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Victims of Violent Extremism

Shkelqim Veseli and Besa Arifi

Abstract

In the present era, humanity is confronted with a wide range of challenges across different spheres of life, with security and economic issues standing out as the most pressing. Phenomena such as terrorism, radicalization, violent extremism, insecurity, poverty, and unemployment have become enduring concerns for both individuals and societies worldwide. These conditions underscore the necessity of examining the problem within the framework of scientific inquiry. Furthermore, an additional factor that motivates such research is the frequent association, within contemporary discourse, of violent extremism with Islam.

By examining the origins, forms, and driving factors of extremism, along with its consequences for victims and the broader dimensions linked to this phenomenon, the objective is to establish a comprehensive knowledge framework regarding this complex and detrimental issue. Such an analytical approach is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the scope and repercussions of extremism, which, even when not directly experienced by every individual, inevitably produces indirect effects on social, political, and economic structures. In this way, the analysis contributes not only to the advancement of scholarly understanding of extremism but also provides a foundation for developing policies and protective strategies aimed at preventing and mitigating its influence at both the individual and collective levels.

Within this framework, the research is directed along two primary dimensions: first, toward analyzing and conceptualizing violent extremism as a phenomenon that generates deeply harmful effects on both individuals and society; and second, toward exploring the mechanisms and opportunities available for safeguarding communities from its risks and consequences, including approaches to addressing the needs and treatment of its victims.

Keywords: Violent extremism, victim, violence.

The Meaning of Violent Extremism

A clearer understanding of violent extremism requires an initial exploration of the goals and motivations that lead individuals or groups to adopt extremist orientations. The drivers behind such behavior are diverse, yet they converge on the justification or application of violence as a means of advancing ideological, religious, or political objectives. At present, no single, universally agreed-upon definition of violent extremism exists; however, the academic literature provides multiple conceptualizations. In this context, Gus Martin (2011) emphasizes that extremism constitutes a core element of violent and terrorist conduct, arising as a radical ideology—particularly in the political domain—marked by intolerance toward opposing viewpoints and interests. He further argues that violent extremism becomes evident when individuals or groups articulate their ideological commitments through acts of violence or through incitement to such actions (Halili, 2007).

Violent extremism is a concept that still lacks a universally standardized definition; however, it is commonly linked to the instrumental use of violence for advancing particular ideological, political, social, or religious convictions. At its core, the notion implies that the radicalization of ideas and beliefs often serves as a precursor to violent extremism. It encompasses the attitudes and practices of individuals or groups who endorse, justify, or engage in violence as a strategy for achieving their objectives. When violence, fear, or terror are legitimized and employed as tools for goal attainment, such actions constitute clear expressions of violent extremism. Within the religious sphere, this phenomenon is frequently understood as the rigid enforcement or intensification of religious norms and prescriptions beyond their traditional or conventional boundaries (Halili, 2008).

From the range of existing definitions, it can be inferred that violent extremism reflects a radicalizing process in which individuals or groups regard violence as an essential means for achieving their aims, or actively promote and encourage its use. In this context, violence becomes the primary instrument for enforcing ideological, political, social, or religious change, whether within a single state or on a global scale. A more comprehensive conceptualization of violent extremism would therefore define it as the inclination to pursue ideological, political, or religious transformations through violence as the central method of action.

Types of Violent Extremism

Violent extremism may appear in various forms, yet its core characteristic remains unchanged: the reliance on violence, or the promotion and encouragement of its use, as a means of pursuing specific goals. In practice, violent extremism often shares common features with terrorism; however, scholarly discourse has devoted greater attention to categorizing terrorism than to systematizing violent extremism. Prior to attempting a typology of this phenomenon, it should be emphasized that every manifestation of violent extremism is, in one way or another, underpinned by political dimensions (Halili, 2007).

In this context, violent extremism may be categorized into several principal forms, including:

1. Religious-driven violent extremism,
2. Politically motivated violent extremism,
3. Ethnically based violent extremism,
4. Nationalist-oriented violent extremism, and
5. Racially motivated violent extremism.

1. Religiously motivated violent extremism constitutes one of the most pervasive and complex forms of contemporary extremism. This phenomenon typically emerges when certain individuals or groups diverge from the fundamental tenets of their respective religions, engaging in processes of radicalization, indoctrination, and mass mobilization, which are then exploited to advance specific agendas. In such cases, religion is not pursued as an ultimate goal but is instrumentalized to legitimize and justify primarily political or ideological objectives that contradict the core teachings of the faith. Numerous extremist groups have been identified across various religious traditions, often erroneously associated with particular religions despite lacking a genuine connection to their principles. Within Islam, prominent examples include organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra, and certain self-proclaimed Salafist movements. In the Christian context, groups frequently cited include the Amana Ecclesiastical Society, the Church of True Inspiration, the Assemblers of Christian Soldiers, the Church of Israel, Antoinism, and the Brothers of Jim Roberts. Buddhist-related extremist movements encompass entities such as the American Buddhist Movement, Aum Shinrikyo (Aleph), the Dalitic Buddhist Movement, and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. In Hinduism, notable examples include Adidam (or Free Deists),

Ananda Marga, and Arya Samaj. These cases collectively illustrate that religious extremism, irrespective of the faith it claims to represent, fundamentally reflects the instrumentalization of religion to serve political, ideological, or social ends, thereby transforming spiritual teachings into a pretext for violence (Akkoc, 2015).

2. Political violent extremism constitutes a distinct form of extremism in which individuals or groups pursue political objectives through the application of violence or by promoting and inciting violent actions. Members of such movements consider violence a necessary instrument for achieving their political aims and often engage in deliberate acts of aggression to capture public attention and advance their agendas. Notable examples of organizations associated with this form of extremism include the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers) (Miller, 2012).

3. Ethnic violent extremism refers to a form of extremism in which actions are undertaken to advance the interests of a particular ethnic group, frequently at the expense of other ethnic communities, through the use of violence or by promoting and inciting violent behavior. A notable illustration of this phenomenon in the Balkans is the campaign of the Milošević regime against the Albanian population in Kosovo during 1998–1999, when Serbian forces employed violence to forcibly remove Albanians from their territories to assert control. Other historical examples include the Cham issue in Greece and the forced migration of Albanians from what is now North Macedonia to Turkey during the Ranković era, highlighting the pattern of ethnic-based violence employed to achieve political or territorial objectives (Halili, 2008).

4. Nationalist violent extremism represents a specific form of extremism in which the exercise of state power plays a central role. While its manifestations vary across countries, it is particularly evident in multiethnic states where certain groups are systematically treated unequally by state institutions, often being perceived as second-class citizens. Tensions intensify when particular ethnic communities enjoy privileges relative to others within the state's population. In the case of the Republic of North Macedonia, nationalist organizations have, at times, engaged in or incited violence under the pretext of safeguarding state security. Such actions contribute to heightened polarization between the country's major ethnic communities. Furthermore, instances of violence frequently remain unpunished, or when addressed, are handled with inconsistency by law enforcement, undermining both justice and public trust in civic institutions (Veseli, 2018).

5. Racially motivated violent extremism has manifested prominently at various points in history, particularly in the United States. This form of extremism is defined by the deployment of violence or the promotion of violent acts against individuals based solely on their race, rooted in racial prejudice and discrimination. Historically, African Americans in the United States have experienced systemic marginalization across social, political, and economic spheres and have often been stereotyped as inherently criminal because of their skin color. Contemporary examples of racial extremism include organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which continue to employ violence and intimidation against racial minorities. Over time, however, the dynamics and public perception of racial extremism have evolved, particularly following the presidency of Barack Obama, whose eight-year tenure represented a historic milestone in the political representation of African Americans and challenged entrenched racial stereotypes (Halili, 2008).

The Causes of Violent Extremism

Since the dawn of human history, social life has been marked by ongoing conflicts between opposing forces. This dualistic nature persists in contemporary society, where notions of good and evil, life and death (manifested, for example, through acts of homicide), and morality versus immorality are constantly in tension. Similarly, the ideals of peace, security, and stability are continually threatened by violence, terrorism, radicalism, and violent extremism, including armed conflict. Among these, violent extremism stands out as one of the most alarming phenomena in modern society, significantly disrupting social order and stability. It has emerged as a global security concern, impacting nearly every nation to varying extents. As a result, states are compelled to implement comprehensive strategies and policies aimed at safeguarding their populations, as ensuring peace, security, and stability constitutes a core obligation of governance.

The academic literature highlights multiple factors that contribute to the development of violent extremism. These include ideological beliefs, economic hardships, ongoing armed conflicts, the role of prisons as environments conducive to radicalization, media influence, familial and social networks, as well as the individual's level of education and overall educational background.

Ideology

Ideology constitutes a structured set of ideas and beliefs that guide individuals in understanding reality and directing their social actions. It provides a framework for interpreting the current social order, envisions a desired future, and prescribes methods for achieving change, particularly in the political domain. Social discontent, often arising when the interests of a particular group are perceived as universal, can contribute to the emergence of extremism. In numerous instances, individuals or groups pursuing these goals resort to violence as their primary means of effecting change. While democracy is broadly recognized as the most functional and acceptable form of political organization in modern society, challenges emerge when extremist groups distort its principles, exploiting democratic freedoms to justify incitement, advocacy, or politically motivated violent acts. By manipulating the liberties inherent in democratic systems, such groups propagate messages of hatred, exacerbate societal divisions, and openly exhibit radical tendencies that conflict with the foundational principles of democracy. Within this framework, ideology may serve as a motivating factor for violent extremism but should never be considered a legitimate instrument for violence. All forms of violence are unjustifiable and must be addressed and prevented through institutional, legal, and societal measures (Hoffman, 2017).

Economic Factors

Economic challenges constitute significant contributors to the rise of extremist phenomena, including violent extremism. Conditions such as economic crises, high unemployment, poverty, and general hardship influence decision-making, often prompting non-violent yet extreme responses, such as the emigration of youth and other segments of the population in search of stable employment and improved living standards. This trend reflects a form of economic extremism, frequently resulting from inadequate economic policies and inefficient public resource management. The failure to ensure genuine opportunities for economic growth and social inclusion has fueled widespread discontent and mass migration, complicating state efforts to prevent these outcomes. Economic instability, unemployment, and poverty are closely linked not only to criminal behavior but also to the emergence of violent extremism. Rising prices, production slowdowns, and financial uncertainty often create conditions conducive to criminal activities such as theft, extortion, fraud, and other illicit practices. As Aristotle observed, “poverty is the mother of crime, but prosperity is the mother of immorality.” Extremist groups exploit

deteriorating economic circumstances to recruit individuals, promising solutions to their hardships. This manipulation drives many to join radical organizations, resulting in serious consequences for individuals, families, and society at large. A notable example is the Gülen movement in Turkey, which, leveraging financial resources, established a parallel structure that ultimately culminated in the failed coup attempt of July 16, 2016 (Halili, 2008, pp.241-248).

Violent Extremism and Armed Conflict

Violent extremism and war are closely interconnected, as both rely on the use of violence to achieve specific objectives. War typically involves armed confrontation between nations, states, or groups, often arising when peaceful solutions are unattainable and driven by factors such as territorial disputes, competition over resources, cultural tensions, or ideological, political, and religious disagreements. The connection between these phenomena lies in their shared aim: the pursuit of change through violent means. Although war can have profound and long-lasting effects on a nation's population and infrastructure, violent extremism has the potential to inflict even wider-reaching harm, given its capacity to transcend borders and operate opportunistically across different times and locations (Halili, 2008, pp. 257-259).

Prisons and Radicalization

Prisons, as institutions designed for punishment and correction, are intended to facilitate the re-socialization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of individuals who have engaged in criminal activity, in line with national and international standards and principles of penology. In practice, however, these objectives are often inadequately met, and in many countries, prisons function more as instruments of retribution than as centers for rehabilitation. In developing and transitional nations, incarcerated individuals frequently experience substandard living conditions, including insufficient food, inadequate shelter, lack of heating, and limited access to meaningful employment. Such deficiencies impede effective rehabilitation and increase the vulnerability of inmates to recruitment by radical groups. The situation is similarly concerning in the Republic of North Macedonia. Idrizovo Prison, for instance, suffers from overcrowding, inhumane conditions, and limited medical care, resulting in fatalities. Upon release, the absence of post-incarceration support further elevates the likelihood of recidivism or integration into extremist networks. As Franz von Liszt observed, one of the greatest threats arises from individuals with criminal tendencies operating in freedom (The Independent, 2014).

Victims of Violent Extremism

In legal and scientific discourse, a "victim" denotes an entity—individual, group, or even non-human—that suffers material, moral, physical, or psychological harm due to unlawful acts or events infringing upon fundamental rights. The term originates from the Latin *victima* and *vincere*, conveying notions of suffering and injury. Victimology, the discipline examining this phenomenon, investigates its causes, consequences, and protective measures. Central to the field is victimization, understood as the process by which an individual's essential rights are violated, characterized by the scale, intensity, and forms of harm. In criminal justice, the victim's role has shifted from a passive source of evidence to an active participant with legally recognized rights. The concept of victimhood captures the prevalence and extent of victimization in a society over time, providing an empirical basis for the development of criminal policies and interventions (Halili, 2015, pp. 7-15).

From a criminological standpoint, the concept of victimhood encompasses not only legal recognition but also the broader consequences that individuals or groups endure due to actions or omissions constituting criminal offenses. The Declaration on Fundamental Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power defines a victim as any person who has suffered physical, psychological, emotional, or economic harm, or whose fundamental rights have been violated, either individually or collectively. This definition underscores that victim status is independent of religion, race, gender, age, ethnicity, or political affiliation. In contexts of violent extremism and terrorism, victims frequently endure severe social and psychological impacts. According to Recommendation No. 8/2006 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, victims are recognized as civilians who have sustained physical or mental injury, economic loss, or emotional distress, including family members and those directly dependent on the affected individual (Halili, 2008).

Violent extremism and terrorism exert multifaceted effects on society: beyond the immediate loss of life and physical injuries, victims frequently experience psychological trauma, heightened anxiety, social marginalization, and material deprivation. From a criminological perspective, these outcomes extend beyond the individual, serving as indicators of broader societal challenges such as insecurity, community fragmentation, and increased vulnerability to further violence. This understanding emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive victim support and rehabilitation strategies that address both personal and societal consequences of criminal and terrorist acts (Halili, 2015, pp. 47).

Victims of terrorism include individuals who have been killed or injured during a terrorist attack, as well as members of their immediate families. In contrast, victims of violent extremism are those directly involved in extremist groups or adversely affected by their actions, which typically aim to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives. Engagement in extremist formations represents a unique form of victimization, as harm is initially inflicted upon the individuals themselves and their relatives before extending to others. Terrorist and extremist acts are generally not targeted personally at the victims but are directed against the political, ideological, or religious structures of a state. Consequently, these victims differ from those of conventional crimes and require formal recognition and specialized support from both institutions and society. Effective protection necessitates a coordinated effort among state authorities, civil society, and relevant religious organizations. Drawing on prior experiences, preventive measures and mobilization programs should be designed at both individual and collective levels. Ensuring victims are equipped to withstand violent extremism requires several conditions: acknowledgment by the state and reassurance that they are not isolated; access to legal or community protection and social support; comprehensive management of physical, emotional, psychological, economic, and social consequences; avoidance of guilt or stigma within family and society; and recognition of trauma, including psychosomatic effects. This recovery and support process is often extensive, potentially requiring months or even years to achieve (Law on Criminal Procedure, 2018).

Individuals who have experienced the effects of violent extremism can play a crucial role in its prevention and mitigation. Victims possess unique insights into the processes and consequences of extremism, making their contribution to society particularly valuable. Their involvement can take multiple forms, including sharing personal testimonies, participating in public discussions to identify factors that drive individuals toward extremist groups, evaluating the effectiveness of educational and cultural programs, and disseminating their experiences through media outlets. Additionally, victims can provide support to others affected, safeguard themselves and others from secondary victimization, raise societal awareness about potential harms, and contribute to the development of strategic policies by state authorities, civil society, and religious institutions. They may also offer recommendations and intelligence relevant to deradicalization initiatives. Through these actions, victims serve not only as participants in preventive efforts but also as societal ambassadors in the collective fight against violent extremism (Halili, 2015).

Ranking of Victims of Violent Extremism

The occurrence of a negative event, criminal act, or harmful phenomenon inherently involves at least two participants: one assuming the role of the offender, and the other of the victim. This dynamic is equally applicable in the context of violent extremism. Victimological studies, taking into account both the relationship between the offender and the victim and the respective roles each plays in the event, have proposed various typologies of victims of crimes and other hazardous phenomena, including terrorism and violent extremism. The following section presents several of these classifications, as identified by prominent scholars in the field of victimology.

Despite the general typologies of crime victims, those affected by violent extremism and terrorism exhibit distinct characteristics that set them apart from victims of conventional crimes. A defining feature is that, in many instances, perpetrators do not specifically target identifiable individuals, yet the number of victims can be substantial. Terrorist and extremist actions are frequently directed at influencing ideological, religious, or political beliefs, rendering individuals or groups associated with these values automatic targets. Additionally, victims may be harmed merely due to their presence in public spaces at the time of an attack. Unlike ordinary crimes, which are often spontaneous and carried out with efforts to avoid detection, acts of terrorism and violent extremism are meticulously planned to maximize damage, and perpetrators are often willing to assume responsibility for both the attack and its consequences (Martin, 2011).

The classification of victims of violent extremism can vary, although many frameworks developed for crime victims are also applicable in this context. Two principal typologies are particularly useful for identifying victims of violent extremism or terrorism, as both phenomena share the common objective of employing violence. The first distinction is between direct and indirect victims of violent extremism. The second categorization differentiates between immediate victims and subsequent victims. Additional classifications may consider the nature of the extremism—whether political, religious, ethnic, national, or racial—but the aforementioned typologies provide a comprehensive framework encompassing all forms of victimization resulting from violent extremism or terrorism.

The term “direct victim” denotes individuals, groups, or even entire populations who experience immediate harm—such as injury, loss of life, property damage, or emotional and material suffering—resulting from violence aimed at enforcing

ideological, religious, or political changes within a given territory. In contrast, indirect victims are those who endure the repercussions of extreme violence without being the immediate targets, experiencing harm as a secondary consequence of actions intended to achieve the aforementioned objectives.

Based on the timing of the event, immediate victims are those who are directly impacted at the moment the violence occurs. In contrast, subsequent victims are individuals who experience the enduring effects of ideological, religious, or political changes enforced through violence, suffering consequences that persist over the long term.

Conclusion

Violent extremism represents a global phenomenon that poses direct threats to societal stability and collective interests. Due to its complexity, it generates a wide range of challenges, particularly within the security domain. Examining this issue from both theoretical and practical perspectives allows for the development of effective strategies aimed at its prevention and mitigation. Evidence from multiple studies indicates that violence functions as a central and indispensable instrument for extremist individuals and groups in pursuing their political, ideological, or religious objectives.

Violent extremist organizations pursue their objectives through a variety of methods, employing all available means, either directly via their own actions or indirectly through media channels. Youth represent a particularly vulnerable group to the influence of violent extremism, a susceptibility linked to factors such as limited educational opportunities, unemployment, familial challenges, difficulties in adapting to life's demands, and other social determinants. In order to examine and elucidate this phenomenon, several critical dimensions have been explored, including its origins and sources, definitions and classifications, as well as its connections to other hazardous phenomena, notably terrorism. Additionally, the factors influencing its emergence, the underlying causes, and the consequent effects on victims have been systematically analyzed.

A defining feature of violent extremism is the instrumental use of violence to achieve political, social, ideological, or religious objectives. Extremist actors direct their actions exclusively toward realizing these aims, which necessitates a comprehensive and coordinated response from societal structures to safeguard both individuals and the broader community. Effective intervention requires the

collaborative involvement of state authorities, religious organizations, civil society, and citizens, operating in a mutually reinforcing manner. In the absence of such an integrated approach, efforts to mitigate this phenomenon remain inadequate.

The analysis offers valuable insights into the dynamics of violent extremism and can inform practical strategies for addressing specific cases. Additionally, access to quality education is identified as a critical instrument for overcoming societal challenges and addressing complex issues, including violent extremism. Within this framework, collaborative engagement across all segments of society can facilitate the prevention of such phenomena and the promotion of positive values, ultimately fostering the triumph of constructive over destructive forces.

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