

# Understanding violent extremism in the 21st century: the (re)emerging role of relative deprivation

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Recently, the world has experienced a wave of violent protest, and in particular Islamist and right-wing extremism have become increasing challenges for many societies. We argue that especially the experience of relative deprivation, that is the perception that oneself or one's group is undeservingly worse off than others, can explain various, contemporary forms of violent extremism, including (a) low-power groups' violent attempts to challenge the unequal status quo, (b) high-power groups' violent defense of their privileged position, and sometimes even (c) people's violent attempt to help out-groups in need. In light of recent research and growing social inequalities, we expect relative deprivation to be a key factor driving violent extremism across cultures and contexts in the 21st century.

## Addresses

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“They are the kings, and we are the slaves. Enough.”

Suzy Barakat, protester, Beirut, 2019 [1]

From 2017 to 2020, the world witnessed a wave of violent protests, ranging from Bolivia to Hong Kong, France, Spain, Venezuela, Iraq, Lebanon, and Chile, to name just a few. At the same time, many societies have faced challenges related to individuals and groups engaged in terrorist and other types of violent extremist activities. Most prominent examples include the increase of right-wing extremism in the West and the rise of ISIS in the Middle East [2]. In this review, we aim to demonstrate

that the experience of relative deprivation is a motive often shared by individuals and groups engaged in such contemporary forms of violent extremism. Consequently, we argue that, due to rising social inequalities and corresponding power asymmetries intra- and internationally, the experience of relative deprivation is likely to become one of the key factors driving violent extremism across groups, cultures and contexts in the 21st century.

## Relative deprivation and collective action

A central way by which humans obtain information about themselves and their social standing in society is through social comparisons [3], and relative deprivation describes a negative evaluation resulting from this [4–7]. Specifically, relative deprivation involves the perception that oneself or one's group does not receive valued resources, goals, ways or standards of living, which others possess and one feels rightfully entitled to [8\*].

Relative deprivation has for long time been used to explain why people engage in political and social protest [for a review, see Ref. [6]]. Underlining its subjective nature, relative deprivation can trigger collective action even for people who are not personally and directly affected by injustice but who still perceive themselves to be victims of it [e.g. [9]]. Such subjective perceptions predict collective mobilization [10], and often are stronger predictors of non-normative forms of protest than more objective types of deprivation [11]. Subjective feelings of relative deprivation do not necessarily mirror objective conditions [see Refs. 12–15], although they likely are informed by the latter [16]. Interestingly, sometimes both objective and subjective deprivation interactively predict protest. For instance, as referred to as the ‘deprivation-protest paradox,’ people may protest especially if their own negative experiences of deprivation do not fit macro-level positive economic outlooks in their social environments [8\*,17]. Additional important factors here include people's understandings of the past (e.g. collective remembering) and visions of the future [18\*\*].

It is important to emphasize that relative deprivation does not always lead to violent extremism or other forms of non-normative behavior [see Refs. [8\*,19]. That is, the cognitive component of relative deprivation (i.e. the mere realization that one receives less than one feels rightfully entitled to) often has less influence on non-normative collective action than its affective components [i.e. perceived illegitimacy, feelings of anger or injustice; 20\*\*,21–24]. In other words,

people may engage in violent extremisms to counter *feelings* of their own and especially their group's lost economic, social and psychological significance [25,26\*\*,27].

Most research so far has investigated the role of relative deprivation for normative forms of collective action. Whereas many theories and models suggest that relative deprivation also plays a key role for extremism [28,29], little research has directly investigated this relationship, and especially applications to current forms of extremism are missing. However, as we aim to demonstrate, in particular research from the recent years supports the central role of relative deprivation for understanding contemporary types of extremism among low-power and high-power groups alike.

### **Extremism among low-power groups: fighting against perceived injustice**

Attempts to explain the rising proliferation of extremism among low-power groups (and Muslims in the West and Middle East specifically) have led many to suggest a causal relationship between extremism and objective deprivation [e.g. poverty, low educational attainment, or lack of political influence; [30,31]. However, evidence for this association seems to be lacking [see, e.g. 32–34], although exceptions exist [e.g. 35,36]. In fact, Muslim individuals enrolled in higher education and high earners are sometimes *more* likely to support and sympathize with violent protest and acts of terrorism [37,38], and those born in the West tend to be more inclined to endorse violence than those born in conflict areas [20\*\*]. This suggests that, rather than actual deprivation, what matters in particular may be minority-group members' subjective experience of it. Indeed, a recent study conducted with Muslim youth in the Netherlands suggested that perceptions of relative deprivation and consequent violent intentions may stem in parts from intergroup experiences their parents teach them about [39].

Relative deprivation can powerfully explain large-scale domestic riots by low-power groups such as those following the Arab spring. Using a creative operationalization of relative deprivation by measuring the negative change in national-level feelings of happiness from 2009 to 2010, Korotayev and Shishkina [40\*] showed that relative deprivation was related to more sociopolitical destabilization across a range of Arab countries. At the micro-level, a relative deprivation perspective also seems vital in explaining extremist violent movements such as Jihadism. For instance, in a study conducted with Muslims in the Netherlands, perceived group deprivation (but not individual deprivation) predicted more support for violence [41] [also see Ref. 42]. Moreover, a recent study suggested that this relationship further depends on participants' immigrant generation. Second-generation Muslim immigrants from 20 Western countries endorsed violence more than first-generation Muslim immigrants

and non-Muslims did [21]. Importantly, their elevated anger and violent inclinations were explained primarily by the perception of being stigmatized and having low status in society. Hence, the unfavorable comparison of their own group's social standing to that of the native/autochthonous population (e.g. the advantaged, high-power group) may lead Muslims to show more violent extremism – arguably a 'counter-dominance' attempt to attenuate the prevailing power asymmetry [cf. 43].

Studies from the Middle East provide convergent results. For instance, the more Christians and Muslims in Syria and Lebanon perceived domination and exploitation by the U.S., the more they supported violent action against American targets [44]. Similarly, the more unjust Muslims living in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Western societies experienced Western military and foreign policy, the more violent behavioral intentions they showed [22]. Importantly, whereas relative deprivation may drive extremist violence within one cultural sphere, perceptions of mistreatment endured by group members in other parts of the world may also lead to what has been referred to as 'victimization-by-proxy' [20\*\*]. For instance, when Muslims in the West perceive that religious peers in other geographical areas (e.g. the Middle East) experience deprivation, this can have the same effects on violent behavioral intentions as experiencing deprivation oneself. This finding, hence, underlines the need to understand the interconnectedness of social systems in various parts of the world when investigating the effect of relative deprivation on violent extremism.

### **Extremism among high-power groups: defending or challenging the status quo**

The reviewed studies confirm the role of relative deprivation among groups who have low power intra- and internationally. But what about groups with relatively high power within these social systems? Generally, in an attempt to defend their dominant status, members of high-power groups seem to show more violent extremism against out-groups when intergroup inequality is high [45–47]. Some evidence further suggests that this tendency is potentiated by the subjective experience of relative deprivation. In a study with Dutch youth, experiences of group and personal relative deprivation were both correlated with more support for right-wing extremist violence and own violent intentions [48]. Similarly, in Indonesia where Islam is the dominant religion, the more injustice Muslim majority-group members perceived against their group, the more they supported harm against other people to enforce their religious group's political influence [49]. Causal evidence for such a relationship was further obtained in a recent experimental study [50\*]. White U.S. Americans with a Republican affiliation were asked to recall potential experiences of relative deprivation or mundane life experiences. Participants in the relative deprivation condition showed a stronger willingness to violently persecute political out-

groups. Interestingly, mediation analyses showed that effects on these extremist tendencies were largely mediated by people's increased closeness [i.e. identity fusion; see Ref. 51] with their political leader. In other words, the more relative deprivation people experienced, the more they fused with their political leader, which in turn made them more willing to violently fight people who this leader had identified as threats. This finding may help explain past political movements in which extreme leaders were adored and followed, and that ultimately resulted in intergroup atrocities. Moreover, the observed processes may be particularly valuable when aiming to understand intergroup relations in times of increasing populism and political authoritarianism [also see Refs. 52,53].

However, not all members of high-power groups support or engage in efforts to violently maintain the status quo, and often the opposite is true. In these cases, relative deprivation again seems to play a decisive role. For instance, perceiving that out-groups experience injustice may under certain conditions motivate normative collective action on their behalf [9,54–56]. But under which conditions are people willing to engage in non-normative, *violent* action to support groups they do not belong with? Recent work suggests that this is the case especially if the unjust treatment that an out-group is perceived to endure clashes directly with people's ideological convictions. For instance, in a series of studies [57], leftists were more likely to engage in violent protest for out-groups who tend to be seen as victims of oppression (e.g. Palestinians) than for out-groups for whom such a perception often is lacking (e.g. Kurds). Yet, experimental evidence showed that this tendency could be altered. Once the Kurds' situation was framed as an asymmetrical occupation rather than a symmetrical war (or a neutral control condition), leftists felt closer with the Kurdish people, which in turn was related to more extreme political protest on their behalf. Further analyses with a sample of aspiring foreign fighters corroborated these results. When Leftist foreign fighters experienced a moral obligation to support the Kurds in their struggle, they experienced more closeness to them and, subsequently, reported a higher likelihood to join the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in their fight against ISIS and to sacrifice their lives for the Kurdish people.

## Conclusion

Perceptions of relative deprivation are powerful motivators for contemporary forms of violent extremism across cultures and contexts. They may explain the violent behavioral intentions of (a) low-power groups who aim to improve their life prospects and challenge the hierarchy, (b) high-power groups who aim to maintain the self-serving status quo, and (c) those helping out-groups whose life conditions are perceived as desperate. Overall, the predictive power of relative deprivation depends on how fairly resources, power and social status are

distributed within social systems, and, importantly, how this distribution is perceived [18\*\*]. As social inequalities internationally and within many societies around the world are increasing, if relative deprivation is not a key driver of violent extremism in the 21st century yet, it can be expected to become so over the next few decades.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Jonas R Kunst:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Milan Obaidi:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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