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Leader-Follower Dynamics in Violent Regimes: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Social Psychology of Cumulative Radicalisation

This chapter develops a theory of the socio-psychological mechanisms that shape the feedback loops between national leadership and subnational actors who radicalise towards extreme violence and mass atrocities. Despite extensive historical and political research, the psychological and cognitive processes underlying cumulative radicalization and widespread civilian participation in state-backed violence remain underexplored. Drawing **on empirical research** in evolutionary anthropology and social psychology, we argue that top-down and bottom-up pathways to cumulative radicalization are driven less by shared ideologies than by identity fusion, a form of group alignment in which personal and group identities become one. A large body of research has shown that fusion motivates extreme forms of pro-group violence when the ingroup is perceived as threatened by a demonised outgroup. Building on this work, we propose that cumulative radicalization – expressed through support for violent leadership or direct participation in extremist acts – is most likely when both threat perception and identity fusion are high, such as among local actors living near warzones or frontlines. We consolidate existing research on the drivers of cumulative radicalisation, **discuss the findings of our empirical research of leader-follower dynamics in contexts of extreme violence**, and present our conceptual framework using examples from diverse geographic and cultural contexts. This approach aims to deepen our understanding of the psychological processes that draw civilians into escalating violence, offering insights that can inform both scholarship and prevention efforts.