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Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories

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Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories

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Abstract

In discourse about countering terrorism, the term "radicalization" is widely used, but remains poorly defined. To focus narrowly on ideological radicalization risks implying that radical beliefs are a proxy—or at least a necessary precursor—for terrorism, though we know this not to be true. Different pathways and mechanisms of terrorism involvement operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different contexts. This article explores the problems in defining radicalization and radicalism, and suggests that radicalization—and more specifically, involvement in terrorism—might best be viewed as a set of diverse processes. It goes on to review several potentially promising theories that might support further study of those processes, including social movement theory, social psychology, and conversion theory. Finally, it describes some possible frameworks for understanding *how* the processes might facilitate terrorism-related behavior.

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Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Definitions and Applications of Social Science Theories

Nearly a decade after declaring war on terrorism, it is apparent now—if it was not before—that while removing terrorists from the battlefield and disrupting terrorist plots are, and should be, high priority objectives, they are insufficient to neutralize the global threat of violent extremism. A successful effort to counter violent extremism (CVE) must attempt to stem the tide of new extremists. Assuming that a specific ideology drives that violence (which is, of course, open to some debate), has led some to focus on interrupting the "radicalization" process, referred to here as radicalization into violent extremism (RVE). Using the RVE terminology may be ill-advised, but is intended here to refer to the processes by which people come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it, and how they progress—or not—from thinking to action. Doing this successfully requires some understanding of the purveyors and the targets of violent extremism.[1]

This effort must seek to understand not only *what* people think, but *how* they come to think what they think, and, ultimately, how they progress—or not—from thinking to action. It is not a task for a single theory or discipline. Any useful framework must be able to integrate mechanisms at micro (individual) and macro (societal/cultural) levels.[2] It must account for the fact that "one size does not fit all" when it comes to creating a violent extremist.

A focus on radicalization, however, risks implying that radical beliefs are a proxy—or at least a necessary precursor—for terrorism. We know this not to be true. Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists—even those who lay claim to a "cause"—are not deeply ideological and may not "radicalize" in any traditional sense. Different pathways and mechanisms operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different contexts.[3]

Radicalizing by developing or adopting extremist beliefs that justify violence is one possible pathway into terrorism involvement, but it is certainly not the only one. Informed policies and practices to mitigate and prevent the spread of violent extremism require an understanding of these kinds of variations, not just general trends. The broader question is how people become involved, stay involved, and sometimes disengage

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from terrorism. Studying the processes of terrorism involvement is not purely an "academic" exercise; it provides a foundation for the "next wave" of global CVE efforts—those focused on prevention.

Defining the Problem of Radicalism

First, there is little discussion and even less consensus about what "radicalism" and "extremism" even mean.[4] Given that researchers and governments cannot reach consensus in defining terrorism, perhaps it should not be surprising that such a diversity of views exists in defining even more nuanced concepts related to radicalization. Although the motto of many CVE efforts has shifted away from a "War on Terrorism" to a "Battle of Ideas," the questions of which ideas, among whom, and at what level of extremism continue to be debated… or sometimes just ignored.[5] Though conventionally, the term "extreme" refers to deviations from the norm, that element alone is not a sufficient basis for defining a security threat. Yet, how we define the threat has profound implications for how we understand and address it. Again, this is not simply a topic for abstract, post-modern epistemological discourse (not that there is anything wrong with that), but a very practical problem of identifying and describing what many believe to be the most serious contemporary threat to global security.[6]

Sometimes the concepts of radicalism and terrorism become conflated. In this paper, the term *radicalization* is used to refer to the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs. The term *action pathways* (or action scripts) will refer to the process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions. Some people with radical ideas and violent justifications—perhaps even most of them—do not engage in terrorism. The best available global polling from organizations like Pew and Gallup suggest that there are tens of millions of Muslims worldwide who are sympathetic to "jihadi aspirations," though most of them do not engage in violence.[7] Conversely, some terrorists—perhaps even many of them—are not ideologues or deep believers in a nuanced, extremist doctrine. Some have only a cursory knowledge of, or commitment to, the radical ideology. They are drawn to the group and to the activity for other reasons. Ideology and action are sometimes connected, but not always. We need to understand the distinctions between them.

Little attention has been given in the scholarly or policy literature to defining criteria for which extremist ideologies pose a threat to national or global security, or whether extremist ideologies matter in the absence of violent actions. A 2009 U.S. Presidential Task Force on Confronting the

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Ideology of Radical Extremism even suggests the administration *expand* its focus from violent to nonviolent extremism.[8] Perhaps it is important to bring out into the open the distinctions among radical extremist ideologies so they can be examined in light of what is known, and guide what needs to be known, about the evolution from radicalization to violent extremism.

Even ignoring the myriad violent ideologies of the world and limiting the focus only to ideologies of militant Islamism, there is no clear line to be drawn.[9] Jordan and Boix suggest several defining elements for Islamist ideologies that might pose a security concern, specifically those that are segregationist or anti-democracy, blame the West for all of Islam's problems, and may support (directly or indirectly) or condone acts of terrorism.[10] That seems to be a reasonable starting point—at least for Western democratic countries. Neuman (2010), drawing in part from *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought*, goes on to say:

> "Extremism can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society's core values and principles. In the context of liberal democracies this could be applied to any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights. The term can also be used to describe the methods through which political actors attempt to realise their aims, that is, by using means that 'show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others.'"[11]

An even more fundamental issue embedded, but often not discussed, in debate over "where to draw the line," is whether—and the extent to which—a distinction exists between the core doctrine of Islam and the interpretations and distortions of Islamic teachings by militant violent extremists. Despite reassurances from U.S. Presidents and others to the contrary, many persons in Islamic and other countries continue to believe the West is at war with Islam, not just with the violent extremists or their ideologies. When countries cannot delineate which specific ideas they oppose, their reassurances lack credibility.

Some have attempted to articulate a distinction between *Islam* and *Islamism*, explaining that *Islam* is a religion that conventionally—at least in modern practice—does not overtly encourage hatred of non-Muslims and neither mandates nor justifies killing of civilian non-combatants, but that *Islamism* (or some other variant on this ideological term), refers not to a religion, but to a totalitarian political ideology driven by a strong anti-Western and anti-democratic sentiment whose goal is "conquest of the

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world by all means."[12] The argument is that militant leaders—particularly since the late 1980s—have been able to use Islam (the religion) very effectively as a platform or vehicle to transport and deliver this extremist ideology. As evidence of this distinction, they point to the fact that most adherents of the religion do not subscribe to the violent ideology (and certainly do not behave violently), and that many proponents of the militant ideology are not particularly "religious" or pious.

A contrasting view—articulated recently, for example, in Robert Spencer's 2008 book *Stealth Jihad*—is that core Islamic texts and teachings mandate subjugation of and warfare against non-Muslims (unbelievers), and advocate for *Sharia* law to be globally imposed as the only legitimate source of social and political authority.[13] Accordingly, he argues, there is no such thing as "moderate Islam." In a 2008 interview, Spencer made that assertion in the following way:

> "Ibn Warraq's observation that there are moderate Muslims, but no moderate Islam, is absolutely true in light of the fact that there is no orthodox sect of Islam and no school of Islamic jurisprudence that does not teach the necessity to work toward the political dominance of Islamic law and the subjugation of unbelievers under that law."[14]

Proponents of this position acknowledge that many Muslims—particularly American Muslims—do not adhere to those tenets in practice, but maintain that these anti-democratic principles are precisely what the doctrine commands. They see no distinction between the separatist, anti-democratic, violence-inciting doctrine of those labeled as "violent extremists" and the core doctrine of Islam. They believe that their arguments cannot be openly discussed without their being accused of bigotry and labeled as *Islamophobes*, and that their position is easily dismissed by most of the American public because others are uninformed about Islamic doctrine.

There are profoundly different strategic and tactical implications, however, for whether we identify the religion, its holy text, or a narrower ideology as the core threat to global security.[15] These divergent views need to be discussed openly, not with the aim of determining a winner and loser, but to clarify security-related policy objectives. There may be many reasons to debate interpretations of religious doctrines, but governments and organizations responsible for national security should make a concerted effort to define and circumscribe "radicalism" or "extremism" primarily as it relates to strategic outcomes. It is important to identify *what* we are trying to counter before launching a plan to defeat it.

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Defining the Problem of Radicalization

Second, just as we struggle with the boundaries of radicalism, we face a similarly complex challenge in operationalizing the concept of "radicalization." As we noted at the outset, the term "radicalization" has many meanings, and while it may not necessarily be the most useful term, it remains popular.[16] Veldhuis and Staun from the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, discuss the absence of clear and universally accepted definitions:

> "Although radicalisation has increasingly been subjected to scientific studies, a universally accepted definition of the concept is still to be developed. Nevertheless, faced with pressure to tackle radicalisation, policy makers have developed a few definitions. Definitions of radicalisation most often centre around two different foci: (1) on violent radicalisation, where emphasis is put on the active pursuit or acceptance of the use of violence to attain the stated goal, and (2) on a broader sense of radicalisation, where emphasis is placed on the active pursuit or acceptance of far-reaching changes in society, which may or may not constitute a danger to democracy and may or may not involve the threat of or use of violence to attain the stated goals."[17]

Several state intelligence and security services have "working definitions" for radicalization and its related constructs. For example, the Dutch Security Service (AIVD) defines radicalization as:

> "Growing readiness to pursue and/or support—if necessary by undemocratic means—far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a threat to, the democratic order."[18]

The Danish Intelligence Service (PET) focuses on "violent radicalization," defining it as:

> "A process by which a person to an increasing extent accepts the use of undemocratic or violent means, including terrorism, in an attempt to reach a specific political/ideological objective."[19]

The U.K.'s Home Office, in its CONTEST counterterrorism strategy, refers to radicalization simply as:

> "The process by which people come to support terrorism and violent extremism and, in some cases, then to join terrorist groups."[20]

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McCauley and Moskalenko focus more on its mechanisms and on group dynamics in defining radicalization as:

> "Increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup."[21]

Wilner and Dubouloz, in a discussion of how homegrown extremism often follows a process of "transformative learning" suggest that:

> "Radicalization is a personal process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence. It is both a mental and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour."[22]

Stevens and Neuman in their report on "online radicalization," say the following about the definition:

> "Most of the definitions currently in circulation describe radicalisation as the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims. Some authors refer to 'violent radicalisation' in order to emphasise the violent outcome and distinguish the process from non-violent forms of 'radical' thinking."[23]

Most recently, Crossett and Spitaletta attempted a broadly reaching review of psychological and sociological concepts in radicalization. They define radicalization as:

> "The process by which an individual, group, or mass of people undergo a transformation from participating in the political process via legal means to the use or support of violence for political purposes (radicalism)."[24]

A Side Note on Recruitment

If radicalization refers to some kind of process of change, there are some who argue that process is often intentionally and systematically facilitated or directed by others. Those facilitators are sometimes regarded as recruiters, and the facilitation itself is known as recruitment. Recruitment efforts can be a part of the RVE process, though not all who are radical-

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ized are recruited. Some debate exists among contemporary scholars, however, about the nature and extent of terrorist recruitment, at least as it relates to militant jihadist-Salafism. Marc Sageman, for example, has argued that there is no recruitment *per se* to armed jihad or to al-Qaida. He believes that "enlistment" (because people want to join) is the mechanism by which new militants emerge. He reports having data to show that nearly 90% "join the jihad" through friendship and kinship. While it seems reasonable to assert that traditional recruitment—as the military does with a dedicated budget and personnel—may not be prominent, it seems nearly incontrovertible that Islamist militants seek new supporters, activists, and members and that they engage in active efforts to influence others to adopt their point of view. That is arguably just a broader conceptualization of recruitment. If true, perhaps some of the contested differences really lie in *how* they do it rather than *whether* they do it. The issues cannot be resolved here, but the notion of recruitment is raised both to distinguish it from radicalization and to suggest—as a policy matter—that there may be some value to considering a broader, rather than a narrower, definition of recruitment as it relates to violent extremism.

Radicalization as a Process

The professional literature on radicalization, though rather limited, has primarily concerned itself with the question of why (and to a lesser extent, how) someone comes to adopt beliefs and behaviors that support his or her engagement in subversive and terrorist activity, particularly violence toward civilian noncombatants. Since the late 1960s, the academic research community has attempted to find answers to this question by analyzing terrorist activity at different levels: Individual, Group, Network, Organization, Mass Movement, Socio-cultural context, and International/ Interstate contexts.

Early efforts tended predominantly to focus on the individual level, assuming that the aberrant behavior so prominently associated with the dramatic consequences of terrorism must reflect some mental or personality abnormality. This line of thinking prompted some clinical explanations for terrorism and a multitude of attempts to identify a unique terrorist profile. Forty years of terrorism research, however, has firmly debunked the notion that only "crazy" people engage in terrorism and has yet to reveal a meaningful, stable, terrorist profile.[25] Fortunately, with very few exceptions, most contemporary social scientists studying terrorism have moved past these early, naïve assumptions. They have

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realized terrorism is most usefully viewed not as a "condition," but as a dynamic "process." The nature of that process, however, remains poorly understood.

This review begins with the assumption that many pathways into and through radicalization exist, and each pathway is itself affected by a variety of factors. Within this "developmental" or "pathway" approach, radicalization is viewed not as "the product of a single decision but the end result of a dialectical process that gradually pushes an individual toward a commitment to violence over time."[26]

Prior research and analysis supports the general proposition that no single pathway or explanatory theory exists that would apply to all types of groups or to all individuals.[27] Walter Laqueur has said of terrorism that the quest for a "general theory" is misguided because: "Many terrorisms exist, and their character has changed over time and from country to country."[28] This seems to be equally true for the radicalization process itself. Several efforts have been made, however, to articulate a general sequence of stages, events, or issues that might apply across and within group types. A central guiding question in these efforts seems to be: how do people come to adopt violent extremist ideologies (radicalize), translate them—or not—into justifications or imperatives to use terrorist violence, and choose (or choose not) to engage in violent and subversive activity in service of those ideologies?

To be clear, most of what has been written so far about "radicalization" into violent extremist ideologies (particularly those that support terrorism) is conceptual, rather than empirical.[29] While the exact mechanisms and sequences of these changes is a matter of some debate, it is certainly clear that different pathways and mechanisms operate in different ways for different people. Operationally, it seems, with a more nuanced understanding of how this process operates both between and within groups, we may be able to develop more informed policies and practices to mitigate and prevent the propagation of violent extremism.

In the following sections, we will review briefly (a) the possible utility of social science theories for understanding the radicalization process and the social-cognitive mechanisms by which they might facilitate violent action, (b) recent (post-9/11) conceptual models of the radicalization process, and (c) recent (post-9/11) empirical studies of radicalization. This review is offered with the understanding that each model remains underdeveloped: none of them yet has a very firm social-scientific basis as an established "cause" of terrorism, and few of them have been subjected to any rigorous scientific or systematic inquiry. The objective is simply to

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aggregate existing knowledge and stimulate new ideas that might lead us to ask better questions about the RVE process.

Potentially Promising Theories That Might Support Further Study of the Radicalization Process

Theory can serve as an azimuth for exploring complex questions. There are many possible theoretical-analytic frameworks that might be applied to the radicalization process. About such processes, Cable, Walsh, and Warland incisively note:

> "Rather than seeking some single model of activist recruitment and commitment, consisting of structural and/or social psychological variables,...analysts should assume that there are multiple models and then get on with the more useful work of specifying the conditions under which one or another is more appropriate."[30]

There is significant practical utility to this approach. Taking this further, we can state that theory can—and arguably should—provide a foundation for systematic inquiry and even for the development of conceptual models.[31] Though the relevance of theory is often neglected or explicitly rejected in applied social/behavioral research, as social psychologist Kurt Lewin famously said, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."[32]

Crossett and Spitaletta claim: "There are sixteen theories that have been proposed to explain the underlying cause of radicalization," and proceed to summarize each in their report.[33] This section is much less ambitious. It will review only three theoretical frameworks—social movement theory, social psychology (broadly), and conversion theory (roughly corresponding to mass-, group- and individual-level processes)—with the aim of exploring how each might contribute to asking better questions about radicalization, and to illuminating variations as well as common patterns in the process.

Social Movement Theory

One of the most promising theoretical frameworks applied to understanding radicalization processes and violent extremism is Social Movement Theory (SMT).[34] Zald and McCarthy define a *social movement* as:

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> "A set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society."[35]

Social movement theory began in the 1940s with the idea that the movements arose from irrational processes of collective behavior occurring under strained environmental conditions (what sociologists would call "Strain Theory"), producing a mass sentiment of discontent. Individuals would "join" a movement because they passively succumbed to these overwhelming social forces.

Contemporary SMT theories, though, have revealed that more rational and strategic processes are operating. SMT researchers in the 1980s and 1990s discerned that the primary task of any organization or movement is to maintain its own survival. This requires that adherents/members collect and maintain a body of supporters. Human losses through attrition must be replenished, and new members must be added for the movement to grow. Growth is necessary to expand the movement's influence and capacity. Klandermans and Oegema suggest that to survive and sustain itself, any Social Movement must attend to the following tasks:

- Forming mobilization potential
- Forming and motivating recruitment networks
- Arousing motivation to participate
- Removing barriers to participation[36]

SMT theorists have also found when members of the movement look to recruit others, they operate as "rational prospectors."[37] They want to be efficient and effective, so they seek to identify those most likely to agree to act, if asked, and to act effectively to further the cause. They "conceive of the recruitment process as having two stages: (1) rational prospectors use information to find likely targets; and (2) after locating them, recruiters offer information on participatory opportunities and deploy inducements to persuade recruits to say 'yes.'"[38] The strength of socials bonds and relationships are central to both tasks, and understanding relationships among potential prospects is, therefore, critical to understanding recruitment networks.

SMT's focus has changed over the past half-century, but the two most prominent contemporary influences are *New Social Movement (NSM)* Theory, which focuses more on macro/structural processes, and *Resource*

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Mobilization (RM) Theory, which focuses more on contextual processes like group dynamics.

Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen of the Danish Institute for International Studies suggests a third school of SMT thought which may be promising, *Framing Theory*.[39] Rooted in constructivist assumptions, Framing Theory focuses on how movements and social collectives construct, produce, and disseminate meaning. This is a recursive process in which the movement's idea entrepreneurs attempt to frame messages in ways that will best resonate with the interests, attitudes, and beliefs of its potential constituency. Then, as people accept the movement's frames of reference, they increasingly come to identify with the collective movement. Dalgaard-Nielsen concludes that:

> "Movements diagnose problems and attribute responsibility, offer solutions, strategies, and tactics (prognostic framing), and provide motivational frames to convince potential participants to become active. Key to mobilization, according to this perspective, is whether the movement's version of the 'reality' resonates or can be brought to resonate with the movement's potential constituency. Some scholars have referred to this process as 'frame alignment'—the emergence of congruence between an individual's and an organization's interests, values, and beliefs."[40]

Dalgaard-Nielsen believes that SMT generally, and Framing Theory in particular, might be useful for understanding radicalization because it focuses on processes, not sociodemographics, and because it emphasizes a mid-level analysis.

Though SMT has been used in social science for many years, its application to understanding terrorism and radicalization is more recent. In fact, SMT researchers have grappled for a half-century with questions that terrorism researchers are just now re-discovering. Donatella Della Porta is among the first serious terrorism researchers to connect SMT concepts to violent extremism in her studies of Italian and German militants.[41] More recently, Quintan Wiktorowicz conducted an in-depth study of how people came to join a militant Islamist group (Al-Muhajiroun) based in a Western democracy (just outside London, England).[42] Working within an SMT framework, Wiktorowicz presented a four-component developmental model for radicalization. Those who came to be radicalized first revealed an openness to new worldviews (cognitive opening), then came to view religion as a path to find meaning (religious seeking), eventually

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found the group's narrative and ethos to "make sense" (frame alignment), and ultimately, through a process of socialization, became fully indoctrinated into the movement.

These insights from SMT create an attractive framework for systematically studying the processes of radicalization and influence within militant extremist movements, but they are also not brand-new discoveries.[43] In 1965, Lofland and Stark studied a "small millenarian cult" based on the West Coast seeking to understand how its members came to "convert" to such an extreme set of views. They characterized their conclusion in the following way:

> "For conversion, a person must experience, within a religious problem-solving perspective, enduring, acutely-felt tensions that lead him to define himself as a religious seeker; he must encounter the cult {deviant perspective} at a turning point in his life; within the cult an affective bond must be formed (or pre-exist) and any extra-cult attachments neutralized; and there he must be exposed to intensive interaction if he is to become a 'deployable agent.'"[44]

The parallels with Wiktorowicz's contemporary observations of a Western Islamist movement are striking.

SMT also brings to the study of radicalization decades of experience and research on the question of differential involvement or participation. This line of inquiry essentially focuses on why different adherents within an extremist movement assume different roles or are willing to take different kinds of actions. Even in the mid 1980s, SMT researcher Doug MacAdam was discussing this as a longstanding vexing question in the field of SMT:

> "Among the topics that have most concerned researchers in the field of social movements is that of differential recruitment. What accounts for individual variation in movement participation? Why does one individual get involved while another remains inactive?"[45]

Just as terrorism researchers now differentiate between a person's motivations for entering, staying in, or leaving a terrorist group, social movement theorists typically differentiate between understanding one's entry into the movement and the nature and level of participation, which Klandermans calls "action mobilization."[46]

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Viewing contemporary militant Islamism as a global social movement—as a number of analysts have suggested it is—permits a different conceptualization of the problem with several potential insights for understanding the radicalization process.[47] First, it provides the framework of "mobilization potential" to consider the process by which a movement's human resources are developed and to better understand the how different people with the same set of beliefs come to assume different roles and take different kinds of actions. Second, it offers the notion of "recruitment networks," with some historical guidance for navigating the processes by which those networks or formed and motivated. Third, it offer the mechanism of "frame alignment" to explain how the networks shape members' beliefs and sentiments to best serve the interest of the group or movement. Fourth, it points out the importance in understanding radicalization of not only analyzing incentives and grievances, but also how groups effectively identify and remove barriers to participation.

Social Psychology

Theories and empirical research findings from the field of social psychology (though not directly about violent extremism) have factored prominently into academic scholarship and formulations about radicalization. Social psychology is a sub-discipline of psychology concerned primarily with relationships, influences, and transactions among people, and particularly group behavior. Gordon Allport, one of its early pioneers, defined social psychology as "an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals is influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others."[48] Social psychology brings to the study of radicalization a deep and longstanding focus on intergroup conflict and dynamics.

Because violent extremism is most often a group-related phenomenon, the sub-discipline's empirical lessons about group dynamics help to illuminate the behavior of terrorist collectives. Some of the key lessons include the following:

- *Group contexts cultivate extreme attitudes*: Individual opinions and attitudes tend to become more extreme in a group context. Group opinions and attitudes also tend to be more extreme than those held by its individual members, a phenomenon often referred to as "group polarization."

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- *Group decision making is often more biased and less rational, than individual decision making*: The phenomenon—popularly referred to as "groupthink"—is one in which group members attempt excessively to reach agreement, to the point where the need for consensus overrides the goal of making the most appropriate decision.

- *Group perceptions are colored by group membership, often called the "in-group/out-group bias*:" People tend to identify and classify in-group member behaviors more positively, and to make more positive attributions about them. Others outside the group (including other groups) are identified as having more negative traits and behaviors. This group-serving attributional style is often referred to within social psychology as the "in-group/out-group bias."

- *Individuals feel less responsible for "group" actions*: Individuals may feel less personally answerable, by diffusing accountability over the entire group. If an individual acts violently within the context—or in the name—of a group, the mere presence of the group may diminish his perceived agency and therefore lower the acceptable threshold for violent behavior.[49]

- *People join groups because of perceived incentives and rewards*: The incentives to join a group are dynamic and variable across different individuals. Some persons are primarily seeking social affiliation or a personal sense of meaning. Others may be on a quest for excitement or—more practically—a way to get food, shelter, and meet their basic needs for survival.[50]

- *Groups have internal norms and rules that control member behavior*: They have implicit and explicit expectations for what individual members think and how they behave. They leverage the social pressure of these expectations to get members to conform. When groups are more cohesive, more isolated, or invoke high costs for dissent, group conformity is even stronger, and conditions for compliance/obedience are elevated as well.[51]

For more than two decades, Bryn Mawr professor Clark McCauley has been one of the most consistent voices of social psychology in the field of terrorism studies. Most recently, McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko have posited several key "mechanisms" of political radicalization, based principally on a social psychological analysis. They propose a number of mechanisms by which groups or collectives may radicalize:

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- *Extremity Shift in Likeminded Groups—Group Polarization*: A dynamic based on the social psychological principal of "group polarization," that the "average" opinions of group members tend to become more extreme as they attempt to negotiate consensus.

- *Social Reality Power of Isolated Groups—The Multiplier*: A dynamic based on numerous social psychological studies showing that when groups are isolated and experiencing conditions of threat, their levels of cohesiveness and perceived interdependence increase, which also enhances member compliance.

- *Group Radicalization in Competition for the Same Base of Support—Outbidding*: A dynamic based on inter-group competition, in which groups who are more radical or more extreme may be perceived as more committed or devout, which may make them more attractive to potential members and supporters.

- *Activist Radicalization in Competition with State Power—Condensation*: A dynamic by which the pressures and adversity of state opposition to a radical group cause less-committed members to drop out, with only the most active remaining. Radicalism and commitment among those remaining members tends to intensify.

- *Group Radicalization from Within-Group Competition—Fissioning*: A dynamic based on the observation that divisive tensions often cause factions to develop within ideologically-based groups. Sometimes these factions evolve into "splinter" groups that compete (and sometimes fight) with one another in an escalating battle of extremity.

Conversion Theory

Another thread of theory development has focused somewhat less on the collective movement, and more on the individual process of transforming beliefs and ideologies—often regarded as "conversion." Conversion research is drawn largely from the disciplines of sociology and psychology of religion and has decades of research beneath it.[52] Wright notes "there have been literally hundreds of studies on conversion over the last thirty-five years, constituting a well-researched stock of knowledge that is available to us."[53]

Following decades of developmental or stage models in the study of religious conversion, Lewis Rambo proposed a more integrative and less linear solution. He developed a seven-component model, which accounts for

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the fact that each phase or facet is cumulative and can recursively affect the others. The seven "stages" are:

- *Context*: comprises the field of environmental factors—cultural, historical, political, social—operating throughout the conversion process that may accelerate or impede its development.
- *Crisis*: is a state of personal disequilibrium typically caused by personal or social disruption.
- *Quest*: often precipitated by a crisis, is a process of seeking solutions or activities to restore equilibrium.
- *Encounter*: marks the initial contact between a seeker (one engaged in a "quest") and a spiritual option or proponent of that option.
- *Interaction*: describes the exchange between the seeker and the proponent to develop more information about or introduction to the spiritual option and to other proponents.
- *Commitment*: involves two important elements, first a decision or series of decisions demonstrating investment or faithfulness to the religion; and second, a promised bond of membership or public statement of faith that solidifies the person's status (or identity) as a part of the movement.
- *Consequences*: are the effects of the actions, commitments, and decisions made in service of the belief. They are constantly monitored and evaluated.

Rambo suggests that during these processes, "relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles interact and reinforce one another."[54] This seems to be quite consistent with observations of the post-2001 militant Islamist radicalizations as well.

Richardson notes that theoretical perspectives on conversion historically have polarized into one of two categories: *Passive*, which views the convert as a passive target who has been damaged by trauma and/or has unfulfilled psychological needs, and whose will is overpowered by brainwashing—not unlike Chinese Communists' "thought reform"—for indoctrination; and *Active*, which views the convert as a rational actor and active seeker, whose decision to join is an act of uncompromised volition. The passive view is principally considered the "old" or "classic" conversion paradigm, but the preponderance of research evidence and scholarly opinion favors the active perspective.[55]

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Particularly relevant to the study of radicalization is the conversion literature on "New Religious Movements"—sometimes called alternative religious movements or cults—whose trajectory has been quite similar to that of the radicalization literature.[56] Early explorations focused on "psychopathological" explanations for religion conversion and participation, assuming some combination of individual abnormality, deficiency, or trauma to be the primary causal factors.[57, 58] Then, researchers in the sociological tradition of religion studies focused on strain and deprivation as possible causes of religious seeking and conversion.[59, 60] Strain-oriented theories focus on failure to achieve, losses (personal and status), and negative life events.

Similarly, people writing about radicalization have recently begun to use the term (often quite loosely) "self-radicalizing," as if it is a new discovery, but conversion researchers were working on this phenomenon long before the Internet. In describing what they called "conversion motifs," they have observed a style of "intellectual or self-" conversion:

> "The intellectual mode of conversion commences with an individual, private investigation of possible new grounds of being, alternate theodicies, personal fulfillment, etc., by reading books, watching television, attending lectures, and other impersonal or disembodied ways in which it is increasingly possible sans social involvement to become acquainted with alternate ideologies and ways of life. In the course of such reconnaissance, some individuals convert themselves in isolation from any interaction with devotees of the respective religion."[61]

Lofland and Skonovd go on to describe five other conversion motifs to include the *Mystical* (a personally transformative epiphany, typically occurring as an abrupt event); *Experimental* (where a "seeker" connects with a group to try out the identity of group membership); *Affectional* (where conversion results either from strong emotional sentiment or from strong emotional bonds and attachments to others); *Revivalist* (a profound, emotionally-charged transformative experience occurring in the context of a crowd); and *Coercive* (akin to "brainwashing," this is a form of psychological coercion in which people are emotionally depleted, socially isolated from others, then subjected to intense group pressures and influences). The Mystical and Revivalist motifs have less resonance with the radicalization experience, but the Experimental and Affectional motifs are clearly prominent among persons known to have become radicalized into violent extremism, particularly into militant Islamist movements and terrorist cells.

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Lofland and Stark's "World-Saver" model or "value-added scheme" (described in the earlier section on SMT) blended—perhaps for the first time—the traditional, deterministic "strain" factors of conversion with the more dynamic principles of social influence in which the convert acts, and is not only acted upon. In fact, they divide their elements into the categories of "Predisposing Conditions" and "Situational Factors." The first three factors in the model (acutely felt tensions, occurring in a religious problem-solving perspective, and leading one to self-define as a religious seeker) are conceived as "Predisposing Conditions." The tensions, in particular, reflect general strain factors, such as stressors, losses, and thwarted expectations. The nature of these factors shares some affinity with Horgan's notion of "vulnerabilities" to radicalization. The remaining four factors (exposure during a turning point in life, affective bond with the group, neutralizing attachments outside the group, and exposure to intensive interaction within the group)—deemed the "situational factors"—are the ones that predict why a convert connects to one particular group, instead of another. Though the model was modestly developed nearly a half century ago to narrowly explain enlistments into a relatively small West Coast cult, its conceptual utility is already leaps ahead of most contemporary thinking about radicalization into violent extremism.

The still nascent study of RVE would be well served by learning and applying a few of the lessons learned from decades of conversion research. Three of those lessons seem particularly deserving of consideration. First is to regard radicalization, like conversion, as a process rather than as an event—one that occurs in a "complex, multifaceted environment that can be better understood only by taking into account the perspectives of several disciplines."[62] Second, by using an active conversion paradigm, perhaps a comparable array of motifs might be conceptualized for RVE to help aggregate the many diverse radicalization pathways. Third, Lofland and Stark's work integrating "Predisposing Conditions" and "Situational Factors" might help the study of RVE get beyond a dualistic view and begin the much-needed journey to understand how features of the person and of the situation/context recursively influence one another throughout the radicalization and engagement process.

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Potentially Promising Theories that Might Support Further Study of the Mechanisms of Radicalization into Violent Extremism

Most proposed theories or models of violent radicalization have components that account for at least three factors: (1) developing antipathy toward a target group; (2) creating justifications and mandates for violent action; (3) eliminating social and psychological barriers that might inhibit violent action.

The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Counterterrorism Division (2006) classifies the mechanisms of radicalization on a motivational dimension—whether internal or external—resulting in what they refer to as four "distinct" conversion types:

- *Jilted Believers*—intrinsically motivated converts for whom "internal frustration and dissatisfaction with the current religious faith (has led) the individual to change belief systems."
- *Faith Reinterpretation*—an intrinsically motivated conversion in which "the individual alters his religious tradition through introspection and evaluation. This motivation [according to the document] refers specifically to those who are Muslim by birth but then choose to follow a more extremist form of Islam."
- *Protest Conversion*—an extrinsically motivated conversion in which a person's sense of perceived deprivation "negatively affects (the) individual's attitude and beliefs toward those implicated, leading to a change of faith as an answer to the deprivation."
- *Acceptance Seeking*—also a form of extrinsically motivated conversion, driven by an individual's need to "form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting and significant interpersonal relationships."

Venhaus, based on interviews and personal histories of 2,032 "foreign fighters" who sought to affiliate with al Qaida-related movements, concluded, "the recurring theme was that they all were looking for something ....they want to understand who they are, why they matter, and what their role in the world should be. They have an unfulfilled need to define themselves, which al-Qaida offers to fill."[63] Referring to the potential recruits as "seekers," he classifies them into four primary types:

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- *The Revenge Seeker*, whom he sees as diffusely frustrated and angry and seeking an outlet to discharge that toward some person, group, or entity whom he may see as being at fault.
- *The Status Seeker*, whom he sees as seeking recognition and esteem from others.
- *The Identity Seeker*, whom he sees primarily as driven by a need to belong and to be a part of something meaningful. They seek to define their identities or sense of self through their group affiliations.
- *The Thrill Seeker*, the least common (less than 5% of his sample) is attracted to the group because of the prospects for excitement, adventure, and glory.

Drawing more on social psychological principles, McCauley and Mosalenko classify individual mechanisms of radicalization in the following way:

- *Individual Radicalization through Personal Grievance*: An individual becomes radicalized as a result of some (perceived) harm or injustice perpetrated upon him/her or a loved one.
- *Individual Radicalization through Political Grievance*: An individual becomes radicalized as a result of some harm or injustice perpetrated upon, or threatening, a group with which he identifies.
- *Individual Radicalization in Action—The Slippery Slope*: An individual engages with a radical group or persons espousing a radical ideology and follows a progressive, though sometimes insidious, progression of subversive behaviors, sometimes culminating in terrorism.
- *Individual Radicalization in Action—The Power of Love*: An individual initially engages with a radical group or persons espousing a radical ideology because of social or emotional bonds to its members; those bonds become the impetus for action on behalf of the group.
- *Individual Radicalization in Status and Thrill Seeking*: An individual is lured to engage with a radical group, expecting either to elevate his social status and perceived power or to engage in the glamorous and dangerous life of a terrorist.
- *Individual Opening to Radicalization: Unfreezing*: An individual experiences a destabilizing life event—such as the loss of family—that removes social/lifestyle barriers to radicalized activity.

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The categories represented in Venhaus' seeker typology or in McCauley and Mosalenko's mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is quite likely that multiple elements often exist in any given case, and that the relative importance of these dimensions of the individual change over time and across situations. They may or may not actually elucidate *mechanisms* of radicalization; instead, they may just describe different precipitants or contributing factors. They are not quite *motifs* in the Lofland and Skonovd tradition, but they do begin to parse the problem. The authors are careful to point out that no empirical evidence suggests that any of them are sufficient conditions for engaging in terrorist activity. A reasonable next step might be to tie some of these precipitants into existing social/behavioral theories to explore *how* they might lead to or facilitate engaging in violent extremism. What follows are examples of social science theories—beyond the application of basic social psychological principles—that might address some of these key mechanisms:

Roots of Evil: While using the moniker of "evil" in discussions of extremist-motivated violence can be inflammatory and unproductive, it is a concept with popular resonance. Roy Baumeister (1996)—a psychology professor at Florida State University and rigorous social scientist—has proposed four roots of "evil" as they relate to violent action, at least three of which harmonize with the RVE process. Sternberg summarizes these elements in the following way:

> "The first is an ideologically based belief that one's own side is good and that the side of the enemy is evil. One hates the enemy because it is evil. This kind of hatred can be seen in religious forms of hatred and in some political ones as well. The second basis is the desire for revenge over injustices and humiliations one (or one's group) has experienced, especially when threatened egotism has been involved. The third basis is greed, lust, ambition, and other forms of self-interest in instances in which a rival is standing in the way of what one wants. The fourth root, sadism, can precipitate brutal violence but typically may be less relevant to hate."[64]

Duplex Theory of Hate: Yale psychology professor Robert Sternberg proposes a model of hate, which is comprised of three components:

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- *Negation of intimacy (distancing) in hate: Repulsion and disgust*. Creating emotional and cognitive distance between the actor and the target—as dehumanizing images and beliefs tend to do—can erode psychological barriers to violence. Propaganda typically depicts the targets as incapable of receiving, giving, or sustaining feelings of closeness, warmth, caring, communication, compassion, and respect. (According to Sternberg, these beliefs are slow to develop and slow to fade.)

- *Passion in hate: Anger/fear (in response to threat)*. Propaganda may depict the targeted individuals as an imminent threat to approved society, and one that should be feared because of this threat. (According to Sternberg, these beliefs are rapid in growth and rapid in demise).

- *Decision—commitment in hate: Devaluation—diminution through contempt*. The hater is likely to feel contempt toward the target individual or group, viewing the target as barely human or even as subhuman, and therefore not only different or more distant, but also contemptible.

Those who foment hate aim to change the thought processes of the preferred population (in-group) so that its members will conceive of the targeted group(s) (out-group) in a devalued way.

Moral Disengagement and Neutralization: Psychologist Albert Bandura has argued for many years that "self-sanctions play a role in the regulation of inhumane conduct."[65] He notes, however, that these self-sanctions can be selectively "activated and disengaged" to facilitate behavior that would otherwise violate one's own moral standard. He describes this process of breaking down barriers as "moral disengagement," which can operate through a variety of processes, including: moral justification, sanitizing language, disavowal of a sense of personal agency by diffusing or displacing responsibility, disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of one's actions, attribution of blame to victims, and dehumanization of victims. The "disengagement" processes Bandura describes are regularly seen in terrorist rhetoric. Invoking "morality," however, in an explanation for religiously motivated violent extremism can be a bit vexing. For some violent actors, it is not clear whether their sense of morality has been disengaged, or whether perhaps it has been replaced.

In the sociological tradition, criminologists David Matza and Gresham Sykes put forth a similar idea, which they called neutralization theory, with regard to general criminal behavior. They suggested that most people who commit crimes do recognize and respond to society's proscriptions against unlawful conduct. Offenders use certain cognitive

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techniques, however, to rationalize and justify their behavior, thereby reducing what social psychologists call "cognitive dissonance." The five main neutralization techniques that Matza and Sykes describe are: denying responsibility, denying harm, denying a victim, condemning people in authority, and appealing to a higher authority. Many of the mechanisms are quite similar to those in Bandura's theory of moral disengagement. It is arguably these "disengagement" or "neutralization" processes that best distinguish hateful extremists who do not engage in violence from those who do.[66]

It is potentially quite important to understand the difference, among violent extremists, between mitigators of and mandates for violence. While mitigators, like rationalizations and excuses, may justify behavior that a person knows to be wrong, when violent extremists adhere to a mandate for violence, the moral calculus may change. Instead of having to justify to themselves (and others) why they *should* commit violence, when it is generally wrong to do so, they may struggle to justify why they should *not* follow the imperative to commit violence despite their belief in the mandate or its source of authority. Rationalizations and justifications are often attached to specific behaviors and may change over time, but moral imperatives—particularly from a divine source of authority—are more general and typically reflect deeply held core beliefs and values, which are more resistant to change.

Conclusion

The preceding review examined the basic concepts of RVE, including the terms "radicalization" and "radicalism," the framing of RVE as a pathway rather than as an event, and explored the possible utility of social science theories for understanding the RVE process and the embedded social-cognitive mechanisms that might facilitate violent action. *Radicalization*—the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs—needs to be distinguished from *action pathways*—the process of engaging in terrorism or violent extremist actions. Ideology and action are sometimes connected, but not always. Most people who harbor radical ideas and violent justifications do not engage in terrorism, just as many known terrorists—even many of those who carry a militant jihadi banner—are not especially pious and have only a cursory understanding of the radical religious ideology they claim to represent. Understanding radicalization into violent extremism requires more than understanding a religion or a doctrine. The goal of this paper was to distill the essence of what is currently

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known about radicalization processes, and perhaps more importantly, to suggest that drawing upon existing social science theories might help researchers to ask better, more focused questions about RVE.

Social Movement Theory has shown how ideologies may develop a life of their own that transcends the boundaries of any particular group. It also has helped to emphasize the importance of process, not just transformation, including critical distinctions that may exist between the processes underlying one's entry into a movement and those driving the nature and level of participation. Social psychology has moved the study of human behavior beyond a preoccupation with individual traits, to emphasize the power of situations and social interaction, influence, and conflict at collective levels. Finally, conversion theory links these concepts together, pointing out the importance of integrating—rather than polarizing—predisposing conditions and situational factors in understanding causes of extremism.

None of the theories discussed here provides easy answers. No single theory is likely to explain all violent radicalizations. But achieving clarity in defining our concepts and appropriately using guidance from decades of social science theory and research may help to curtail the reinvention of a problem and provide a platform for moving forward. Part II of this review will review recent (post-9/11) conceptual models of the radicalization process and recent (post-9/11) empirical studies of RVE.

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