why individuals become terrorists in the first place.

To summarize, many psychological and sociological theories of political violence are compelling but are based on very anecdotal evidence. Victoroff struggled to find examples...

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9 Ibid, 29.

10 See Crenshaw (1992); Taylor and Quayle (1994); Kelly and Rieber (1995).

11 See Davies (1973).

12 For more information, see the following: Merton (1938), Cantor and Land (1985), Aseltine et al. (2000), Baron (2008), Jacobs and Carmichael (2002), and Hannon and DeFronzo (1996).

13 See Gurr (1970) for further explanation.

14 Victoroff, 20. For further explanation see Crenshaw (1986); Taylor and Quayle (1994); Post, Sprinzak, and Denny (2003).

15 Victoroff, 21.
of empirical testing of these theories in the case of terrorism. At the risk of generalizing, most of these theories share a common empirical challenge: while aberrant psychological and sociological behaviors are common in many societies and settings, rebellion is relatively rare, and terrorism is especially rare. Thus, these theories do not provide sufficient explanations.

Theories of Group Process, Radicalization and Deradicalization

Theories of group process are drawn primarily from social psychology and emphasize the effect of joining a group on an individual’s behavior. Theories of group process assert that groups provide the context for individual development and allow individuals to define new identities within the group structure. These theories assert that individuals participate in groups because of the solidarity and commitment this process generates. As one set of authors note, by joining a group “an overarching sense of the collective consumes the individual.”

In much of the literature on political violence, particularly terrorism, theories of group process are presented in the context of radicalization. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) define radicalization as a “change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup.” Some authors contend that while the sociological theories outlined above certainly shape individuals’ perceptions of the world, these individuals are not mentally prepared to employ political violence until after they are radicalized. Post, Ruby, and Shaw (2002) note that “groups and organizations that reach terrorism generally do so at the end of a process of radicalization during which the balance progressively shifts from psychological constraints against violence to incentives for violence, to viewing violence-terrorism as the only course.” In his study of Islamic diasporas in Europe, Sageman (2008) finds that although young men in these diasporas may harbor feelings of frustration, humiliation, and oppression, they must be radicalized by others to “cross the line from venting their anger to becoming terrorists.”

Much has been written about what occurs during the process of radicalization into violence-producing groups. In general, these studies suggest that during the process of radicalization, group forces—including “ideological indoctrination, repetitive training, and peer pressures”—alter group members’ perceptions of and ability to partake in violence. However, there is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding which aspects of the process are the most critical. Some scholars contend that ideological indoctrination is the key component of the radicalization process, whereas others contend that socialization among group members is the critical aspect of radicalization. There is also a debate as to whether group processes are sufficient to turn a non-violent individual into someone capable of employing violence or whether the individual’s psychological characteristics must also be factored in. Sageman, among others, contends that terrorism is “a group phenomenon,” and suggests that terrorism cannot be thought of without factoring in group processes (i.e. radicalization). On the other hand, scholars have emphasized that groups specifically target individuals who already possess specific psychological characteristics or who have undergone particular experiences that may predispose them to commit violence.

Deradicalization is the process of turning a radical group away from using violent methods to achieve political goals. While this is an important process in restoring order in areas of the world where conflict does exist, deradicalization is not a well understood (or well studied) process. Most of the literature concerning deradicalization involves understanding and changing the psyche of the radical or group by creating incentives for leading a normal life. Whether this can be successful is largely debatable, and the literature is seriously lacking in empirical studies. The role aid can play in this process is not well defined. Aid can provide incentives to enter legitimate society. However, an increase in incentives to enter legitimate society would likely draw the least devoted members first, resulting in a remaining group of more radical individuals who might want to perpetuate more violence. Thus, in the short-run, aid can both reduce the number of terrorists

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16 Post, Sprinzak, and Denny (2003), 176. Some authors use the term radicalization to include any psychological, sociological, or ideological characteristic/factor that contributes to an individual’s use of political violence. See Helmus (2009) for example. In this paper, radicalization is viewed more narrowly, in the context of a group process. McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), 416.
17 Post, Ruby, and Shaw (2002), 94.
18 McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), 416.
19 Post, Ruby, and Shaw (2002), 94.
20 Sageman (2008), 84.
21 For examples of radicalization by terrorist groups, see Sageman (2008), Hegghammer (2006) and Venhaus (2010).
22 Victoroff, 30.
25 Victoroff, 30.
26 See Victoroff (2005) for a summary of this ongoing debate.
27 Ashour (2010)
28 Bueno De Mesquita (2008)
and create a more radical terrorist organization. A priori, there is no way to know which of these effects will outweigh the other.

**Ideology and Religion as Drivers of Political Violence**

Many groups that employ political violence adhere to an ideology. This ideology can represent “a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture” or “the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.” However, the hypothesis that an ideology, in and of itself, causes groups to be violent is largely erroneous. As will be discussed in research cluster two, groups that employ political violence do so in order to achieve political objectives. Examples of political objectives include the desire to change forms of government, claim or reclaim territory, or alter the laws under which a state is governed. These groups apparently make rational choices to utilize violence to achieve their objectives.

Another theory suggests that groups undertake political violence because of their religious beliefs. While numerous religiously inspired individuals and groups employ political violence, the explanatory power of this theory is limited. As Berrebi (2009) highlights in his thorough review of this theory: “Dealing with religious terrorism can be confusing, since it is difficult to know whether terrorist organizations, which on the face of it are considered religious, are using religion to attract an audience while primarily motivated by secular goals. Further confusing to the outside observer is when political goals are claimed by terrorist organizations in the name of religion, despite the fact that religion was not at the source of these claims.”

A related theory suggests that individuals undertake political violence to obtain religious rewards. This theory has been advanced to explain the actions of suicide terrorists, particularly those who are Muslim. The theory purports that these individuals are motivated by the belief that they will undertake political violence, such as a passage to heaven or 72 virgins that await them once there, in the afterlife. While this theory has grown in popularity since September 11, 2001, it is based largely on anecdotal evidence from interviews with some Islamic militants rather than on empirical study. It is possible that this theory explains the actions of a small number of individuals who undertake political violence, its explanatory power as an individualistic driver of political violence is severely limited. Aside from the fact that not all individuals that employ political violence are religious, even among those who are religious, most do not actively seek out death with the hope of obtaining heavenly rewards. Psychologist Ariel Merari’s interviews with failed suicide terrorists provide compelling evidence on this point (Berman 2009).

**Poverty and Low Education as Drivers for Political Violence**

For many years it was thought that individuals with low levels of income and education were relatively more likely to undertake political violence. This theory rested on the notion that these disadvantaged individuals faced lower opportunity costs of violence and were therefore more susceptible to radicalization than their richer and more educated neighbors. Recent studies that have examined biographical data of terrorists have not supported this theory. Krueger and Maleckova (2003), in their study of Palestinians and Lebanese citizens, find that education, income, and class played no relevant role on radicalization. These authors analyzed biographical data of 129 members of Hezbollah’s military wing who died in action between 1986 and 1994, and found that Hezbollah fighters had on average low levels of poverty (though this figure was not statistically significant), and that Hezbollah fighters were significantly better educated than the average Lebanese young man. In his study of 335 Palestinian terrorists, Berrebi (2007) found that “both higher education and standard of living appear to be positively associated with membership in terror organizations, such as Hamas or PIJ, and with becoming a suicide bomber.” However, these studies and others similar in design have focused solely on members of terrorist organizations. Terrorist organizations are just one of many types of groups that employ political violence, and there is evidence indicating that low opportunity costs may be a driver for participation in other groups that employ political violence. This topic will be explored below.

Another way to think about poverty and low levels of education as a precursor to violence is that high levels of education (and, to a certain extent, conditions related to upper class living situations) should correlate with certain value structures in which human life is most treasured. Additionally, education should allow individuals

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29 Definitions from Webster’s online dictionary.

30 For examples see Hegghammer (2007) and Soibelman (2004).
access to the political system and to non-violent methods of political engagement, thereby decreasing any given individuals support or participation in violent activities.

The evidence linking education to radicalization as a process or to support for radical groups is limited. The assumption that madrasas are the source of radicalization is very difficult to verify. According to Winthrop and Graff's (2010) analysis of survey data, census reports, and expert opinion, madrasas are not clearly linked to terrorism. Parents often send their children to madrasas because they value religious education and radicalization is in no way an obvious outcome. Furthermore, links between the level of education more generally and terrorism are difficult to empirically validate.32 Similarly, researchers have trouble validating links between poverty and support for extremists. In their study on support for militant organizations in Pakistan, Shapiro and Fair (2009) do not find poverty to be a root cause of support for militancy.

Material Incentives as Drivers of Political Violence

An alternative approach to examining characteristics of violence-producing individuals and groups is examining the role of material incentives as a driver of participation in political violence. One influential theory suggests that individuals participate in violence-producing groups for material benefit. In their study of the factors that caused individuals to join the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) find that material offers made participation in the RUF more likely. Similarly, in her analysis of why Afghans join the Taliban and Hizb-i Isami in Afghanistan, Ladbury (2009) finds that Afghans who were unemployed or underemployed, and therefore had low opportunity costs for joining the insurgency, joined the Taliban and Hizb-i Isami to obtain cash.

A related theory suggests that the presence of lootable resources makes political violence more likely at the organizational level. This theory rests on the notion that the prospect of accessing and controlling lootable resources provides an incentive for individuals to join violence-producing groups. Although lootable resources usually refer to natural resources and commodities, they can also take the form of development aid. De Soysa (2000) finds that countries with an abundance of mineral wealth are likely to suffer greed-motivated rebellion. In their studies of civil wars, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) find that primary commodities provide extortion opportunities and thereby increase the risk of political violence.33 These arguments are more fully developed in Cluster 2.

Alternative Theories

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory suggests that individuals and groups participate in violence because they lack one of the necessary elements for an efficient (Coasian) bargain.34

a) Information on everybody else's intentions is incomplete - others may have both the capability and willingness to attack and without sufficient

information violence may be the best preemptive move;

b) Credible commitments from other individuals or groups that they will not engage in violence or not reneg from an agreement are impossible;

c) Issues are indivisible, meaning that whatever groups disagree about cannot be split in a meaningful way (locations, such as the Temple Mount, exemplify something that is only meaningful to groups in its entirety).

Victoroff (2005) notes that this theory of violence as a bargaining failure, as it is used to explain terrorism, is commonly criticized because it fails to explain why relatively few individuals, among many who are in the same position, become terrorists. The Rational Choice Theory will be explored in more detail in cluster two.

Self-control theory

The self-control theory suggests that countries with a large proportion of young males are more prone to crime and violence because of the age specific tendency toward violence of this subpopulation. This is the demographic structure of Afghanistan and so this theory is relevant. It combines ideas about the biological basis of self-control with demographic theories of crime.35

Criminal Opportunity Theory

This theory asserts that as macroeconomic conditions improve, increasing economic activity and decreasing unemployment, more opportunities for criminal behavior emerge and, thus, the crime rate increases. In the context of a terrorist group or

32 Noted in Shafiq and Sinno (2010).

33 This study also found that ethnic and religious heterogeneity and income inequality did not explain the outbreak of civil war.


insurgent group, opportunity cost theory may apply in a slightly different way. As a group grows and consolidates, the opportunities to join as a member or as an operative also increase.  

Globalization Theory

The Globalization Theory suggests that there is a link between globalization and terrorism such that globalization, and the relative disjoint it has created between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” incites some to participate in terrorist activities.

Implications for Development Policy

The evidence for pathological individual psychology as a cause of recruitment to political violence is weak. Yet even if it were strong, the policy implications for development practitioners would lead to a contradiction. Insurgent organizations are small, numbering in the tens of thousands, even in a large insurgency like that taking place presently in Afghanistan. Terrorist organizations are even smaller. A public health intervention aimed at identifying and reducing the number of individuals with individual pathologies in a population of millions would be prohibitively expensive. Moreover, since mental illness is notoriously difficult to cure, a capture or kill strategy, however ethically abhorrent, would likely be more cost effective. This view of a limited pool of potential insurgents may be what convinces the military that a capture or kill strategy is attractive.

The same problem of orders of magnitude applies to any intervention based on reducing grievances, income inequality, unemployment, or the like. Drying up the pool of potential recruits until it is so small that there is no insurgency would require absolutely massive programs, especially in conflict areas such as Afghanistan, where unemployment is extremely high, grievances run rampant and mental health care is generally nonexistent. So while psychological profiles of terrorists and insurgents would be valuable to a security guard engaged in screening, for example, they do not aggregate up to an argument for a development strategy aimed at reducing violence by reducing the proclivity of predictive characteristics in the population.

In fact, as Berrebi (2009) notes, the evidence for sane, rational, terrorists (and insurgents) cannot be dismissed:

- a) Targets are chosen instrumentally, as shown by Berrebi and Lakdawalla (2007), and by Heger (2010).
- b) Tactics are chosen optimally.  
- c) More talented assailants are sent to attack higher value targets.  
- d) Terrorism might be achieving political and territorial objectives. This point is controversial as the stated objectives of terrorist groups are often ridiculously impractical (e.g., a global Caliphate), probably revealing strong incentives to exaggerate. Yet there is evidence of terrorism altering political attitudes, and it has certainly influenced U.S. policies.  
- e) The morphing of many terrorist and insurgent groups into political organizations suggests that their motivations are highly political.

Evidence of rationality on the part of insurgents and terrorists might be discouraging from this point of view, as it suggests that the pool of potential violent actors is quite large. This is, in fact, what Hamas claims about their pool of potential suicide attackers. A reassuring fact is that even with a large pool of recruits, the number of sustainable terrorist or insurgent organizations is quite small, as noted by Berman (2009), suggesting that the operative constraint on the amount of political violence a country experiences is not the size of the recruiting pool. A discussion of those constraints requires a theory of violent organizations, which is the subject of cluster two.

Interventions that improve governance and foster development may still be effective through means other than reducing recruitment. A "hearts and minds" theory predicts that these programs can shift the support of noncombatants away from rebels and toward government. A club model predicts that these measures can weaken the hold of violent clubs on members and reduce their ability to recruit defection-resistant operatives. These theories are developed in cluster two on organizations and in cluster three on interventions.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed explanations for participation of individuals in political violence, spanning psychology, sociology, political science and economics. Although the arguments are compelling at an anecdotal level, the evidence is weak, as the literature leans heavily on retrospective cases, without examining the characteristics of counterfactual individuals who do

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36 For more information on the description of crime and opportunity cost theory, see Cantor and Land (1985).

37 Berman and Laitin (2008).

38 Berrebi and Benmelech (2007).

39 See Berrebi and Klor (2008) for example.
not engage in political violence. Where counterfactual comparisons are made, the conventional wisdom is often overturned. For instance: terrorists are not disproportionately poor or poorly educated (Krueger and Maleckova, 2003); suicide terrorists are not psychotic or motivated primarily by religious beliefs (Merari, 2004); grievances and rebellion are uncorrelated across countries (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Moreover, explanations based on individual or group pathology face the same empirical problem, namely that these pathologies are quite common in societies that do not experience widespread political violence, and sometimes have not for centuries. More research is necessary to understand these phenomena.

From a development policy perspective, it should be reassuring that political violence is not rooted in psychosis or other aberrant individual behavior, as those problems are notoriously difficult to treat and prevalence is quite high, even in peaceful societies. On the other hand, development policies aimed at drying up the pool of potential recruits with any given predisposition to political violence face a logical contradiction. The characteristics of recruits are not homogeneous or easily identified, the interventions available to shrink the pool (e.g., reducing unemployment, income inequality, or societal grievances) can result in only fractional reductions in large pools, while the number of recruits required to sustain an insurgency is relatively small. Fortunately, the number of organizations that can sustain political violence is also relatively small, as they require special characteristics. Evidence and analysis suggest that development policies can reduce political violence by undermining violent organizations, a topic addressed in the accompanying readings on organizations and on interventions.
Drivers of Popular Support for Militancy: Studies from Pakistan


Major Findings

Winthrop and Graff (extracted verbatim):

- Demand for education within Pakistan far exceeds the government’s ability to provide it.
- Contrary to popular belief, madrasas have not risen to fill the gap in public education supply and have not been one of the primary causes of the recent rise in militancy.
- Beyond madrasas, the education supply gap in and of itself likely increases the risk of conflict in low-income countries, including in Pakistan, highlighting the importance of expanding educational access.
- A nuanced analysis of the mechanisms whereby education may exacerbate conflict risk suggests that in addition to access, education quality and content may be just as important for promoting stability.
- Poor education-sector governance creates huge discrepancies in the public education system, inflaming citizens’ grievances against the government.
- Poor learning outcomes hinder the development of the core skills, including those related to good citizenship, that are needed to help mitigate extremism.
- The curriculum and teaching in government schools help create intolerant worldviews among students.
- Schools do little to prepare students for the labor market, frustrating young achievers and increasing the pool of possible militant recruits.
- Education provision is highly inequitable, exacerbating grievances by those left out of the system.

Asal et. al.:

- A family’s economic standing influenced their beliefs about their son’s joining a militant organization; richer households are less likely to consent to their son joining a militant organization.
- Pakistani sons who were unemployed faced fewer rebuttals when they attempted to join a militant organization than those who were employed.
- There was a positive correlation between the son’s madrasa attendance and his family’s consent.
- Deobandi families were less likely to consent to their sons joining a militant organization than non-Deobandis.

Methodology: Winthrop and Graff’s primarily quantitative paper is based largely off of existing studies Asal et al rely on data from surveys of 141 Pakistani families, primarily concentrated in Punjab and NWFP, who had at least one son who had been slain while he was a member of a militant organization.

Summary: In their own words, Winthrop and Graff’s report “systematically explores [their nine] key findings, provides an objective synthesis of the available evidence on education and militancy, and highlights the mechanisms through which education appears to contribute to various forms of militancy in Pakistan. It also represents a call to action, underscoring the power of education reform as a means of supporting security and stability in Pakistan. It identifies priority areas that can serve as a guide to policy interventions in the education sector, and seeks to promote dialogue within Pakistan about how to best harness the power of education for stability and peace.”

Through their survey data, Asal et. al. test the following seven hypotheses:

- Families who are weaker economically are more likely to give consent.
- Families who have more sons are more likely to give consent.
- Sons who are educated and unemployed are more likely to be given consent.
- Families that are more religious are more likely to give consent.
- Sons who are educated in a madrasa are more likely to be given consent.
- Families that are connected to militant-inclined traditions should be more likely to give consent.
- Older heads of household are more likely to give consent.

Conclusion: Winthrop and Graff provide 13 policy recommendations based on their findings. Most of
their recommendations involve supporting Pakistan’s education system, which they believe is key to providing stability in Pakistan and possibly reducing militancy. They also encourage a more thorough analysis of the linkages between deficiencies in education and militancy.

Asal et. al. conclude that although their sample size was small, their findings suggest the importance of programs in Pakistan that reduce poverty and foster employment opportunities. The authors also conclude that their study largely debunks the notion that madrasas are breeding grounds for militants; however, they acknowledge that families that support militancy may prefer madrasas for their children. Like Winthrop and Graff, Asal et. al. also emphasize the need for additional, empirical study on the link between education and militancy in Pakistan.

**On Deradicalization**


**Major Findings:** Ashour discusses a number of successful and unsuccessful de-radicalization processes in Egypt and Algeria, and highlights four primary factors contributing to successful de-radicalization. Namely: successful leadership, effective state repression, positive external social interactions, and inducements. Bueno de Mesquita uses a game theory model to highlight the difficulties of creating an effective deradicalization strategy, including how aid can serve as a radicalizing force.

**Methodology:** Ashour examines armed Islamist movements in Egypt and Algeria since the 1950s seeking common factors contributing to de-radicalization. Bueno de Mesquita uses a two-period game theory model to explain recruitment: in the first period, members of the population can join a terrorist group, and in the second period, members can splinter into a new faction.

**Summary:**

"The De-Radicalization of Jihadists" identifies the following four independent variables, which explain the initiation and success of the deradicalization process:

1. **Leadership:** the religious/spiritual leaders, as opposed to the radical organization leaders, play a crucial role in bestowing legitimacy on de-radicalization. Without a charismatic leadership that controls or strongly influences its followers, the initiation as well as the success of a de-radicalization process is less likely. And, in the cases not led by a charismatic leadership, the unsuccessful attempts were followed by fractionalization, splintering, and internal violence.

2. **State Repression:** On one hand, this is a primary cause of radicalization. However, intense and sustained repression was one factor that led the leadership of armed organizations to rethink the costs of violent confrontations.

3. **External social interaction:** If allowable and successful, it may affect the worldviews of the leadership of armed organizations, which can lead to de-radicalization.

4. **Inducements:** By using "carrots" to attract the attention of the members of the armed organization, it can bolster the position of those who support de-radicalization and oppress those who are not.

"Terrorist Factions" discusses how sociopolitical and economic factors can contribute to radicalization of a terrorist group, or how it can encourage formation of a splinter group (or both). The model discusses populations as having a range of preferences, which terrorist organizations can accommodate. In many cases, when governments provide benefits (e.g., jobs or training programs) to individuals in terrorist groups which induce them to exit, those who remain in the group do so because they are more devoted to the cause and in many cases are more willing to use violence. From his model Bueno de Mesquita concludes:

1. An improvement in the economy increases the extremism of the original faction, decreases the probability of a splinter faction forming and, conditional on a splinter forming, increases the extremism of the splinter faction.

2. When nonviolent political systems are more viable, the extremism of the original faction increases, and the probability of the splinter group forming decreases, and conditional on a splinter group forming, the extremism of the splinter faction increases.

3. When factional leaders are better able to provide non-ideological benefits, a more moderate splinter group is more likely to form.

4. When the structural environment makes terrorist mobilization more difficult, it can lead to increased extremism within the terrorist group.
While Bueno de Mesquita’s model is only applicable to the short run and even then contains some flaws (which the author addresses), the conclusions it draws are noteworthy.

**Conclusion:** De-radicalization is not a well understood process. These two papers present starkly different views on the potential for aid. Ashour argues that through both “carrots” and “sticks,” individuals can have their incentives realigned and change the organization for the better. Bueno de Mesquita argues the factors which draw individuals away from a terrorist organization only succeed in having those least devoted to the cause depart; in doing so, the makeup of the organization becomes more radical, which can lead to a newer more aggressive position.

**Lessons From Interviews**


**Major Findings:** Ibrahim and Post et al discuss commonalities between Islamist and secular terrorists. Taken together, they detail the socioeconomic factors contributing to radicalization and how joining radical groups can lead to elevated status and family support. Ladbury highlights the role society plays in promoting radicalization in Afghanistan though a series of civilian and insurgent interviews.

**Methodology:** Ibrahim conducted a series of interviews in 1977 of 33 imprisoned Islamic militants who were members of the Technical Military Academy group (the MA) or the Repentance and Holy Fight group (RHF). Those interviewed occupied a range of positions within the organization’s hierarchy. Post et al interviewed 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists representing Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, Hizballah, and Fatah (a secular group). Ladbury conducted a study of 192 individuals who lived in areas of Afghanistan which had high insurgency activity, including civilians, Taliban Combatants, and Hizb-i Islami commanders.

**Summary:**

"Terrorists in Their Own Words" highlights a wide range of factors that lead to radicalization in both secular and religious organizations. We highlight four:

1. The social environment of youth plays a large role. Namely, when one’s peers join terrorist organizations, that individual is at higher risk of radicalization.
2. The prison experience further consolidates the terrorist’s identity as a member of their organization. Most incarcerated members felt the prison experience brought them closer to the group and they became more committed to the cause.
3. The process of recruitment is largely a personal one, with over half the subjects knowing their recruiter prior to the recruitment.
4. Most interviewees reported not only enhanced social status for the families of fallen or incarcerated members, but financial and material support from the organization and community as well.

"Anatomy of Egypt’s Militant Islamic Groups" had similar findings, but also expanded on the militants’ backgrounds and philosophies. Ibrahim observed most militants also came from rural areas or small towns and joined the groups upon shortly after moving to a large city, often to attend university. He found the militants generally did well in school, were highly motivated, came from middle or lower-middle class families, and joined the militancy during times of crisis or sociopolitical upheavals. Ibrahim indicates in the absence of a credible, secular national vision, which enhances the present and future socioeconomic prospects of the middle and lower class, individuals will continue to turn to militancy.

"Testing Hypotheses on Radicalisation in Afghanistan" highlights a number of findings concerning the culture of insurgency in Afghanistan. We highlight the most significant ones below:

1. Religious motivation is one of several reasons for joining or supporting the Taliban or Hizb-i Islami. The religious message of the militants does resonate with the majority, but only because it is couched in terms of two keen grievances: the
corruption of government and the presence of foreign troops.
2. There is almost no government support in the regions studied (less than 6% attributed something positive to the government).
3. The majority of respondents supported the Taliban.
4. Young men join:
   - For cash due to unemployment.
   - For status reasons- to receive a gun and a cause.
   - For religious beliefs.
   - For self-protection.
   - To leverage armed support for an ongoing dispute, usually over land or water with another family or lineage member.
5. Radicalization generally occurs after joining the Taliban group.
6. Responses from those interviewed confirmed the Taliban is a broad movement of groups with different agendas and varying degrees of alliance to a central command.

**Conclusion:** These studies indicate a range of factors contribute to radicalization. This finding suggests that while aid may be used as a tool to deter young men against radicalization, it will not halt all radicalization. However, all studies indicate that improving socioeconomic prospects for youths results in fewer incentive to join a militant group.

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**Education and Economic Factors on Radicalization**


**Major Findings:** Despite frequent claims connecting poverty and poor education with radicalization, these two studies show otherwise. Krueger and Maleckova, over several national studies and one cross-national study, indicate education, income, and class play no relevant role on radicalization. Berrebi shows if there is a link between income level, education, and participation in terrorism, it is either very weak, or in the opposite direction of what one might intuitively expect.

**Methodology:** Berrebi first encodes and runs hypothesis tests on the biographies of 335 Palestinian terrorists from 1987-2002, the sources of which were the websites and on-line Journals of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, analyzing data on education and poverty levels. He compares this sample with a random sample of 306 Palestinian civilians of a similar age range to construct a model for predicting terrorist participation. He also constructs a dataset containing daily information for every fatal terrorist attack against noncombatants that occurred on Israeli soil from 1949 to January31, 2003, and runs a regression testing the predictive capabilities of economic factors. Krueger and Maleckova utilize interviews and public opinion polls from Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and biographies of Hezbollah militants in Lebanon (data was obtained from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and the Lebanese government, respectively), and run chi-squared tests on socioeconomic factors to examine how they lead to radicalization.

**Summary:** “Education, Poverty and Terrorism” shows highly educated Palestinian individuals are no less supportive of violent attacks against Israeli targets than those who are illiterate and poorly educated. They also show that students, in particular, find the use of violence against Israel to be acceptable. They also analyze biographical data of 129 members of Hezbollah’s military wing who died in action between 1986 and 1994, and found that these members to have on average lower levels of poverty than the normal population before their death (though this figure was not statistically significant), and that these members were significantly better educated than the average Lebanese young man. Overall, they found no direct connection between poverty or low education and participation in terrorism.

“Evidence About the Link Between Education, Poverty and Terrorism Among Palestinians” reveals an individual’s economic condition and education are statistically insignificant, but have a positive correlation with likelihood of becoming a terrorist. To explain this, Berrebi highlights segments taken from textbooks, noting the anti-Israeli sentiments as a possible explanation for the findings relating to education, as he argues the education system is venue for radical propaganda.

**Conclusion:** Both papers explore the role economic factors and education play in radicalization. The impact of economic factors on political violence is further explored in the Cluster 3 analyses, with the primary conclusion from the sections “Labor Market Conditions and Insurgent Violence” and “Lessons from Cross-National Studies on
Macroeconomic Trends and Violence" being there is no simple link between employment or GDP per capita and political violence. However, many papers in these sections still indicate aid can be used to counter violence, especially if it is administered at a local level to better the lives of the populations and reduce income inequality.
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