



Addressing Extremism

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“I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And let me remind you that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” –Barry M. Goldwater

“Extreme justice is often injustice.” –Jean Racine

“They violate our land and occupy it and steal the Muslim’s possessions, and when faced by resistance they call it terrorism.” –Osama bin Laden

“God deliver you, dear reader, from a fixed idea...it is they that make both supermen and madmen.”
–Friedrich Nietzsche

“The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be...The nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists”
–Martin Luther King, JR

“What is objectionable, what is dangerous about extremists is not that they are extreme, but that they are intolerant” –Robert F. Kennedy

Defining Extremism

Extremism is a complex phenomenon, although its complexity is often hard to see. Most simply, it can be defined as activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary. In conflict settings it manifests as a severe form of conflict engagement. However, the labeling of activities, people, and groups as “extremist”, and the defining of what is “ordinary” in any setting is always a subjective and political matter. Thus, we suggest that any discussion of extremism be mindful of the following:

- Typically, the same extremist act will be *viewed* by some as just and moral (such as pro-social “freedom fighting”), and by others as unjust and immoral (antisocial “terrorism”) depending on the observer’s values, politics, moral scope, and the nature of their relationship with the actor.
- In addition, one’s sense of the moral or immoral nature of a given act of extremism (such as Nelson Mandela’s use of guerilla war tactics against the South African Government) may change as conditions (leadership, world opinion, crises, historical accounts, etc.) change. Thus, the *current and historical context* of extremist acts shapes our view of them.
- *Power* differences also matter when defining extremism. When in conflict, the activities of members of low power groups tend to be viewed as more extreme than similar activities committed by members of groups advocating the status quo. In addition, extreme acts are more likely to be employed by marginalized people and groups who view more normative forms of conflict engagement as blocked for them or biased. However, dominant groups also commonly



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- employ extreme activities (such as governmental sanctioning of violent paramilitary groups or the attack in Waco by the FBI in the U.S.).
- Extremist acts often employ *violent means*, although extremist groups will differ in their preference for violent vs. non-violent tactics, in the level of violence they employ, and in the preferred targets of their violence (from infrastructure to military personnel to civilians to children). Again, low power groups are more likely to employ direct, episodic forms of violence (such as suicide bombings), whereas dominant groups tend to be associated with more structural or institutionalized forms (like the covert use of torture or the informal sanctioning of police brutality).
 - Although extremist individuals and groups (such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad) are often viewed as cohesive and consistently evil, it is important to recognize that they may be conflicted or ambivalent psychologically as individuals, and/or contain a great deal of *difference* and conflict within their groups. For instance, individual members of Hamas may differ considerably in their willingness to negotiate their differences with the Palestinian Authority and, ultimately, with certain factions in Israel.
 - Ultimately, the core problem that extremism presents in situations of protracted conflict is less the severity of the activities (although violence, trauma, and escalation are obvious concerns) but more so the *closed, fixed, and intolerant* nature of extremist attitudes, and their subsequent imperviousness to change.

Where Does Extremism Come From?

There are a variety of schools of thought on the sources of extremism, which are given unequal weight in the literature. Here is a summary of the main perspectives:

1. **Extremism is grown.** That adverse conditions (poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, nutrition, education, and employment), a denial of basic human needs (for security, dignity, group identity, and political participation), unending experiences of humiliation, and a ever-widening gap between what people believe they deserve and what they can attain leads to extreme acts. This is particularly so because normative channels for getting needs met are experienced as blocked.
2. **Extremism is constructed.** This takes two forms. One, political leaders, capitalizing on adverse conditions, incentivize extremism (such as offering monetary awards to families or emphasizing benefits to “martyrs” in the afterlife) and legitimize militantism in order to draw attention to their cause and gain power. Two, dominant groups, in an attempt to maintain power and resist demands for change, characterize the actions of marginalized groups as “extremist” and create a self-fulfilling prophesy which elicits increasingly extreme actions from these groups.
3. **Extremism is an emotional outlet for severe feelings.** Persistent experiences of oppression, insecurity, humiliation, resentment, loss, and rage lead individuals and groups to adopt conflict engagement strategies which “fit” or feel consistent with these experiences. Thus, extremists will use violent, destructive strategies, not because they are instrumental to attaining other goals, but because they feel righteous, vengeful, and good. In fact, when extremism is morally sanctioned



- by ones ingroup as an appropriate response to such feelings, members become more invested in extremist acts because they are empowering and feel “right”.
4. **Extremism is a rational strategy in a game over power.** That extremist actions are an effective strategy for gaining and maintaining power in an hierarchical environment where resources are scarce and competition for power is paramount for meeting one’s needs. In other words, extremism works. It can call attention to one’s cause, damage one’s opponent, and unite one’s ingroup against a common enemy. This is a very common and popular perspective on the prevalence of extremism.
 5. **Extremism emerges from apocalyptic, eschatological ideologies.** Extremist activities are often committed and valued because they are consistent with broader myths or systems of meaning. Some of these ideologies are focused on the cataclysmic demise of evil ruling powers (the outgroup) and the elevation and glorification of the righteous (ingroup), and thus emphasize the destruction of the other. Such belief systems include: good vs. evil framing; an other worldly orientation; a need for self-purification; divine sanctioning of horrendous violence; and the depiction of martyrdom as an act of self-purification and justice.¹ Youth are often socialized to buy into these ideologies by families, peers, communities, educational systems (such as madrassah), media, and politicians.
 6. **Extremism is a pathological illness.** This perspective views extremism as a disease and a way of life where people look to violence to provide a feeling of aliveness. Greun (2003) writes, “The lack of identity associated with extremists is the result of self-destructive self-hatred that leads to feelings of revenge toward life itself, and a compulsion to kill one’s own humanness.”² Thus extremism is seen as not a tactic, nor an ideology, but as a pathological illness which feeds on the destruction of life.

This summary of perspectives on extremism raises many questions. First, are these in fact completely different phenomena which cannot be meaningfully categorized under the single heading of “extremism”? Or are these all factors or components of a process which can work in various combinations and result in an extremist act? Or perhaps they are aspects of a developmental process which begins with certain conditions and ideologies, are shaped by various political, emotional and tactical dynamics, and result in a closed, severe and intolerant state which may become pathological. Ultimately, we must leave this for the reader to decide, hopefully in a manner that is informed by the specifics of the situation they face, and mindful of the relative values of the different perspectives outlined above.

The Consequences of Extremism.

¹ Derived from Wessells, Michael (2002). Terrorism, apocalyptic ideology, and young martyrs: Why peacebuilding matters. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Conference in Chicago, August, 2002.

² Gruen, Arno (2003). An unrecognized pathology: The mask of humaneness. Journal of Psychohistory. Vol 30(3) Win 2003, 266-272. Association for Psychohistory, US.



Depending on one's perspective, extremism can have both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it can draw the attention of one's opponent, the general public, or the international community to one side's hidden concerns. It can also send a message of desperation or of a deep and abiding commitment to a cause. As such, it may motivate a more powerful foe to consider negotiating, or third parties to intervene. And as the prevalence of such activities increase in a given conflict, they may become normative or glorified within one's group, thereby attracting others to the cause.

The negative consequences of extremism are varied. Violent atrocities committed by extremists (such as civilian bombings, kidnappings, and the spread of bio-toxins) enrage, traumatize, and alienate their targets, their opponents, and many potential allies to their cause (such as moderates on the other side and other regional and international members who morally oppose such acts). Extreme acts, even if committed by a small minority within a group, are often attributed to the entire group, and elicit an escalated response from the other side. At times, such responses are intentional, as in the case of "spoilers" whose aim it is to stop a peace processes which they believe to be exclusive or a betrayal of their cause. Ultimately, extremist ideologies, actions, and hostile intergroup interactions lead to a hardening of oppositional identities and deep ingroup commitments which contribute to the perpetuation of hostilities.

Approaches to Addressing Extremism.

There are a variety of approaches used by leaders, diplomats, military experts, third parties, and others to address extremism, which fall on a continuum from total elimination of extremists to total engagement. The choice of such strategies is usually determined by the perspective taken on the primary sources of extremism (from individual pathologies to social, political and economic conditions) as well as the level of representation of the larger population's legitimate interests that the extremists are able to secure. It is a mistake to imagine extremists as isolated actors. Frequently, extremists are fringes that represent what the larger community is unable (or unwilling to represent). The dichotomy is particularly relevant when violence is used. Violent extremists may be a fringe not supported by the population because of the use of violence but are in tune with the larger group's desire to obtain the same political goals.

Some of the strategies aimed at addressing extremism include:

- **Elimination.** Simply the use of information, the law, and force to identify, locate, and apprehend (or destroy) extremists or key leaders of extremist groups. Sometimes this entails using legal maneuvers to tie up economic resources, thereby crippling the ability of such groups to organize and function. These tactics have been used by the Southern Poverty Law Center to undermine the operations of white supremacist groups in the United States.

Downside: Although elimination may work to remove key individuals and groups, it fails to address the underlying causes of extremism. These strategies are also often viewed as unjust by some, and can generate increased incidents of resistance and extremism from sympathizers. Also, there is a tendency to want to sacrifice certain civil liberties and human rights when working to directly eliminate extremism.



- **Divide and conquer.** When one group is able to infiltrate the opposing side's extremist groups, or establish relationships with ambivalent members of those groups, they can begin to create a wedge between members. Such schisms can fester and be the undoing of groups, particularly when conformity and cohesion is prized and betrayal is punished by extreme measures.

Downside: Such strategies can backfire and lead to increased group unity, and can be “flipped”; used by the extremist groups to gain information and resources from their opponents. As above, a somewhat superficial or temporary approach to addressing extremism.

- **Isolation.** This strategy is often used by more moderate members of a community who disagree with the tactics of their more extreme members or who resent the “high-jacking” of their conflict processes by such members. It entails everything from a public distancing of the main group from extreme members and a condemnation of their actions to a more private withdrawal of support and backing from moderates.

Downside: Such strategies can intensify the intragroup conflict (between moderates and extremists) and destabilize the group. Such a state of vulnerability might also be seen as an opportunity to be seized by hardliners in the intergroup conflict, thus further weakening the moderate's situation.

- **Intergroup cooperation against extremism.** This is a variation on the above strategy, but entails cooperation between the parties involved in the intergroup conflict. Essentially, both groups agree to frame extremism and terrorism as a mutual problem to be solved jointly by the parties. This can be particularly effective on the heels of a peace agreement between the parties, where they attempt to anticipate and publicly label extremist responses to the agreement, thereby heading off the “spoiler” effects of destructive reactions.

Downside: Such strategies are built on the trust and assurances made of each of the opposing parties to isolate their own extremist groups, trust which tends to be fragile at such an early stage of peace processes. If it fails it can jeopardize the entire peace agreement.

- **Expanding the middle.** In situations of protracted conflict, you often find moderates (pro-negotiation camp), hardliners (anti-negotiation camp), and extremists (anti-other camp) on each side. This strategy is an active attempt to establish the conditions which grow the more moderate (and even hard-line) segments, thus attracting the more moderate members of extremist groups toward a position of tolerance and away from a commitment to the destruction of the other.

Downside: The creation of “fake” interlocutors, almost puppet representatives with no political legitimacy beyond their cozy relationship with the external interveners. In certain conditions this strategy can also provoke the formation of “moderate” as profession. Supported by ideologically close donors, these actors may lack the political capital to actually influence the process, raising expectations (especially among less well-read, well-connected actors). Another downside is to



provoke an over-reaction by the extremists within the organization group, thus complicating the establishment of effective channels of communication and negotiation.

- **Covert negotiation chains.** Often, it is politically damaging for the leaders of one group to have any formal contact with members of extremist groups on either side. Such contact can alienate the opposing leadership as well as one's own constituents. Therefore, unofficial "chains" of communication are sometimes established where the leadership of one group has contact with extreme members of her/his own group, who in turn contact sympathizers in the opposing group, etcetera, until a communication chain is formed with key members of extreme groups. Thus, some progress may be made in covert negotiations, while leaders maintain some degree of political cover and deniability.

Downside: A politically risky strategy which is dependent on the trustworthiness of several individuals from different segments of the conflict. Chains are also subject to unintended (and frequently well intentioned) mistakes. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the issues at stake, members of chains may intentionally or unintentionally hide, modify, or censor relevant information. Chains are also not easy to maintain and sustain over time.

- **Contradictory strategies.** These are combined strategies which use many of the other approaches either simultaneously or at different times or stages of a peace process in an attempt to eliminate more serious threats to security while expanding the middle and addressing the conditions which perpetuate extremism.

Downside: Often, the use of elimination strategies, even when accompanied by more conciliatory strategies, poisons the relationship and increases suspicion and escalation.

- **Intragroup work within polarized groups in intergroup conflicts.** Rarely utilized, this approach would encourage and facilitate intragroup dialogue and problem-solving in an attempt to actively address the concerns of more extreme members and reduce the incidence of splinter-groups. An "organic" example of this strategy could be found in any highly organized structure such as the Italian Communist Party fighting the Fascist regime. Distinctions between "hawks" and "doves" are a permanent feature even in extremist groups.

Downside: It is extremely difficult to establish the internal relations of open communication and trust that make this strategy viable. It should be supported –if worthwhile- from the outside. Also, participation of such a degree of "intimacy" would transform the intervener to an active political actor. Many professionals resist that orientation mightily.

- **Direct, overt engagement.** The active and direct attempt to include key members of extremist groups in formal peace processes, especially through intelligence contacts. Extremist groups are in fact –in many areas of the world- heavily infiltrated and at time direct, confidential contacts can be established.



Downside: Significant security concerns. Also, you run the likely risk of spoiler (from all sides) acts which can shut down the entire process.

- **Peacebuilding.** This approach, which is aimed at addressing the underlying conditions which foster extremism, requires activities at two levels. At the macrosocial-level it requires work toward: a reduction of inequity and oppression; protection of human rights; weakening of extremist ideologies; a reduction of militarism, racism, and sexism; systems that promote political empowerment, intergroup tolerance, cooperation, and non-violent conflict resolution; democratization and participatory governance; and strengthening of civil society. At the microsocial-level it requires: a reduction of stereotypes and enemy images; the promotion of empathy, caring, and intercultural understanding; and the provision of economic and social support for young people.³

Downside: An ambitious, but daunting agenda, frequently rejected by the extremists as too long-term, too optimistic and not realistic. The slow pace of peacebuilding processes may also alienate sectors of communities that while not extremist per se advocate a more adversarial pro-active approach.

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Research on Democracy and Society: Extremism, Protest, Social Movements, and Democracy by Frederick D. Weil (Editor), et al (January 1996)

Web sites on Extremism:

Extremist Groups Links

<http://www.stetson.edu/~mmcfarla/extreme.html>

Combating Extremism

http://www.adl.org/education/default_combat_hc.asp

http://www.adl.org/main_combating_hate.asp

Democracy and Extremism

<http://www.edc.org/GLG/edu-democ/hypermail/0014.html>

Groups

http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Issues/Race-Ethnic-Religious_Relations/Hate/Watch_Groups/?il=1



Responses to Extremism (most web site have responses to Islamic extremism)

<http://216.239.37.100/search?>

q=cache:EbAdNI5zkHcC:www.essex.ac.uk/ecpr/jointsessions/edinburgh/details/ws%25204.pdf+responses+to+extremism&hl=en&ie=UTF-8

<http://lists.partners-intl.net/pipermail/academic-resources/2001-June/000912.html>

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