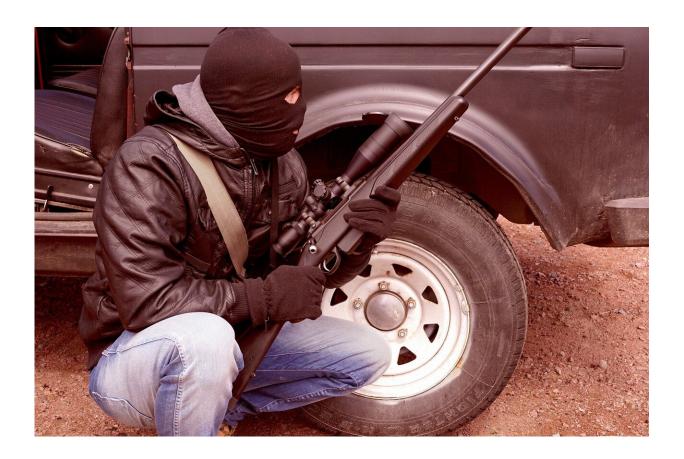# Cultural threats can lead to violent extremism

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Violent extremism has been on the rise in recent years. This trend poses a global threat to international peace and security. But how do people end up as violent extremists?

An international team of researchers has analyzed this question through six studies. The researchers conclude that [violent extremism](#) largely grows out of a sense of cultural threat. This is especially true for people with specific personality traits.

"The Muhammad cartoons are one of many examples of how the perception of cultural threat can lead to violent extremism and promote black-and-white thinking," says Milan Obaidi, Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology.

He is leading the research project, which is based on large amounts of population data from Denmark, France, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The study also includes data on Muslims from over 20 countries.

Seeking definitive answers and solutions

The researchers have focused particularly on jihadist extremism. There are several reasons for this.

"Firstly, countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan are heavily affected by terrorism, but there is limited psychological research on the causes of violent extremism among non-Western populations," says Obaidi:

"Second, terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam have fueled widespread fear and suspicion of Muslims and the Islamic faith. this has led to harmful stereotypes and linked jihadist extremism with Islamic values."

While right-wing intolerance and violent extremism are often attributed to individual personalities, Jihadist violent extremism is commonly generalized to people sharing a specific culture or religion.

"By adopting a personality approach, our research sheds light on how

Muslim violent extremism, similar to other forms of intolerance in Western cultures, may be influenced by individual traits," explains Obaidi.

The researchers highlight the human need for definitive answers and solutions to complex problems as a key explanation for why a sense of cultural threat can lead to extremist behavior. The psychological phenomenon is called 'Need for Cognitive Closure'—NFC.

"NFC is linked to our craving for structure, predictability and decisiveness. Individuals with high levels of NFC tend to find relative values unpleasant and adhere to black-and-white, authoritarian and dogmatic beliefs," explains Obaidi, elaborating:

"Extremist groups can respond to the need for clarification by offering a simplified, black-and-white narrative of the world and a solution to perceived threats. Here, violence and terrorism can be presented as the only solutions to cultural threats".

Can arise in all cultures

According to Obaidi, NFC is a psychological mechanism that resides in people across groups and cultures.

"We could find the same results in other extremist environments by threat imagery. This could be Western right-wing extremists who perceive their status, power and group dominance as threatened by minorities and immigration," he mentions.

Obaidi hopes that the study can both raise awareness of the processes behind violent extremism and also help to limit its spread.

"It would be obvious to provide information on how, for example,

language use can be perceived as a cultural threat—in order to make risk groups less exposed to what they perceive as threatening. At the same time, our results underline the need for more constructive dialogue, where definitive answers and solutions are not allowed to dominate," he concludes.

The study is published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.