

What is violent extremism?

Violent extremism is the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals. This includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated and communal violence.

Violent extremism

When a person's beliefs move from being relatively conventional to being radical, and they want a drastic change in society, this is known as radicalisation. This is not necessarily a bad thing and does not mean these people will become violent.

However, if a person or group decides that fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change, and then acts accordingly, this is violent extremism.

Violent extremism in Australia

Australia has enjoyed a history relatively free from violent extremism. Though the threat to the Australian community from violent extremist behaviour is small, it still exists.

Actions of violent extremists threaten not just public safety but also Australia's core values and principles, including human rights, the rule of law, democracy, equal opportunity and freedom. The Australian Government rejects all forms of violent extremism and promotes a harmonious and inclusive society.

Motivations for violent extremism

There are many different types of violent extremism. Motivations are varied and many usually relate to particular ideologies (for example, interpretations of political movements or religious beliefs), issues such as environmental or economic concerns, or ethnic or separatist causes. People can also be motivated by more than one issue.

All forms of violent extremism seek change through fear and intimidation rather than through peaceful means.

Ideological violence

The motivation for violent extremism in Australia is often political. This includes right wing or nationalist extremism which has the goal of preserving the perceived majority culture (usually white/Anglo-Saxon culture/race) at the expense of other cultures. These ideologies justify violence based on patriotism or a belief of superiority to other cultures and races.

In Australia there are a small number of extreme nationalist groups, some of which promote white supremacist beliefs. They are sometimes called hate groups because of their racist and dehumanising propaganda, which promotes anti-immigration (eg 'keep Australia white'), anti-Semitic or anti-Islam beliefs. While their views are offensive to many, their words and actions are not necessarily unlawful. Using or advocating violence to promote these or other beliefs, however, is always unlawful.

Ideological violent extremism can also be motivated by religious beliefs. In this instance the underlying motivation is also generally political, but is justified using interpretations of traditional religious texts and teachings, or following guidance from influential people here and overseas.

In Australia, acts of violence have been committed in the name of many different religions. They have often been planned by small groups or individuals inspired by overseas organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIL.

An example of an individual motivated to violent action by an interpretation of religious beliefs is Christian fundamentalist and anti-abortionist Peter James Knight, who killed one person in an attack on an abortion clinic in Melbourne in 2001.

Issue-based violence

Violent extremism dedicated to a specific issue or cause such as animal liberation, environmental activism or anti-gun control, is known as 'issue-based violent extremism'. Supporters of this type of violent extremism can include groups that are anti-government, anti-globalisation or anti-capitalist.

Activism dedicated to a specific issue can be disruptive but is often used simply to draw attention to a cause through peaceful means. This is a legitimate expression of free speech in Australia.

However, violence, threatening behaviour and/or criminal damage are sometimes advocated by people who want to take their cause a step further. People or groups that use or support violence to promote their cause are of major concern and may be acting illegally.

For example, in 2009 a group reportedly representing the Earth Liberation Front hand-delivered a threatening letter to the head of a large Australian electricity company, stating "your property will not remain safe."

Ethno-nationalist or separatist violence

The actions of groups or individuals involved in violent political or independence struggles based on race, culture or ethnic background either in Australia or overseas are often described as ethno-nationalist or separatist violent extremism.

An example of an ethno-nationalist or separatist violent extremist group is ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), a Basque separatist group seeking independence from Spain for the Basque people.

Countries such as Australia, with large culturally and ethnically diverse communities, are often directly impacted by international conflicts/civil wars.

For example, in the 1980s and 1990s Australians travelled to the former Yugoslavia, and more recently Australians have participated illegally in conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon and Somalia. Some people who have trained or fought overseas have also attempted to carry out acts of violent extremism in Australia after returning home from conflict zones.

Individuals have been arrested in Australia for intentionally raising money to assist banned international terrorist organisations involved in ethnically motivated conflicts. For example, people have been convicted for funding terrorism by raising money in Australia to support the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka.

While such conflicts can evoke strong emotions in communities in Australia and many feel compelled to help those affected, it is important to be aware of the legality of any actions taken.