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Analytical Review Article

**WEAPONIZATION OF RELIGION AND RISE OF
EXTREMISM IN FRAGILE STATES**

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Abstract

The weaponization of religion has become a significant factor in the rise of extremism, particularly in fragile states facing socioeconomic decline. Political actors often exploit religious identity to mobilize support, consolidate power, and divert attention from governance failures. This article examines how economic instability, weak institutions, and social inequalities create fertile ground for religious manipulation and radicalization. It further explores the consequences for governance, social cohesion, and long-term stability.

Running title: weaponization of religion, religious extremism, fragile states

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Introduction

Fragile states are characterized by weak governance, economic instability, and social divisions. In such environments, religion—an important source of identity and meaning—can be politicized. Political leaders and non-state actors often use religious narratives to gain legitimacy, mobilize followers, and suppress opposition. This process transforms religion from a unifying force into a tool of division and conflict.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative review approach based on academic literature, policy reports, and case studies from 2015 to 2026. Sources include peer-reviewed journals, think tank analyses, and reports from international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns of religious manipulation and their socio-political impacts.

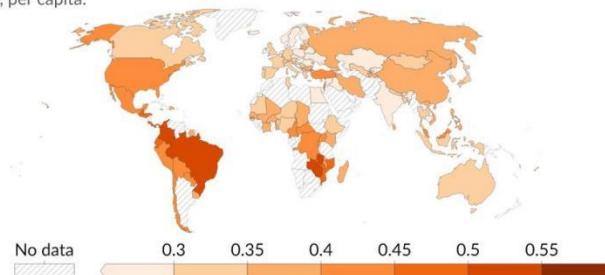
Socioeconomic Decline and Vulnerability

Economic hardship plays a central role in increasing vulnerability to extremism. High unemployment, poverty, and inequality create frustration, especially among youth. When governments fail to provide basic services, individuals may turn to alternative sources of identity and support, including religious groups.

Income inequality: Gini coefficient, 2024

Our World
in Data

The Gini coefficient measures inequality on a scale from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate higher inequality. Depending on the country and year, the data relates to income (measured after taxes and benefits) or to consumption, per capita.



Data source: World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (2025)

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Key drivers include:

- Youth unemployment and lack of opportunities
- Rising inequality and social exclusion
- Weak public service delivery
- Loss of trust in state institutions

Political Exploitation of Religious Identity

Political actors exploit religious identity in multiple ways:

- Framing political issues as religious conflicts
- Using religious symbols and rhetoric to gain legitimacy
- Labeling opponents as threats to faith or tradition
- Mobilizing mass support through sectarian narratives

This strategy simplifies complex socioeconomic issues into emotional identity-based conflicts, making populations easier to mobilize.

Pathways to Extremism

The transition from identity politics to extremism follows a gradual process:

1. Grievance due to inequality and marginalization
2. Exposure to politicized religious narratives
3. Social isolation and group identity formation
4. Acceptance of extremist ideology
5. Potential involvement in violent activities

Table: Impact on Governance and Society

Dimension	Impact of Religious Weaponization
Governance	Weakening of state authority
Social Cohesion	Increased polarization and division
Security	Rise in violence and instability
Economy	Reduced investment and growth
Institutions	Decline in trust and legitimacy

Figure: Cycle of Extremism in Fragile States

Socioeconomic Decline → Political Manipulation of Religion → Social Division
→ Radicalization → Violence & Instability → Further State Weakness

Future Prospects

Future research should explore the role of education, media literacy, and community engagement in countering extremist narratives. The impact of digital technologies on radicalization and the

effectiveness of counter-extremism strategies also require further investigation. Additionally, comparative studies across regions can provide insights into successful approaches for preventing the weaponization of religion.

Recommendations

Policymakers should focus on strengthening governance institutions, promoting inclusive political systems, and addressing socioeconomic inequalities. Investment in education and employment opportunities can reduce vulnerability to extremist recruitment. Religious leaders and community organizations should be engaged in promoting tolerance and countering extremist ideologies. International cooperation is essential to disrupt transnational extremist networks and support fragile states in building resilience.

Conclusion

The weaponization of religion in fragile states is closely linked to socioeconomic decline and weak governance. Political actors exploit religious identity to maintain power, often at the cost of social cohesion and stability. This process fuels extremism, deepens divisions, and undermines democratic development. Addressing this issue requires strengthening institutions, promoting inclusive governance, improving economic opportunities, and encouraging responsible political leadership. Without such measures, fragile states remain vulnerable to cycles of conflict and instability.



Review Typology and Reporting

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