



# When is Conventional Wisdom Wise?

Testing the Assumptions Behind Preventing Violent Extremism



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## Foreword

The year of 2020 will stand out in history as the year the world had to come together to focus on a common threat, COVID-19. With the spread of the pandemic, which has impacted all segments of society, new threats and concerns have emerged.

One of these concerns relates to support for terrorism and violent extremism. Prevention of violent extremism is still as important, if not more, than it was before the pandemic. In order to prevent radicalization and extremist sentiments, a clear understanding of the causes of support for terrorism and violent extremism is still needed. As a result, UNDP's Oslo Governance Centre and PRIO have collaborated to quantitatively assess the factors most commonly associated with support for terrorism and violent extremism. This report uses global survey data to conduct unique and novel assessment of the factors that drive support for terrorism.

The findings are relevant at a time when concerns are rising that the pandemic may eventually lead to an increase in the justification and support for terrorism and violent extremism. With the world in a sudden lockdown, people are spending a lot more time at home and on the internet. The closure of schools has exposed children and adolescents all over the world to more unsupervised internet usage. Early reports suggest that terrorists and violent extremists are trying to exploit this sudden global increase in internet and social media exposure among children and youth to spread propaganda and misinformation, potentially leading to increased radicalization. The UN Security Council has already warned that they are anticipating a rise in extremist activity following in the wake of COVID-19.

We hope that the results from this report can inform policymakers, NGOs and other stakeholders around the world and help them in their engagements to prevent violent extremism during and after the pandemic. We also provide recommendations for additional research needed as we go forward.

UNDP and PRIO, one of the world's leading research institutions on peace and conflict, are proud to have partnered with each other on this report. Considering the current political climate, this report could not have come at a more pertinent point in time.

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## Explaining support for terrorism:

Improving understanding of why people would support terrorism can provide insights to prevention. There are certain assumptions regarding who supports terrorism and who joins extremist groups. However, scholars and practitioners have long questioned whether these assumptions are valid on a global scale and what factors may induce someone to support extremist violence. This report tests a number of these assumptions with quantitative analyses of support for terrorism. Understanding who supports terrorism may help improve policymakers' insight into what beliefs and life experiences may correlate with support for terrorism, which in turn can inform prevention of violent extremism. UNDP and PRIO jointly undertook this study to achieve this objective.

Although terrorism and violent extremism are distinct concepts, most available quantitative data measures the former rather than the latter, possibly since it is more concrete, such as in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) and the World Values Survey (WVS). These sources show that the total number of deaths as a result of terrorism declined for the fifth consecutive year in 2019, but terrorism is still a major global threat. Right-wing terrorist attacks have increased substantially in the West, and 2019 brought a surge in terrorist activity in both North and sub-Saharan Africa. Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) global reach is steadily increasing. Furthermore, as many as 90 countries experienced at least one terrorist incident in 2019.<sup>iv</sup> Increased terrorist activity is not the only concern. There are signs of a global increase in support for terrorism, and that the use of political violence is more widely accepted.<sup>v</sup>

COVID-19 may affect levels of support for violent extremism. A report by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) highlights that despite a decrease in recruitment offline and decreased coverage of terrorism in the media, other alarming trends have emerged. Violent extremist groups across the ideological spectrum have aimed to exploit the pandemic by spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation to undermine confidence in government, while also trying to increase their support base.<sup>vi</sup>

### BOX 1: TYPES OF EXTREMISM

The below 'types' were prepared according to academic literature and should not be seen as formal definitions.

**Right-wing extremism:** commonly associated with a strong state, nationalism, racism, xenophobia and anti-democracy. Ideologically often associated with fascism and Nazism.<sup>i</sup>

**Left-wing extremism:** commonly associated with the rejection of capitalism, globalization and militarism. Anti-racist and anti-fascist. Ideologically often associated with Marxism and anarchism.<sup>ii</sup>

**Religious extremism:** commonly associated with anti-modernity, anti-democracy and anti-progressive goals. Refers to individuals who use religion to justify their views and actions.<sup>iii</sup>

This report does not differentiate among types of extremism. Support for terrorism is investigated independent of context, time and place, as well as ideology and religion.

**BOX 2: KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

This paper does not seek to provide a concrete definition of **violent extremism**. The terms “violent extremism”, “terrorism” and “radicalization” are often used interchangeably due to a lack of consensus internationally, resulting in widely varying legal and policy definitions of these terms, which are then reflected in wide ranging mandates, scopes and the roles of the entities working on these issues. This document will reflect the language and usage of United Nations documents, including Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) and the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.

Where the term **terrorism** is used, this report follows the definition used by the GTI, which defines terrorism as ‘the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation’.<sup>vii</sup>

**Support for terrorism** refers to individuals who support or justify the use of terrorism as per the question posed in the WVS.

That such groups and organizations take advantage of a crisis is not a new phenomenon. After the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, violent extremist groups gained immense popularity from their relief efforts.<sup>viii</sup> Similarly, after an earthquake in South Asia in 2015, militant groups with ties to Al Qaeda won widespread praise for their efforts to help provide support and distribute aid.<sup>ix</sup> The pandemic is allowing violent organizations across the world to gain political legitimacy through delivering essential services, especially in countries and regions with low state capacity.<sup>x</sup>

This study refers to public support ascertained through the direct question posed in the WVS “please tell me whether you think terrorism as a political, ideological, or religious mean can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between”.<sup>1</sup> That individuals support or justify terrorism is problematic, even if they don’t act on their views. First, not only does it legitimize terrorist organizations, but many such groups depend on public support in order to raise funds, recruit volunteers, or avoid capture.<sup>xi</sup> And terrorist organizations that survive for several years often have better support networks with regard to both recruitment and funding.<sup>xii</sup> Second, the presence of support for extremist groups and terrorism can impact success of preventive measures on community level. Indeed, even distanced support for terrorism can lead to a lack of will among the community to take action

against it.<sup>xiii</sup> Understanding the factors associated with support for terrorism can thus lead to more effective prevention efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the Methodology section for full description of how support is described as it relates to the World Value Survey.

## Summary of results:

This report investigates the factors most commonly associated with support for terrorism using data from the seventh wave of the World Value Survey. Several logistic regressions and a correlation analysis show that:

- **Individuals who justify political violence, domestic violence or violence towards children are more likely to support terrorism.**
- **Individuals who are younger and uneducated are more likely to justify terrorism.**
- **Individuals who identify as not religious or atheist are more likely to justify terrorism compared to individuals who are religious.**
- **Confidence in government is positively related to support for terrorism.**
- **Individuals who believe it is somewhat important to live in a democracy – rather than those who believe it is very important or not important at all – are the most likely to feel terrorism is justified.**
- **There was no relationship found between feelings of alienation from society and support for terrorism.**
- **The significance of different factors vary by region; however, the importance of democracy and importance of God had a consistent relationship across all regions.**

### **BOX 3: WORLD VALUE SURVEY (WVS)<sup>2</sup>**

WVS conducts representative national surveys across the world, covering the full range of global variation, ranging from very poor to very rich countries.<sup>xiv</sup>

Surveys are organized in waves every 5 years. Data in Wave 7 was collected between 2017 and 2020.

WVS is the only global dataset that enables cross-national analysis of support for terrorism.

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<sup>2</sup>To access their data, visit: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>.

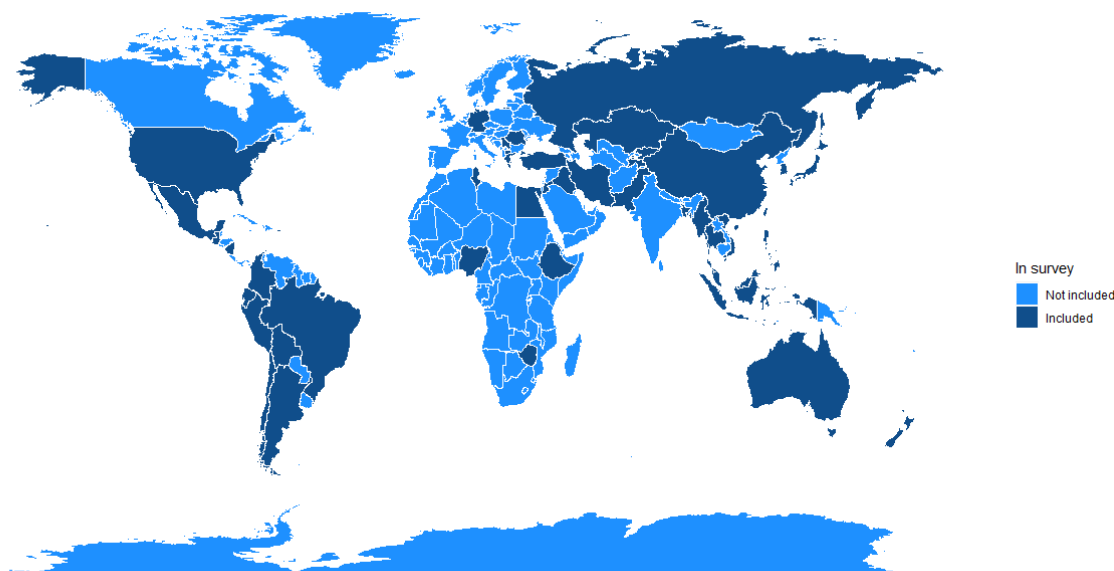
## Methodology

This report investigates what factors are associated with support for terrorism (see Box 5) by using the seventh wave of WVS (see Box 3).<sup>xv</sup> The sample used includes 47 countries and had a total of 65,603 respondents. Figure 1 shows which countries were included in the analysis. The sample in wave 7 is representative of the population aged 18 and older residing within private households in each country, and the minimum sample size in most countries is 1,200. To investigate support for terrorism, several logistic regression analyses were conducted, in addition to a correlation.<sup>3</sup>

The WVS collects survey-based perception data and asks respondents for their views on terrorism. For the purposes of this analysis, however, support for terrorism is presumed to hold insight with regard to support for violent extremism as well. The WVS question on terrorism asks:

On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is “Never justifiable” and 10 is “Always justifiable”, please tell me whether you think terrorism as a political, ideological, or religious mean can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between.

Responses to this question were analysed alongside answers to a range of other questions on factors that may be correlated with support for terrorism. While data from the WVS cannot reveal which of any respondents may take a further step of joining a violent extremist group, this global survey can provide clues as to who is more likely to support terrorism and therefore where prevention efforts are best targeted.



*Figure 1: Countries included in the sample*

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<sup>3</sup> Standard errors are clustered on countries for all logistic regressions.



## **Limitations of cross-country survey data on terrorism**

Surveys depend on respondents answering truthfully, but they may not do so: respondents may say one thing but do another, or respond based on their perceptions of what is 'correct' or socially acceptable rather than their actual belief or opinion on a matter.<sup>xvi</sup> As this report investigates support for terrorism, social desirability bias constitutes the biggest challenge. Most people condemn terrorism and terrorist acts. Consequently, those who find such acts justifiable might not openly admit their views. If respondents have answered in a socially desirable manner when asked whether they justify terrorism, they have probably understated their true opinion, making the data systematically biased. To address this concern, all individuals who answered '1' (terrorism can never be justified) to the question posed in the WVS (Box 4) were grouped together, while the rest whose answers fell between 2 and 10 (terrorism can be justified) have been grouped together.

## Key findings

Scholars and policymakers assume that a number of factors influence support for terrorism and violent extremism (see Box 5).<sup>4</sup> Because these assumptions have underpinned both policy and programming, this report seeks to test whether they are supported by evidence. Broadly, they can be divided into four main categories: propensity to justify violence; demography; role of religion; and government and marginalization. The first category, propensity to justify violence, is investigated using a correlation analysis. The latter categories are investigated through logistic regressions.

Figure 2 shows a coefficient plot of the logistic regression, containing the variables from the latter 3 categories. Variables that are located on the left side of the vertical dotted line have a negative relationship with terrorism, while those located on the right side have a positive relationship. The variables which cross the vertical dotted line are not statistically significant.

### BOX 5: FACTORS INVESTIGATED

**Propensity to justify violence:**

views on beating wife, views on beating children, views on violence and political violence.

**Demographics:** age, sex, education, employment status, income.

**Role of religion:** religious vs non-religious, religiousness, openness to other religions.

**Government and marginalization:** confidence in government, feeling of alienation, views on democracy, pride in one's nation, views on people of a different race.

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance UNDP (2016). Preventing Violent Extremism Through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance, and Respect for Diversity. A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism; Stephens, W., Sieckelinck, S., & Boutellier, H. (2019). Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-16; Odorfer, C. (2015). Root causes of radicalization in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. In: New York: UNDP Discussion Paper; and Ojielo, O. (2017). Journey to extremism in Africa: drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment.

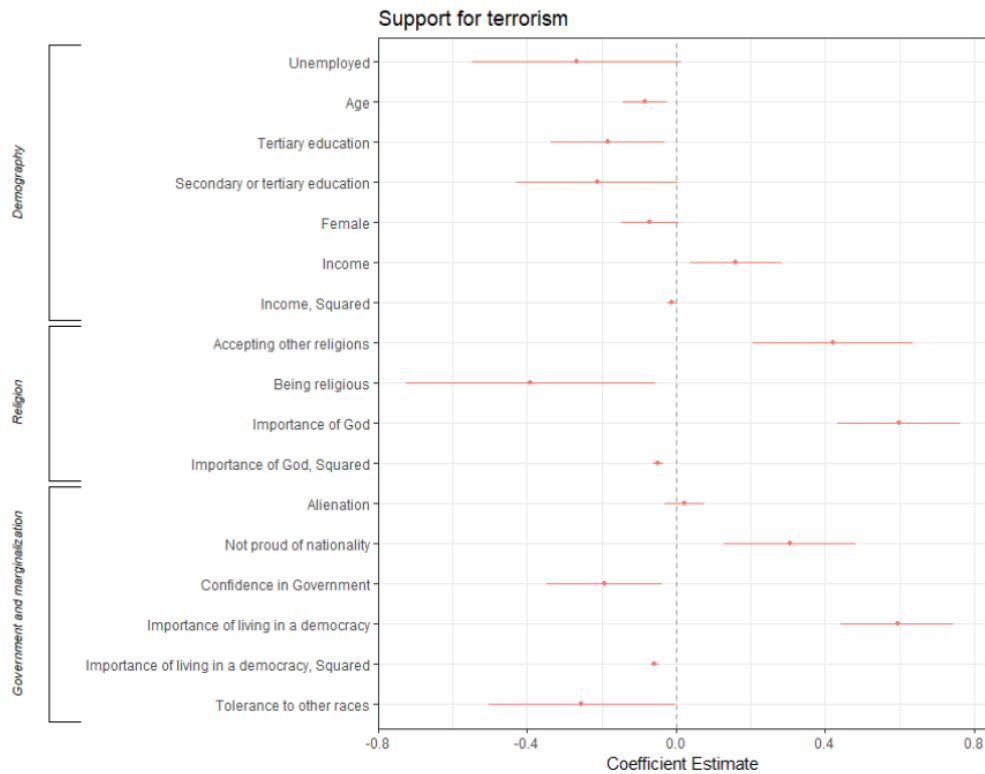


Figure 2: Coefficient plot - full model

## Propensity to justify violence

### BOX 6: POLITICAL VIOLENCE VS TERRORISM

**Political violence** is broader than **terrorism**, as it is used to describe violence committed by people or governments to achieve a political goal. Political violence can thus be terrorism, but it can also be guerrilla warfare, government repression, rioting, genocide or civil war. As such, terrorism is a type of political violence, but not all political violence is considered terrorism.

The relationship between terrorism and domestic violence is not new. The subordination of women is central to the ideology and tactics of several extremist groups.<sup>xvii</sup> Domestic violence and terrorism both rely on violence, fear and control. Efforts by both scholars and practitioners to investigate the relationship between these two types of violence have increased.

Hostile sexist attitudes toward women, combined with support for violence against women, are strongly associated with support for violent extremism. This relationship was established in a 2019 study, which analysed survey data from four different countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Libya).<sup>xviii</sup> This report expands the geographic scope to investigate whether this relationship holds on a global scale.

<b>Table 1: correlation matrix</b>	Terrorism	beating wife	beating children	violence	political violence
terrorism		0.6	0.3	0.7	0.7
beating wife	0.6		0.4	0.6	0.6
beating children	0.3	0.4		0.4	0.3
violence	0.7	0.6	0.4		0.6
political violence	0.7	0.6	0.3	0.6	

The results from the correlation matrix suggest that such a relationship also exists globally. Table 1 highlights some interesting associations between justifying terrorism and the propensity to justify different types of violence. First of all, the correlation between justifying terrorism and justifying that a man can beat his wife is high, indicating that individuals who justify beating their wife usually justify terrorism. In other words, most of those who feel terrorism is justified also hold hostile sexist attitudes. Second, supporting terrorism is positively correlated with support for beating children, although not very strongly. Third, support for terrorism is strongly associated with support for both violence and political violence. Individuals who justify terrorism usually also justify other forms of violence.

## Demographics

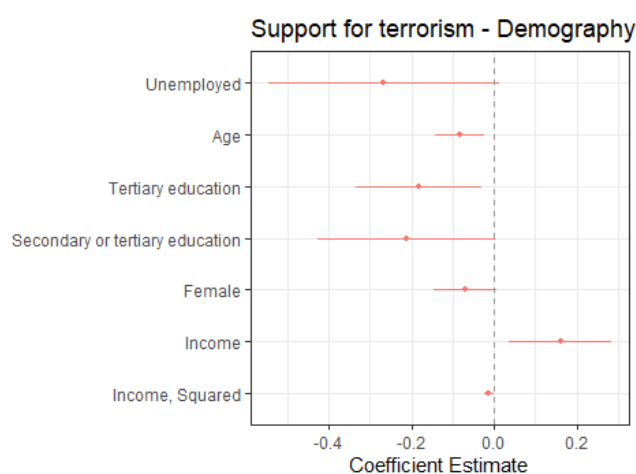


Figure 3: Coefficient plot - Demography

Policymakers and researchers have often assumed that demographic factors such as employment, education, age, sex, and income affect why some individuals support terrorism. Figure 3 shows a coefficient plot with the demographic variables, which indicates that age, tertiary education and income are the only significant results from the analysis.

**Age:** It is widely assumed that young people are particularly vulnerable due to higher impulsivity, higher levels of confidence, greater attraction to risk-taking, and need for status.<sup>xx</sup> Other research emphasizes adolescents' search for an identity, or their attempts to make sense of the world as factors that influence support for violent extremism.<sup>xx</sup> While it is not possible to identify which reasons are the most relevant, the results from the logistic regression suggest that age matters. The propensity to support terrorism decreases with age, indicating that the older the individual, the less likely that the respondent justifies the use of terrorism.

**Education:** Some scholars have argued that a lower level of education makes individuals more susceptible to propaganda and inclined to support violent extremism.<sup>xxi</sup> But the evidence is mixed; many individuals who have perpetrated terrorist acts have attained high levels of education. In an analysis of the profiles of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, more than 60 percent had at least some college education, making them more educated than the average

person worldwide.<sup>xxii</sup> This analysis using data from the WVS finds that education does matter. Individuals with tertiary education are less likely to justify terrorism.

**Employment:** Research has shown that unemployment can act as a predictor of domestic terrorism, and that countries with fewer opportunities are more likely to experience terrorist attacks.<sup>xxiii</sup> The UNDP report *Preventing Violent Extremism* also points to unemployment, and how the systematic lack of opportunity can lead to radicalization and violent extremist behaviour.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, employment renders insignificant results in this analysis, showing no relationship between support for terrorism and employment status.

**Sex:** Terrorism is commonly perceived as a male phenomenon, in part because most terrorists have been men historically. But in terms of support for terrorism, the data suggests that there is no statistical difference between men and women in whether they feel terrorism is justified.

**Income:** Some research suggest that poor individuals are more likely to support terrorism, as they should be more dissatisfied with the status quo.<sup>xxv</sup> The results indicate that income has a curvilinear relationship with support for terrorism: individuals who report being on the middle of the income scale are the most likely to support terrorism, rather than the poorest.

## Role of religion

Following Al Qaeda’s attacks on September 11, 2001, religion and specifically Islam has become associated with acts of terrorism.<sup>xxvi</sup> The rise and spread of ISIL, which was the deadliest terrorist organization in the world for four consecutive years, reinforced this misperception.

Evidence showing that religion – in particular Islam – leads to support for terrorism is lacking. Similar to other research, this report finds that the relationship between religion and support for terrorism is more complex than often assumed. The analysis shows that individuals who identify as either atheist or not religious are more likely to justify terrorism, compared to individuals who identify as religious. Simply being religious is not an important factor for explaining support for terrorism.

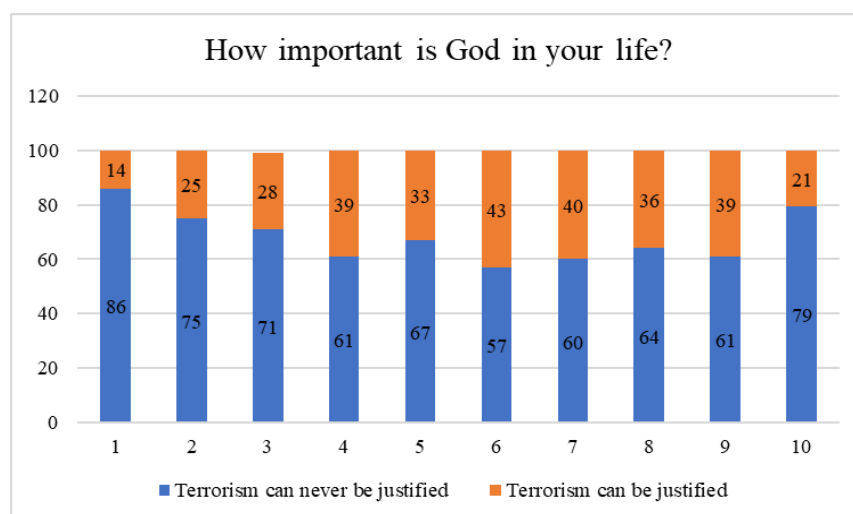


Figure 4: Importance of God in one’s life and distribution of whether the respondent justifies terrorism

Among those who are religious, it is neither the most nor the least religious who are most likely to justify terrorism, but rather those who say God is only somewhat important in their lives. Figure 4 shows that 43% of respondents who answered ‘6’ (on a scale of 1 to 10) believe terrorism can be justified.

Individuals who accept other religions are less prone to justifying terrorism. This suggests that it is not a matter of how religious the respondent is, but it is rather a lack of openness and tolerance towards other belief systems that matters. This finding suggests that fundamentalism – meaning strict adherence to one belief system – may be more associated with terrorism than other forms of religious belief.

## Government and marginalization

Perceptions of government and experiences of marginalization may affect the propensity to support terrorism. These factors include: feelings of alienation from society; pride in one’s nation; confidence in government; perceived importance of democracy; and tolerance for other races. According to the results, all factors are statistically significant, with the exception of alienation which does not have a clear relationship with support for terrorism (see Figure 5).

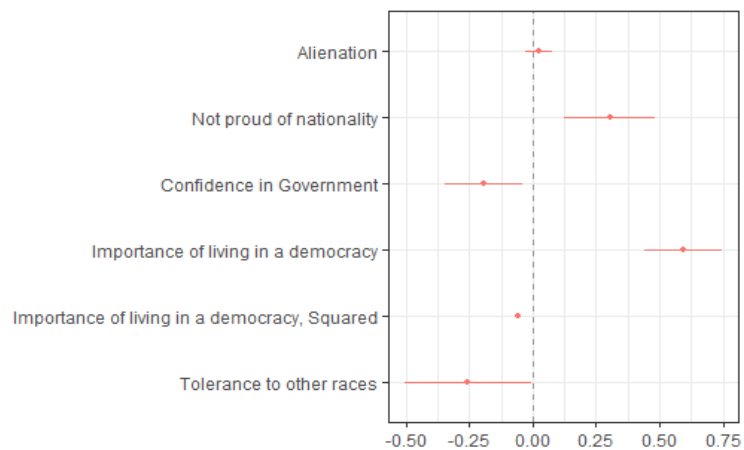


Figure 5: Coefficient plot - Government and Marginalization

**Pride in one’s nation:** Previous research has identified that some violent extremists have had little or no sense of emotional belonging to their nation-state, a factor which may also influence who supports terrorism.<sup>xxvii</sup> The data shows that national pride is negatively related to support for terrorism: respondents who are proud of their nationality are less likely to justify terrorism, compared to individuals who are not proud of their nationality.

**Confidence in government:** Distrust towards government institutions has been highlighted as a common trait among violent extremists and may characterize those who justify terrorism as well. The results however are contrary to what was expected and warrant further research: people with higher levels of confidence in government were actually more likely to support terrorism.

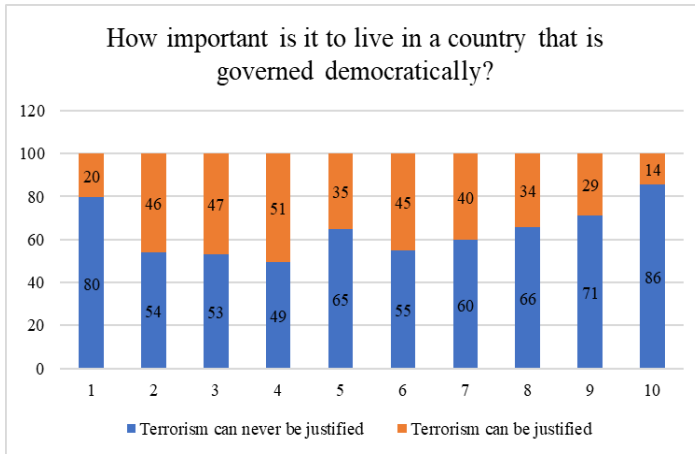


Figure 6: Importance of living in a democracy and distribution of whether the respondent justifies terrorism

**Importance of democracy:**

Extremism, by its very nature, is anti-democratic, and extremist beliefs, regardless of their ideology, are largely incompatible with a liberal democratic system. Because democracy offers channels to express grievances and influence politics, it seems likely that those who value democracy would not support terrorism. Interestingly, the results show that respondents who believe living in a democracy is of medium importance are most likely

to support terrorism, as in Figure 6. Respondents who do not believe democracy is important at all (1 on the scale) and those who believe it is extremely important (10 on the scale) are the least prone to justifying terrorism.

**Tolerance of other races:** Because right-wing extremism often invokes xenophobia and racism, the relationship between support for terrorism and tolerance of others warranted investigation. The results suggest a general trend among supporters of violent extremism: individuals who do not want people of a different race as neighbours are more likely to justify terrorism.

**Regional overview**

The root causes of terrorism are often said to be complex, multifaceted and intertwined.<sup>xxviii</sup> Due to the contextual nature of terrorism, this report also sought to uncover potential regional variations in support for terrorist actions across Africa, Asia and Oceania, the Americas, and Europe respectively (see Table 5).

The results show quite divergent results across regions. Age, for instance, is statistically significant in the European and American sample, but not in the African and Asian and Oceanian sample. Further, having tertiary education is associated with lower likelihood of justifying terrorism, but only in the Americas and Asia and Oceania. Being proud of your nationality is only a significant factor in the African and European sample. These findings show the importance of understanding the factors driving terrorist sympathies on a regional or national level.

Despite the complex and multifaceted nature of terrorism and support for it, two variables associated with support for terrorism are in fact statistically significant across all four regions. Individuals who feel God is moderately important in their lives and are only somewhat committed to democracy are likely to support terrorism across all regions. This demonstrates that although support for terrorism is contextual, and deviations between regional and global trends do exist, there are some global trends that should be better understood.

**Table 5: Regional differences**

	Dependent variable: Do you justify terrorism				
	Full	Africa	America	Asia and Oceania	Europe
Unemployed	-0.268 (0.143)	-0.219 (0.112)	-0.124 (0.068)	-0.503* (0.238)	-0.042 (0.175)
Age group	-0.083** (0.030)	-0.005 (0.033)	-0.111*** (0.018)	-0.057 (0.047)	-0.068* (0.032)
Tertiary education	-0.182* (0.078)	0.159 (0.164)	-0.250** (0.091)	-0.260* (0.126)	0.092 (0.158)
Secondary or tertiary education	-0.212 (0.110)	0.042 (0.163)	-0.293** (0.091)	-0.235 (0.156)	0.153 (0.275)
Female	-0.070 (0.039)	-0.015 (0.075)	-0.142* (0.066)	-0.031 (0.055)	-0.095 (0.066)
Income	0.160* (0.063)	0.046 (0.131)	0.070 (0.060)	0.257** (0.093)	0.119 (0.068)
Income squared	-0.012* (0.006)	-0.008 (0.012)	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.022* (0.009)	-0.011 (0.008)
Accepting other religions	0.421*** (0.109)	-0.013 (0.104)	0.606*** (0.103)	0.237 (0.191)	0.226 (0.199)
Are you religious	-0.391* (0.171)	-0.088 (0.156)	-0.181** (0.062)	-0.424 (0.266)	0.409* (0.205)
Importance of God	0.599*** (0.085)	0.794*** (0.072)	0.408*** (0.083)	0.743*** (0.104)	0.388* (0.152)
Importance of God squared	-0.048*** (0.007)	-0.075*** (0.008)	-0.038*** (0.008)	-0.056*** (0.010)	-0.035** (0.012)
Alienation	0.023 (0.027)	-0.006 (0.096)	0.003 (0.028)	0.003 (0.050)	0.111*** (0.031)
Not proud of nationality	0.306*** (0.091)	0.443* (0.226)	0.277 (0.157)	0.248 (0.150)	0.660*** (0.113)
Confidence in government	-0.193* (0.079)	-0.200 (0.114)	-0.051 (0.062)	-0.174 (0.093)	0.020 (0.056)
Importance of living in a democracy	0.594*** (0.077)	0.630*** (0.127)	0.491*** (0.090)	0.606*** (0.119)	0.681*** (0.189)
Importance of living in a democracy squared	-0.057*** (0.005)	-0.058*** (0.010)	-0.047*** (0.006)	-0.058*** (0.008)	-0.067*** (0.017)
Tolerance to other races	-0.255* (0.128)	-0.539* (0.272)	-0.343** (0.118)	-0.144 (0.184)	-0.079 (0.159)
Constant	-1.873** (0.598)	-1.344 (1.026)	-1.172** (0.436)	-2.481** (0.909)	-4.118*** (0.604)
Observations	51,096	5,177	13,707	26,031	6,181
Log Likelihood	-26,011.220	-2,293.644	-6,655.264	-14,305.740	-2,121.718
Akaike Inf. Crit.	52,058.430	4,623.289	13,346.530	28,647.470	4,279.436

Note: \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Logistic regression, standard errors clustered on countries



## Implications of the findings: COVID-19 and beyond

Individuals who support terrorism help legitimize terrorist organizations, represent a source of potential recruits, and can provide valuable funding. Moreover, support for terrorism can impact preventive measures, as individuals and communities who believe terrorism is justified may be unwilling to cooperate with prevention of violent extremism programs. As such, it is imperative to look more closely at the factors that are associated with such support. This report has shown the relationships between support for terrorism and a range of political, demographic and religious factors.

The findings are especially concerning in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated existing governance challenges and intensified horizontal inequalities. While it is too early to see the impact of the pandemic on support for terrorism, it is clear that violent extremist and terrorist groups are exploiting the pandemic to their advantage.

First, an individual's propensity to justify other forms of violence, such as political violence, domestic violence or violence towards children, is positively correlated with support for terrorism. Available research shows that domestic violence has increased during COVID-19, and thus the relationship between this form of violence and support for terrorism requires urgent attention.<sup>xxix</sup>

Second, demographic factors such as age and education are related to support for terrorism. The impact of COVID-19 on young people's access to education is therefore of particular concern. Widespread temporary school closures have affected 91 percent of students worldwide.<sup>xxx</sup> As young people are more prone to justify terrorism than older people, the number of young people engaging in unsupervised internet usage may offer terrorist groups an opportunity to expose them to their ideas and forge new connections online.<sup>xxxi</sup> Terrorism experts and government officials have also warned against terrorist groups exploiting the fact that in some countries more people are at home, bored and lonely, with little to do but surf the web.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Third, confidence in government, pride in one's nation, the perceived importance of democracy and openness to people of a different race are all related to support for terrorism. Thus, COVID-19 has created new opportunities for violent non-state actors to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories that may shift public opinion of government in ways that could increase support for terrorism.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Specifically, terrorists, violent extremists and violent non-state actors have maliciously used social media to undermine trust in governments, reinforce extremist narratives and drive recruitment strategies during the pandemic. They are also working the virus into their existing narratives and increasing the volume of online propaganda.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Since the pandemic changed the world, supporting tolerant and cohesive societies has become even more important to preventing support for violent extremism.

Fourth, in this study, there is no significant relationship between those who identify as most the religious and support for terrorism. This result reflects a growing body of research that

unpacks the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of radicalization and extremism.<sup>xxxv</sup> Becoming a violent extremist is not necessarily a religious issue. Placing ideology as one aspect of a broader set of motivational factors may prove more beneficial in understanding how we can more effectively prevent violent extremism. While this study illustrates that individuals who identify as either not religious or atheist are more likely to support terrorism than those who identify as religious, more analysis of the role ideology plays is warranted.

Since support for terrorism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, there are regional and contextual differences; in turn, this means that the impact of the pandemic on support for terrorism will vary across the world. In order to understand whether support for terrorism is changing over time, more longitudinal survey data with broader geographical distribution is needed. Such data is essential to deepening scholars and policymakers' understanding of the factors that influence support for terrorism, which in turn may lead to radicalization and involvement in violent extremist groups.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Prioritize violence prevention.** A culture of violence, including domestic violence and political violence, may serve as a gateway to support for extremism. Supporting violence prevention programs can lower levels of different types of violence and in turn possibly reduce risks of terrorism and violent extremism.
- **Strengthen efforts to address the link between misogyny and support for terrorism.** Hostile sexist attitudes are positively associated with support for terrorism. Addressing these attitudes more directly and observe behaviour may help predict or undercut support for violent extremism.
- **Ensure access to education is a priority during and after the pandemic.** Lockdowns have severely affected children's ability to learn while allowing them to spend more time online, often unsupervised. Because young people are more prone to justify terrorism, they are uniquely vulnerable and thus improving access to education may help prevent support for violent extremism.
- **Invest in better research about the relationship between religion and support for terrorism.** Despite a public perception that terrorism is a religious issue, evidence supporting this assumption is limited and more complex. Emphasizing the role of religion may aggravate tensions between societies and peoples and incite fear, especially Islamophobia.

## Endnotes

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