

NOREF Expert Analysis

Poverty and radicalisation into violent extremism: a causal link?

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Executive summary

The consensus in past research into terrorism and radicalisation into violent extremism (RVE) is that generally there is no link between poverty and radicalisation, and if such a link exists, it is a weak one. However, insufficient attention has been paid to how terrorism has changed over the last few years to become a phenomenon that frequently occurs in weak, conflict-ridden states. In these states, poverty seems to play an essential role especially with regard to the motivation of suicide bombers. In the case of Pakistan, a current hotbed of terrorism, little research has been done on this issue and what little research that has

been conducted points in opposite directions. However, more recent research has concluded that RVE and terrorism have to be researched in each country/area where terrorism exists and conclusions cannot be generalised to all countries. There is reason to believe that there is a causal link between poverty and RVE, especially in countries such as Pakistan, where there are high levels of poverty and militant groups both recruit and supply social services, and where poverty-stricken young men have few livelihood options other than that of joining a militant group.

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Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, radicalisation into violent extremism (RVE) is defined as *a personal or group psychological process that escalates towards support for political violence or the use of political violence*. Terrorism is defined as *an act of violence, or threat of violence, by a non-state actor against civilians or society to achieve political or ideological goals*. This literature review and analysis examines the conceptual framework relating to RVE and poverty, and essential research on the subject, including literature on terrorism and poverty. RVE is a rather new concept, understanding of which has recently become essential because of homegrown terrorism. In the search for explanations for and ways of countering RVE, socioeconomic background is often a key reference point. When examining poverty as a possible explanation for RVE, however, there seems to be a gap in our understanding, since only certain local conflicts have been examined in many studies of the links between poverty and RVE, but these have affected the current consensus. Furthermore, in much of the examined literature the type of poverty is not specified, i.e. absolute or relative poverty. In this paper the focus will be on absolute poverty, although theories dealing with relative poverty will also be presented. Furthermore, a few key studies have dominated terrorism research and have not been sufficiently questioned. RVE can be seen as a precursor to acts of terrorism, but many people and groups go through an RVE process without actually committing such acts (Borum, 2011). Insight into this topic will be important in designing policies to deal with the problem of RVE.

The general consensus

There is controversy among researchers regarding the link between poverty and political violence. Researchers representing the different perceptions of such a link can be separated into three groups that can be labelled “no link”, “weak link” and “link”. In the first group – “no link” – can be found researchers such as Sageman (2004), Kreuger (2007), Berrebi (2007) and the early views of Piazza (2004); in the second group – “weak link” – can be found Wiktorovicz (2004) and Hegghammer (2010); while the third group – “link”

– contains researchers such as Von Hippel (2004) and Piazza (2011). The general understanding within research on political violence has in the past been that there is no link between poverty and political violence or terrorism, and if there is such a link, it is a weak one. In research using a psychological or sociological approach, poverty is viewed as one element of relative deprivation. Researchers using a quantitative approach have often measured the absolute poverty or socioeconomic backgrounds of known terrorists, including suicide bombers.

Gurr (1970) introduced the theory of relative deprivation as a cause of aggression and rebellion. In his view it was not absolute deprivation that caused men to rebel, but rather their perception of their situations compared to other groups in society. Merton’s strain theory has many similarities to Gurr’s relative deprivation/aggression theory. According to this theory everybody in society has the same desires and needs; however, these needs and desires are not equally fulfilled. When people expect them to be fulfilled, but they are not, then such people experience strain, which causes delinquency (see Tierney, 2006). McCauley and Moskalenko (2011) understand RVE as a psychological process that takes place at the personal and group levels. Wiktorovicz (2004) presents RVE as a socialisation process that progresses in stages. Gurr, Merton, Wiktorovicz, and McCauley and Moskalenko all include socioeconomic conditions as an element in the radicalisation process, but treat such conditions in relative terms, i.e. poverty may affect RVE, but in the form of relative poverty and not absolute poverty. The common understanding within sociology, social psychology and political science is that there is no link or a weak link between absolute poverty and political violence. A European Commission (2008) paper on the causal factors of RVE argues that if poverty is a cause of RVE, it will be an indirect one that depends on social and individual factors.

When focusing on particular groups, Kreuger (2007) and Berrebi (2007) find that terrorists are neither poor nor have lower levels of education. According to Kreuger (2007) there is no link between poverty and terrorism. Sageman (2004) conducted an empirical study on the al-Qaeda network in 2004 and concluded that the

terrorists he studied were mostly from the middle class and not from impoverished backgrounds. Nonetheless, a problem with using his research to test the link between poverty and radicalisation is the rather small sample he used comprising only 172 Islamic militants. Hegghammer (2010) and Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman (2009) confirm similar findings about global jihadis, although in Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman's sample the individuals came from a slightly lower class than in Sageman's (2004) sample. Hegghammer (2010) researched al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and found that most members came from the middle class or lower-middle class. Merari (2010) and Kreuger (2007) used the examples of Hizbullah and Hamas suicide bombers. However, their findings cannot be generalised to all suicide bombers.

Recent political science research has helped to correct this picture. In 2004 Piazza initially found no correlation between poverty and terrorism, but later (Piazza, 2011) admitted that he and many other researcher had used a cross-country database that gave a skewed result. Furthermore, a UN report on suicide bombers in Afghanistan concludes: "Afghanistan and Pakistan are counter examples to the consensus about no link between poverty and terrorism" (UNAMA, 2007).

Von Hippel (2004) gives examples of individual groups in specific countries and concludes that many researchers may have drawn their conclusions too soon. She gives examples from Somalia and Pakistan where young men have been recruited especially among the poor and point out that militant groups are often supported by the poor, since these groups are able to offer social services that governments cannot. Her points is that local contexts and groups must be studied individually. The Club de Madrid Working Group draws the same conclusion: "Terrorism today has both local and transnational causes and costs, and it therefore requires coordinated local, regional, and global policy responses" (Gurr, 2005: 19).

The case of Pakistan

Since Pakistan can be defined as a weak state, has many militant groups, and is a challenge to regional and international security (*The Nation*,

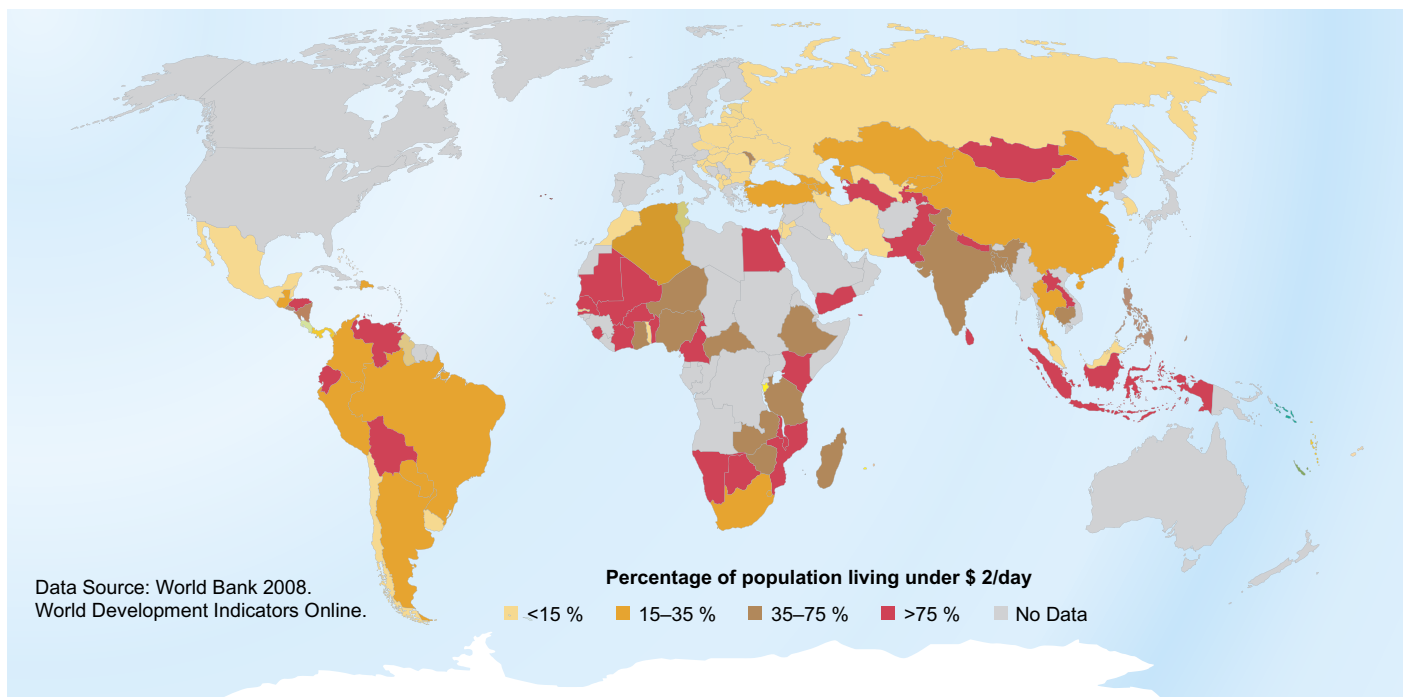
2012), it is therefore especially interesting to examine the correlation between RVE and poverty in this country. Blair et al. (2011) conclude that there is no link between poverty and support for militant groups in Pakistan. The question becomes how Blair et al. (2011) managed to reject a positive correlation between RVE and poor socioeconomic background in Pakistan. Interviewees were asked about policy and were informed that, for example, the Pakistani Taliban supported a certain policy. By presenting the questions in this way, the focus was on the policy and not the specific militant groups. According to the researchers, the respondents would then be less hesitant to reply to questions on what was perceived as a sensitive topic, i.e. support for militant groups. But since the respondents were not asked directly about their support for such groups, there is a risk that they focused more on the policy issue than on the militant group when they responded to the questions, which might have skewed the results. One of the four policy questions covered was whether the teaching of maths and science should be obligatory in *madrassas* (Islamic schools). This can be viewed as an issue of religious piety/culture versus foreign interference, where the policy might have been the focus of respondents' personal opinions, and militant groups' support for it might have been less important/irrelevant. Blair et al.'s (2011) research design also ran the risk that asking such policy questions could have created a bias due to an imbalance in power between the respondents and the interviewer. The respondents, especially the poorest, might have wanted to please the interviewer and as a result may have been more negative towards anything to do with militant groups than they truly felt, since there was possibility that the researcher might have been seen to belong to a different class than themselves and perceived to have a Western connection. This may have been especially the case when policy questions were posed regarding sensitive issues, such as the implementation of obligatory maths and science in *madrassas*. Another essential question is whether it was possible to obtain relevant answers from the respondents on such sensitive issues without spending a relatively long period in the field with each respondent to build up trust. Thus, the research design and conclusions drawn are debatable.

Other research conducted in Pakistan comes to different conclusions. According to a research project in the Swat Valley, 63% of households agreed that youth joined militant groups to improve their livelihoods (Aziz, 2010). This research also revealed that malnutrition as a consequence of poverty led to many children being born with brain damage and being passed on to militant groups (Aziz, 2010). A research study by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies demonstrates higher support for militants in the poorer districts of Pakistan than in better-off districts (Manzar, 2010). Although the study concludes that poverty is not only to blame for the radical worldview of the samples in the poorest provinces – North Western Frontier Province and Balochistan – poverty cannot be dismissed as a determining factor for radicalisation in Pakistan. It is clear that these research results point in different directions and that some of the research designs are questionable. It is therefore difficult to draw any definitive conclusions on the correlation between militancy and poverty in Pakistan and to use the results from these research programmes as evidence of a link between poverty and RVE. Another cause for RVE in Pakistan is probably the many U.S. drone attacks against al-Qaeda leaders and militant leaders with a connection to al-Qaeda such as leaders of the Taliban. It is especially in the remote and poorest areas, such as Waziristan, where many drone attacks have taken place and in several cases innocent people have died, causing deep resentment and possibly

encouraging support for anti-U.S. militants, especially given the Pakistani governments inability to prevent such attacks (Akbar, 2012). The use of drones in the U.S.'s counterterrorism strategy makes it even more important to examine what role poverty plays in RVE in Pakistan in order to distinguish clearly between the effects of each possible cause of radicalisation (McCants & Watts, 2012).

Conclusion

Political violence, including terrorism, has changed over the last 10-15 years by spreading to many weak states experiencing ongoing conflicts. Research on the topic of a possible correlation between poverty and RVE does not seem to have kept up with this development. For example, the socioeconomic situation of suicide bombers in these countries is very different from that of the 9/11 suicide bombers, most of whom were Saudi citizens (Saudi Arabia is extremely wealthy from its oil revenues and offers many social programmes/benefits to its citizens as a result). Although recent research (e.g. Piazza, 2011) has to a certain degree corrected the previous understanding of the link between poverty and RVE, more qualitative and quantitative studies on groups, individuals and local contexts, especially in weak, conflict-ridden states, are needed to provide a clear result and a coherent understanding of the issue.



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