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EXTREMISM IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC MOTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the phenomenon of extremism, its causes, and its repercussions on the individual, society, and the state, focusing on the political, economic, social, religious, and psychological dimensions. It aims to understand the factors that motivate individuals toward extremism, as well as the resulting impact of this phenomenon on the political and social stability and security. The motives of extremism are represented by a set of the intermeshing factors, including the political motives such as political deprivation and persecution; economic and social motives such as poverty, unemployment, and social discrimination; intellectual and religious motives that including extremist thought and inflammatory rhetoric; and psychological and personal motives related to feelings of injustice and the need for belonging and social recognition. These factors combine to create a fertile environment for adopting extremist ideas and behaviors. The repercussions of extremism encompass security and political dimensions, as extremist groups lead to instability, an increase in terrorist attacks, and threats to national and international security. They also include the legitimization of extremism through religious, political, social, and ideological justifications, which fuel violent behaviors. The research concludes that extremism is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single factor. To curb its spread, comprehensive policies are needed, including promoting social justice, providing economic opportunities, ensuring proper education, and enhancing the values of tolerance, freedom, and political participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, human societies have faced a marked rise in the phenomenon of radicalism and extremism in its various intellectual, political, and religious forms; this has been reflected in the proliferation of armed conflicts, civil wars, as well as the growth of transnational violence. Discourse based on hatred and bigotry has become a major factor in destabilizing internal and regional security, to the point that virtually no society in the world remains free from extremist groups or movements that threaten its safety and stability. Many researchers agree that extremism represents a complex phenomenon with multidimensional effects; it not limited to threatening communal security but extends to pose economic, political, and strategic threats. Terrorist attacks weaken economic and financial structures and undermine states' ability to achieve political and security stability.

1.1. Study Problem and Its Questions

Since the first Afghan war against the Soviet Union, through the conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Somalia, and up to the crises in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic world has witnessed the participation of large numbers of young people who joined the fighting for political, economic, and ideological motives. Many of them returned to their countries to form the nucleus of extremist groups and terrorist cells that carried out violent acts within Arab and Islamic states; this reality has exacerbated security, political, and cultural concerns associated with the growth of this phenomenon.

Accordingly, the problem of the study emerges through the following primary question:

To what extent do political and economic motives influence the growth rates of extremism phenomenon in the Islamic world? The following sub-questions branch out from this primary question:

What is meant by extremism?

What are the most prominent causes behind the emergence and spread of extremism?

How do political and economic factors contribute in enhancing an environment conducive to extremism?

1.2. Study Objectives

The study aims to the following:

- 1- Analyzing the concept of extremism and clarifying its theoretical and practical dimensions.
- 2- Identifying the most prominent political and economic factors influencing the emergence and growth of the phenomenon.

3- Highlighting the repercussions of extremism on political, social, and economic stability in the Islamic world.

4- Presenting an analytical vision that contributes to understanding the relation between the political and economic factors and the structure of extremism.

1.3. Study Methodology

The researcher adopted the descriptive-analytical approach, as it is the most suitable for studying complex social phenomena. This approach is based on describing the phenomenon as it exists in reality, and analyzing its components, dimensions, and internal and external relations, thus enabling the deduction of the underlying causes behind the phenomenon and understanding the factors that explain it.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies can be divided into three main themes:

2.1. Studies That Addressed the Concept of Extremism and Its General Causes

Al-Ghamdi's study (2023) indicated that religious extremism is a complex phenomenon that encompassing practical attitudes and actions that affect societal stability, and is not merely an idea or theoretical stance; while Tazaz'ah's study (2021) focused on the interplay of religious, political, economic, and social factors for extremism, emphasizing that hate speech exacerbates societal divisions. On the other hand, the study of Al-Ma'ayta and Al-Zu'bi (2020) highlighted the role of educational and security institutions in preventing intellectual extremism and called for curriculum development to systematically counter extremist ideology.

2.2. Studies That Focused on the Motives for Joining Extremist Organizations:

Study of Youmna Mohammed (2021) concluded that the motives for joining Islamic State (Daesh) are often linked to identity and belonging, and to discrepancy in interpretation between the peaceful religion and the violent behavior. Quantum Communications study (2021) showed that the motives of fighters vary, ranging from the search for status, identity, and money, to excitement and ideology, and that social background plays a significant role in these motives, as they differ between western and local participants in Iraq and Syria. Also, Tuckers study (2021) reinforced this

trend, explaining that the social and political environment constitutes key determinants of youth involvement in extremist organizations.

2.3. Studies That Focused on the Economic and Social Factors

Study of Bakheet (2020) showed that unemployment and poverty constitute powerful motives for drifting toward extremism, particularly among economically disadvantaged youth. In a global analytical study, Cordesman (2017) explained that economic, political, and social factors intersect to shape patterns of violence and terrorism, noting that the lack of accurate data poses a challenge to analysis.

Most studies agree that extremism is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be confined to a single factor; rather, it arises from the interaction of intellectual, social, economic, and political factors. Recent studies have confirmed that hate speech and closed interpretations of religious texts reinforce individuals' tendencies toward radicalization; however, this influence is further amplified by the surrounding social and political conditions (Al-Ghamdi, 2023; Tazaz'ah, 2021). On the other hand, field studies have confirmed that poverty, unemployment, and the absence of economic justice increase young people's susceptibility to joining extremist groups, although the motivations of local and Western fighters differ (Quantum Communications, 2021; Tucker, 2021).

Within the theoretical context, Rawashdeh (2015) presented a sociological model explaining how extremism can be interpreted through a functionalist perspective (structural dysfunction), a Marxist perspective (poverty and class inequality), or a psychological perspective (absence of justice and stability). Cordesman (2017) demonstrated that extremism is a transnational phenomenon, influenced by the economic, social, and political policies in different societies.

It is evident that extremism arises in an environment where economic, political, and social factors intersect, and that most studies have focused on a single factor or specific aspect, while the dialectical relation between political and economic factors has not received comprehensive analytical attention within the context of the Islamic world. Consequently, the importance of the current research lies in analyzing the mutual impact of these factors in fostering fertile environments to violent extremism.

Section One: The Concept of Extremism and Its Motives

The First Requirement: The Concept of

Extremism

Extremism is considered one of the most complex concepts in social and political studies, as its connotations vary according to the cultural and political backgrounds that determine what is acceptable or unacceptable.

First: linguistic meaning:

The term "extremism" is derived from the word "the end", meaning reaching the furthest end or deviating from the middle of the path. The term is used to denote exceeding the moderate limit in behaviors or ideas, whether in practical or intellectual life, and it is typically contrasted with the concepts of "moderation" or "equality". It is also related to the concept of "exaggeration", which reflects rigidity and excess beyond what is customary (Al-Tarifi, 1999).

Second: The idiomatic meaning:

There is no unified definition of extremism; rather, there are several approaches:

Al-Ghamdi (2023) argues that extremism is the adoption of radical positions that lack moderation and transgress ethical and social norms.

According to Hamza (2012), extremism reflects a deviation from legal and social rules and may range from deplorable behaviors to criminal acts.

Al-Jalil (1985) links extremism to the individual's psychological factors and environmental, social, and economic conditions.

LeBaron (2011) explains that extremism often manifests in the form of socially unacceptable behaviors that may include violent or terrorist practices under the pretext of protecting specific beliefs.

Third: Distinguishing between extremism and terrorism:

Extremism is linked to beliefs and ideas that contradict prevailing norms, while it transforms into terrorism when violence or threats are used against individuals or institutions to achieve political or ideological goals.

Fourth: The relative dimension of extremism:

Classifications of actions as "extremism" or "terrorism" are influenced by cultural and political standards. For example, resistance against colonialism may be considered a moral project by one group, while it is considered terrorism by another, as was the case with Nelson Mandela's experience in South Africa.

The Second Requirement: Motives For Extremism

The motives for extremism arise from the intersection of political, economic, social,

intellectual, and psychological factors, and include the following:

First: Political motives:

Studies indicate that political deprivation, discrimination, or the absence of justice reinforces the tendency toward extremism, as affected individuals and groups resort to extremism as a means of protest or to defend their interests (Al-Rawashdeh, 2015). Furthermore, armed conflicts and civil wars also influence in pushing some youth to join extremist groups under the pretext of protecting their beliefs or groups (Tucker, 2021).

Second: Economic and social motives:

Poverty, unemployment, and social deprivation are among the most prominent catalysts for extremism, as limited economic opportunities lead to feelings of frustration and alienation, increasing individuals' susceptibility to adopting extremist ideas in search of a new identity or status (Bakheet, 2020). Studies have shown that some fighters join extremist organizations for reasons related to identity, status, financial gain, or the search for excitement (Tucker, 2021).

Third: Intellectual and religious motives:

militant intellect and closed religious and political discourse contribute to pushing individuals toward extremism, especially when intolerance, hatred, and the demonization of others are widespread; coupled with weak societal culture and incendiary rhetoric (Al-Ghamdi, 2023).

Fourth: Psychological and personal motives:

Extremist motives are linked to internal psychological factors such as an individual's feeling of injustice or deprivation, and the need for belonging and social recognition; these factors may interact with external pressures to reinforce extremist behaviors (Al-Rawashdeh, 2015; LeBaron, 2011).

Fifth interlacement among factors:

Political, economic, social, religious, and psychological factors are often intertwined; making extremism is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon, ranging from militant intellect to organized violence and terrorism (Al-Ma'ayta & Al-Zu'bi, 2020).

Factors at the individual level

Socio-Economic Conditions: Recent studies indicate that poverty alone does not guarantee an individual's joining extremist groups; as poor individuals often focus on meeting their basic needs and are less likely to support armed groups compared to individuals from middle-income backgrounds. Conversely, extremist groups often attract educated and intelligent individuals, who may be less politically active in general (Blair et al.,

2013; Krueger & Maleckova, 2003; Mustafa, 2013).

Economic opportunities vs. economic conditions: Evidence suggests that the lack of economic opportunities may be a stronger factor driving individuals toward violent extremism compared with their general economic circumstances. Educated individuals who lack access to suitable opportunities are more likely to experience frustration and anger as a result of inequality (Blair et al., 2013).

Religion and extremism: Studies have shown that religiosity does not directly determine the propensity for violent extremism, as the relation depends on the group's organizational ideology and its leadership (Fair et al., 2010). A comprehensive examination clears that religion is often exploited to justify violence rather than being a root cause.

The absence of democracy and political grievances: Repressive regimes can drive some young people to violence; but the empirical evidence does not prove a direct link between a lack of democracy and violent extremism. Conversely, democracies provide space for the growth of extremist ideologies through freedom of expression, movement, and assemblage (Sisk, 1992).

Socio-Economic Injustice: Inequalities in the distribution of wealth and opportunities, and relative deprivation, contribute to individuals' feelings of frustration and social alienation; this increases the likelihood of their affiliation extremist groups (Fahmy, 2024; Harir, 1996).

Victimhood narratives and existential threat: In many cases, individuals rely on experiences of persecution and exclusion to justify joining armed groups, which reinforces a sense of belonging and a defense of their identity (Mironova et al., 2014).

Unemployment and loss of hope: Persistent unemployment leads to a sense of despair, causing individuals to seek radical solutions. Extremist groups exploit this sentiment by offering a new ideological goal that promises a better life or revenge against a society they perceive as unjust (Berkowitz, 1993).

Inequality and the justice gap: Inequality erodes trust in the state and leads individuals to seek alternative justice, often through violence or joining extremist groups (Sharp, 1997).

Civilizational conflict with the West: Some scholars argues that Islamic values clash with Western materialistic and secular values, and that political Islam may not be compatible with Western democracies, requiring decision makers to dealing with Islamic movements with an exclusionary mindset (Miller, 1993; Sisk, 1992).

The Third Requirement: Theories Explaining

Extremism

Psychological, social, and political studies seek to explain the reasons why individuals and groups tend toward extremism.

This is reflected in the existence of two main approaches to analyzing human behavior:

First: Dispositionism: This approach focuses on the individual and psychological characteristics of the person as the source of his tendency toward extremism. That is, the behavior stems from internal motives inherent in the personality (Al-Sayed Yass, 2016).

Second: Situationism: This approach focuses on the external factors surrounding the individual, such as social, political, and economic conditions, and how these affect the individual's behavior. It also includes theories that consider extremism a rational strategy in the conflict between supporters and opponents of authority (Al-Sayed Yass, 2016).

First: Dispositional Theories at the Individual Level

These theories focus on individual characteristics as a primary factor in a person's tendency toward extremism. They are based on the premise that extremist behavior stems from psychological or personality characteristics, or pre-existing dispositions (Adorno, 1950; Altmaier, 1950).

Social domination theory: Jim Sidanius (2000) argues that individuals belong to groups of higher status and believe in their group's ability to dominate. Intolerance emerges when they feel their group is superior to others, as seen in racial segregation in the United States.

Stereotyping theory: Barbara Engels (1985) indicates that the human mind categorizes phenomena and individuals into patterns to simplify reality. These categorizations can lead to preconceived prejudice and the issuance of inaccurate judgments about other groups (Al-Saffar, 2022).

Frustration-Aggression theory: This theory posits that frustration resulting from the obstruction of individual needs, sometimes lead to extremist aggressive behavior. This is more likely when an individual compares himself to others and experiences a sense of relative deprivation (Kamal, 1985).

Narcissism-Aggression theory: Richard Perlstein (2004) argues that individuals with extreme narcissistic tendencies face frustration due to damaged self-esteem, leading to aggression and violence as expressions of anger and excessive narcissism (Al-Hakim, 2018).

Second: Contextual-Level Theories.

These theories focus on the influence of the environment and individual's surrounding situation on his extremist behavior, explaining extremism as a result of the individual's interaction with external forces that affect his decisions and thoughts.

Situational theory: This theory posits that individual's behavior is influenced by the surrounding situation and conditions, such as state weakness or corruption, poverty and discrimination, and a lack of justice. State failure or the absence of democracy also reinforces the tendency toward extremism. The surrounding environment can drive physically and psychologically healthy individuals to engage in violence, as happened at Abu Ghraib prison (Houghton, 2017).

Horgan's Process Model theory: Horgan (2004) explains that the transition toward extremism occurs gradually as a result of the interaction of individual factors with surrounding conditions, such as the desire for material or moral gains, belonging to groups of like-minded individuals, social pressures, and a lack of opportunities to improve one's reality. (Gharaibeh, 2016)

Rational extremism theory: This theory posits that extremism and violent behaviors may be a rational strategic plan to achieve specific goals, as seen in the use of media to instill fear and influence governments, as in the case of Islamic State (Daesh). (Al-Sayed Yass, 2015).

Needs theory (Maslow): This theory links basic human needs, such as belonging, respect, and self-actualization, to extremist behavior. Deprivation of these needs leads individuals to resort to extremism and violent behaviors as a means of fulfilling them (Qattanani, 2011).

Section Two: Repercussions Of Extremism

The phenomenon of extremism and terrorism is among the most prominent issues facing countries and societies globally. There are numerous reasons that lead individuals to engage in extremist behaviors, with economic and social factors such as poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and inequality playing a significant role as the most significant drivers of this phenomenon (Al-Issawi, 2020).

The First Requirement: Security And Political Repercussions

Extremism and terrorism are not limited to any particular religion or culture; rather, it constitutes a global threat posed by individuals who act outside human values, exploiting religious and political

differences to achieve their goals (Al-Issawi, 2020). Studies have indicated that the most prominent political risks began with the escalation of Al-Qaeda's activity and the emergence of new terrorist groups in the Middle East after 2001 (Byman & Bensahel, 2004). Between 2001 and 2021, several Middle Eastern countries were subjected to terrorist attacks that affected their security and economic stability. The number of these attacks rose from approximately 400 in 2001 to around 6,000 in 2015, with the Arab Spring uprisings clearly contributing to the rise of extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Zimmerman, 2021). Despite attacks declining after 2015, organized groups such as al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, Islamic State (Daesh) and Taliban continued to carry out a significant proportion of these attacks during the period 2011-2016. The START database showed that approximately 85% of global attacks occurred in Muslim-majority countries (START, 2016). Globally, from 1979 to April 2024, a total of 66,872 attacks were recorded, resulting in approximately 249,941 deaths, with the majority of attacks concentrated in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa (Reyni, 2024). (Global Terrorism Database (GTD) - START Center, University of Maryland).

This data is considered an indicator of the escalating of terrorist activity in the region, necessitating special attention from governments and the international communities. The data also shows a slight decrease in the number of terrorist incidents in 2020, which may be attributed to increased counter-terrorism measures or the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorist activities.

The Second Requirement: The Economic Impact of Terrorism and Extremism

Terrorism in the Middle East has multiple and interconnected economic impacts; as its emergence has led to structural changes and economic contraction through various means. Continuous violence poses a constant threat that directly and indirectly affects local economies. The direct consequences of terrorism include loss of human lives, destruction of infrastructure, industries, and agriculture, and disruption of trade operations. (Mustafa, 2013)

As for the indirect consequences, they include a decline in foreign direct investment, capital flight, weakened economic growth rates, increased unemployment, and the substantial expenditures associated with the rehabilitation of those displaced by wars and counter-terrorism operations. Consequently, restoring economic stability and

growth and providing livelihood opportunities represents a long-term challenge given the deep-rooted political, security, and economic difficulties in many affected countries. (Ghoneim, 2020)

Terrorism has had a significant impact on the oil sector, which serves as the backbone of economic stability in many countries across the region. Armed conflicts affect both regional and international economies by disrupting production through the targeting of infrastructure and the severance of supply routes. In Iraq, Islamic State (Daesh) activity reduced oil production by as much as 320,000 barrels per day at the height of its control. By 2014, the organization had seized more than 60% of Syrian oil production, generating approximately \$3 million daily from illicit sales (Ghoneim, 2020).

The effects of terrorism on the oil trade are also evident in the ongoing attacks on oil tankers, which increase market instability. European and African markets have experienced supply shortages due to fears of maritime delays resulting from terrorist attacks, leading ships to avoid transiting the Red Sea. The Houthis target ships sailing south of Yemen using drones and missiles, highlighting the importance of the Suez Canal as one of the world's most vital waterways for the transport of oil and goods. (Fahmy, 2024)

Terrorism derives a significant portion of its funding from oil, a resource that could otherwise have supported development initiatives aimed at combating poverty and improving infrastructure and health services. As the foundation of many Middle East economies, the instability of energy supplies imposes a heavy burden, underscoring the urgent need to restore sustainable growth and secure vital assets targeted by extremist organizations.

Developing financial markets exhibit significant sensitivity to armed conflict and terrorism, as increased political and economic uncertainty amplifies instability in stock and currency markets. Studies have shown that political turmoil in the Middle East had a profound impact on early economic stability during the Iraq War (2003), with significant changes in stock market volatility in five Arab countries, reflecting the impact of terrorism on investment opportunities and the business environment. (Fahmy: 2024)

Furthermore, protracted wars have forced states to expend vast resources on security and defense, overriding basic humanitarian and financial objectives. Engaging in war requires massive budgets for mobilizing and deploying forces in turbulent zones, purchasing weapons, and other unproductive defense expenditures, thus reducing

resources available for profitable civilian projects and negatively impacting future economic prospects. This combination of supply disruptions, high government spending during periods of war, and political and social instability has fueled inflation in the region. (Bakheet: 2020)

The Third Requirement: Legitimizing Of Extremism

The legitimization of extremism can be categorized into four main groups:

Religious beliefs: Religious extremism often emerges as a reaction to difficult political, economic, and cultural conditions, where individuals sometimes resort to violence as a means of change or protest. A study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2017 indicated that 40% of those who voluntarily joined extremist groups in Africa were motivated by religious reasons (UNDP, 2017).

Political beliefs: Extremism is sometimes linked to unjust political practices, such as the suppression of freedoms and the violation of rights, which drives individuals to use violence as a response to oppression. Additionally, media and modern social communication technologies also contribute to the spread of extremist ideas and encourage joining armed groups (Byman, 2004).

Psychological and social motives: Psychological and environmental factors influence an individual's tendency toward extremism; as poverty, discrimination, poor education, and family instability increase the likelihood of engaging in violent behavior (examples: Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, the National Party in South Africa in 1948).

Ideological motives: Extremism is characterized by a rigid adherence to specific intellectual or religious principles and along with the pursuit of imposing them on society and seizing power to implement them. Additionally, this is evident in

historical conflicts between different economic or religious systems, as well as in organizations like Islamic State (Daesh).

3. CONCLUSION AND RESULTS

This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of extremism, with focusing on its motives and effects on individuals, society, and the state. The results showed that the motives for extremism are multifaceted, ranging from the political motive; including feelings of deprivation, marginalization, and persecution, as well as armed conflicts- the economic and social motives; including poverty, unemployment, and exclusion, which are driving factors for joining extremist groups, in addition to the search for a new identity or material gains- intellectual and religious motives ; where extremist and inflammatory rhetoric contributes to strengthening extremist affiliations- and psychological and personal motives; including an individual's feeling of injustice and the need for belonging and social recognition, which interact with external factors to generate extremist behaviors. These factors often overlap, making extremism a multidimensional phenomenon.

Extremism has political and security repercussions, as extremist groups have contributed to destabilizing security and political stability in the Middle East, and the number of attacks increased after the events of September 11 and the Arab Spring. The reasons that justify violence are numerous, including religious, political, psychological, social, and ideological justifications. In conclusion, extremism is a global phenomenon fueled by complex and intertwined set of factors. To curb its spread, countries need comprehensive policies that include social justice, economic opportunities, education, and the promotion of values of tolerance and political participation.

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