

Radicalization in Context: Risk and Protective Factors for Terrorism Vary Across Countries

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Abstract

Objective: This study examined whether risk and protective factors for cognitive radicalization generalize across countries or depend on national context. Using a global, multilevel design, the manuscript contributes evidence on how individual attitudes and country conditions jointly shape support for terrorism beyond the Western settings that dominate prior research.

Method: We analyzed nationally representative survey data from 59,758 adults in 53 countries from the World Values Survey and linked these responses to country-level indicators from Varieties of Democracy and development databases. Weighted multilevel logistic models estimated associations between justifying terrorism and individual-level predictors, country-level characteristics, and cross-level interactions.

Results: Support for terrorism varied substantially across countries, with about one-fifth of baseline variance attributable to between-country differences. At the individual level, greater basic-needs insecurity, approval of military or religious rule, honor-based masculinity, online political activism, and privileging faith over science were associated with higher odds of justifying terrorism. Stronger social belonging, perceived life control, positive views of democracy, conventional civic activism, positive views of science, religiosity, and religious attendance were associated with lower odds. At the country level, higher human development predicted lower support for terrorism.

Conclusions: Risk and protective factors for justifying terrorism are partly robust but also context sensitive. A practical implication is that prevention efforts should combine reducing material insecurity and strengthening democratic, inclusive avenues for participation with country-specific tailoring rather than relying on one-size-fits-all interventions.

Public Significance Statement

Across more than 50 countries, people were less likely to justify terrorism when they felt socially connected, in control of their lives, and committed to democracy, and more likely to justify it when they faced material hardship or favored authoritarian and exclusionary worldviews. These patterns also changed across national settings, suggesting that prevention works best when it strengthens democratic inclusion and basic security while adapting to local conditions.

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Across the world, there is increasing concern about political violence. After the Capitol insurrection in the U.S., for instance, concerns about an increasing use of violence to achieve political aims have sparked (Klaus & Turnbull, 2025; Wintemute et al., 2025). In the U.S., support for political violence has been shown to be related to attitudes towards democracy (Voelkel et al., 2024), polarization (Piazza, 2023), and fearmongering from political elites (Kim, 2025). Recent cross-national polling efforts have shown that a small, but meaningful proportion of citizens supports political violence across multiple democracies (Jacob, 2024). Those citizens largely supported a particularly nefarious kind of political violence, that is terrorism. Even though definitions vary, terrorism is usually characterized by unlawful acts of violence against non-conforming civilians to further a political or social goal (Agnes, 2010; Desmarais et al., 2017). At the same time, many publics in current democracies show a decrease in their faith in democratic institutions (Stiglitz et al., 2025; Wike et al., 2025). These concerning parallel trends raise an important question for research on the psychology of violence: Under what individual and contextual conditions are people more willing to legitimate terrorism, and do democratic attitudes play a role in developing or refuting such attitudes?

In past research, attitudes justifying terrorism and rejecting democracy have been subsumed under the umbrella of (violent) political extremism. Accordingly, radicalization research has focused on pinpointing the factors that lead to or restrict the development of attitudes supportive of the use of violence. Ultimately, the goal of radicalization research is to prevent terrorism, or violent behavior in general (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Since the development of *radical attitudes* can be seen as a necessary, but not sufficient, antecedent of *radical behavior* (Bélanger et al., 2014; Jensen et al., 2020; Klausen et al., 2016, 2020), in this paper, we investigate the development of violent attitudes, that is, *cognitive radicalization*, as

a key antecedent of violent behaviors. More specifically, we address the lacuna of cross-regional research on radicalization (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021; Wolfowicz et al., 2021) by leveraging an international large-scale survey spanning over 50 countries with a multitude of political systems, cultural and religious contexts, that go beyond the usual western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) populations in radicalization research (Henrich et al., 2010; Wolfowicz et al., 2021): Research on WEIRD populations often introduces biases in research such that results may not generalize to different contexts. This might be especially important when investigating violence prevention as most political violence happens in non-WEIRD contexts (Bartusevičius et al., 2020). We therefore aimed to identify not only context-independent risk and protective factors for radicalization, but also the extent to which they vary across countries and political and cultural contexts.

Risk and Protective Factors for Radicalization

The risk-protective factor framework has long guided radicalization research (Wolfowicz et al., 2020; Stern et al., 2016). It generally posits that radicalization is multicausal: There is not one reason why an individual develops an attitude supporting the use of violence. Rather, it is the cumulative and interactive weight of multiple risk factors, in the context of weaker or stronger protective factors, that increases or decreases the likelihood of an individual radicalizing (Farrington et al., 2012). Identifying risk factors as well as protective factors for radicalization, according to this framework, is key to designing successful interventions. One should counter-act on risk factors and strengthen protective factors (Duindam et al., 2021; Farrington et al., 2012).

A growing body of work therefore asks which risk and protective factors make it more or less likely that individuals develop radical attitudes in the first place. Many of these conditions are familiar from criminology and radicalization research: economic and social strain, weak integration and low trust, status- and significance-seeking, exposure to deviant or radical peers and networks, and the availability of legitimizing narratives, offline or online

(Agnew, 2010; Kruglanski et al., 2016; Pauwels & Schils, 2016; Wolfowicz et al., 2020). To connect this work to our empirical analysis, we group our predictors into several theoretically grounded domains that map directly onto the variables in our multilevel model.

A first domain concerns material strain and social integration. General strain and relative deprivation theories argue that economic hardship, blocked opportunities, and perceived injustice provide fertile ground for grievance and anger (Agnew, 2010, 2016). Experiencing discrimination, crime victimization, or social exclusion could erode trust in institutions as well as weaken one's social support (De Waele & Pauwels, 2014; Second Author et al., 2025; Third Author et al., 2023). Multiple studies have found that such experiences are associated with radical attitudes, whereas a secure sense of belonging, social embeddedness, and higher social trust function as protective factors (Rousseau et al., 2019; Ellis & Abdi, 2017; Nivette et al., 2017).

A second domain concerns views of democracy and authoritarian alternatives. Experiencing and perceiving adversity could lead to a reduction in one's trust in democratic and social institutions (Osborne et al., 2023). Recent studies indicate that low support for democratic norms, low perceived responsiveness of institutions, and positive attitudes towards authoritarianism are associated with greater justification of political violence (Dyrstad & Hillesund, 2020; Bartusevičius et al., 2020; Piazza, 2024; Second Author et al., 2026). By contrast, attaching importance to democracy and feeling able to shape one's life and political environment should be protective factors regarding radicalization (Piazza, 2024). We test these assumptions independently by including several distinct attitudes towards authoritarian, e.g., military, or religious regimes as well as attitudes towards democracy in our model.

Concomitantly, third, certain epistemic and religious world views have been shown to impact radicalization tendencies. Current research distinguishes between the overall salience of religion and more specific forms of fundamentalism that stress absolute truth claims and sharp in-group/out-group boundaries (Demmrich & Hanel, 2024). Fundamentalist beliefs can

make a violent defense of certain values appear morally justified, particularly under perceived discrimination or threat (Beller & Kröger, 2018; Demmrich & Hanel, 2024). At the same time, religious communities may provide prosocial norms and support that buffer against radicalization (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Religiosity has additionally been shown to increase trust and cooperation across religions, demonstrating its capacity for peacebuilding and violence prevention (Pasek et al., 2025; Second author et al., 2026). We therefore consider religiosity to be a protective factor unless it shows an exclusionary claim to truth, either against other religions (religious fundamentalism), or over other truth-searching endeavors such as science. Religious fundamentalism and an exclusionary epistemic mindset should be risk factors of radicalization (Demmrich & Hanel, 2024; Beller & Kröger, 2018).

Our fourth domain pertains to other normative views around gender, status, political engagement, and information environments. Traditional, honor-based ideals of masculinity, emphasizing toughness and readiness to use force, are consistently associated with aggression and may increase acceptance of political violence (Leander et al., 2020; Walters, 2001). The quest for personal significance and status – a desire to feel respected and important – has been identified as a core motivational driver of radicalization (Kruglanski et al., 2014, 2015). These motives can be channeled into conventional civic activism or more radical forms of action (Jasko, 2019). Civic participation within institutional politics is often seen as protective, offering non-violent avenues to express grievances, whereas engagement in loosely moderated online spaces can expose individuals to extremist peers, narratives, and networks (Jasko, 2019; Third Author, 2021). From a social learning perspective, media content and online interactions can act as sources of models and justifications for violence (Pauwels & Schils, 2016). We therefore differentiate between more conventional forms of activism and online political engagement, and between reliance on classic mass media versus internet sources.

Finally, we incorporate indicators of socioeconomic position and structural context. Education and income are treated as background conditions that may shape how people interpret their circumstances and political options (Second Author et al., 2025). At the macro level, we capture cross-national differences in civil and gender liberties, religious freedom, the quality of electoral democracy, levels of political and physical violence, mobilization for autocratic alternatives, human development, economic inequality, and the extent to which social media are used to promote violence. These features characterize the broader ecological context within which individual risk and protective factors operate.

Radicalization Frameworks and the Need for a Contextualized Approach

Recent work on radicalization underscores the central role of an individual's context in shaping whether people come to view terrorism as a mean to achieve a political goal. Educational displacement theory, developed in the context of the genocide in Bosnia, shows how perceived exclusion, misrecognition, and invisibility in a society can undermine trust in mainstream institutions and push learners toward alternative sources of authority (Third Author, 2021): When curricula erase certain groups, teachers stereotype students, or educational pathways are experienced as closed, formal education loses legitimacy. Informal mentors and online influencers then step in to provide replacement education through sermons, tutorials, and social media content that offer structured worldviews and grievance-based narratives (Third-Author, 2021).

Beelmann's (2020) Social-Developmental Model of Radicalization situates such educational experiences within a broader life-course perspective. It conceptualizes radicalization as the outcome of trajectories in which societal conditions (such as inequality and collective marginalization), social environments (families, peer groups, neighborhoods), and individual characteristics interact over time. Certain combinations of these influences could then lead to four proximal processes that could be activated by conflicts and crises: identity problems, prejudice, ideological commitments, and antisocial attitudes and behavior.

Protective influences, including positive relationships, school bonding, and endorsement of democratic norms, can counteract these risks. This perspective emphasizes multicausality: different configurations of risk and protection can lead to similar radical outcomes, and the same early experiences can also lead to non-radical pathways when protective factors counteract one's negative experiences (Beelmann, 2020).

Together, these frameworks suggest that risk and protective factors for radicalization operate at multiple, interacting levels: the micro-level of personal development and learning, the meso-level of schools, peer networks and local contexts, and the macro-level of wider political and institutional arrangements. They also highlight that what counts as displacement, integration, or a criminogenic setting will vary across different systems, media landscapes, and regime types. Yet, to this date, radicalization research largely remains uncontextualized and Western-centric (Bartusevicius, 2020; Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021; Wolfowicz et al., 2021). This begs the question whether similar constellations of strain, identity dynamics, democratic and authoritarian orientations, religiosity, and media use have comparable implications elsewhere. This poses a few significant problems for the science of radicalization: First, an over-emphasis on individual-level explanations (Bilali, 2025). Risk and protective factors might vary largely depending on the societal circumstances of an individual. What could be an enabling factor for radicalization, such as a fundamentalist worldview in a democratic society, could be a protective factor in a fundamentalist society. In a fundamentalist society, a fundamentalist individual should not see the need to violently overthrow the government. Due to these problems in defining risk and protective factors independent of a specific context, Hafez and Mullins (2015) even propose a puzzle metaphor that describes the complex multifaceted structure of radicalization.

The Current Study

In an effort to address the research lacuna of cross-cultural research in radicalization, we use the latest version of the *World Values Survey* (WVS; Haerpfer et al., 2022) which

spans the years 2017 to 2021. WVS is an international research program which aims to investigate several social, political, economic, religious, and cultural values and beliefs of people from all over the world. Since 1981, WVS has administered an extensive standardized comparative social survey to inhabitants of 120 countries representing approximately 95 percent of the world's population. The newest wave was administered to 64 countries and applied full probability sampling of the population aged 18 years and older. In total, 94,728 participants completed the WVS survey.

We focused on respondents in 53 countries who were asked to what extent terrorism for political or religious ends can be justified. By distinguishing between those who say that terrorism is “never” justified and those who see it as at least sometimes acceptable, we model a core cognitive component of radicalization that is comparable across a wide range of political systems, cultures, and religious contexts. We thus formulated our first Research Question as follows:

RQ1: Does the prevalence of justifying terrorism vary across countries, and to which extent?

Guided by the risk and protective factor framework and the multi-level models of radicalization discussed above, we estimated a multilevel logistic regression with individuals nested in countries. At the micro-level, we included indicators of economic and social strain, social integration and trust, democratic values and openness to non-democratic rule, religiosity and fundamentalism, epistemic orientations (faith versus science, attitudes toward science), gendered honor norms, quests for status and significance expressed through civic and online engagement, information diets (traditional media versus internet sources), and basic socioeconomic resources. These measures operationalized the different domains highlighted by social-developmental and educational displacement theories: how people's experiences of inequality, recognition, belonging, and learning environments shape their

propensity for terrorism. In light with educational displacement theory and the social-developmental theory of radicalization, we formulated the following Research Questions:

RQ2: To what extent are indicators of material strain, social integration (e.g., belonging, trust), and perceived threat associated with the likelihood of justifying terrorism in the general population?

RQ3: How are religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and epistemic worldviews (e.g., privileging faith over science vs. confidence in science) related to support for terrorism?

Adding to the emerging body of research on democratic values as buffers for radicalization, we asked our third Research Question:

RQ4: Are democratic orientations (e.g., valuing democracy, feeling free to shape one's life) negatively, and authoritarian preferences (e.g., support for military or religious rule) positively associated with justification of terrorism?

At the macro-level, we incorporate indices of civil and gender liberties, religious freedom, electoral democracy, levels of political and physical violence, mobilization for autocratic alternatives, media bias and censorship, the extent to which media are used for violent mobilization, economic development, human development, and income inequality in our model. In line with situational action theory, these contextual indicators capture the moral and institutional environments within which individual dispositions are enacted. We thus asked the following Research Questions:

RQ5: Can any country-level characteristics predict support for terrorism after adjusting for micro-level variables?

RQ6: To what extent do the individual-level risk and protective factors vary across countries?

This design allows us to pursue three aims. First, we identified individual-level risk and protective factors for justifying terrorism in a genuinely global sample that goes beyond the usual WEIRD settings. Second, we identified some cross-country variation in the

prevalence of cognitive radicalization and in the strength of risk and protective factors. Third, through a set of theoretically motivated cross-level interactions, we tested whether the same individual characteristics could carry different implications depending on the broader political and institutional context.

Method

Data Sources and Participants

We combined individual-level data from Wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS 7; Haerpfer et al., 2022) with country-level indicators from the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem v15), and publicly available development statistics (GDP per capita, Human Development Index, income inequality).

WVS7 is based on nationally representative probability samples of the adult population in each participating country, using face-to-face interviews and standardized instruments. Throughout our analysis, we applied normalized versions of the calibration and equilibrated weights to make country samples representative for the adult population of this country and cross-country comparisons valid – each country was thus weighted as $N = 1,000$. The full WVS dataset included $N = 94,728$ respondents from 64 societies. Following the theoretical focus of the present study, we restricted the sample to countries in which respondents were asked about the justifiability of terrorism and for which matching V-Dem and macroeconomic data were available, yielding 53 countries in the fully specified multilevel models ($n_{\text{final model}} = 59,758$). We excluded respondents who were missing on the main dependent variable or had missing country identifiers. All data were fully anonymized and collected under the ethical procedures of the WVS network and the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2019). For all multi-item measures, we include the specific questions in the Online Supplement.

Measures

Justification of Terrorism

Our primary outcome captures a core element of cognitive radicalization: willingness to justify terrorism as a political or religious tool. WVS 7 included an item asking participants how much they think that terrorism as a political, ideological, or religious mean is justified (Q192, answered on a 10-point scale from 1 = *never justifiable* to 10 = *always justifiable*). Following prior work on radical attitudes and due to the heavy skewness of the distribution (Bartusevičius et al., 2020), we dichotomized this item into an indicator of support for terrorism. This was not only a statistical decision. Justifying terrorism in any case – regardless of the degree of justification – could be seen as an indicator of radicalization (Dixon, 2009), which is the primary interest of this research. This dichotomization thus matches our theoretical distinction between complete rejection versus any openness to violent means and captures the theoretical distinction between the onset and intensity of violence (Dixon, 2009). Country-specific counts of respondents who fully rejected versus tolerated terrorism are summarized in Table 1. Even though dichotomization might reduce power, our relatively large sample size ($n = 59,758$) should allow us to find significant effects despite this decision. Responses of 1 were coded 0, and any response from 2 to 10 was coded 1, indicating that terrorism is seen as at least sometimes justifiable. Respondents who did not receive the item or answered *don't know* or *no answer* were coded as missing. We report additional hurdle models in the Online Supplement which corroborate the results presented here.

Individual-level Predictors

All individual-level predictors were drawn from WVS7 and grouped into theoretically grounded domains reflecting material strain and social integration, democratic versus authoritarian orientations, religiosity and epistemic worldviews, normative orientations around gender and status, civic/online engagement and information diets, and socio-economic background. Where items had differing response formats, we first recoded them so that higher scores consistently represented more of the underlying construct (e.g., greater insecurity,

stronger authoritarian preference, higher religiosity). All variables were z-standardized before entering them into the model. We evaluated the internal consistency of all multi-item indices using McDonald's ω based on polychoric correlations, as ω is increasingly preferred over Cronbach's α (Dunn et al., 2014). Below, we summarize the key individual-level measures used in the multilevel models; full item wording and coding schemes are documented in the WVS7 codebook.

Material strain, insecurity, and social integration

Basic needs insecurity. We constructed a four-item index capturing participants' fulfilment of basic needs based on questions about how often, in the past year, the respondent's household had to go without enough food, medicine, or a safe place to live or lacked money for basic necessities (e.g., food, clothing). Higher scores indicate greater material strain and deprivation (items derived from WVS 7 Q51, Q53-Q55). The resulting scale provided a high reliability, MacDonal's $\omega = 0.88$.

Violence-related insecurity and worry. Two composite measures capture perceived insecurity due to violence and terrorism and general worry about crime, war, and terrorism. Items for the first index asked how safe respondents felt in their neighborhood (WVS 7 132-138) and how worried they were about terrorism, civil war, and violent crime (WVS 7 Q146-148). Higher scores represent greater perceived threat and insecurity. The resulting scale again yielded a good reliability for the insecurity scale, MacDonal's $\omega = 0.87$, and a very good reliability for the score measuring worry about terrorism, civil war, and violent crime, MacDonal's $\omega = 0.94$.

Social belonging. A five-item index based on questions about feeling close to people in one's local community, region, country, continent, and the world. Higher scores indicate stronger sense of social belonging and identification with broader communities (items derived from WVS 7 belonging battery, Q255-259). The resulting scale again yielded a good reliability, MacDonal's $\omega = 0.86$.

Interpersonal and institutional distrust. A six-item index combining perceived distrust in family, neighbors, people the respondent meets for the first time, religious groups, and the broader society. Higher scores indicate greater interpersonal distrust (WVS 7 Q58-Q63). The resulting scale again yielded a good reliability, MacDonald's $\omega = 0.81$.

General flourishing and agency. We included a three-item flourishing index combining self-rated health, overall life satisfaction, and a general well-being (WVS 7 Q46, Q47, Q49), alongside a single item on perceived freedom of choice and control over one's life (WVS 7 Q48, "How much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out?"). Higher scores indicate better subjective well-being and greater perceived agency. The resulting scale yielded an adequate reliability, MacDonald's $\omega = 0.61$.

Democratic Orientations and Openness to Authoritarian Rule

Democratic and authoritarian attitudes were measured using standard WVS items asking respondents to evaluate different political systems.

Importance of democracy. A single item asking, "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?" (WVS 7 Q250, 1 = *not at all important*, 10 = *absolutely important*).

General support for political systems. From the "Political Culture and Political Regimes" battery of WVS 7, we additionally adopted several measures of approval of (non-) democratic political systems. Participants were asked how well they thought a certain way of ruling the country is (1 = *very bad*, 4 = *very good*). All measures are single-item measures.

Attitude toward democracy. Approval of "Having a democratic political system" (WVS 7 Q238).

Military rule. Approval of "Having the army rule" (WVS 7 Q237).

Religious rule. Approval of "Having religious authorities interpret the laws" in place of elected politicians (WVS 7 Q239).

Authoritarian rule. Approval of “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” in place of elected politicians (WVS 7 Q235).

Religiosity, fundamentalism, and epistemic worldviews

Religiosity. To measure religiosity, we employed two indicators. First, the self-reported importance of God in one’s life (WVS 7 Q164, 1 = *not at all important*, 10 = *very important*). Second, the frequency of attendance at religious services (WVS 7 Q171, 1 = *never, practically never*, 7 = *more than once a week*).

Religious fundamentalism. A single item assessed the degree of religious fundamentalism versus relativism (WVS 7 Q170), recoded such that higher scores indicate a more fundamentalist, absolute truth orientation. The item asked participants how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “The only acceptable religion is my religion” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*).

Science as a positive force. We built an index reflecting positive views towards science from items in the science and technology battery, by including two items: First, “science and technology are making our lives healthier, easier, and more comfortable” (WVS 7 Q158, 1 = *completely disagree*, 10 = *completely agree*). Second, “All things considered, would you say that the world is better off, or worse off, because of science and technology?” (WVS 7 Q163, 1 = *a lot worse off*, 10 = *a lot better off*). This resulted in a scale with adequate, but not good reliability, MacDonald’s $\omega = 0.57$. While such a reliability would be considered too small for testing purposes, it should be adequate for use in prediction models (Rost, 2005).

Faith over science. A “faith over science” index combined three items: (a) “We depend too much on science and not enough on faith” (WVS 7 Q 160), (b) “one of the bad effects of science is that it breaks down people’s ideas of right and wrong” (WVS Q 161), and (c) “Whenever science and religion conflict, religion is always right” (WVS 7 Q169), recoded so that higher scores reflect privileging religious faith and absolute truth claims over scientific inquiry. This resulted in a scale with adequate, but not good reliability, MacDonald’s $\omega = 0.55$.

Civic and online engagement, information diets, and immigration attitudes

Honor-based masculinity. A six-item index captured traditional and honor-based masculine norms such as allowing men rather than women into universities or favoring male political leaders over female ones (WVS 7 Q28-Q33). Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of masculinity ideals. This resulted in a scale with decent reliability, MacDonald's $\omega = 0.73$.

Conventional civic activism. An eight-item index combined questions about signing petitions, boycotting products, participating in lawful demonstrations or strikes, donating to political causes, contacting politicians, and encouraging others to vote. Items asked if respondents had done, might do, or would never do each action; these were recoded and averaged so that higher scores indicate greater engagement in conventional political activism (WVS 7 Q209-216). The resulting scale provided a high reliability, MacDonald's $\omega = 0.90$.

Online activism. A four-item index drew on items about using the internet or social media to search for political information, sign online petitions, encourage others online, or organize political events (WVS 7 Q217-220). Higher scores indicate more intense online political engagement. This, again, resulted in a scale with a high reliability, MacDonald's $\omega = 0.90$.

Information diets. For participants' information diets, we distinguished between reliance on traditional mass media compared to digital media for receiving information about their country as well as the world. A classic media index was computed by averaging the frequency participants indicated to follow news through daily newspapers, tv news, or radio news (WVS 7 Q201-203; 1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*), MacDonald's $\omega = 0.59$. An internet media index was computed by averaging the frequency of using smartphones, the internet, and social media for political information (WVS 7 Q204-207; 1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*), so higher scores reflect heavier reliance on the respective media channel, MacDonald's $\omega = 0.78$.

Socio-demographic Predictors

Finally, all models included age and gender. Gender was coded as a binary indicator (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*; WVS Q260). Citizenship (citizen vs non-citizen of the country of residence) was included as an additional structural control (0 = *non-citizen*, 1 = *citizen*; WVS Q269).

Country-level predictors

Country-level characteristics were derived primarily from the V-Dem v15 (Varieties of Democracy) dataset, with GDP and HDI drawn from standard international sources (World Bank and UNDP). The V-Dem institute, which is based at the University of Gothenburg, asks about 3500 country experts worldwide to provide their expertise on the state of several important variables in a given country. We matched these data to the WVS country and survey year, using the value from the year preceding the survey fieldwork to reduce simultaneity concerns (e.g., using 2016 V-Dem scores for WVS interviews conducted in 2017). We focused on country-level indices capturing civil, religious, and gender liberties, media environments, polarization and violence, autocratic mobilization, and development. The values of these predictors for each country can be found in Table 2.

Equal civil liberties. An index based on the V-Dem equality before the law and individual liberty components, capturing the extent to which civil liberties are equally protected across social groups. Experts were asked whether “all social groups, as distinguished by language, ethnicity, religion, race, region, or caste, enjoy the same level of civil liberties, or [whether there] are some groups generally in a more favorable position” (V-Dem, 2025, p. 187). Higher values indicate more equal and better-respected civil liberties.

Religious freedom. V-Dem’s freedom of religion indicator, which assesses the extent to which individuals and groups “have the right to choose a religion, change their religion, and practice that religion in private or in public as well as to proselytize peacefully without being subject to restrictions by public authorities” (V-Dem, 2025, p. 192). Higher values denote greater religious freedom.

Equal gender liberties. An index derived from V-Dem’s egalitarian component and gender equality indicators, measuring the degree to which political and civil liberties are equally guaranteed to women and men.

Media equality and freedom. We included a media bias index based on V-Dem’s indicator v2mebias, which captures whether “there [is] media bias against opposition parties or candidates” (V-Dem, 2025, p. 213). Higher values for this index reflect less bias. We also included a media freedom variable based on indicators of government censorship of news and information in traditional media. Higher values reflect less censorship.

No social media use for violent mobilization. An additional indicator captured the extent to which social media is used in a society to organize offline violence. Higher values indicate less frequent use of social media to coordinate offline violence.

Political violence. Based on the V-Dem index of political violence, we included an indicator that reflected “how often non-state actors used political violence against persons this year” (V-Dem, 2025, p. 234). Higher values indicate that more political violence has occurred in a country.

Freedom from physical violence. An additional physical violence index was included that captured the extent to which physical integrity is respected by the government. Other than the political violence index, this index captures the extent to which the government uses physical force exert influence on its citizens. Higher values indicated more respect for citizens’ physical integrity.

Polarization. We additionally included a variable capturing the extent to which society is polarized, that is, to which different political camps in a country interact in a hostile or friendly manner. Higher values indicated higher polarization, that is, more hostility towards out-partisans.

Autocratic mobilization. Our last V-Dem indicator built on the research on democratic norms as protective factors for violence. This second-level risk factor captured the

extent to which “frequent and large have events of mass mobilization for pro-autocratic aims” (V-Dem, 2025, p. 238) have been held. Higher values indicated more mass mobilization for autocracy in a country.

Human and economic development and inequality. Economic development was measured using GDP per capita based on purchasing power parity (PPP) in international dollars as gathered by the World Bank. This indicator expresses a country’s total economic output per person, adjusted for differences in price levels across countries and for inflation. In PPP terms, an “international dollar” has the same purchasing power over GDP as a U.S. dollar has in the United States.

We additionally used the Human Development Index (HDI) as a broader measure of social and economic development. The HDI is a composite index constructed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), summarizing average achievements in three dimensions: (a) a long and healthy life (life expectancy at birth), (b) access to knowledge (mean and expected years of schooling), and (c) a decent standard of living. These dimensions are first normalized to indices between 0 and 1 and then combined as a geometric mean. HDI scores also range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating higher overall human development. After standardization in our analytic dataset, positive values denote countries with above-average human development relative to other WVS countries.

Income inequality was captured via the Atkinson index of income inequality. The Atkinson index is a welfare-based measure of inequality that incorporates an “inequality aversion” parameter (ϵ) to weight changes at different parts of the income distribution, it is thus more sensitive to the lower ends of the income distribution compared to the Gini index. Values of the Atkinson index range from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (maximum inequality). Higher values indicate that more of society’s income would need to be redistributed to achieve equality, and hence greater inequality. In our dataset, we used the national-level Atkinson index reported by the UNDP Human Development Reports.

Results

We estimated a series of weighted multilevel logistic regression models predicting whether respondents deemed terrorism at least sometimes justifiable. Individuals (Level 1) were nested in countries (Level 2), with random intercepts for countries and (in the final model) random slopes for theoretically central individual predictors. All continuous (individual and country-level) predictors were grand-mean standardized (*z*-scores), so coefficients represent the change in log-odds associated with a 1 SD increase in the predictor. The main results are presented in Table 3, and Figures 1-3.

Prevalence and Between-Country Variability

Across the 64 societies in the baseline model, a substantial minority of respondents indicated that terrorism is at least sometimes justifiable (Table 1). In an initial random-intercept model including only basic sociodemographic covariates (Age, Gender, Immigration status, Education, Income), there was considerable between-country variation in the log-odds of justifying terrorism. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was .21 in this model, indicating that about one-fifth of the total variance in the log-odds of support for terrorism was attributable to between-country differences.

Individual-Level Risk and Protective Factors

To address RQ2–RQ5, we estimated a sequence of models adding domains of individual-level predictors: material strain and social integration, religiosity and epistemic worldviews, democratic versus authoritarian orientations, and gender norms, activism, and media use. We focus on the final random-slope model for substantive interpretation (Model 7 in Table 3). Effects were highly similar in simpler specifications of the model.

Material strain, insecurity, and social integration

Consistent with a strain perspective, basic needs insecurity emerged as a robust risk factor. Across models, higher levels of material deprivation were strongly associated with greater odds of justifying terrorism (final model: $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$). By contrast,

feeling more socially embedded and connected to one's community and broader social groups was protective: higher belonging predicted lower support for terrorism ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .002$).

Perceived freedom of choice and control over one's life was also a consistent protective factor. Respondents who felt more able to shape their lives as they wished were less likely to justify terrorism ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$). General worry about crime, war, and terrorism, interpersonal distrust, and violence-related insecurity showed no reliable associations once other risk and protective factors were included (all $p > .10$ in the final model).

Sociodemographic controls showed small but consistent effects: older respondents were less likely to justify terrorism ($b = -0.005$, $SE < 0.001$, $p < .001$), and women were less likely to justify terrorism than men ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$). Higher education predicted lower support ($b = -0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .002$), whereas higher household income was associated with higher support ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$).

Religiosity, fundamentalism, and epistemic worldviews

Religious and epistemic orientations showed a nuanced pattern of risk and protection. On the protective side, a more positive view of science was associated with lower support for terrorism ($b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), and greater importance of God in one's life predicted lower justification of terrorism ($b = -0.29$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$). Higher frequency of religious service attendance was also modestly protective ($b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .019$).

By contrast, an epistemic orientation that privileges faith over science was positively associated with justification of terrorism ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .005$). Net of these other indicators, religious fundamentalism had a small, non-significant main effect in the final model ($p = .45$), but – as shown below – its association with justification of terrorism depended systematically on the broader level of religious freedom in a country.

Overall, the results suggest that “belief in God” and religious practice per se are not risk factors; rather, the risk appears linked to specific fundamentalist or exclusivist orientations and their interaction with the institutional context of religious freedom.

Democratic orientations and authoritarian preferences

Democratic values showed some of the strongest protective associations in the model. Placing greater importance on living in a democracy predicted lower support for terrorism ($b = -0.21$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), as did more favorable attitudes toward democratic political systems ($b = -0.20$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). These effects persisted after controlling for material strain, religiosity, and all other domains of predictors.

By contrast, preferences for authoritarian alternatives were positively associated with willingness to justify terrorism. Greater approval of rule by the army predicted higher support ($b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), as did approval of religious authorities ruling instead of elected politicians ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). Taken together, the results support the notion that commitment to democracy functions as a key protective factor against cognitive radicalization, whereas openness to authoritarian and theocratic rule is associated with a greater willingness to legitimate terrorism.

Gender norms, status seeking, activism, and media use

Honor-based masculinity norms emerged as a individual-level risk factor. Higher scores on traditional, status- and toughness-oriented masculinity were associated with greater support for terrorism ($b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .021$). Patterns of political engagement and media use differentiated between risk- and protective pathways:

Conventional civic activism (e.g., petitions, demonstrations, contacting officials) was associated with lower justification of terrorism ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .035$), suggesting that institutionalized channels of participation may provide non-violent outlets for grievances.

By contrast, online political activism (e.g., using social media to promote or organize political activities) predicted *higher* support ($b = 0.12, SE = 0.04, p < .001$), in line with concerns about exposure to radical content and networks in loosely moderated digital spaces.

Frequent use of traditional mass media (newspapers, radio, TV) to follow news was strongly protective ($b = -0.14, SE = 0.02, p < .001$). Somewhat unexpectedly, greater reliance on internet-based news and social media for political information was also negatively associated with justification of terrorism on average ($b = -0.11, SE = 0.02, p < .001$). However, as shown below, the association between media use and support for violence depended on the broader media environment.

Macro-Level Predictors

To address RQ5, we added a comprehensive set of country-level indicators capturing civil and gender liberties, religious freedom, media environment, political and physical violence, mobilization for autocracy, social media use for violent mobilization, economic development (GDP per capita), human development (HDI), and income inequality. A visualization of country-level associations of these indicators and country-level justification for terrorism can be found in Figure 1.

In the additive macro-level model without cross-level interactions, most country-level predictors did not reach significance. The one consistent macro-level signal was the Human Development Index, which showed a negative association with justification of terrorism ($b = -0.51, SE = 0.23, p = .025$). On average, respondents living in more highly developed societies were less likely to see terrorism as justifiable.

No single macro-level factor by itself fully accounted for between-country differences in justification of terrorism; rather, country-level features primarily shaped how individual risk and protective factors translated into attitudes, as reflected in the cross-level interactions.

Cross-Level Interactions and Cross-National Heterogeneity

To examine whether individual-level predictors operate differently across institutional contexts (RQ6), we estimated models with cross-level interactions between key micro-level variables and macro-level indicators, and then allowed several slopes to vary randomly across countries.

Several cross-level interactions showed that the implications of religious beliefs depend on the level of religious freedom in a country: The positive association between religious fundamentalism and justification of terrorism was markedly stronger in countries with greater religious freedom (interaction $b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$). In more restrictive contexts, fundamentalism was less clearly linked to support for violence. Support for religious rule (preference for religious authorities governing instead of elected politicians) was also more strongly associated with justification of terrorism when religious freedom was higher, even though this effect was only marginally significant (interaction $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .061$).

In contrast, the protective effects of religiosity tended to increase with increasing religious freedom. In the cross-level model, higher religious freedom amplified the *negative* association of attendance with support for violence (interaction $b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$). These patterns suggest that fundamentalism and support for religious rule become especially risky where people are otherwise free to practice religion, whereas ordinary religious commitment can function as a protective resource.

The associations between media use and justification of terrorism depended on the media environment: Reliance on classical mass media was generally protective, and this protective effect was stronger where media bias was low (interaction $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .086$) but weaker or partially offset in contexts with stronger media freedom (interaction $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .028$). These findings indicate that media habits cannot be interpreted in isolation: whether online engagement is risky or protective depends on how media systems are structured and used.

Random slopes and model fit

Finally, to directly test whether individual-level effects varied across countries, we specified a random-slope model in which the effects of key predictors (e.g., masculinity norms, belonging, democratic importance, importance of God, media use, religious and democratic attitudes, education, income) were allowed to vary by country. This model substantially improved fit relative to the random-intercept cross-level model (see Table 3) and increased the conditional R^2 from .29 to .39, indicating that allowing slopes to vary captured additional systematic country-level variance. The detailed variance components can be found in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the improved fit indicated that the strength of risk and protective factors themselves differs across countries, consistent with RQ6 and with contextualized models of radicalization.

Discussion

The present study set out to contextualize cognitive radicalization – people’s willingness to justify terrorism for political, ideological, or religious ends – within a global, multilevel framework. Using data from over 50 countries spanning diverse political, cultural, and religious systems, we asked when and for whom terrorism is seen as legitimate, whether macro-level conditions matter beyond individual dispositions, and to what extent risk and protective factors themselves vary across contexts. Overall, our findings support a multicausal, context-sensitive view of radicalization: risk and protective factors are not fixed traits, but part of configurations of personal, social, and institutional conditions that differ across societies.

In line with recent cross-national polling on political violence (Jacobs, 2024), we found that a minority of respondents across countries considered terrorism at least sometimes justifiable. At the same time, there was marked between-country variability: roughly one-fifth of the variance in support for terrorism was attributable to country-level differences in the baseline model. Our analysis revealed that no single macro-level indicator – such as civil

liberties, media freedom, or political violence – fully explained this variance. After adjusting for individual-level factors, the Human Development Index emerged as the most robust country-level predictor: respondents in more highly developed societies were less likely to justify terrorism. Taken together, these results are consistent with contextualized theories of radicalization (Beelmann, 2020; Third Author, 2021; Hafez & Mullins, 2015) that view structural conditions as shaping risk configurations rather than acting as simple root causes.

Consistent with general strain perspectives (Agnew, 2010, 2016), basic needs insecurity emerged as a robust risk factor: individuals who struggled to meet fundamental material needs were more likely to justify terrorism. Surprisingly, but in accordance with current research on the non-protective – and often aggravating – role of higher socio-economic status in cognitive radicalization (Grosche & Rothmund, 2025; Wolfowicz, 2025), higher income was consistently associated with more justification of terrorism. At the same time, several indicators of psychosocial integration functioned as protective factors. A stronger sense of belonging to one's community, country, and the broader world, and feeling more freedom of choice and control over one's life, were associated with lower justification of terrorism. These findings provide further evidence for educational displacement theory (Third Author, 2021), and social-developmental models of radicalization (Beelmann, 2020), which emphasize that experiences of exclusion and powerlessness can feed identity problems and antisocial attitudes, whereas positive bonding and agency can keep grievances from escalating into cognitive radicalization.

The present findings also speak to the role of age and gender in cognitive radicalization. Across countries, younger respondents and men were more likely to justify terrorism, in line with meta-analyses from WEIRD populations (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). These effects fit perspectives that link violence legitimacy to gendered norms around force and dominance and to life-course processes such as identity exploration, risk-taking, and political grievance in younger adulthood (Beelman, 2020; Nivette et al., 2022). In addition,

the gender difference is consistent with scholarship linking support for violence to gendered norms around force, dominance, and hegemonic masculinity (Bardall et al., 2019; McDermott, 2020; Pearson, 2019). Importantly, however, this gender difference was not constant across contexts: in countries with higher equal gender liberties, women were even less likely relative to men to justify terrorism. Citizenship had no effects on justification of terrorism, refuting a common political narrative in some countries (Schmuck & Matthes, 2019).

We further investigated whether religiosity, fundamentalism, and epistemic orientations relate to support for terrorism. Our findings underscore the need to distinguish between ordinary religious commitment and more exclusivist, fundamentalist mindsets. Importance of God in one's life and more frequent attendance at religious services were associated with lower odds of justifying terrorism, as were more positive views of science. By contrast, privileging faith over science predicted higher support for terrorism, and religious fundamentalism showed context-dependent risk (see below).

These patterns resonate well with educational displacement theory (Third Author, 2021). Religiosity embedded in supportive communities and non-exclusionary epistemic frameworks appears to function as a protective factor – providing meaning, social support, and prosocial norms (Ellis & Abdi, 2017; Pasek et al., 2025). In contrast, absolutist truth claims that dismiss scientific inquiry and other viewpoints seem to increase openness to violence, especially under favorable contextual conditions. The current study thus contributes to a more nuanced, cross-national understanding of religion and radicalization, challenging simplistic assumptions that religiosity per se is a risk factor.

Democratic values emerged as some of the strongest protective factors in the model. In line with theoretical discussions that see democratic values as protective factors for developing radical extremist positions (Bartusevičius et al., 2020), both placing a high importance on living in a democracy and holding positive attitudes toward democratic

systems were associated with substantially lower support for terrorism, even after adjusting for strain, religiosity, and other predictors. This supports emerging work suggesting that democratic attitudes can buffer against cognitive radicalization and terrorism (Bartusevičius et al., 2020; Dyrstad & Hillesund, 2020; Piazza, 2024).

Conversely, preferences for authoritarian alternatives – rule by the army and rule by religious authorities – were positively associated with justifying terrorism. This fits with theories of authoritarianism that highlight support for coercive, hierarchical order and willingness to use force to deal with perceived threats and conflicts (Osborne et al., 2023). Within McCauley and Moskalenko’s (2017) two-pyramids model, these findings suggest that attitudes legitimizing authoritarian power structures go hand in hand with attitudes legitimizing terrorism.

We furthermore replicated results that honor-based masculinity – a toughness- and status-oriented ideal – was associated with higher support for terrorism (Wolfowicz et al., 2021), paralleling research linking such norms to aggression and norm-violating behavior (Leander et al., 2020; Walters, 2001). Pearson’s (2019) critique of “toxic masculinity” is useful for interpreting this finding. Rather than treating violent or extremist masculine performances as the pathology of a small group of deviant men, Pearson argues that such performances are better understood as intensified expressions of broader patriarchal norms and hierarchies. In this sense, honor-based masculinity in our model should not be read as a fringe disposition alone, but as a more general orientation that normalizes dominance, gender hierarchy, and force as acceptable means of defending status or political order. Our cross-level results refine this picture. Although the main effect of gender showed that women were less likely than men to justify terrorism, replicating previous research (Wolfowicz et al., 2021), this gender gap became significantly larger in countries with higher levels of equal gender liberties. Substantively, this suggests that the gap between men and women in the legitimization of terrorism widens in more gender-equal contexts. One plausible interpretation is that more

gender-egalitarian institutional settings more clearly separate women from coercive, dominance-based political norms, or make men's greater acceptance of such norms more visible. This interpretation is consistent with broader work arguing that male-dominance hierarchies and women's subordination are structurally tied to political violence, even though the way gender shapes political attitudes depends on institutional context (McDermott, 2020).

Conventional civic activism (petitions, lawful demonstrations, contacting officials) was associated with lower justification of terrorism, supporting the idea that institutionalized participation provides non-violent channels to express grievances. By contrast, online political activism predicted higher support for terrorism, consistent with social learning accounts that emphasize exposure to extremist content and peers in less regulated online spaces (Pauwels & Schils, 2016). Interestingly, both classic mass media use and internet-based news consumption were on average associated with lower justification of terrorism. This suggests that, globally, politically engaged media consumption often coincides with democratic orientations and broader information horizons. Yet, as our cross-level analyses indicate, media effects cannot be interpreted without considering the surrounding media environment.

A central goal of the study was to examine whether risk and protective factors operate similarly across contexts. In line with contextualized models of radicalization (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021; Wolfowicz et al., 2021), we found substantial cross-national heterogeneity in the strength – and sometimes direction – of individual-level associations (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). The risks associated with religious fundamentalism and support for religious rule were amplified in countries with higher religious freedom. This pattern resonates with educational displacement theory: when mainstream institutions are open and pluralistic, exclusivist ideologies may be especially radical in positioning themselves against tolerant social orders and alternative sources of authority.

At the same time, the protective effect of religious practice (attendance) was stronger where religious freedom was higher. That is, in contexts where people can freely practice or

not practice religion, ordinary religious participation appears particularly likely to coincide with lower justification of terrorism – probably because it connects individuals to communities that emphasize prosocial norms and non-violent conflict resolution.

Finally, the random-slope model showed that allowing key predictors (e.g., democratic importance, importance of God, masculinity norms, media use, education, income) to vary across countries substantially improved model fit and explained more variance. This means that individual risk and protective factors for cognitive radicalization could not be treated as universal constants. Rather, they form part of context-dependent “puzzle pieces” (Hafez & Mullins, 2015), which combine differently across political, cultural, and religious systems. Still, factors such as democratic orientations, importance of god, information consumption, gender, age, and education showed remarkably stable protective patterns, even though the slopes were not significantly different from zero in every country. Basic needs insecurity, preference for non-democratic governments, and online activism, on the other hand, were found to be significantly associated with justification of terrorism in many – but again not all – countries.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be pointed out – and could serve as inspiration for future research. First, our outcome measure captures a specific form of cognitive radicalization – willingness to justify terrorism – based on a single item and dichotomization. While this aligns with prior work and addresses strong skewness, it cannot capture nuances across different types or degrees of political violence, nor does it directly measure behavior.

Second, although WVS7 offers broad cross-national coverage, not all constructs central to radicalization research (e.g., detailed peer networks, specific extremist exposures) could be included, and some constructs relied on single items. Future work could combine large-scale surveys with in-depth country studies, experimental designs, or administrative and digital trace data to triangulate mechanisms.

Third, even though the countries included in this analysis range from lower-middle to high income countries as classified by the world bank (World Bank, 2025), no low-income countries are included in the analysis. While the findings could thus generalize to a large part of the world's population, they might not generalize to people living in low-income countries.

Fourth, some of the computed indices did not provide strong reliability estimates in the WVS data. Future, cross-cultural research could therefore benefit from developing and using more reliable indices to measure, for instance, honor-based masculinity, human flourishing, and epistemic beliefs about science. Even though we found some effects of these predictors in the WVS dataset, effect sizes could have been attenuated by lower reliabilities. Thus, future research could investigate the effects of these constructs on justification for terrorism to yield better effect size estimates. The WVS additionally could benefit from using more psychometrically established scales. We additionally invite testing some of the exploratory and surprising findings, e.g., regarding the radicalizing impact of higher income in other datasets in a confirmatory way.

Finally, we modeled countries as the main contexts of interest, but meaningful variation also exists within countries – across regions, communities, and online subcultures. Nested designs that capture local ecologies and digital spaces would further refine our understanding of how risk and protective factors are embedded in everyday environments.

Implications for Theory, Prevention, and Policy

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present findings speak to several debates in the radicalization literature. First, they reinforce the risk–protective factor framework (Farrington et al., 2012; Wolfowicz et al., 2020) by showing that material deprivation, honor-based masculinity, online activism, and authoritarian preferences are robust risk factors, while social belonging, perceived life control, democratic orientations, religious practice, and conventional activism are protective – across a genuinely global sample.

Second, they support social-developmental and educational displacement perspectives by highlighting the role of exclusion, misrecognition, and alternative epistemic authorities. People who lack basic security and feel little control over their lives are more willing to legitimate political violence, especially when their orientation to truth and authority is exclusivist. Interventions that reinforce inclusive schooling, equal access to liberties, and credible, non-violent role models in both offline and online spaces are therefore promising.

Third, the findings underscore that strengthening democratic norms and institutions is not only a political ideal but also a violence-prevention strategy. Citizens who value democracy and endorse democratic systems are markedly less likely to accept terrorism. Efforts to improve institutional responsiveness, transparency, and participation may thus indirectly reduce cognitive radicalization.

Fourth, the results regarding individual strain as well as collective human development point to the potential effectiveness of local as well as global development initiatives. The protective association of the HDI regarding cognitive radicalization shows that human-development initiatives might be contributing to violence prevention across the globe. The risk-relevant association between a lack of basic necessities and cognitive radicalization might point to the feasibility of local development programs for violence prevention. Strengthening such initiatives could therefore be a way to build not only more affluent and healthier, but more peaceful societies. Abolishing human-development initiatives might conversely lead to more cognitive radicalization and violence in less developed countries, echoing calls of NGOs to not abort human development initiatives (e.g., Amnesty International, 2025).

At the same time, the context-dependence of effects cautions against “one-size-fits-all” prevention programs. Religious fundamentalism, media use, and even religiosity itself have different implications in different institutional environments. Effective policy requires tailoring interventions to local constellations of risk and protection, rather than importing models developed in WEIRD settings.

Conclusion

Across more than 50 countries, the present study demonstrates that support for terrorism is shaped by a constellation of material, psychosocial, ideological, and institutional factors. In moving beyond WEIRD samples and single-level explanations, our findings support a context-sensitive science of radicalization that treats risk and protective factors as embedded in broader social and political ecologies. Efforts to prevent political violence will be most effective when they simultaneously reduce material and status-related strains, bolster inclusive and democratic institutions, and attend to the specific configurations of risk and protection that characterize different societies.

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Table 1.*Justification of terrorism per country.*

Countr y	Terrorism not Justified	Terrorism Justified	Missing
AND	956	44	4
ARG	799	183	21
ARM	1123	81	19
AUS	1647	142	24
BGD	747	453	0
BOL	1360	582	125
BRA	1469	219	74
CAN	3016	1002	0
CHL	698	286	16
CHN	2623	397	16
COL	1234	286	0
CYP	431	61	508
CZE	835	360	5
DEU	1459	66	3
ECU	864	321	15
EGY	1070	66	64
GBR	2347	241	21
GRC	1102	89	9
GTM	823	383	23
HKG	1333	729	13
IDN	2450	723	27
IND	1145	458	89
IRN	1229	233	37
IRQ	644	556	0
JOR	1048	148	7
JPN	1209	101	43
KAZ	871	337	68
KEN	644	581	41
KGZ	1002	146	52
KOR	528	717	0
LBN	761	434	5
LBY	1083	47	66
MAC	462	555	6
MAR	721	479	0
MDV	967	70	2
MEX	1063	643	35
MMR	958	241	1
MNG	618	1020	0
MYS	587	726	0

Table 1.*Justification of terrorism per country.*

Countr y	Terrorism not Justified	Terrorism Justified	Missing
NGA	913	323	1
NIC	918	282	0
NIR	380	64	3
NLD	1794	175	176
NZL	933	85	39
PAK	1502	435	58
PER	1066	286	48
PHL	310	889	1
PRI	1020	92	15
ROU	1089	129	39
RUS	1315	449	46
SGP	1757	244	11
SRB	700	298	48
SVK	842	339	19
THA	1005	481	14
TJK	293	907	0
TUN	993	209	6
TWN	1004	219	0
UKR	868	371	50
URY	842	141	17
USA	2104	466	26
UZB	957	248	45
VEN	788	402	0
VNM	424	776	0
ZWE	995	216	4

Table 2.
Country-level predictors included in the final model

Country	Civil Liberties	Freedom of Religion	Media Balance	Media Freedom	Polarization	Political Violence	Mobilization Autocracy	Equal Gender Liberties	Freedom from Physical Violence	Social Media for violent mobilization	GDP	HDI	Income Inequality	Income (World Bank)
AND	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-2.78	0.75	-1.10	High
ARG	0.60	1.00	0.10	0.49	1.22	-0.63	-0.43	1.32	0.55	0.24	0.26	0.54	-0.16	Upper-middle
ARM	1.58	0.01	0.48	-0.02	0.88	0.31	1.10	-0.06	0.85	-0.25	-1.51	0.02	-1.02	Upper-middle
AUS	0.60	1.01	1.22	1.23	-1.12	-0.78	-1.58	1.68	0.96	0.03	0.38	1.47	-0.63	High
BGD	-0.16	0.20	-0.08	-0.83	0.86	1.76	0.74	-1.54	-1.59	-1.69	0.29	-1.04	1.34	Lower-Middle
BOL	0.68	0.95	0.11	-0.41	0.78	0.13	0.65	-0.11	0.76	0.05	-1.03	-0.78	0.33	Lower-Middle
BRA	-0.31	0.45	0.17	0.22	0.77	1.20	0.69	0.78	0.06	-0.56	0.89	-0.14	2.25	Upper-Middle
CAN	0.25	0.76	0.63	1.43	-1.13	-1.07	-1.25	1.21	0.98	0.13	0.59	1.32	-0.92	High
CHL	0.51	0.88	0.90	1.14	-1.23	-0.59	-1.31	-0.25	0.91	0.77	-0.15	0.70	1.57	High
CHN	-2.13	-2.31	-2.34	-1.78	-0.75	-0.42	1.14	-0.55	-0.73	-0.64	2.02	0.09	0.72	High
COL	-0.51	1.08	0.14	0.75	0.45	1.05	-0.18	-0.40	0.12	-0.74	0.10	-0.19	2.28	Upper-Middle
CYP	1.23	0.35	1.11	0.71	-0.21	-0.90	-1.57	1.13	1.01	1.45	-1.55	1.06	-1.00	High
CZE	1.36	0.54	0.58	0.36	-0.48	-1.80	-0.07	1.22	1.00	1.21	-0.21	1.01	-1.48	High
DEU	2.49	0.80	1.63	1.35	-0.81	-0.31	-0.75	1.15	1.02	-0.12	1.07	1.50	-0.89	High
ECU	0.03	0.93	0.05	-0.52	0.82	-0.83	-0.79	0.54	0.83	0.72	-0.62	-0.27	0.75	Upper-Middle
EGY	-0.25	-1.16	-1.22	-1.61	0.41	0.77	-0.20	-0.69	-2.12	0.98	0.46	-0.39	-0.61	Lower-Middle
GBR	0.29	0.42	0.88	1.05	-0.20	-0.63	-1.23	0.88	0.74	-0.21	0.84	1.35	-0.84	High
GRC	1.05	0.15	0.53	0.49	-0.62	0.60	-1.09	1.31	0.95	0.23	-0.40	0.97	-0.62	High
GTM	-1.93	0.44	0.12	0.08	-0.39	0.15	-1.43	-0.85	0.03	1.05	-0.70	-1.25	1.00	Upper-Middle
HKG	0.33	0.13	0.47	0.52	0.59	-0.28	0.65	0.69	0.94	-0.92	—	—	—	—
IDN	0.18	-0.11	0.80	0.44	0.93	1.04	0.89	-0.73	0.39	-0.70	0.86	-0.66	-0.02	Upper-Middle
IND	-1.09	-0.66	-0.58	-0.67	0.95	0.93	-0.63	-0.93	-0.18	-1.04	1.50	-1.18	1.70	Lower-Middle
IRN	-1.94	-2.09	-1.78	-1.40	0.84	0.04	1.18	-2.14	-1.57	-0.63	0.32	-0.06	0.40	Upper-Middle
IRQ	-0.35	-0.02	-0.90	-0.26	1.05	2.00	0.60	-2.48	-1.51	-3.42	-0.16	-0.83	0.17	Upper-Middle
JOR	-0.02	-0.32	0.33	-1.00	-0.61	-0.36	0.36	-0.10	0.14	0.61	-1.09	-0.41	0.01	Lower-Middle

Table 2.
Country-level predictors included in the final model

Country	Civil Liberties	Freedom of Religion	Media Balance	Media Freedom	Polarization	Political Violence	Mobilization Autocracy	Equal Gender Liberties	Freedom from Physical Violence	Social Media for violent mobilization	GDP	HDI	Income Inequality	Income (World Bank)
JPN	1.24	1.19	0.39	0.62	-1.32	-1.33	-0.41	-0.47	0.98	2.12	1.11	1.19	-0.79	High
KAZ	0.33	-1.24	-1.73	-1.01	-0.34	0.32	0.66	0.23	-0.54	1.39	-0.07	0.28	-1.07	Upper-Middle
KEN	0.29	0.91	1.26	0.42	-0.41	0.66	-0.71	0.50	-0.60	0.76	-0.53	-1.51	1.79	Lower-Middle
KGZ	0.73	0.17	-0.14	-0.09	0.05	-0.70	-0.18	-0.39	-0.14	0.82	-1.61	-0.69	-0.99	Lower-Middle
KOR	1.22	1.27	1.54	1.04	0.14	-0.88	0.75	0.48	0.98	-0.16	0.67	1.28	-0.87	High
LBN	-0.29	0.45	0.19	-0.19	0.39	0.57	0.38	-0.56	0.20	-0.22	-1.32	-0.44	-0.43	Lower-Middle
LBY	-1.47	-1.92	-0.36	0.04	2.02	2.12	1.28	-1.67	-1.99	-1.69	-1.15	-0.47	—	Upper-Middle
MAR	0.49	-1.40	-0.21	-0.78	-0.82	-0.60	0.69	-1.14	0.24	0.80	-0.45	-0.81	0.22	Lower-Middle
MDV	1.00	-2.52	0.08	0.22	0.17	-0.31	-1.08	-0.59	0.61	-0.31	-2.37	-0.33	0.52	Upper-Middle
MEX	-1.06	0.31	0.56	0.00	-0.31	0.67	0.24	-0.63	-0.60	-0.32	0.70	-0.20	0.74	Upper-Middle
MMR	-2.25	-0.96	-0.20	0.20	0.25	0.74	0.80	-1.72	-0.71	-0.45	-0.54	-1.54	-0.74	Lower-Middle
MNG	1.81	0.62	0.03	0.94	-0.15	-0.73	-1.36	0.76	0.85	1.66	-1.48	-0.49	-0.55	Upper-Middle
MYS	-0.82	-0.85	-1.35	-0.96	0.82	-0.05	0.51	-0.85	0.16	0.89	0.18	0.16	0.08	Upper-Middle
NGA	0.41	0.28	0.84	0.41	-1.38	1.84	0.72	-0.96	-1.49	0.94	0.26	-1.98	-0.62	Lower-Middle
NIC	-1.40	-0.33	-0.73	-1.58	1.11	1.48	1.99	-0.81	-1.91	-1.54	-1.51	-0.88	1.29	Lower-Middle
NLD	1.51	1.07	1.14	1.27	-0.87	-0.24	-0.89	1.35	1.02	-1.05	0.27	1.44	-1.43	High
NZL	1.07	1.31	1.10	1.27	-2.08	-0.58	-1.23	1.21	1.06	1.58	-0.61	1.34	-0.68	High
PAK	-1.54	-1.36	0.69	-0.16	-0.84	0.83	-0.63	-0.99	-0.93	-0.32	0.30	-2.13	0.47	Lower-Middle
PER	-0.69	0.98	0.67	0.91	0.46	-0.85	-0.79	-1.12	0.79	0.43	-0.21	-0.17	0.75	Upper-Middle
PHL	-0.66	-0.12	1.09	-0.06	-0.82	-0.07	-0.34	0.28	-1.14	-0.46	0.17	-0.81	-0.05	Lower-Middle
ROU	0.04	0.58	0.16	0.27	-0.10	-1.77	-1.73	1.07	0.91	0.52	-0.01	0.39	-0.14	High
RUS	-0.13	-0.73	-1.31	-1.30	0.46	0.55	0.91	0.01	-1.17	-0.66	1.12	0.25	-0.61	High
SGP	0.12	0.00	-0.16	-0.57	-1.19	-1.90	-1.01	0.66	0.88	2.23	-0.01	1.41	0.22	High

Table 2.
Country-level predictors included in the final model

Country	Civil Liberties	Freedom Religion	Media Balance	Media Freedom	Polarization	Political Violence	Mobilization Autocracy	Equal Gender Liberties	Freedom from Physical Violence	Social Media for violent mobilization	GDP	HDI	Income Inequality	Income (World Bank)
SRB	0.54	0.47	-0.92	-1.30	-0.29	0.19	0.81	0.16	0.84	0.40	-0.84	0.20	-1.21	Upper-Middle
SVK	0.45	0.30	0.39	0.97	-0.38	-1.41	-0.14	0.79	0.82	1.11	-0.69	0.65	-1.62	High
THA	-1.37	0.16	-0.43	-2.04	0.75	0.31	0.11	0.44	-1.64	-0.42	0.37	0.14	-0.27	Upper-Middle
TJK	-0.52	-2.29	-2.55	-1.54	-1.17	-0.30	1.02	-1.96	-1.72	1.18	-1.60	-0.96	-0.47	Lower-Middle
TUN	0.66	-0.24	0.66	0.71	0.04	-0.12	0.75	0.20	0.23	-1.36	-0.88	-0.48	-0.13	Lower-Middle
TUR	-0.79	-1.13	-1.06	-1.25	2.84	1.24	2.42	-0.57	-1.22	-0.46	0.70	0.49	0.56	Upper-Middle
TWN	0.72	1.20	0.66	0.89	-1.34	-1.28	-0.23	0.90	1.01	0.18	—	—	—	High
UKR	-0.29	-0.27	0.49	0.21	0.85	1.75	0.14	0.97	-0.01	-1.32	0.00	-0.10	-1.23	Upper-Middle
URY	0.89	1.00	0.47	0.99	-2.23	-2.05	-1.65	0.22	0.98	1.35	-1.10	0.46	-0.09	High
USA	-0.20	1.29	0.52	1.39	0.60	-0.02	-0.32	1.35	0.94	-0.36	1.90	1.18	0.05	High
UZB	-0.27	-0.89	-2.15	-1.31	-1.41	-1.64	-0.67	-0.46	-0.63	1.10	-0.47	-0.49	—	Lower-Middle
VEN	0.38	-0.17	-0.77	-1.80	1.38	1.26	0.04	0.91	-1.77	-1.13	—	-0.76	-0.33	—
VNM	0.32	-1.29	-2.53	-1.39	-0.88	-0.87	0.42	0.16	-0.39	1.66	0.26	-0.26	-0.34	Lower-Middle
ZWE	0.68	0.71	-0.52	-0.81	1.71	0.61	1.90	-1.15	-2.20	-0.05	-1.47	-1.75	3.30	High

Note. Income is defined by the World Bank formula for classifying countries in low, middle, and high-income countries (World Bank, 2025).

Table 3*Multilevel logistic regression predicting justification of terrorism*

Predictor	Baseline Model	Individual Predictors	Level-2 Predictors (RQ 5)	Interactions and Random Slopes (RQ 6)
Intercept	−0.69 (0.12)	−1.06 (0.12)	−1.01 (0.11)	−0.75 (0.12)
Demographics / structural				
Age	−0.01 (0.001)	−0.01 (0.001)	−0.01 (0.001)	−0.01 (0.001)
Gender	−0.12 (0.02)	−0.10 (0.02)	−0.09 (0.02)	−0.10 (0.02)
Immigration	−0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.02)
Education	−0.16 (0.01)	−0.08 (0.01)	−0.10 (0.01)	−0.08 (0.03)
Income	0.08 (0.01)	0.14 (0.01)	0.13 (0.01)	0.10 (0.02)
Material strain, insecurity, and social integration (RQ 2)				
Social belonging	—	−0.08 (0.01)	−0.08 (0.01)	−0.10 (0.03)
Interpersonal distrust	—	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)
Violence-related insecurity	—	−0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Basic needs insecurity	—	0.21 (0.01)	0.19 (0.01)	0.16 (0.01)
Worry about crime/war/terror	—	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
Freedom of choice/control	—	−0.10 (0.01)	−0.10 (0.01)	−0.10 (0.01)
Religiosity and epistemic worldviews (RQ 3)				
Faith over science	—	0.05 (0.01)	0.05 (0.01)	0.04 (0.02)
Science is good for society	—	−0.10 (0.01)	−0.09 (0.01)	−0.11 (0.03)
Importance of God	—	−0.16 (0.01)	−0.17 (0.02)	−0.29 (0.05)
Religious fundamentalism	—	0.03 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Religious attendance	—	−0.04 (0.01)	−0.04 (0.01)	−0.03 (0.01)
Democratic vs. authoritarian orientations (RQ 4)				
Importance of democracy	—	−0.26 (0.01)	−0.20 (0.02)	−0.21 (0.03)
Attitude: democracy	—	−0.21 (0.01)	−0.22 (0.01)	−0.20 (0.03)
Attitude: strong leader	—	0.03 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.02 (0.03)
Attitude: military rule	—	0.13 (0.01)	0.12 (0.01)	0.11 (0.03)
Attitude: religious rule	—	0.16 (0.01)	0.15 (0.01)	0.17 (0.03)
Masculinity, activism, flourishing, media use				
Honor-based masculinity	—	0.04 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.05 (0.02)
Conventional civic activism	—	−0.05 (0.02)	−0.05 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)
Flourishing (well-being)	—	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)
Classic media use (TV/radio/newspaper)	—	−0.14 (0.01)	−0.14 (0.01)	−0.14 (0.02)
Internet/social media for news	—	−0.10 (0.01)	−0.10 (0.01)	−0.11 (0.02)
Online political activism	—	0.12 (0.01)	0.10 (0.02)	0.12 (0.04)
Macro-level context (country-level) (RQ 5)				

Predictor	Baseline Model	Individual Predictors	Level-2 Predictors (RQ 5)	Interactions and Random Slopes (RQ 6)
Civil liberties	—	—	−0.03 (0.15)	0.02 (0.17)
Religious freedom	—	—	0.27 (0.17)	0.16 (0.19)
Media balance	—	—	−0.32 (0.21)	−0.40 (0.24)
Media freedom	—	—	0.11 (0.22)	0.18 (0.25)
Political polarization	—	—	−0.06 (0.17)	−0.12 (0.19)
Political violence	—	—	−0.12 (0.18)	−0.17 (0.20)
Mobilization for autocracy	—	—	0.15 (0.18)	0.11 (0.20)
Gender liberties	—	—	0.05 (0.18)	0.32 (0.21)
Freedom from physical violence	—	—	−0.20 (0.20)	−0.24 (0.23)
No social media use for violent mobilization	—	—	0.17 (0.18)	0.07 (0.20)
GDP per capita	—	—	0.10 (0.13)	−0.01 (0.16)
Human Development Index (HDI)	—	—	−0.35 (0.20)	−0.51 (0.23)
Income inequality	—	—	−0.16 (0.12)	−0.19 (0.15)
Interaction Terms				
Belonging × Importance of democracy	—	—	—	−0.01 (0.01)
Belonging × Freedom of choice	—	—	—	−0.02 (0.01)
Income × Importance of democracy	—	—	—	−0.01 (0.005)
Religious fundamentalism × Religious freedom	—	—	—	0.08 (0.02)
Attitude: religious rule × Religious freedom	—	—	—	0.06 (0.03)
Honor-based masculinity × Gender equality	—	—	—	−0.00 (0.02)
Gender × Gender equality	—	—	—	−0.16 (0.02)
Classic media use × Media bias	—	—	—	−0.05 (0.03)
Classic media use × Media censorship	—	—	—	0.07 (0.03)
Internet news use × No social media for violent mobilization	—	—	—	0.02 (0.02)
Online activism × No social media for violent mobilization	—	—	—	−0.02 (0.04)
Religious attendance × Religious freedom	—	—	—	−0.05 (0.01)
Income × GDP per capita	—	—	—	0.02 (0.01)
Model fit indices				
Number of individuals (<i>N</i>)	87,848	66,888	59,758	59,758
Number of countries	64	61	53	53
AIC	86,987.50	62,152.30	56,419.20	54,240.50
BIC	87,053.20	62,416.50	56,851.10	54,996.30
ICC (adjusted) (RQ 1)	0.21	0.18	0.13	0.24

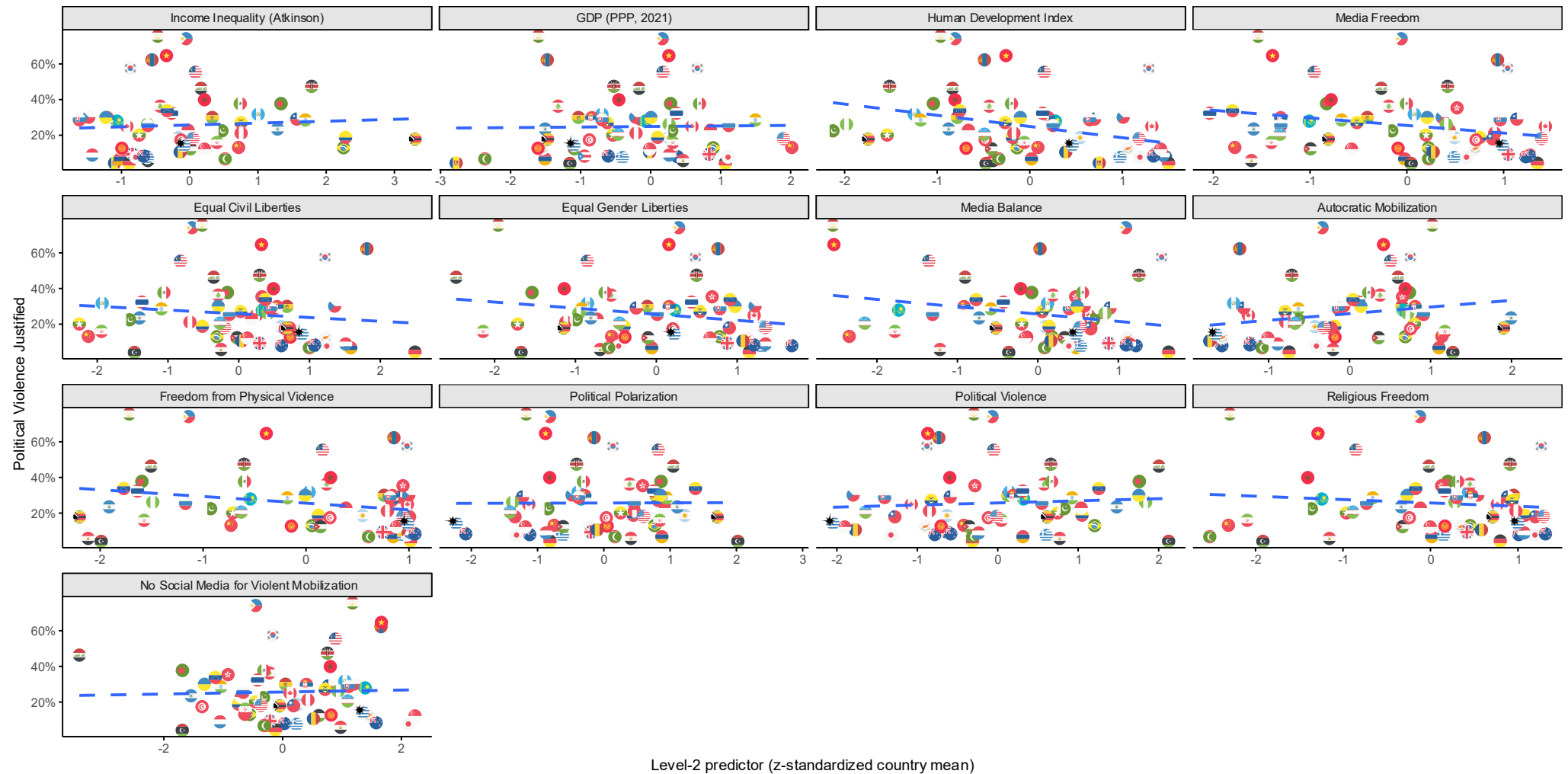
Predictor	Baseline Model	Individual Predictors	Level-2 Predictors (RQ 5)	Interactions and Random Slopes (RQ 6)
Marginal R^2	0.01	0.13	0.18	0.20
Conditional R^2	0.22	0.28	0.29	0.39

Note. Significant predictors are marked in bold. Bold RQ-mentions signify the research questions answered by including a particular set of variables – or freeing the slopes – in the analysis

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Figure 1.

Country-Level Predictors for Justification of Terrorism.



Note. This figure shows the country means of justification of terrorism on the y-axes and values for the z-standardized country-level predictors included in the final multilevel model on each x-axis.

Figure 2.
Odds ratios for cross-country random slopes.

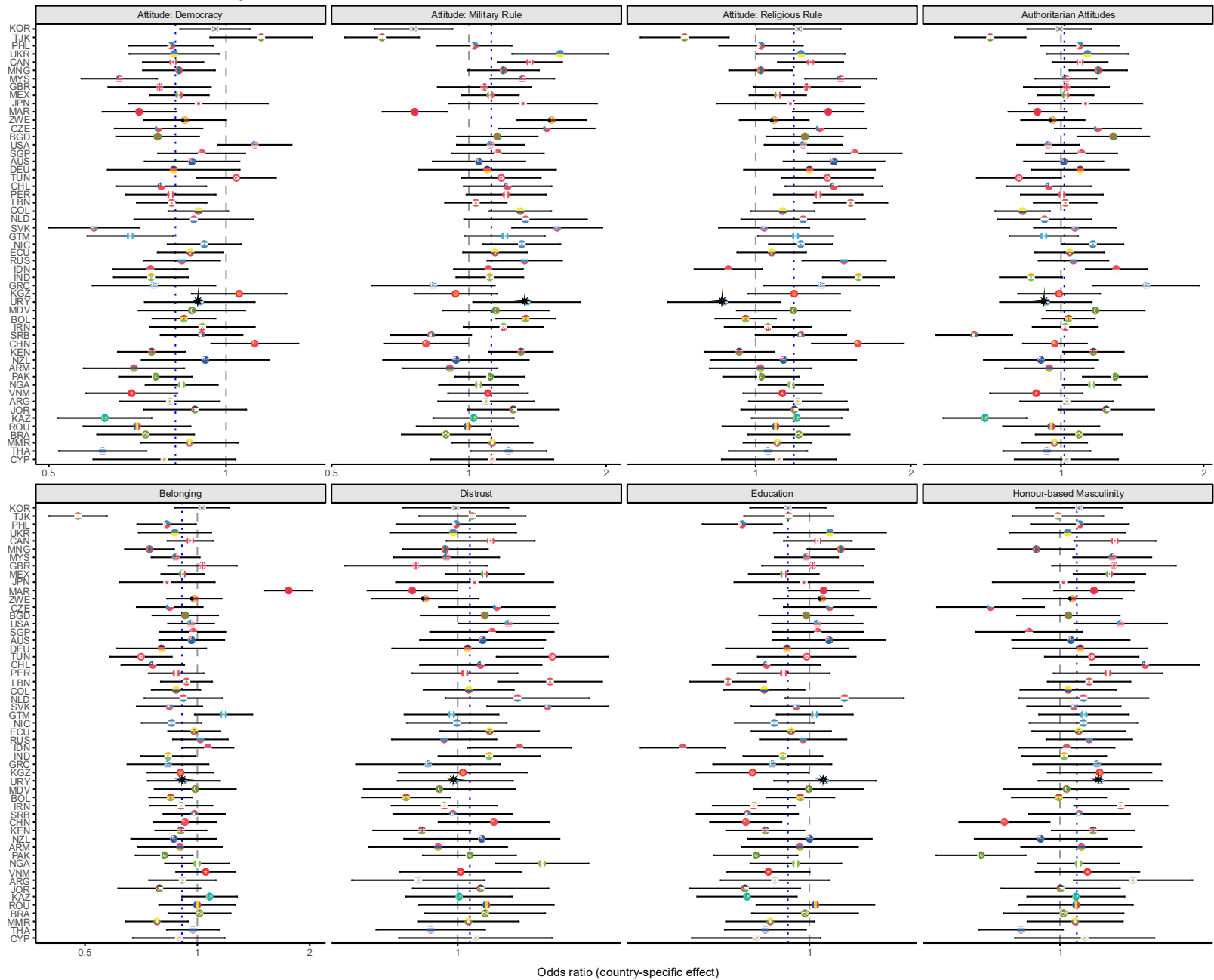


Figure 3.
Odds ratios for cross-country random slopes.

