



WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS?

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What drives someone to become a religious extremist, even to the point of becoming a suicide bomber? Like most people I assumed that there were two overriding answers: poverty and ignorance.

The poverty line goes like this: grinding poverty from which there appears to be no escape fosters seething resentment against those who have more. If your choice is to die a martyr or die a beggar, martyrdom is the clear winner.

The ignorance line goes like this: the poor have no chance to get a decent education and thus are susceptible to easy manipulation. Clever people play on their prejudices and superstitions. Once the extremist gets this ignorant poor person in his grasp, indoctrination is easy.

Since there's plenty of poverty and plenty of ignorance around the world, that's a lot of people to draw from. This is how the source of terrorism is explained.

Then, I went to Pakistan and actually lived in the world from which extremists recruit. And I found something much different than I expected. Poverty had little to do with who became an extremist; lack of education even less.

Many of those that I met who subscribe to religious extremism – and are prepared to murder and die for their cause – are from the middle class; and many had a university education. These are not poor people and these are not uneducated people. They are well fed and well read.

So, if poverty and ignorance don't drive people to extremism, what does?

One is a desire for meaning and for order. Places like Pakistan are submerged in chaos and corruption. Islamists promise clear cut solutions to every problem: here's how things will change if you follow these rules. And only these rules.

Another is a desire for change. The old corrupt order, the narrative goes, must be overthrown and that can only happen through violent action. Again, it is Islamists that step in – with a promise to create a new form of government.

Then throw in a strong sense of victimhood – we are not responsible for the sorry state of our country; others have brought us down – and you have a toxic brew that many willingly imbibe. These, of course, are the same easy answers that tyrants and demagogues – from Lenin to Mussolini to Hitler to bin Laden – have always offered their followers.

I saw this played out one day while living in Pakistan. After one of the many assassinations of a major figure there, I was sitting with two middle class parents. The father owned a small business and the mother was a nurse. They had given their son a good life. He wanted for nothing.

They told me that during dinner with the family a few days earlier, their son noted how the person who was murdered “deserved to die.” Why? Because he had spoken out on behalf of religious minorities. They were shocked. How could their son, who had been educated and well raised, think that? This story is all too typical.

So what to do about this extremism?

The first step is to get off this false narrative that this is first and foremost a poverty or education issue.

The second is to take on the narrative of the extremist groups. They promise a better way, but what in fact do they deliver? The answer is always: more death, more suffering and more poverty. In other words, young people need to see these extremist groups for what they are. Only then will recruitment numbers begin to go down.

Third, the media have to stop treating extremists as freedom fighters, a narrative that is all too common in places like Pakistan.

Fourth, teachers and parents cannot assume that just because they reject religious extremism, their children and students will, too. Middle class parents and teachers have to be vigilant in instilling moderate, pluralist values in their children.

Fifth, politicians have to stop blaming their countries’ problems on the West and have to confront the endemic corruption that destroys countries like Pakistan from within.

Sixth, and probably most important, Islamic religious figures have to stop looking the other way, or worse, glorifying so-called “martyrs” – Muslims who murder innocent people – almost always other Muslims – in the name of Islam. Muslim religious leaders must promise these murderers eternal damnation, not some sort of twisted heavenly bliss.

The people of Pakistan and other Muslim majority countries have real grievances. But extremism only makes things worse. Always and everywhere.

It is not poverty and misery that creates religious extremism. It is religious extremism that creates poverty and misery. And death.

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