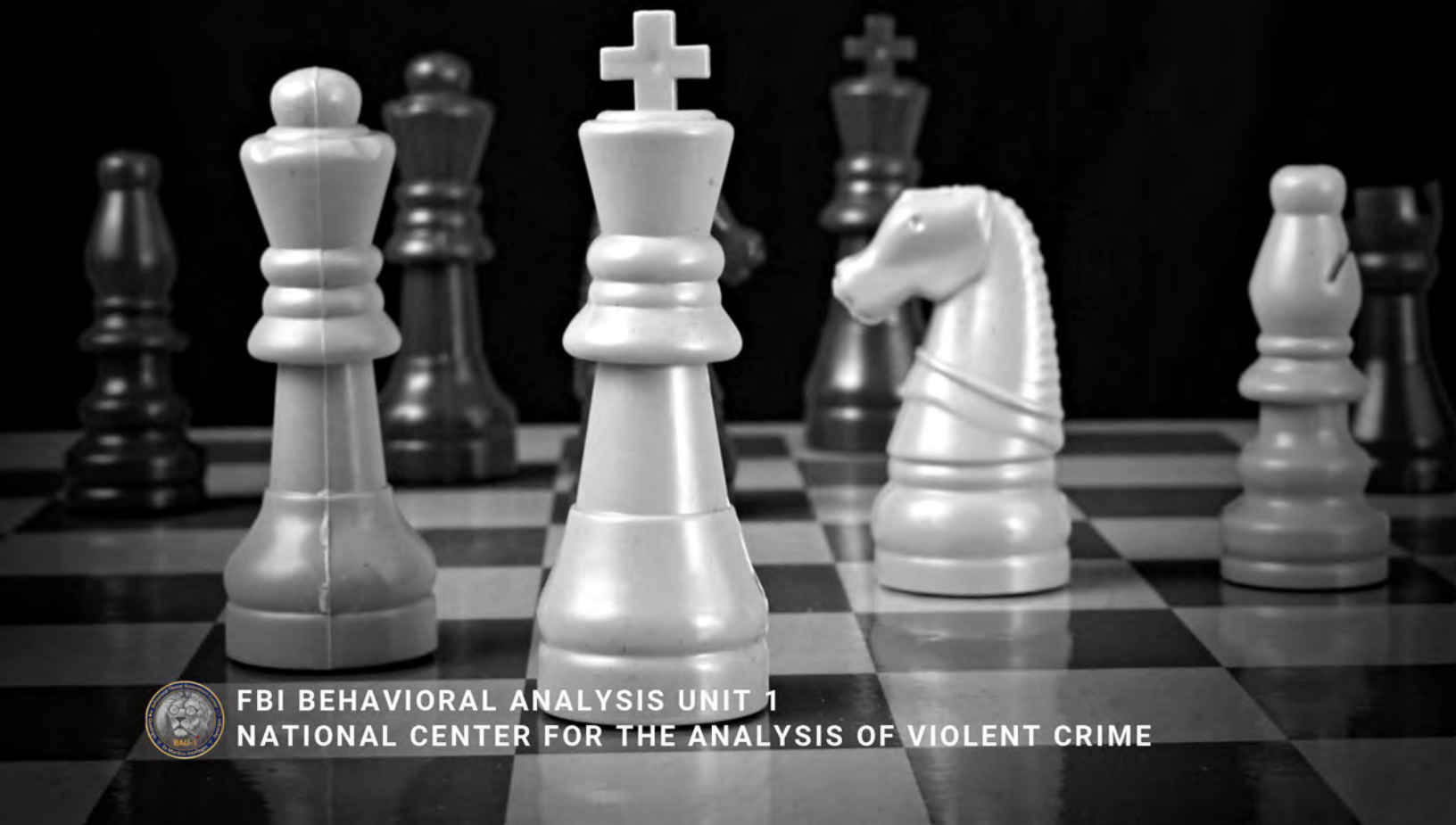
U.S. Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation

BEYOND BELIEF

PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN AMERICA



FBI BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS UNIT 1
NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CRIME

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Critical Incident Response Group

National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime

Behavioral Analysis Unit 1

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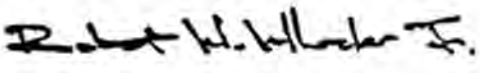
MESSAGE FROM THE CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE GROUP

Throughout our history the FBI has worked tirelessly to investigate and prevent acts of terrorism in the homeland. Our unwavering commitment to the safety of the American people has led to the disruption of multiple terror plots in the United States and around the world. Over the years, these plots have increased in complexity, motivation, and origin; yet the FBI and our law enforcement partners continue to interrupt those intent on committing acts of terror against our great country.

As the calls for such attacks continue to escalate, questions remain as to how and why people succumb to violent extremist ideologies in the first place. The psychosocial processes of radicalization and mobilization are complex and worthy of a deeper understanding by law enforcement writ large. Grasping this complexity may also contribute towards answering a more pressing question as to what Americans can do to help a friend, family member, or loved one turn away from violent extremism to prevent tragedy in our communities.

In the pursuit of such knowledge, the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit 1 (BAU) dedicated their time and effort toward examining the range of behaviors characterizing violent extremists, from lone actors to terrorist groups. The creation of Beyond Belief is a demonstration of the BAU's collective experience and expertise to address how and why people adhere to violent extremist ideologies, how they mobilize, and the process by which they may make a personal decision to turn away from violent extremism.

I am grateful to all those who have contributed directly or indirectly to this practical guide for law enforcement and practitioners. Thank you for your continued effort to convey such knowledge to our local, state, and federal partners to augment their understanding of this threat that undermines our nation's security. It is my hope that this guide hones our investigative acumen in countering such threats and, in so doing, guides our law enforcement community to better safeguard the American people.



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The FBI thanks past and present members of the BAU for their continued efforts to counter violent extremism and make America safe. We would like to extend gratitude to retired FBI SSA Matthew Collier for his creative vision which underpins Beyond Belief.

The FBI and the BAU also gratefully acknowledge the insights and experiences shared by a number of former violent extremists, both at the 2021 Symposium on Radicalization, Disengagement, and Deradicalization and also throughout the years. Our research and recommendations would not be possible without their contributions.

FOREWORD

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) is part of the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) located at the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia, and consists of FBI Special Agents, analysts, professional support staff, and representatives from other federal agencies and departments. The NCAVC provides operational support in the areas of counterterrorism, targeted violence, counterintelligence, cybercrimes, crimes against children, and crimes against adults. The Behavioral Analysis Unit 1 (BAU) is the NCAVC's center of expertise for behavioral threat assessment and management. Cases accepted by the BAU often include "person of concern" cases in schools, workplaces, and other contexts; violent extremism; other forms of planned violence; and post-incident analysis of completed terrorism or mass casualty attacks.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the BAU hosted a virtual symposium from August 10-13, 2021, that brought together academic researchers, mental health experts, former extremists, and law enforcement personnel from the United States and the United Kingdom to discuss violent extremism (see **Appendix A** for a full list of topics). The symposium participants discussed the equifinality of radicalization, while former extremists added granularity to distinct features separating the process of deradicalization from disengagement. The virtual event allowed participants to reaffirm theoretical findings, coalesce forward-leaning ideas, and hear personal stories of radicalization that would otherwise have been untold.

Unbeknownst at the time of the symposium, discussions diametrical in nature were also taking place in the dark corners of the internet. Amid imposing social isolation to contain the pandemic, the virtual echo chambers of online communities amplified violent narratives in an unbridled manner. The phenomenon of self-radicalization supplanted known traditional processes and gave rise to a new wave of violent extremists that would be dealt with in the days, months, and years after the national lockdowns were lifted.

Beyond Belief is a culmination of such experiences with recommended practices to counter an evolving threat. In it, the authors describe their operational expertise, corroborated by academic findings, to provide value to those actively working in the field. While some of the examples may sound similar to cases in other parts of the world, this publication focuses on countering violent extremism in the United States. Thus, Beyond Belief represents a law enforcement perspective of preventing and countering violent extremism in America.

Behavioral Analysis Unit 1

INTRODUCTION

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Behavioral Analysis Unit 1 (BAU) created Beyond Belief to assist law enforcement and their non-traditional partners in addressing the threat of violent extremism in the United States. Readers will find behavioral insights into violent extremism from experts at the BAU encompassing more than 50 years of observing and studying violent extremist behavior, often in real-time. Beyond Belief discusses the similarities between ideological and non-ideological violent extremists, their nuanced differences, and the need for a multidisciplinary approach to address both types of threats effectively. This monograph is about understanding violent extremism writ large so that practitioners from law enforcement to mental health professionals may identify, assess, and manage the risk of this threat in their communities.

The FBI established the Behavioral Threat Assessment Center (BTAC) within the BAU in 2010. The BTAC is the only national-level, multi-agency, multi-disciplinary taskforce whose mission is to prevent mass violence on U.S. soil. As part of this mission, the BAU—through the BTAC—leads the FBI's effort to organize and coordinate a national threat assessment and threat management (TATM) initiative across all 55 FBI field offices and their areas of responsibility. BTAC Supervisory Special Agents undergo a multi-year certification process and direct this enterprise-wide capacity building effort and its operational aspect. It is also the only team authorized to conduct formal behavioral threat assessments on behalf of the FBI.

Integral to the FBI's national TATM initiative is the formation of partnerships across all levels of government and law enforcement, including the incorporation of mental health professionals—such as psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and social workers—when such expertise is necessary. The BAU has found the integration of non-traditional partners into TATM at the local level has been especially crucial when dealing with concerning cases that involve radicalization towards a violent extremist ideology, but with no violation of local or federal laws. Non-traditional partners, to include school districts, medical professionals, and community leaders, offer a unique set of tools that, when partnered with law enforcement, enable the FBI to address the complex spectrum of violent extremism from concerning thoughts to violent action.

The BAU's operational experience has shown that violent extremist action may not necessarily originate from a traditional ideology. A non-ideologically motivated attacker, such

as a school shooter, may demonstrate extreme behavior like that of a terrorist while they are plotting, planning, and preparing to enact violence on a specified target. While the intrinsic motivation and targets may differ between the two, the BAU has found that both types of attackers traverse similar behavioral pathways when moving towards the extreme decision to take American lives. This BAU finding enables law enforcement and their partners to employ a motivation-agnostic framework to prevent and counter violent extremist behavior from progressing.

"We, the FBI, don't investigate ideology, no matter how repugnant. We investigate violence. Any extremist ideology, when it turns to violence, we're all over it."

Former FBI Director Christopher Wray

Regardless of a violent extremist's mindset, religion, or ideology, the prevailing theories of TATM and radicalization to mobilization can be combined in practice to keep communities safe. To illustrate this conceptually, a mapping of these models along the Pathway to Intended Violence by Calhoun and Weston (2003) can be found in **Appendix C**. This graphical depiction of operationally relevant theories to practice reflects the reason the FBI's Counterterrorism Division and the Criminal Investigative Division both utilize the same tools available through the BTAC's national TATM initiative to prevent and counter predatory violence in their respective investigations. It also reminds law enforcement to aim their focus on the behavioral actions of a potential attacker and not solely on extremist thoughts.

During a congressional hearing in July 2019, former FBI Director Christopher Wray crystallized the operational landscape of violent extremism for law enforcement with the following remarks: "We, the FBI, don't investigate ideology, no matter how repugnant. We investigate violence. Any extremist ideology, when it turns to violence, we're all over it." Former Director Wray's comment simplified the complex issue of violent extremism to orient law enforcement towards investigating predatory behavior, irrespective of the beliefs pursued by an extremist group or individual. This orientation is, and should be, the perspective of law enforcement personnel in the United States.

In the following sections, the BAU builds on former Director Wray's statements through an examination of relevant concepts and operational experience derived from the qualitative analysis of former violent extremists, adjudicated FBI investigations, prison interviews of individuals incarcerated on terrorism-related offenses, and the compilation of post-attack analyses conducted by the BAU. This publication is unique in that some of the insights were gleaned in real-time, close to the time of an attack or planned attack, and in the cultural context of the United States. It is important to note, the BAU's rich array of knowledge and experience is a byproduct of the acumen demonstrated by FBI investigators, analysts, and other personnel who have worked tirelessly to detect, deter, and disrupt acts of terrorism and predatory violence in this country. The combination of their work, and the vigilance of the American public who also safeguard this nation, are honored through this monograph.

SECTION ONE

WHY AND HOW PEOPLE RADICALIZE AND MOBILIZE

This section discusses why and how individuals come to believe that ideologically motivated violence is justified, and what actions they may decide to take in the name of violent extremism. These insights are based on the BAU's operational experience and research which aligns with the body of academic research in the field of violent extremism. The aim is to highlight key operational considerations for practitioners who are investigating or interacting with individuals who have adopted or are acting on behalf of a violent extremist ideology. This work is not intended to provide a comprehensive review of what is understood about radicalization and mobilization. The BAU's efforts continue to benefit from, and are informed by, the work of a community of expert researchers, academics, and practitioners. For in-depth discussions on sociological and psychological theories and research related to violent extremism and terrorism, BAU directs readers to the works of many talented professionals who are dedicated to advancing society's understanding in this field, including but not limited to Borum (2011, 2023), Horgan (2014, 2024), Logan et al. (2023), and Victoroff (2005).

JOURNEY TO RADICALIZATION

The BAU's case experience, interviews of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses, discussions with individuals who have shared their radicalization and deradicalization experiences, and research on domestic and international violent extremists, in conjunction with academic research, provide the basis for the BAU's understanding of the complexities surrounding why and how individuals come to embrace violent extremist beliefs. For the purposes of this document, we are guided by the FBI's definitions of radicalization and violent extremism.

Radicalization is the process by which individuals come to believe that engagement in or facilitation of nonstate violence to achieve social and political change is necessary and justified.

Violent extremism is the "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals" (Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team, 2017).

The journey to radicalization is an individualized process, in both how it occurs in an individual and how it manifests to others. Researchers in the study of violent extremism describe radicalization as a phased, dynamic, psychosocial, individualized process (Borum, 2011, 2023; Horgan, 2014, 2024). The consensus among the BAU, experienced practitioners, and academic researchers is that context is key to understanding how an individual's ideology is formed and how radicalization occurs (Borum, 2023; Richards et al., 2019). For most individuals, receptivity to violent extremist ideologies and the radicalization process derives from the convergence of multiple personal factors and external influences. The transition from views aligned with a nonviolent belief system to one adhering to violent extremism occurs over time. Radicalization is complex, reflected in the fact that individuals follow different paths to radicalization; and individuals possessing similar personal factors and experiencing comparable life circumstances, when exposed to violent extremist ideologies, have different outcomes in terms of whether or to what extent they become radicalized (Borum, 2011, 2023; Corner et al., 2019; Horgan, 2014, 2024; Logan et al., 2023; Victoroff, 2005).

WHY AND HOW RADICALIZATION OCCURS

BAU research and academic experts in violent extremism have found there is no meaningful demographic profile of individuals prone to radicalization or to violent extremist action (Horgan, 2014; Precht, 2007; Richards et al., 2019). The BAU has infrequently encountered a pure ideologue, meaning an individual whose radicalization is assessed to be driven solely by adherence to the doctrine of a violent extremist group. In the BAU's experience, factors spanning multiple domains contribute to why and how an individual becomes radicalized.

Push, Pull, and Personal Factors

When considering why and how individuals radicalize and mobilize, the BAU's experience supports the academic concepts of push, pull, and personal factors (Borum, 2023; Horgan, 2014; Vergani et al., 2020). Vergani et al., (2020) described push factors as, "structural root causes of terrorism that drive people toward resorting to violence." Examples of push factors include, but are not limited to, loss of legitimacy, geopolitical factors, state repression, relative deprivation, inequality, injustice, and unemployment. Simply put, push factors are grievance-based factors external to the individual that may foster movement toward violent extremism (Borum, 2023). Pull factors are incentive based factors that attract an individual toward violent extremism (Borum, 2023). Pull factors may include, but not be limited to, ideology, consumption of propaganda, search for adventure, cultural congruence, group belonging, group dynamics, and identification. Broad, grievance-based, push factors frequently co-occur

with much narrower, more personal, pull factors that attract certain individuals to violent extremism at a certain time based on these converging factors (Borum, 2023).

Personal factors are individual characteristics that may make some individuals more vulnerable to violent extremism. These factors can include, but not are limited to life circumstances, identity seeking, stressors, psychological disorders, personality traits, prior trauma, and mental health issues (Vergani et al., 2020). One category of personal factors which BAU seeks to understand with an individual who is on the path to radicalization is risk factors. The BAU defines risk factors as "existing realities" about an individual "that may increase the risk of violence he poses in a given situation" (Amman, et al., 2017). History of violence, substance abuse, history of suicidality, problematic behavioral history, isolation, and unhealthy family and peer dynamics are among these potential threat enhancers. The BAU considers these same risk factors as potential contributors to an individual's receptivity to a violent extremist ideology.

Assessing whether and to what extent an individual has radicalized requires a holistic view of the individual.

When considering the totality of personal factors, the BAU also looks for protective factors, or mitigators, which could serve as buffers or stabilizers in an individual's life. These internal and external influences, such as healthy social supports, access and receptiveness to assistance, and positive coping mechanisms, may act as inhibitors which lower the likelihood of radicalization and potential mobilization to violence (Amman, et al., 2017). In the context of threat assessment, the BAU seeks to establish a comprehensive understanding of both risk and protective factors associated with an individual to further understand their path to radicalization.

This merging of push, pull, and personal factors impacts not only why, but also how radicalization occurs. The timing and overlap of personal and grievance-based factors with exposure to extremist material and/or extremist ideological beliefs play a key role in the process. Therefore, assessing whether and to what extent an individual has radicalized requires a holistic view of the individual. Checklists noting the presence or absence of personal factors, risk factors, and protective factors are insufficient because they do not allow practitioners to understand the nuanced nature of these factors and their specific influence on the individual.

Investigators must also have insight into the individual's ongoing behavior. Horgan (2014) argued that understanding the behavior of individuals involved with extremist groups may be more productive for preventing violence than simply understanding what those individuals are like. The BAU's operational experience consulting with law enforcement partners on counterterrorism cases supports that argument.

The BAU has observed individuals either transitioning between diverse extremist ideologies over time or merging tenets of multiple extremist ideologies into a blended ideology suiting their personalized needs and perspectives. The BAU has frequently consulted on investigations where the individual of concern viewed targeted violence as the solution to address issues stemming from a blend of personal and ideological influences; similarly, the BAU has consulted on investigations involving individuals who have shown interest in one or more ideologies over time but who appear to be pursuing an act of targeted violence to fulfill personal needs. What this operational experience points to is that while violent ideology may be present, it is often not the primary driver toward violence.

Impact of Online Communication Platforms and the Internet

The impact of online communication platforms—to include social media, mobile messaging applications, and the Internet as a whole–on the radicalization process cannot be understated, particularly in relation to the ease of access to a multitude of radicalizing influences. The Internet provides increased opportunity for exposure to violent extremist ideologies and ideologues, access to extremist propaganda, development of connections with like-minded individuals, associations with violent extremist groups, and a renewed sense of social identity.

The BAU has observed a significant increase in autonomous radicalization as mobile messaging, social media, and the Internet circumvent the necessity for in-person associations with violent extremist groups or one-on-one in-person recruitment or vetting. Some individuals radicalize entirely independently of an extremist group, viewing "violence as an accessible and justified method for advancing their own ideological goals" (Richards et al., 2019). One former violent extremist, who we will call Alex*, recounted feeling a deep sense of helplessness and powerlessness as he grew up. He felt he did not have an escape from the pressure of the millennial generation, so he turned to the internet, where he found counterculture. In his words,

**To protect the identities of the individuals whose stories are described throughout Beyond Belief, the BAU assigned each an alias name.*

"I was raised by the internet." Once Alex graduated and went to college, away from his support system, he found himself drifting back towards dissident subcultures. He spent much of his time online, on platforms like 4chan and YouTube, where these platforms had developed algorithms designed to "suck you in." Additionally, Alex found that there was more counterculture content available than previously imagined. Alex cited a prominent social media personality as the start of his exploration into radical ideologies. He felt this person gave him the language and tools to criticize the mainstream culture that he hated. At this time in his life, Alex "felt like we were at war." Influential online personalities created a sense of urgency regarding existential threats. He said it was like, "the world is caving in and it's happening now." Alex expressed a belief that an existential threat to his perceived culture made them defenders, not aggressors, who were justified to enact violence if necessary.

"I was raised by the internet."

Individuals seeking a platform to establish influence, power, control, or status over others have also benefitted from the internet. The BAU has witnessed several cases in which individuals, who were seemingly ineffective and uninspiring in real life, leverage virtual status and charisma in the online space to lead, direct, and inspire others in the name of a violent extremist ideology. These radicalizers often leverage platform features, such as video live-streaming, file hosting, encrypted user-to-user messaging, and minimal content moderation, while also maintaining access to non-extremists for recruitment, harassment, and legitimacy (Baumgartner et al., 2020a, 2020b; Squire, 2019).

THE REALITY OF RADICALIZATION: PUSH, PULL, AND PERSONAL FACTORS IN PRACTICE

Experience providing operational case support and conducting interviews of individuals detained for terrorism-related offenses informs the BAU's understanding of the layering and complexity of push, pull and personal factors which contribute to the individualized radicalization processes. While each person who radicalizes walks their own path, common themes have emerged as key features which may make an individual more vulnerable to accepting and adhering to violent extremism. **Figure 1** highlights common themes in the radicalization process derived from the BAU's operational experience, many of which may overlap or contribute to others.

The intertwined nature of push, pull, and personal factors, along with vignettes derived from interviews conducted by the BAU of individuals who were convicted of terrorism-related offenses are described below. These case examples underscore the significant interplay among personal circumstances, radicalizing influences, and the impact of their convergence on an individual's movement toward accepting a violent extremist ideology. The following examples do not include the entirety of potential push, pull, and personal factors; rather, they are offered as a means of emphasizing the complex and individualized nature of the radicalization process. An important caveat is that just because overlapping themes are evident in the personal situation, characteristics, and traits of the individual accounts detailed herein, one should not infer that other individuals with similar personal characteristics and facing comparable circumstances will necessarily become radicalized.

Figure 1

Common Radicalization Themes

Adopting a holy cause	Religious / Ideological justification
Anger at life situation	Resentment / Disenfranchisement
Crisis	Seeking a sense of purpose
Excitement	Seeking connection or a sense of belonging
Hopelessness / Resignation	Seeking structure
Isolation / Alienation	Substance use/abuse
Mindset – "They are Evil"	Too much free time
Perceived injustice / Grievance	Victimhood

Unmet Needs

Figure 2

Examples of Unmet Needs

- Feelings of:
  - Hopelessness
  - Frustration
  - Failure
  - Resignation
  - Irrelevance
  - Powerlessness
- Personal crises
- Substance use or abuse
- Mental wellness issues

Individuals vulnerable to radicalization often experience multiple, coinciding personal struggles, which may include feelings of hopelessness, frustration, failure, resignation, irrelevance, and/or powerlessness. Unaddressed mental health issues, substance use and abuse, and personal crises may also contribute to an individual's openness to a violent extremist ideology. A lack of structure and too much free time may result in increased time spent online, presenting opportunities for exposure to, and exploration of, violent extremist ideologies. Individuals who are unemployed or disengaged from school may be susceptible to exposure to extremist ideologies due to the loss of productive ways to fill their time. Kruglanksi et al. (2018) highlighted that for some individuals, the need for personal significance, to have meaning in life and to matter, drives their attraction to extremist narratives touting violence as a mechanism for gaining or restoring significance. Involvement in violent extremism may provide a sense of purpose and structure which is otherwise lacking in their lives. As exemplified below, an array of unmet needs and external factors often contribute to the radicalization process.

Benjamin, who was convicted for making false statements in a federal investigation regarding his support and promotion of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS), described a series of personal factors as drivers in his radicalization process. Benjamin started using drugs in high school and became addicted to methadone. To the disappointment of his family, he dropped out of college. He dealt with an abusive spouse and experienced pervasive anger. Benjamin described feeling irrelevant and that his life was an absolute failure. He attributed having too much time on his hands, sitting at home on the Internet, a fascination with religions, and an interest in history as additional contributors to his interest in radical Islam. He described his radicalization process as occurring over time. He was influenced by ISIS propaganda magazines and came to believe he was part of a team taking a stand against corruption and the U.S. government. Embracing radical Islam provided him with a sense of superiority and authority.

Chris, who was sentenced to prison for a plot to attack data centers with explosives, viewed himself to be "scrawny" which brought about insecurity and what he called "little man syndrome." He described a life pattern of doing stupid things at the encouragement of others, without considering the consequences. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chris lost his job and lost access to the gym. He attributed too much time on his hands as providing the opening to a change in his way of thinking. Discussions with his girlfriend on Lenin and Stalin, in relation to one of her college courses, piqued his interest in history. Chris told the BAU he became "obsessed" with Russian history. Chris described getting caught in an echo chamber, conducting online searches for information confirming his own biases. He looked for affirmation of his own thoughts instead of counter arguments. When Chris tried to talk with his in-person friends about his thoughts and beliefs, they would tell him he was crazy or looking too much into it. As a result, he connected with people on the Internet who he believed agreed with him. Chris isolated himself in a room, immersed himself in the material, and became angry if his girlfriend interrupted.

Perceived Injustice, Disenchantment, Victimhood

The BAU has observed that personal factors often converge with grievances or perceived injustices to create an opening for the introduction of violent extremist views. Feelings of victimhood, resentment, and disenchantment with the system are push factors commonly described to the BAU. Perceived corruption, inequality, and unfairness are often cited as justifications for disdain of the U.S. government or loss of faith in the criminal justice system. The overlay of personal stressors with the influence of current events can also facilitate openness to violent extremist beliefs. The following examples highlight how perceived injustice, or a current social or political event, may propel an individual along the path to radicalization.

Dennis sought to recruit like-minded individuals to blow up government buildings, rob banks, and kill law enforcement officers in furtherance of an anti-government belief system. He was ultimately arrested and pleaded guilty to attempted interference with commerce by robbery and solicitation to commit a crime of violence. As Dennis reflected on personal factors and circumstances that led to his arrest, he highlighted the fact that he was a "heavy alcoholic" who drank all day. Dennis claimed alcohol messed with his mind, upset him, and pushed him to want to act. In addition to substance abuse issues, Dennis struggled with severe depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He felt overwhelmed with college and was failing to meet the expectations of others. At the time, Dennis recognized his need to pursue some form of therapy; however, he admitted to "never getting around to it." Dennis first noted what he perceived to be inadequacies of the United States while studying economics. Exposure

to online rhetoric, reading material, videos, and news reports led him to conclude the federal government was failing to follow the Constitution as he understood it. An arrest for driving while intoxicated and "being dragged through the state legal system" introduced Dennis to what he perceived to be governmental abuse. He claimed new laws were specifically passed to aid the state in penalizing him. He felt harassed by excessive charges and the receipt of multiple bills for legal fees, which added to his mounting anti-government views.

Overlay of personal stressors with the influence of current events can also facilitate openness to violent extremist beliefs.

Edward, who made pro-ISIS comments on a social media site, believed his vulnerability to radicalization was attributable, in part, to several challenges in his personal life. Edward was experiencing "girl problems" at the time he was exposed to ISIS. He began watching online videos which influenced his emotions and "scrambled his brain." He also started communicating online with people he did not know. Edward became upset when he heard news reports of a shooting incident in which a Muslim "sister" was shot in the face. In response, he posted comments referencing the need for militancy. Edward claimed he was never completely onboard with radical Islamic beliefs, and he never wanted "death to America."

Personality Considerations

The BAU's experience has shown that for some individuals, enduring character traits, to include those related to their personality, may contribute to their attraction to violent extremism. Unmet expectations, feelings of entitlement, or the need for adventure may drive individuals to seek fulfillment through alternative associations and beliefs. The following examples highlight how personality traits may impact an individual's journey to radicalization.

Frank, who planned to travel to the Middle East to join ISIS and was convicted for attempting to provide material support to ISIS, described the circumstances which led to his radicalized mindset. Frank had a hard time establishing himself in life. He disliked authority, viewed society as the problem, and attributed his lack of success to others. When "religious flavor" was added to his mindset, Frank became convinced difficulties in life were not his fault. Prior to becoming radicalized, he had spent a lot of time sitting around without a job and with nothing productive to do. He described the radicalization process as akin to playing a game; he spent too much time online analyzing and researching. Frank believed, as a new convert to Islam, he had to be the best. As an American, he also felt the need to be over-the-top with

respect to Islam, meaning it was necessary for him to be more dedicated than individuals born into the religion. He came to view himself as a jihadi and considered himself to be part of a more elite group within the larger Islamic community, which appealed to him at the time and provided him with a sense of belonging. While in prison, a therapist told Frank he had an impulsive personality. Frank recognized he had a strong personality, which bordered on obsessive compulsive and when that aspect of him took over he wanted to see things through to the end. He believed some of his personality traits proved to be negatives with respect to his evolution into radical Islam. As a jihadi, he considered himself to be part of a more elite group within the larger Islamic community, which was appealing to his personality and provided him with a sense of belonging.

In another example, a self-described leader of an anarchist group, George, who was convicted on state and federal charges for vandalizing a variety of infrastructure-related properties and for illegally possessing a chemical weapon, provided the BAU with insight into his background. George dropped out of high school around ninth grade, viewing school as uninteresting and the curriculum beneath him. Additionally, he rejected the authority of his teachers. In adulthood, George admitted to being more anti-authority than anti-government or anti-establishment. He felt he was born that way, and held long-standing disdain for authority, viewing authority as always as the enemy. George claimed he followed the rules if he viewed them as useful. George described his relationship with law enforcement, as with all authority, as respectful but adversarial. He believed he had ended up in prison due to a "poor choice of associations." George admitted he might have felt some feeling of power associated with his criminal activities; however, he was driven primarily by a desire to be amused and entertained. During his "adventures," he used a police scanner to determine where the police were located and to assess the results of his efforts.

Need for Belonging

In the BAU's experience, lacking a sense of belonging and feelings of isolation and alienation represent foundational catalysts in some individuals' introduction to violent extremist beliefs. Similarly, relationship instability and the loss of stabilizing influences can result in a person's search for belonging in negative spaces. Seeking connection, particularly in the online environment, may result in exposure to extremist propaganda touting promises of brotherhood and belonging, encounters with like-minded individuals offering acceptance and empowerment within a collective, and opportunities for association with members of extremist groups. The following examples highlight how the desire for belonging or destabilization due to the loss of a relationship may impact an individual's beliefs and actions in the context of violent extremism.

Howard, who was charged with criminal activity relating to his attempted travel to Syria to join ISIS, attributed being misguided, young, and not knowing better as factors contributing to his vulnerability to radicalization. Additionally, his upbringing, his need for a sense of belonging, and his desire to feel successful in life played a role. He was not deeply rooted in ideology. Howard and his close friend became radicalized at the same time. The internet was their teacher. Howard watched mainstream and radical Islamic videos on YouTube. He believed people were drawn to terrorist groups like ISIS because they were gullible and "lacking stuff in their lives," like "brotherhood, success, and other needs." In hindsight, Howard viewed himself as gullible and in search of brotherhood and success. He realized he should have sought to fill those needs by focusing on his job, going to school, or seeking counseling.

Another radicalized male aligning himself with ISIS ideology, Ian, who pled guilty to possession of a firearm by a convicted felon and possession of an unregistered destructive device, identified drug abuse and the end of a long-term relationship as catalysts for his foray into radical Islam. He felt isolated and depressed after the break-up with his girlfriend and looked to the Internet for "outreach." Ian became fascinated by mass attacks and consumed information related to acts of targeted violence. He watched ISIS recruitment videos and found the music in the videos soothing. While he claimed he did not seriously consider traveling

He was not motivated by Islamic extremist ideology, and he did not consider himself Muslim. Rather, he felt hurt, alone, and suicidal.

overseas to join ISIS, he acknowledged searching the price of an airline ticket to an overseas location. Additionally, he sent e-mails to a magazine affiliated with a foreign terrorist organization. Ian characterized himself as "radicalized" after he located a magazine article on how to make a bomb. Around the same time, he purchased an AK-47 with the help of a friend. Ian bought the weapon thinking he might use it to kill his ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend. He claimed he built a bomb out of curiosity, and he buried the bomb and rifle in a state park when he learned law enforcement was looking for him. According to Ian, he was not motivated by Islamic extremist ideology, and he did not consider himself Muslim. Rather, he felt hurt, alone, and suicidal.

Identity Seeking

In the radicalization context, identity-related considerations may be reflected in multiple ways, to include identity as an individual or within the framework of a relationship or group. Much like a lack of belonging, lacking a strong, stable, sense of self may signal an unmet need which some individuals seek to fill through identification with violent extremism. Individuals who feel hopeless or irrelevant may find empowerment and a renewed sense of self through affiliation with a violent extremist group. Additionally, a destabilizing event such as a loss related to employment, relationship status, or financial security, may yield a personal crisis. That crisis may shake an individual's sense of identity or beliefs, resulting in a cognitive opening, or increased susceptibility to the adoption of extremist views (Wiktorowicz, 2004). Kruglanski et al., (2018) posited that an individual's search for significance and meaning following negative or stressful circumstances may result in an attraction to violent extremism. Loss of significance may be derived from a personal experience or from identification with a disparaged group perceived to have been humiliated and disrespected by others. When an individual's identity is tied strongly to a relationship with another individual, relational identification may play a pivotal role in the individual's exposure to and adoption of extremist beliefs. The beliefs and actions of a spouse, partner, or close friend, whether intentional or not, may be a driving factor in the individual's radicalization process. Identity seeking is particularly relevant for juveniles interested in violent extremism (for more information on juvenile violent extremists, see **Section Five**).

The BAU has noted an identity-related trend across some cases involving individuals who were foreign-born immigrants or US-born individuals of first generation-immigrant parents. In the BAU's experience, adherence to violent extremism can be, in part, due to an outcome of internal and external conflicts related to difficulty reconciling ethnicity, heritage, and religious beliefs within the context of Western culture. Similarly, Veldhuis and Staun (2009) hypothesized that identity crises among young immigrant Muslims could be one of the key social causes of extremism.

John, who admitted to involvement in a conspiracy to travel to Afghanistan to fight alongside al-Qa'ida and the Taliban against U.S. and allied forces, described how seeking to connect with his African heritage initiated his journey to radicalization. When John was approximately 16 years old, he fell in love with a girl; however, his family's religious beliefs caused problems with his relationship. He began questioning whether the family's religious beliefs were the truth. John developed an interest in black history, to include studying religions practiced by his African ancestors. Through this process, John pursued an interest in Islam. His

search for stronger connections to his African identity opened the door for what he described as indoctrination at a Salafi mosque. Upon reflection, John viewed his attraction to Islam as resulting from what he characterized as a misguided belief that Islam was Africa-based.

Group Identity

Establishing identity within a group may impact an individual's radicalization process. Identity movements tend to become extreme when the in-group adopts hostile, dehumanizing attitudes towards an out-group or groups (Berger, 2018; Borum, 2003). In this progression, group dynamics may play an important role in lowering the barriers to committing acts of violence. Individuals who cede individual agency to a violent extremist group may be more readily inclined in the group context to view violence as justified and more willing to actively use violence as a method to affect societal or political change. Within the communications of individuals of concern for committing acts of violence, the BAU often encounters "us versus them" thinking and labeling of an outgroup as "bad" or "evil" in the name of an extremist ideology.

The BAU has observed that violent extremist groups are not necessarily as tightly woven as others perceive them to be. The level of commitment to the group identity often varies among its members. Moreover, the BAU has found that some extremists, to include some who have a strong predilection for violent action, do not thrive in group settings and may perceive the group's commitment to, and action on behalf of, a particular cause as inadequate. Considerations related to group dynamics are highlighted by the following examples.

Association with the group gave him a sense of his ancestry, identity, history, and purpose.

Kevin, a member of an African-American separatist extremist group, was sentenced to prison on charges of planning and conspiring to ignite explosive devices during anti-law enforcement protests and procuring firearms for convicted felons. While attending an anthropology course in college, Kevin was exposed to colonialism which led him to conduct additional research online, view YouTube content, and eventually conspiratorial videos. Kevin told the BAU the online exposure was instrumental in influencing him, as he was an impressionable young man. He felt, through the online videos that he was witnessing the pain of vulnerable people being taken away and the tyranny of oppressive governments. During this time, he questioned his role in life and where he was headed. His inner conflict led him to

contemplate taking his own life. He had the underlying belief that he was going to die soon and if so, why bother. Unable to move ahead on his own and feeling hopeless, powerless, and afraid, Kevin empowered himself by associating with others who he viewed as more knowledgeable than himself. The pursuit of power and purpose resulted in his association with an African-American separatist group espousing violent extremism. Before group involvement, he viewed himself as just black, oppressed, poor, and a slave to those circumstances. Association with the group gave him a sense of his ancestry, identity, history, and purpose.

Luke, who was convicted along with others of conspiring to acquire money from a foreign government in exchange for an offer to commit terrorist acts in the United States, described growing up with what he perceived as a religious organization, which was embedded in his neighborhood. Older kids in the organization were viewed as neighborhood heroes who protected younger kids from bullies. Luke joined the group when he was 14 years old. When arrested, Luke looked to his organization for help, believing those who had told him they would "have his back." In retrospect, he felt they did not follow through with their promises. Luke acknowledged having "anger in his heart" and being mad at himself. He felt he got himself in trouble trying to impress other members of the organization when his family should have been his focus.

Mark, who espoused anarchist extremist views and pleaded guilty to charges of conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction, knowingly attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction, and attempting to damage property with explosives, recalled supporting anarchism since he was 15 years old. He maintained long-standing issues with perceived police brutality and abuse of authority; and claimed to have studied the use of violent tactics against authority for years. He had always recognized the inequity of a select few enjoying all the power and controlling all the money. Mark believed law enforcement's job was to keep the inequitable system in place and to operate as its first line of defense. Over the years, his ideology progressed through phases of liberalism to communism, socialism, and ultimately anarchism. Mark learned about anarchism mostly through online readings and personal research. He left his home when he was 18 years old and moved into an "anarchist house." He noted this was a dark time in his life, describing himself as a "wayward kid," a serious alcoholic who was struggling to get by and trying to find a job. Eventually, Mark joined the Occupy movement, which he viewed as the first mass movement where advocates successfully took their cause into the streets. For Mark, the growing feeling among members of the movement was that violence was necessary to effect change. In his opinion, violence carried out by the group was in response to aggressive and oppressive crackdowns by authority towards the Occupy movement.

Violence as a Primary Motivator

Online research is a very common mechanism by which individuals are exposed to a multitude of potential radicalizing influences, to include extremist propaganda, violence, gore, and information related to previous mass attacks/attackers. The BAU has assessed in some cases that an individual's identification with a violent extremist group or an extremist ideology appeared to originate with a fixation on violence and gore rather than an alignment with, or understanding of, a group's ideological beliefs. For some individuals, the need to justify the desire to self-harm or harm others may be among the primary drivers of radicalization. For example, death as a martyr for the sake of an extremist cause viewed as greater than oneself may provide some individuals with a perceived religiously, socially, honorably, or heroically acceptable mechanism by which to overcome the fear of death and loathsomeness of killing (Borum, 2003; Joiner, 2014). The following example highlights an individual who found commonality with the writings and motivations of a violent extremist attacker and felt inspired to emulate the mass attack in the U.S.

Neil, who pleaded guilty to making false statements to the FBI in relation to social media posts encouraging a reenactment of an overseas terrorism attack on U.S. soil, described a history of depression and panic attacks, claiming he was first suicidal at approximately nine years old and many times thereafter. Neil used a wide variety of drugs and alcohol. While a juvenile, he was detained after a fellow student overheard Neil say he wanted to shoot a girl at school. Later he was detained again for a sex crime involving lewd and lascivious behavior. Neil wanted to join the military from a young age, desiring to be an infantryman doing "soldier type stuff, violent type stuff." He contacted a military recruiter and was turned down due to his criminal history and mental health issues. According to Neil, he had always been drawn to violence. He wanted to hurt people who were the enemy and to fight those who wanted to hurt the country. Neil described shifting from across the political spectrum to fascist views as he aged. He agreed with the tenets of fascism, and social media was how he "really got involved." He told the BAU that at one point, all of his social media connections were Nazis. An online friend introduced him to conspiracy theories and got him interested in politics. During this time, Neil's life involved little more than sleeping, smoking marijuana, and viewing online content related to conspiracy theories, politics, and pornography. The friend sent him a link alerting him about an overseas attack on mosques. Neil watched the attack video and read the attacker's manifesto in its entirety twice. He viewed the content as aligning with his way of thinking. In particular, the idea that violence was the solution to these problems resonated with him. Inspired by the attack, Neil planned to meet up with his friend, attack a mosque and police stations, and then hide to avoid consequences.

The Role of Trauma

During the 2021 Symposium on Radicalization, Disengagement, and Deradicalization, the BAU was told personal stories by former violent extremists pertaining to their individual journeys into radicalization. In hearing one story after another, several consistent and compelling common threads emerged. One was the inner-kept secret of trauma, many of whom had experienced prior to developing an interest in violent extremism. More specifically, several of the formers admitted to being victims of trauma originating from physical and/or sexual abuse perpetrated by a trusted authority figure early in their lives.

As described throughout this monograph, the BAU has long taken an individualized approach to understanding the process of radicalization. To hear trauma was often involved in such idiosyncratic journeys towards violent extremism was insightful. In examining the connection between trauma and violent extremism, Simi, et al., (2015) found empirically validated non-ideological risk factors can accumulate over time, beginning in childhood, and can serve to push the individual toward a variety of violent behaviors including violent extremism. The same body of work showed a large portion of violent extremists shared similar backgrounds that involved childhood maltreatment and other factors more commonly noted in members of conventional street gangs. In addition to trauma, Simi, et al., (2015) revealed a variety of mental health issues were also at play resulting in the following: 57% reported experiencing mental health problems proceeding or during their extremist involvement; 62% had attempted suicide or seriously considered suicide; 59% reported a family history of mental health problems; 72% reported experiencing problems with alcohol and/or drugs; 64% reported experimenting with alcohol or drugs before the age of 16; 58% reported truancy issues; and 54% reported academic failures such as being expelled or dropping out of school (Simi, et al., 2015). Seeking out violent extremism may be a maladaptive coping mechanism to adapt and overcome a life of trauma, adversity, and unmet needs that lacked prosocial alternatives (Lewis et al., 2021). Law enforcement and practitioners are, therefore, encouraged to incorporate a trauma-informed approach when investigating individuals who gravitate towards violent extremist groups and their activities. A trauma-informed approach involves acknowledging the widespread impact of trauma and actively working to avoid re-traumatization by prioritizing safety, trust, and collaboration, particularly within contexts where individuals may have experienced traumatic events.

RADICALIZATION: OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The BAU's operational experience and research informs practical guidance for investigators and professionals who in the course of their work may encounter individuals espousing violent extremist views. Taken together, the discourse and case examples provided throughout this section underscore the individualized nature of why and how radicalization occurs and the complex array of push, pull, and personal factors that contribute to the radicalization process.

The following points are offered as key operational considerations:

Exploration may not equate to radicalization.

Indications that an individual has been exposed to or is exploring one or multiple violent extremist ideologies does not equate automatically to an assessment that the individual is radicalized. Likewise, evidence of online and/or in-person associations with radicalized individuals should not be the sole basis for determining that an individual has been radicalized or is radicalizing. When assessing whether, and to what extent, an individual has adopted the view that ideologically motivated violence is justified, the BAU encourages investigators to consider the time, intensity of effort, and cadence of an individual's efforts.

How long has the individual been engaging with violent extremist material?

How much time, energy, and effort are being dedicated to violent extremist-related content and activities?

To what extent does the individual appear fixated on or immersed in violent extremist content as opposed to exploration of violent extremist material intermingled sporadically among other content, interests, and activities?

Understand the individual beyond the extremist beliefs.

The many case examples included herein underscore the need for a holistic approach to establish the best understanding of how and why an individual became radicalized. The greater an investigative team's understanding of the potential push, pull, and personal factors contributing to an individual's view that ideologically motivated violence is justified, the better positioned the team is to assess the level of radicalization and the potential threat of violence, and to therefore devise an individualized threat management plan. Different intervention strategies are needed to address the individual for whom violence and gore are the focal point, the individual who is filling unmet needs of belonging and identity, and the pure ideologue whose predominant driver is assessed to be a strict adherence to a violent extremist ideology. The BAU encourages investigators to broaden the aperture of information toward a comprehensive understanding of the individual's statements, behaviors, and life circumstances.

Beyond communications and actions in support of a violent extremist ideology, what else is occurring in the individual's life?

What personal circumstances and characteristics, risk factors, grievance-based factors, radicalizing influences, and protective factors may have or may be impacting the individual's radicalization process?

Understanding both online and in real life (IRL) communications and behavior.

Indications of radicalization often manifest in statements, materials consumed and/or produced, and relationships and associations (Richards et al., 2019). It is vital that investigative teams gain as much insight as possible into what an individual is doing, not just what he/she is saying. An individual's online communications and activities represent significant considerations when assessing radicalization to violent extremist beliefs. That said, establishing a comprehensive view necessitates understanding those online activities within the context of the individual's on-the-ground realities and behaviors.

What is the individual communicating and how are they behaving online?

To what extent do those communications and behaviors align with and/or contradict the individual's circumstances, statements, and behavior IRL?

Radicalization may not lead to mobilization.

It is important to remember that it is entirely possible to radicalize and not commit violence or break any laws in the process. The majority of those who view ideologically motivated violence as justified never enact violence, nor do they mobilize in other ways (Horgan, 2014). Much like radicalization, the mobilization process is complex and highly individualized. The BAU cautions that the potential for violence may exists even if an individual is assessed to espouse an uninformed or misguided understanding of an extremist belief system. It is important for investigators and professionals to be aware of indications that an individual may be transitioning from thinking violence is justified to acting on those beliefs.

What personal circumstances and characteristics, risk factors, unmet needs, stressors, grievance-based factors, triggers, and protective factors may impact the individual's transition from thought to action?

In addition to communications, what observable behaviors are indicative of the individual's capability and intent to enact ideologically motivated violence?

MOBILIZATION TO VIOLENCE

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the FBI made prevention of future terrorist attacks its number one priority. Since then, considerable resources have been put toward understanding the process of radicalization, as well as the process of attempting to conduct an attack (i.e., mobilization). The FBI is certainly concerned about individuals or groups appearing to radicalize toward a violent extremist ideology since engagement with terrorist and violent extremist content may lead to violent tendencies or a decision that violence is the only viable solution to their plight.

The FBI is bedrock in its mission to uphold the Constitution of the United States, which solidifies the freedom of each citizen to believe in what they choose. In protecting our communities, one of the most critical assessments is whether a person is mobilizing to commit an act of targeted violence. The BAU often combined operational experience and research to assist investigators to determine whether an individual is on a pathway toward violent action, and if so, how close they are to carrying out that action.

Targeted Violence Concepts with Utility in Counterterrorism Investigations

The BAU has significant experience assessing and managing the non-ideologically motivated offender who may target a workplace, an intimate partner, or any location that has some connection to their personalized grievance. The BAU also has significant experience in addressing potential ideologically motivated offenders who have radicalized and decided to act on their violent extremist beliefs. This combined experience has led the BAU to conclude there are more similarities than differences between non-ideologically motivated offenders and ideologically motivated offenders, particularly in terms of the type of violence and the pre-attack behaviors they engage in.

Categorization of Violence – Similarity of Offenders

The BAU often describes two types of violence in relation to individuals of concern: affective and predatory. Affective violence is impulsive or reactive. It is generally charged with emotion and in the mindset of the offender is a defensive response to a perceived imminent threat (Amman, et al., 2017). In contrast to this, predatory violence is planned and purposeful (Meloy, 2012).

When analyzing a non-ideological person of concern, the BAU assesses the potential of both affective and predatory violence. However, when managing the threat of ideologically motivated violence, the BAU is primarily focused on predatory violence. The BAU's research has shown that past offenders who went on to commit mass attacks did not "snap." Without fail, the majority of offenders plan and prepare for violence for at least a brief period before conducting an attack (Silver et al., 2018). The growing body of research on contemporary threat assessment and management supports this concept as well.

Like mass attackers, violent extremists consider, plan, and prepare for their attacks. The "consideration" component of the violent extremist may start during the radicalization process but continues into the murky boundary between radicalization and mobilization. The BAU considers planning and preparation for an attack to be a part of "mobilization" for the violent extremist. Like the opportunity for investigators to identify and observe the budding mass attacker, the period of planning and preparation is an opportunity to identify and observe violent extremists moving toward action.

Different Fields - Potential Solutions

A growing body of research and practice since the 1990s has resulted in the genesis and growth of the field of targeted-violence prevention and threat assessment and threat management (TATM). The high-profile stalking and murder of television actress Rebecca Schaeffer by an obsessed, mentally ill fan, in Los Angeles, California in 1989 largely kickstarted the impetus to address potential violent offenders prior to them acting. The Exceptional Case Study Project, a landmark study on the behavior and motivation of assassins conducted by Robert Fein, PhD. and Secret Service Agent Bryan Vossekuil (1999) determined that predatory offenders traverse up a pathway on their way to consummating their attack. Today, a refined version of Fein and Vossekuil's methodology is seen in the model known as the Pathway to Intended Violence (PIV), which includes six stages, starting with a grievance and ending in the attack (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998).

The BAU's operational experience and research has identified numerous warning behaviors, risk factors, and mitigating factors that contribute to an assessment of the level of concern for violence that a specific person poses, a process otherwise known as a threat assessment. Based on that threat assessment, threat management strategies must be put in place to prevent the person from conducting a targeted violence attack. These concepts, along with the use of structured professional judgement (SPJ) tools to aid in assessment and management, form the bedrock of modern-day threat assessment and management. These industry best practices are utilized by the BAU during consultations with law enforcement partners to address non-ideologically motivated and ideologically motivated offenders and prevent them from enacting violence.

The need to assess whether a non-ideological person of concern is displaying behaviors indicating movement towards targeted violence is the same when assessing whether a potential violent extremist is mobilizing. Both non-ideologically motivated and ideologically motivated

offenders often come to the attention of law enforcement due to concerning behaviors they display before a crime has been committed; resulting in a need for a threat management strategy that sometimes excludes an arrest. Since this is often the case for both types of offenders regardless of the presence or absence of ideology, it stands to reason that the solution may be the same as well. On this basis, coupled with the unit's operational experience, the BAU has found the successful management of non-ideologically motivated offenders through the practice of threat management is equally applicable to the violent extremist. This observation has led the BAU to apply threat assessment and management concepts and tools, widely used in the targeted violence prevention industry today, successfully towards counterterrorism investigations.

A key difference between offenders who went on to commit an act of targeted violence and those who did not was feelings of humiliation.

One risk factor that may be shared among ideologically motivated and non-ideologically motivated offenders is the feeling of humiliation. Humiliation is a sense of being publicly victimized and exposed to be somehow deficient, which can then lead to feelings of shame and anger (McCauley, 2017). McCauley (2017) points out that humiliation is also examined when attempting to understand the origins of asymmetric conflicts, especially conflicts involving terrorism.

In one study by the BAU, it was found that one key difference between offenders who went on to commit an act of targeted violence versus individuals who did not was the feeling of humiliation (Gibson et al., 2020). Moreover, when a timeframe of the event could be determined, 69% of those targeted violence offenders examined had experienced a perceived humiliating event within two years of the attack. The BAU has also found that what is perceived as humiliating to one person may not be seen as humiliating to another. Therefore, law enforcement personnel should take note that while the person's feelings or reactions may seem disproportionate to the situation, it is their perceptions that matter. Further, it is paramount that law enforcement and practitioners work not to inadvertently create a humiliating event through the threat assessment and management process.

Pathway to Intended Violence

The theoretical framework of the PIV is a foundational lens in which the BAU addresses extremist actions by ideologically motivated violent extremists and non-ideologically motivated mass attackers. The PIV model consists of the following six stages: grievance, ideation, research and planning, preparation, breach, and attack (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Fein & Vossekuil, 1998). The importance of identifying whether a potential violence extremist is displaying warning behaviors consistent with research on targeted violence, to include PIV behaviors, cannot be understated. Warning behaviors provide key indicators as to the level of imminence associated with a potential attack. The consideration, planning, and preparatory steps that are integral to an attack, by either type of attacker, are also integral to the PIV. In comparing the PIV to the concepts of radicalization and mobilization associated with violent extremists, the grievance and violent ideation stages tend to correlate to the radicalization process, and the planning and preparation through the attack stage correlate to mobilization.

When seeking to protect communities from acts of targeted violence, law enforcement and their partners should focus their efforts on individuals who appear to be researching, planning, and/or preparing to enact violence. On this basis—from a triage, focus, and urgency perspective — it is key for counterterrorism practitioners to assess, as quickly as possible, where the person is on the planning and preparation continuum. The BAU appreciates, however, that many concerning, radicalized individuals, who show no visible steps of planning and preparation, may need to be addressed and investigated promptly. Whether planning and preparing, or simply radicalizing, it is important to assess the pace at which the person is moving toward violent extremism and the duration of their interest. Is the individual rapidly seeking out and consuming extremist knowledge? Has the individual been radicalizing for a significant period, which may suggest an entrenched mindset and belief system that limits the number of mitigative options? The individual may need greater attention and investigative resources if the pace and duration are elevated.

MOBILIZATION: OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Similarity in pre-attack behaviors.

Non-ideologically motivated offenders and ideologically motivated offenders have been shown by the BAU and other research to display similar behaviors in their process of moving toward a targeted violence attack. These behaviors often include actions in line with the Pathway to Intended Violence model (Calhoun & Weston, 2003). The research-backed and validated principles of TATM, widely used to address non-ideologically motivated offenders, can and should be used to address potential violent extremists, especially when the option to arrest is not available.

What information has the investigation collected regarding the person's potential research, planning, and/or preparation for violence?
What information may be available to assist in identifying these actions?

What concerning behaviors has the person displayed to those around them that may indicate they are moving toward committing an attack of targeted violence?

Duration and intensity.

Whether a person is progressing toward violence with visible planning and preparation, or is in the process of radicalizing, it is important to note any changes in behavior and the intensity of that change. Key factors to assess are the frequency of the behavior (i.e., how often is it occurring), the level of intensity (i.e., with what degree of strength, energy, or feeling), and duration of such behavior (i.e., how long has the behavior of concern been occurring).

When did the person first become interested in violent extremist ideology? Has their level of interest changed since that time?

Does the person appear to be fixated on violent extremism, meaning they are preoccupied with it to the point of social or occupational deterioration, or are they able to focus on other topics?

DOMESTIC FIGHTER VERSUS FOREIGN FIGHTER

The BAU is often consulted regarding potential violent extremists who desire to mobilize by traveling overseas from the United States to join a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) in an overseas conflict. Often, intervention by law enforcement or the individual's own low capability, especially if a juvenile, will prevent their travel but permit the person to remain free within the community. This situation can be problematic for law enforcement who is responsible for managing this seemingly radicalized violent extremist who may have attempted to mobilize in some capacity. The key question practitioners are generally confronted with at that point is the following: what level of concern does the person pose to conduct a violent extremist attack in the U.S. if they are unable to actualize their goal of traveling and joining the FTO?

Thomas Hegghammer (2013) began to answer this question by examining the variation of choice of attack locations by Western Islamic extremists. Hegghammer employs the term "domestic fighter" for an individual who tries to perpetrate violence in the West; and "foreign fighter" for someone who leaves the West to receive training and/or fight somewhere else (Hegghammer, 2013). The BAU's operational experience aligns with Hegghamer's findings, and the terms "domestic fighter" and "foreign fighter" are used hereafter to complement the work he started.

While goals of jihad and martyrdom can both be achieved as a foreign fighter or a domestic fighter, the BAU has observed the motivations of the violent extremist to carrying out either action can overlap or be quite distinct. With foreign fighters, the BAU has found one of the primary motivators for travel is seeking a sense of belonging. The person is endeavoring to travel, often with great difficulty, to join a group that they perceive shares their same ideology and will appreciate their social worth. The personal unmet needs for belonging, further fueled by their romanticized fantasy of how that need will be addressed upon arrival, help drive the violent extremist to embark on this journey. For domestic fighters, the BAU has observed that the individual's personality may play a more dominant role when choosing to enact violence in the homeland. More specifically, the presence of personality traits such as narcissism and grandiosity appear to predominate. Notably, such traits are often seen in potential non-ideologically motivated offenders as well.

The BAU finds that FTOs will often attempt to persuade their prospective adherents to not travel to them, but, instead, stay in place and conduct an attack domestically. FTOs have varying levels of success in this regard and the BAU acknowledges the impact that may have on a violent extremist's plans. In this section, the BAU is describing the decision framework specific to the individual violent extremist. The BAU opines this framework consists of several factors that should be considered when analyzing the level of concern for potential travel to join an FTO versus remaining in the U.S. and conducting a domestic attack. These factors include but are not limited to physical barriers, psychological barriers, how quickly the individual can change plans, and whether group dynamics are involved.

Aspirational Travel: Physical Barriers

As mentioned above, the BAU's research and operational experience have shown that violent extremists consider, plan, and prepare for violence, just as non-ideologically motivated offenders do. It is important to consider the specific steps that foreign fighters and domestic fighters must go through to accomplish their goals. The two processes are quite different.

At a minimum, an aspirational foreign fighter needs to:

1. Identify an FTO they are interested in joining.
2. Make positive contact with a representative of the FTO and/or recruiter who will receive and handle them in or near the overseas territory in which the FTO operates.
3. Possess the required money, supplies, and proper travel documents for a legitimate departure from the United States, generally to Europe, the Middle East, or Asia.

Delving deeper, the first two requirements can be completed on the Internet. Based on BAU's research, the positive contact with a representative of the FTO may come from pre-existing familial relationships. While the BAU acknowledges the process of contacting a legitimate and competent terrorist recruiter is not simple and is often a critical juncture point for many who wish to travel, the accessibility afforded by the Internet has made this possible even for a juvenile who has never traveled overseas and is waging jihad from the safety and comfort of his family's home. The BAU's experience has also shown that minimal finances are needed to achieve this goal and are often provided by unsuspecting or incapable guardians (see **Appendix B** for term definitions) or through a legitimate part-time job. Pre-existing passports, often present in homes of recent immigrants to the U.S. who travel overseas regularly, can make it easier to travel.

In contrast, a domestic fighter, at a minimum, needs to:

1. Identify a target and select a method of attack.
2. Procure the weapon or materials needed to conduct the chosen method of attack.
3. When applicable, train with the weapon/firearms and/or build the explosives clandestinely.
4. Conduct surveillance/breach the attack site, which at times may not be necessary but is an important step impacting the likelihood of a successful attack.

Like the foreign fighter, the first requirement to perpetrate a domestic attack can be accomplished with relative ease where the violent extremist can ideate, research, and conduct some planning all from the comfort of home. However, steps two and three present numerous hurdles depending on the age of the person and their chosen method of attack. The discipline

needed to maintain secrecy is key to conducting a successful attack. Would-be attackers are aware of the risk of detection by bystanders and law enforcement and will take steps, with varying levels of success, to keep their behaviors hidden. It is also important to note, planned attacks utilizing a bladed weapon or vehicle can dramatically lessen the training and acquisition requirements imposed on the individual. Additionally, those families with weapons already present in the home, whether purportedly locked away or not, increase the concern of the violent extremist using those weapons for an attack. Therefore, it is key for violence prevention practitioners to assess potential violent extremists' access to weapons within the home and from their social circle.

Planned attacks utilizing a bladed weapon or vehicle can dramatically lessen the training and acquisition requirements imposed on the subject.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

The BAU has found that a certain amount of confidence and capability is required to either join a FTO overseas or conduct a domestic attack. Factors such as age, life experience of the individual, and the method of support are significant factors that impact the likelihood of the individual being successful in their plans. As such, law enforcement and practitioners must pay attention to the violent extremist's personal attributes and characteristics, just as much as the their behavior, to delineate their trajectory.

Psychological: Foreign Fighters

From the BAU's perspective, the psychological barriers impacting the overt steps that need to be taken by a foreign fighter, even a juvenile, can be relatively low. Many violent extremists, to include juveniles, can acquire travel documentation and financial resources, head to the airport, and board a commercial aircraft with a low concern of being apprehended. While the aspirational foreign fighter has moved one step closer to committing the legal offense of material support by traveling to the airport with the intent of traveling overseas to join a FTO, their mindset is likely comforted by the plausible deniability of their true intent. They may perceive themselves shielded by the outward appearance of conducting legitimate travel activity like people do every day. Additionally, for someone who has experience traveling

internationally, the fear of the unknown is somewhat removed. Such experience, coupled with secure thoughts stemming from the belief that all that is needed upon arrival is to physically meet the recruiter who will handle the rest, can make travel an attractive option to pursue.

In many cases with aspiring foreign fighters there is a naive expectation that belonging and adventure will come without the price of further accountability. Magnifying the perceived ease of traveling, as opposed to conducting a domestic attack, is the expectation the recruiter and the FTO will take responsibility for target selection, weapons procurement, training, and planning. The abrogation of these significant responsibilities, especially for a violent extremist who is lower in capability, lowers the psychological barriers towards this method of violent extremist action.

Psychological: Domestic Fighters

In contrast to a foreign fighter, there are relatively significant psychological barriers that may impact the overt steps needed to be become a domestic fighter. While target selection and general planning can be accomplished over the internet, the procurement of equipment and weapons require overt actions by an aspiring domestic attacker. These activities require the individual to interact with external parties, whether it be buying a gun from a reputable or irreputable seller or acquiring the precursors for an explosive. Not only do these activities increase the individual's behavioral footprint and potential detection by law enforcement, but they also require individuals to take physical action and do something. This overt step is the first psychological hurdle they must be able to navigate on their own that is not present for an aspiring foreign fighter. Hence, the desire to conduct a terrorist attack in the homeland with a firearm or explosive provides an additional psychological barrier the person needs to navigate.

This goal of creating fear, coupled with the desire by many to outdo previous attackers and achieve notoriety, often leads to a domestic fighter attempting an attack with more lethality and shock value.

The BAU appreciates the concern regarding the use of a bladed weapon or vehicle in furtherance of an attack because they are readily available to most of the public. While the risk associated with these weapons being used in an attack cannot be eliminated entirely, the BAU notes the classical definition of terrorism generally encapsulates the requirement to cause fear in the civilian population or in an effort to coerce the government. This goal of creating fear, coupled with the desire by many to outdo previous attackers and achieve notoriety, often leads to a domestic fighter attempting an attack with more lethality and shock value.

Historically, such attacks involving firearms and/or explosives met more of those requirements than knife and vehicle attacks. The FBI's Lone Offender study revealed 67% of attackers used firearms, 27% used explosives, 6% used airplane or vehicle, and 4% used a blade (Richards et al., 2019). However, in recent times, the use of a vehicle as the primary weapon to perpetrate acts of mass violence appears to be on the rise (Crimando, 2017).

When reflecting on the post-attack analyses of previous violent extremists, a vehicle was often used simply as a mode of transportation to get the domestic fighter to the attack location. The evolution of violent extremist methods to utilize a vehicle as the primary weapon for an attack is concerning, especially since this tactic can increase the potential of a domestic fighter to enact multiple stages of an attack using a vehicle, explosives, firearms, and/or a bladed weapon before law enforcement personnel can successfully engage the perpetrator(s).

As this mode of attack grows more lethal, evolves in sophistication, and demand greater media coverage—especially during celebratory events in the U.S.—the objective of inflicting fear and shock among the American public has the potential to match that of a traditional mass shooting. Law enforcement must be ready to take on this increasing trend.

It is important to acknowledge there is a finality associated with carrying out an attack in the homeland. The aspirational domestic attacker generally understands that they face two outcomes: they will either die in the commission of the attack or be arrested by law enforcement. While the potential for escape exists, the amount of law enforcement resources applied to a domestic attack significantly reduces the chance of an extended state of evading U.S. law enforcement and the American public. Simply put, a domestic fighter must be prepared to die or be ready to face severe consequences.

When weighing the options of death or incarceration for themselves, violent extremists often consider and prepare for the impact their final actions will have on their family and friends. This is much more significant when deciding to conduct a domestic attack. Arguably, a domestic attack will have significantly more impact on an attacker's social circle than traveling overseas to participate in a regional conflict where there are no guarantees media coverage will reveal their involvement in terrorist activities. Comparatively, the BAU has found both the physical and psychological barriers an individual must overcome are higher for aspiring domestic fighters than aspiring foreign fighters. The BAU hypothesizes this may be why more individuals attempt to travel as opposed to conduct an attack domestically.

Time is On Our Side

Most aspiring violent extremists supporting an FTO are focused on either traveling or conducting an attack in the U.S, but not both simultaneously. That focus, which is required to successfully accomplish either form of extremist action, is generally all-encompassing and requires thoughtful planning, preparation, and resources. As mentioned previously, the BAU has found there are significant similarities between ideologically and non-ideologically motivated attackers, particularly when traversing the stages of the pathway to intended violence. This pathway model provides an opportunity for detection and observation for those mobilizing to violence, while also providing a window of opportunity to observe those who are modifying their method of extremist action due to an impediment placed in their path. In other words, just as would-be school shooters and mass shooters do not "snap" psychologically, leading them to attack, violent extremists do not "snap" ideologically to a new form of terrorist action. Hence, when a violent extremist is disrupted by law enforcement from their original goal (e.g., traveling overseas to join an FTO), it is less likely they are prepared to immediately enact an alternative plan of carrying out an attack domestically. For many violent extremists, they have been ideating and fantasizing for an extended period of time about the adventures that await them. An unexpected and stark realization that they will not actualize their plan after an extensive amount of time spent ideating can cause some violent extremists to pause, question themselves, and question the identity they were forging. Additionally, they will have to begin to plan for a new method of mobilization if they are to continue their pursuit towards violent extremist action. Such alterations to one's behavior require time and will ultimately become detectable. New planning and physical preparations must be made, while recalibrating their internal goals and expectations to ensure success, especially if their initial plans were thwarted unexpectedly.

Group Dynamics

History provides numerous examples of individuals doing things in groups that they would otherwise be unlikely to participate in on their own. In the BAU's operational experience, being part of a violent extremist group can significantly influence an individual's journey from radicalization to mobilization.

In one example, Oscar, who traveled overseas with the intention of joining an Islamic extremist insurgent group to fight against a conventional army, described the following process by which he recruited four additional members into the group. Oscar first approached the individual whom he believed he was closest with. Once he confirmed this individual's commitment to travel, they approached the next individual together to ask him to join the group, following this pattern for each additional member of the group. After approach, each individual took generally one week to make their decision to join the group. The last person asked to the join the group was arguably the most religious of all five members and had the most promising secular future in terms of acquired education and promising job prospects. Oscar told the BAU that he felt some of the others in the group likely would not have traveled if he had not asked them to go.

In the case of the last individual to join Oscar's group, his radicalization to mobilization was driven by a bottom-up process. The BAU assesses this individual was faced with not only peer pressure from the other four committed members, but self-pressure to uphold his own image within the group. This individual embraced the image of being the most pious and knowledgeable about their religion. Moreover, the act of traveling and joining a jihadi group within the Islamic extremism world was considered the highest endeavor one could do religiously. While it is clear this individual participated of his own free will and was radicalized enough to take this step, the BAU opines the threat to this individual's reputation and identity —as the most religious member of the group—was in jeopardy if he did not commit to travel with the rest of the members. In the group setting, the threat or fear of humiliation and shame played an important role in his decision-making process. This resulted in him looking beyond the opportunity costs associated with traveling, which meant forfeiting the potential to have a successful and high paying career in secular society in order to maintain his social identity.

TRAVELING VERSUS ATTACKING: OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Violent extremists generally are focused on either traveling or a domestic attack, not both.

The BAU has observed violent extremists are predominately interested in traveling. Physical and psychological barriers are lower for aspirational foreign fighters than domestic fighters; and the confidence and capability of the individual matters and can impact the method of extremist action chosen.

What is the person's perception of their own capability to complete their chosen vector for violent extremist action successfully?

If they perceive themselves to be of low capability, they may be more inclined to attempt foreign travel.

Pivoting after plans are impeded takes time.

While it is certainly possible that a person will mobilize to conduct a domestic attack after their travel plans are impeded, it will almost always require some time for the person to re-orient themselves towards enacting violence in the homeland. However, there have been rare instances where violence was enacted quickly but in a very unsophisticated manner (e.g., knife or vehicle).

What information is available to gain insight into the person's mindset, including perceived barriers to action?

What is the quality and quantity of the person's interpersonal relationships (i.e., do they care about their family and/or friends, do they have overseas relatives, etc.?)

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SECTION TWO

MOVING AWAY FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In this section, the BAU offers operationally focused insights into the experiences of individuals who have moved away from violent extremism. These insights were gleaned from interactions with individuals who previously identified themselves with a violent extremist ideology espoused by a particular group. Additional data was gathered through prison interviews of individuals who were detained for terrorism-related offenses.

During collaborative consultations with local, state, and federal law enforcement partners, the BAU is often asked to opine on methods to facilitate the deradicalization and disengagement of individuals involved in violent extremism. The BAU has found that deradicalization is a process through which an individual abandons or rejects violent extremist beliefs or ideology. The deradicalization process involves a fundamental change in an individual's previously held commitment to a violent extremist ideology and/or terrorist group identity. The BAU characterizes disengagement as a separate but related process from deradicalization, through which an individual abandons violent extremist activity or behavior. As such, an individual may continue to engage in behaviors indicative of radicalization, such as consuming propaganda, but will be disengaged from behaviors associated with terrorist operations. Horgan (2004, 2009) posits the process of moving away from violent extremism involves these two distinct, but linked, processes that may occur together, separate, or not at all.

Movement away from violent extremist beliefs cannot be compelled.

Expert findings and the BAU's operational experience have found that movement away from violent extremist beliefs cannot be compelled, while involvement in extremist activities can be mitigated or disrupted. Deradicalization must be a voluntary process, while disengagement from participation in an extremist group or its activity can be voluntary or involuntary. For example, in the case of involuntary disengagement, law enforcement can force this condition through arrest and incarceration of a violent extremist.

It is important to note that both deradicalization and disengagement are highly individualized processes driven by a wide array of personal and contextual factors. There is no set of techniques nor an established deradicalization program guaranteed to move all individuals away from violent extremism (Horgan et al., 2020). In terms of disengagement however, law enforcement and practitioners may have options to influence the process. The BAU's work, as well as research by other experts, have identified common themes that can provide practitioners with considerations as they seek to influence an individual's deradicalization and/or disengagement process. This section seeks to describe these common themes found in individuals who have moved away from violent extremism, whether voluntarily, involuntarily, or through a combination of both.

DERADICALIZATION IS A TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS

Former extremists or individuals incarcerated for terrorism-related offenses often emphasize two key elements of deradicalization to the BAU. First, it is transformative, meaning that their identities and sense of self changed; and second, that it is a process, meaning that it is a series of steps over time and often a lengthy amount of time (Horgan, 2004; Khalil et al., 2023).

In a candid conversation with the BAU, a former extremist, Peter*, who had been a member of a violent extremist group for over a decade posed the following questions: "after spending a majority of your life participating in violent crime, what do you do when you stop? What is next? Who are you? What are your values?" Peter told the BAU that in his experience deradicalizing, he found himself spending time looking for a way to "get back to life" and described the process of shedding his violent extremist identity as feeling a sense of loss.

In discussions with the BAU, multiple former extremists have used the same verbiage for what it feels like to deradicalize without a new identity in place: "the void." They describe "the void" as a period of time in which they sought to attach themselves to a variety of alternate identities. From law enforcement's perspective, this was a positive sign, in that they had shed their previous violent extremist identity, but it was also a time of vulnerability and loss. One former extremist explained that they used therapy to help bridge the gap and assist in building a new identity. Another former extremist, Quinn, described wanting to physically shed his violent extremist identity by removing tattoos but was fearful of being turned away due to the content. Once Quinn overcame this concern and had the tattoos covered, he found that the physical transformation made him feel much better.

**To protect the identities of the individuals whose stories are described throughout Beyond Belief, BAU assigned each an alias name.*

It is important for law enforcement and practitioners to remember that deradicalization is a process that involves multiple steps over time. It is unlikely that a violent extremist committed to their beliefs will simply awake one morning and embrace an alternate, non-violent worldview. Instead, the BAU has found time and time again that deradicalized individuals describe a transformative journey that involves questioning themselves, the violent extremist group and/or beliefs, and the world around them. For some, this process is assisted by a therapist or peer, while for others the process is entirely self-driven. Like radicalization, deradicalization is an individualized process that is influenced by a complex array of push, pull, and personal factors (Van Der Heide, 2016).

DERADICALIZATION MUST BE VOLUNTARY AND WITHOUT COERSION

The most repeated theme in the accounts of former violent extremists was that their deradicalization, meaning their movement away from violent extremist beliefs, was self-driven and could not have occurred involuntarily. Former violent extremists often describe themselves as having been resistant to attempts by others to confront them about their ideology, even when that person was a close friend or family member. For example, one former extremist told the BAU that he was angry about legitimate issues, so "why should I change?" Another former violent extremist, Robert, who had been incarcerated for activity in support of his extremist group, told the BAU that though he had been interviewed by law enforcement twice prior to his incarceration, there was absolutely nothing law enforcement could have said to move him off his path. At the time, Robert wanted to join a violent extremist group and he thought it was the right thing to do. Contact from law enforcement reinforced the messaging he consumed from propaganda and moved him further toward violent extremism. That said, he speculated that a challenge of his beliefs from a person with more knowledge or authority may have been able to change his path.

For some violent extremists, incarceration provided the time, exposure to others, and structure necessary to self-reflect.

These examples speak to the resistance violent extremists feel towards the direct confrontation of their beliefs. Former violent extremists generally agree that their process of deradicalization had to be self-generated. They describe a variety of reasons for beginning to deradicalize, but in some cases involuntary disengagement from the cause, such as through arrest and incarceration, precedes the deradicalization process.

This disengagement process occurred for Steve, who told the BAU, "when you believe and are indoctrinated in something, you just make excuses and keep on believing in it." Steve pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy to levy war against the United States by plotting travel to Afghanistan to fight alongside al-Qa'ida and the Taliban against U.S. and allied forces. Steve described looking to die because he believed he would go to paradise. While in prison, he was exposed to "the politics of Islam," and he explained that he began to question his understanding of the Shi'a and of Islam in general. He adopted a broader view and began exploring other religions. If not arrested and incarcerated, Steve believed he would have "stayed in the blind." He felt that his experience in prison exposed him to his own naivete and his misunderstanding of the Islamic community.

The BAU's experience has shown that for some violent extremists, incarceration provided the time, exposure to others, and structure necessary to self-reflect on personal drivers and circumstances contributing to their radicalization and mobilization to violence. Addressing these personal factors led to a cognitive opening, or receptiveness, to deradicalization. One incarcerated extremist, Tyler, described to the BAU that much like his radicalization, his deradicalization was not an overnight process. Tyler described growing up in a restrictive family environment and being very angry. He was searching for a purpose. During this period of his life, his relationships with family and friends were broken, he was using drugs, and he had

dropped out of school. Taken together, these factors fueled his desire to pursue a bigger purpose. Online propaganda was a significant influential factor towards his decision to travel overseas and join an FTO. Tyler felt his arrest and imprisonment saved him, spiritually, mentally, and physically. The environment gave him structure, and as a result, he felt more productive. If not for prison, Tyler believed his mind would "still be on that kind of stuff."

In a similar example, Ulysses, a former Islamic extremist belonging to a violent online group described to the BAU how prison taught him to humanize others. Prior to his arrest and incarceration, Ulysses was visited by law enforcement on multiple occasions and was admonished for his illegal behavior. Despite these warnings he continued to engage in extremist behavior in order to gain bona fides with the group. Ulysses was eventually charged, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to terrorism, and was incarcerated. Initially he was resistant to change and saw prison as the price paid for holding on to his ideological beliefs. He described having a breakthrough when others in prison began sharing their lives and experiences with him, which ultimately left a humanizing impression. From there, Ulysses sought assistance from the counselors in the prison who provided him with a Qur'an and helped him continue to see the humanity of those around him.

Examples of involuntary disengagement, like the ones mentioned above, are not the only way for an individual to deradicalize. For some, an encounter with law enforcement may be sufficient to deter them from ever taking action in the name of violent extremism. In the case of one incarcerated individual who attempted travel to Syria to join ISIS, he told the BAU that an FBI intervention "would've been a wake-up call" and "my conscience would have come into play." He speculated he would have ceased his extremist behavior because he would have realized that prison could become a real possibility. He believed that law enforcement could help others on a similar trajectory by intervening before an arrest, should such concerning individuals appear to be on the pathway towards violent extremist action. He felt that it would not have been necessary to spend years in prison to finally realize the error in his ways.

Law enforcement must balance the possibility that direct interventions, even when non-punitive, may not deter a violent extremist but rather result in unintended negative consequences.

While the above example sounds simple enough, law enforcement must balance the possibility that direct interventions, even when non-punitive, may not deter a violent extremist but rather result in unintended negative consequences. For instance, a former violent extremist, Vernon, speculated to the BAU that law enforcement contact prior to his arrest would not have deterred him. Instead, he believed it may have had an opposite effect. Noting that he was paranoid about being watched, Vernon assessed law enforcement contact might have prompted him to act on his violent extremist beliefs. At the very least, Vernon believed he would have become much more secretive. Another former violent extremist, Walter, who had been charged with material support to an FTO, reasoned that law enforcement intervention was just further confirmation of his perception that the world was against Islam. Thus, law enforcement must consider that in certain cases their actions could lead to potential unintended consequences, including increasing paranoia, propel violent extremists toward secrecy, and/or trigger mobilization (Stern, 2003).

On the other end of the spectrum, the BAU has encountered individuals who began to deradicalize on their own volition prior to disengaging from an extremist group or extremist activities. In line with this phenomenon, experts have found that some former extremists have reported experiencing disillusionment with the group, which lead directly to the beginning of their deradicalization (Horgan, 2009). Other research has found that former violent extremists were prompted by close family members or friends to change their ideology or were exposed to alternative viewpoints via exposure to prosocial groups (Horgan, 2009; Khalil et al., 2022; Sageman, 2008).

A former violent extremist, Xavier, told the BAU that he had been involved in a violent group which gave him the identity and purpose he had been searching for. However, after the death of a close friend, Xavier began questioning his life choices and the group's hypocrisies. He noted that although the movement claimed to be based on family values, the members treated their families poorly. He also noticed the group did not support his attempts to get sober. This prompted Xavier to begin seeking peers outside the group that could assist him with exiting.

Another former violent extremist, Yousef, described the influence of his wife and a fellow former addict had on his deradicalization process. His wife had never supported his hate but started to significantly feel the negative impact of his role in the group as he gained prominence. At the same time, a former addict approached the violent extremist after several people in his life, including his wife, became concerned with the depth of his hate and his involvement in the group. Yousef told the BAU that at the outset he was very resistant to the conversation. The former addict persisted, describing the conversation as an opportunity to heal. Once Yousef allowed himself to listen, they bonded over their shared struggle with substance abuse and trauma.

Following this experience, Yousef sought therapy to process his trauma, which ultimately addressed his hate. He described this experience as the first time he realized, "oh, I'm wrong," leading him to question "everything" in his life. He asked himself, "can I be addicted to the euphoria that comes from my hate?" In his case, treating his trauma helped lessen the "symptoms" of extremism and hate. Therapy, intervention from his new friend, and his wife's needs led Yousef to become "willing and ready" to leave the hate group. He started seeing the hypocrisy of its members, particularly when they would sacrifice the alleged values of the group for personal profit or gain. This hypocrisy was particularly evident regarding the group's involvement in the drug trade. He also described "moments of clarity" during his attempts at sobriety, and how the more time he spent sober, the more cognitive openings he found for disengagement. He eventually was able to exit the group and used his position of influence to bring others out with him.

PROSOCIAL PEER OR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IS KEY TO SUCCESS

Prosocial peers or family are often the key to a violent extremist's successful deradicalization (Gjelsvik & Bjorgo, 2012; Willams et al., 2015; Khalil et al., 2023; Christensen, 2020). Prosocial peers or family are people not involved in a violent extremist ideology and that provide positive and helpful support to the violent extremist. Research has shown violent extremists are rarely completely isolated, and often interact with family members, peers, and strangers both online and offline (Richards et al., 2019; Horgan, 2004; Gill et al., 2014). The BAU's operational experience has shown that the presence of prosocial supports, such as significant others or close family members, often helps mitigate the risk of extremists mobilizing to violence (Richards et al., 2019). Close family and friends are also often aware of the personal stressors that violent extremists are experiencing even if they are not aware of the individual's ideology or violent intentions (Richards et al., 2019).

The critical role of prosocial family and friends has been emphasized to the BAU in discussions with former violent extremists and individuals incarcerated related to their violent extremism. Alex, whose story was first described in **Section One**, was radicalized entirely online, and he described having a very limited support system. He indicated that his deradicalization was bolstered when he found a peer group and a community that supported healthy debate about his views. Discussion with his peers gave him new language to express criticisms of society and helped him understand that the extreme view he had been holding was a hyperbolized view of the world. His peer group helped Alex understand the perceived existential threat presented to him by other violent extremists was not necessarily a reality.

Another former violent extremist, Zach, who was eventually incarcerated for acting in support of his beliefs, described being socially isolated. His spouse was aware of his extremist views but dismissive of how serious he was about them. He had moved to a remote location and was physically separated from friends and family. Zach felt alone and sought out validation online with those who agreed with him. During his deradicalization process post-incarceration, Zach struggled to find people to talk to about his experience and felt confused. In reflecting on his process, he felt that it would have been best to have someone who cared about him involved; someone who could have helped him care about his life and his family more than the violent extremist cause.

Though the process of deradicalizing must be self-generated, the support of peers or family who are outside of the extremist group is often the key to success.

Another example, Aaron, who pled guilty to assault and battery on a law enforcement officer and felony eluding, described his family and religious leaders as influential factors in his deradicalization process. He felt that prison helped him "unscramble his brain." He attributed his success with moving on to a prosocial path to several Islamic leaders in the community. After his arrest, these individuals expressed their disappointment with him, telling him that he was "trippin on the Internet." They continued to support him during his detention, steering him in a better direction. His mother and Islamic materials also helped change Aaron's mind about the extremist group and understand the "truth."

Numerous former violent extremists and individuals incarcerated for terrorism-related offenses described efforts of loved ones to aid them in the transition away from extremist beliefs. Though the process of deradicalizing must be self-generated, the support of peers or family who are outside of the extremist group is often the key to success (Khalil et al., 2022; Sageman, 2008). These relationships give the former extremist a non-judgmental space to question involvement in the violent group, form and explore a new identity, develop their sense of self, and more.

DISENGAGEMENT ≠ DERADICALIZATION

Deradicalization and disengagement from terrorism are separate but linked processes (Horgan, 2009; Khalil et al., 2023). They occur in no consistent order – some former extremists deradicalize then disengage, others former extremists disengage before deradicalizing, and yet others do so simultaneously. In cases where there are high barriers to exiting a violent extremist group, members may deradicalize, but take a long time to disengage, if at all. The BAU has also found that disengagement does not always immediately prompt deradicalization to begin. In some cases, former violent extremists describe spending years in prison before they began considering alternatives to their violent ideology. Consequently, practitioners should be aware, particularly law enforcement, that involuntary disengagement (arrest, commitment, etc.,) is not guaranteed to resolve the violent ideology (Khalil et al., 2022).

Dennis, whose story is described in **Section One,** explained his viewpoint to the BAU after serving time in prison. He maintained his belief the government would always be corrupt, and the federal government did not follow the Constitution. When asked about anti-government websites he created prior to his arrest, Dennis indicated he was not going to get involved "with that stuff" anymore, stating he would always be a patriot, but he was not going to be violent.

Involuntary disengagement ... is not guaranteed to in itself resolve the violent ideology.

Another individual, Brian, who was charged with manufacturing an explosive device and transporting explosives across state lines, explained his reasoning regarding his intent to draw attention to his political ideology by committing suicide with an explosive device at a public venue. He explained it was not personal, but he came to feel it was the only way to bring attention to certain aspects of selecting governmental officials. Brian told the BAU that he had adopted his viewpoint independently, noting his search for like-minded individuals yielded few results. Because no one viewed the tenets of his political ideology as important, he recognized the event needed to be elaborate, stating "if it bleeds, it leads" in the context of media coverage. He denied being a terrorist, minimized the sophistication of his device, and described himself as "just a home hobbyist with a device larger than most." Brian found the prison experience to be worse than he anticipated, indicating he was more convinced the system was morally corrupt and not sustainable. He claimed no sane person could look at it and say otherwise.

Mark, also discussed in **Section One**, described how his views matured during his time in prison. He described himself as always wanting to act on his beliefs. He conceded to the BAU that his arrest and incarceration were important to him and might even have been necessary, describing the experiences as a "splash in the face." He was jolted out of his militaristic, fire and brimstone, overthrow the U.S. government, insurrection mindset.

These examples help highlight the wide variety of responses by violent extremists when involuntarily disengaged via arrest and incarceration. If the push, pull, and personal factors contributing to an individual's radicalization and mobilization are not addressed, there is no guarantee incarceration alone will prompt deradicalization.

The idea that disengagement does not in itself lead to deradicalization was exemplified in a 2021 violent extremist attack in which an individual committed a murder, then instigated his own suicide via law enforcement by discharging his weapon at people inside a police department. Investigation after the attack uncovered the individual had pledged allegiance to ISIS. The BAU was asked by local partners to assess whether this was a violent extremist inspired attack or purely a suicide attempt. Post-attack analysis revealed the individual, who was a citizen born in the United States, had radicalized to violent extremism in 2007 after watching conspiracy theory videos on YouTube regarding the 9/11 terror attacks, but remained radicalized leading up to the attack in 2021.

A retrospective examination of the attacker's public comments on YouTube pages indicated conspiratorial thinking when his earlier comments defending Islam as a peaceful religion suddenly transformed into a call for violence against America. The individual came to law enforcement's attention in 2010 after his online rhetoric evolved into communications indicative of his intent to travel overseas to join an FTO. He was subsequently interviewed twice by law enforcement during the investigation, and due to this intervention (as well as direct intervention by his close family members), the individual disengaged from actively supporting an Islamic extremist group and the investigation was closed. After his attack in 2021, post-attack analyses revealed that despite law enforcement's best effort, the attacker maintained his extremist ideology and conspiratorial thinking from 2007, and review of his electronic devices revealed he continued to consume violent extremist propaganda up until the attack.

The attacker's ideological extremism was also compounded by a variety of personal stressors that impacted his life. For example, one of his parents was severely impaired following a violent robbery that took place while the attacker was still in college. The attacker himself was later diagnosed with an irreversible degenerative disease which he chose not to seek medical

treatment for. He was fired or laid off from several jobs, and, ultimately, sued for credit card debt. The COVID-19 pandemic was the final straw which led the individual to become significantly isolated and spend the majority of his time online where he consumed conspiracy theories and violent extremist propaganda.

While individuals may disengage from terrorism for years or even decades, they may later pose a threat if their radicalization remains unaddressed.

The BAU determined the confluence of personal stressors, coupled with the attacker's continuing belief in Islamic violent extremism, led to his re-engagement and plotting of enacting violent jihad in the United States. He intended to conduct an act of martyrdom after first murdering a random kafir, then conducting a suicide-by-cop attack, as directed by violent extremist propaganda. A review of his journals after the attack reflected that he had learned from the initial law enforcement investigation to become more secretive about his violent extremist beliefs and attack planning. This case exemplifies how individuals may disengage from terrorism for years or even decades but may later pose a threat if their radicalization remains unaddressed. In this case, twelve years elapsed between when the attacker first radicalized but disengaged, and when he chose to re-engage to enact targeted violence.

POSITIVE LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERACTIONS ALWAYS OCCURRED WITH EMPATHY

All the former extremists and incarcerated individuals who have spoken with the BAU have had interactions with law enforcement. Some were simply interviewed by a law enforcement officer, while others were arrested and processed through the justice system. When discussing successful law enforcement interventions, former violent extremists consistently recalled the importance of perceiving empathy from the law enforcement officer with whom they interacted.

Empathy is the ability to understand and be aware of the experiences and feelings of another person. One former violent extremist put it simply: the officer treated him like he was a human being. While this concept sounds obvious, it was repeatedly raised by former violent extremists as something they perceived as absent from prior law enforcement interactions; therefore, when they felt empathy from a law enforcement officer, it was remarkable and impactful. **Section Three** discusses strategies for implementing empathy in the law enforcement process.

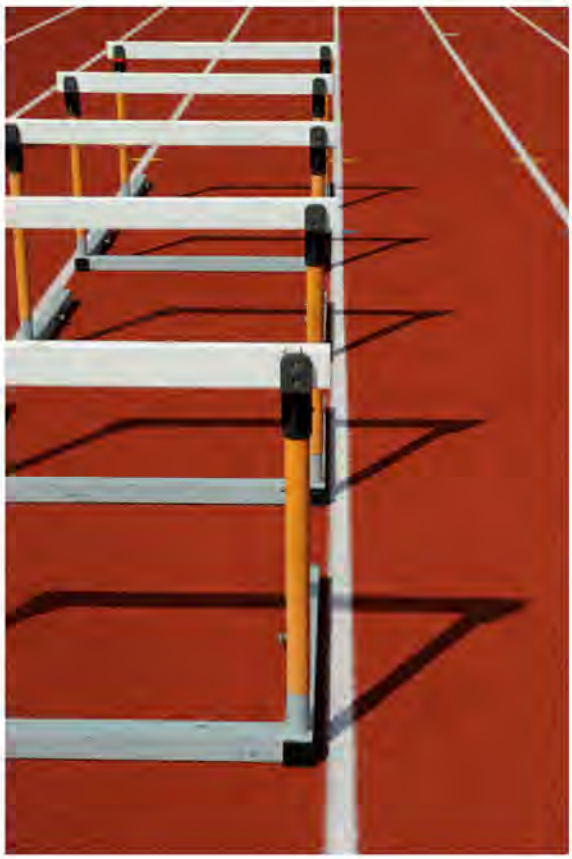
One former violent extremist, Corey, who had been involved in a violent extremist group, described himself as being aware that law enforcement was likely scrutinizing him, which led to him setting expectations of what an eventual interaction would look like. Corey was aware of negative stories regarding law enforcement agencies and had, in the past, purposefully misconstrued the actions of law enforcement to help bolster support for his cause. However, when law enforcement finally interviewed him, he immediately felt the officer understood where he was coming from, which was the most important ice breaker for the conversation. Corey described the officer as empathetic, allowing Corey to say his piece without shutting him down, and being very respectful of his experiences. The officer had a good sense of humor and was willing to show a genuine personality through the conversation, helping Corey see the officer as a fellow human being.

Another former violent extremist, Damien, who had been a member of a violent extremist group, described how he was concerned about being able to leave the group safely with his wife and small child. He and his family sought law enforcement assistance with disengaging. In speaking with the BAU, he praised the efforts of the law enforcement officers that worked with them, particularly in the way they treated him and his family like human beings and ensured that his family felt safe. Damien's gratitude towards the law enforcement professionals who helped his family highlights the importance of empathy in dealing with those disengaging and deradicalizing from extremist groups.

BARRIERS TO EXIT

Research has identified numerous barriers exist for individuals seeking to leave violent extremist groups. This research finding is also consistent with the BAU's operational experience. However, each individual seeking to leave the group may not face the same barriers. Individuals face unique combinations of external and internal barriers when seeking to move away from violent extremism.

Some violent extremist group members fear retaliation against people attempting to disengage (Jonsson, 2014; Koehler, 2015). For example, one former extremist interviewed by the BAU, Briana, described an incident in which she met with a member of the movement who told her they were also planning to leave the group. When Briana arrived for the meeting, she was confronted by multiple members of the movement. She also described how men from the group frequently reached out to try to keep her in the movement, which she found intimidating.



In some cases, the extremist group provides the entirety, or close to entirety, of the individual's social network (Khalil et al., 2022; Bjørgo, 2008). These ties of friendship invoke a sense of loyalty, maintaining the individual's attachment to the group (Jonsson, 2014). In other cases, this extremist social network hinders the individual's attempts to leave by serving as an "echo chamber," for beliefs, particularly if it is an online network (Sageman, 2008). Alex, who was first discussed in **Section One**, described that he "felt like we were at war." Influential online personalities created a sense of urgency regarding existential threats. He said it was like "the world is caving in and it's happening now."

Violent extremist social networks (both online and IRL) may also hinder the individual's ability to form a new sense of self. In the case of Briana, she knew she had changed internally, but felt the external barriers of leaving the group were discouraging because her entire social group was in the movement. She knew she would lose her partner by leaving and was intimidated by the attempts to keep her partner in the group.

INVESTIGATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important for law enforcement and practitioners to consider the transformative nature of deradicalization. For an extremist to deradicalize, he or she must discard their violent ideological identity and adopt a new identity (Horgan, 2004; Sageman, 2008; Marsden, 2017; Khalil, 2023). This identity change is, by its nature, going to be internal to the individual and may be influenced but not forced. Additionally, practitioners cannot control the new identity the individual chooses to assume; however, practitioners, prosocial peers, and supportive family members can assist by encouraging positive identity formation (Marsden, 2017; Khalil et al., 2023).

When working with the peers or loved ones of a violent extremist who seeks to deradicalize, it is important to encourage empathy, non-judgement, patience, and an environment of trust (Khalil et al., 2022). Former violent extremists also recommended honesty, sincerity, and relationships built on trust. When reasonable, peers or family members may help by encouraging the pursuit of interests outside of the violent extremist group, especially if those interests are tied to the community or to occupational opportunities (Khalil et al., 2022; Cherney, 2021). Encouragement of outside interests serves two purposes: it gives prosocial peers an opportunity to spend time with the individual, and it may help the individual form a new identity around the outside interest (Khalil et al., 2022).

It is also important for law enforcement and practitioners to keep in mind that some violent extremists may be in the process of deradicalizing while remaining engaged with the extremist group or activity. The lack of disengagement may be due to a variety of barriers to exiting, or simply due to being early in the deradicalization process. One former violent extremist, Eric, described himself as having "one foot in and one foot out" of his extremist group and ideology during the process. Briana talked about being threatened with violence by her violent extremist peers when she attempted to leave the group of her own accord. Others have told the BAU about experiences in which they did not recognize the sincere efforts by their loved ones to help them.

Mark, who adopted anarchism at 15 years old, told the BAU that he viewed law enforcement as the "enemy" from an early age, so he would not have been receptive to goodwill gestures from law enforcement officers. In hindsight, he saw the rigidity of his extremist beliefs would have made it difficult to persuade him of law enforcement's good intent. During his teenage years, he recalled people around him offering help and guidance; however, he did not, or could

not, recognize the gestures at the time. Mark mentioned specifically a French language teacher who tried unsuccessfully to steer him in a positive direction.

These examples should remind law enforcement and practitioners to not dismiss violent extremists who claim to seek help (via therapy, peers, etc.,) while remaining engaged in an extremist group. Intervention teams should work carefully to assess the sincerity of the extremist's efforts while also treating them with empathy and respect.

In the BAU's experience, the rate of recidivism among violent extremists is lower than the general rate of recidivism in incarcerated non-extremist individuals, primarily because engaging in terrorist activity is difficult. An individual, previously incarcerated due to their activities in support of violent extremism, must either re-establish contacts with an extremist group, re-invigorate their planning and preparation for violence, or otherwise work to pick up where they left off, all while likely being on the radar of a probation or parole officer and under terms of release. This inherent difficulty in re-engagement with violent extremism highlights the key role of probation and parole offices in monitoring released violent extremists to ensure they do not reengage in extremist activity (Sinai, 2022; Cherney, 2021).

DISENGAGEMENT AND DERADICALIZATION: OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Deradicalization must be voluntary.

Each individual's deradicalization process is unique and dependent on their mix of push, pull, and personal factors. The process is transformative, in which the person forms a new identity. The BAU has not observed successful deradicalization through compulsion.

What identity does the violent extremist currently have, and are there other potential identities for them to try on as they deradicalize?

Are there signs that the violent extremist is disillusioned with the belief system or group?

Disengagement and deradicalization are separate but linked processes.

Violent extremists may disengage, voluntarily or involuntarily, before they deradicalize; may deradicalize before they disengage from extremist activity; or may experience both processes simultaneously. Investigative teams should be careful to not consider a violent extremist to be deradicalized simply because they have ceased active participation in the violent extremist activity or group. At the same time, investigative teams should not dismiss claims of deradicalization from violent extremists who are still involved in extremist groups, especially if they face high barriers to exiting.

What are the barriers that the violent extremist or former violent extremist faces regarding leaving the group?
What unmet needs does the group or activity fulfill for them?

For disengaged violent extremists, do they appear to be undergoing deradicalization?
Are they showing signs of wavering in their sense of self or identity?
Are they reducing time spent on the violent extremist content or interacting with other extremists?

Prosocial support is key to successful deradicalization.

Peer or family involvement can be key to successful deradicalization, highlighting the importance of identifying positive bystanders and third-party intermediaries (see **Section Three**).

Who are the people surrounding the violent extremist, and do they hold similar beliefs?

Do the bystanders in the violent extremist's social circle appear to be both capable and willing to assist in stabilizing the individual as they work through the deradicalization process?

Who may be a good intermediary to help threat managers assess whether a former violent extremist has truly deradicalized?

Successful law enforcement interactions are empathetic.

As described in **Section One**, a violent extremist experiencing humiliating events can increase the concern for violent action. Any direct engagement with a violent extremist should be carefully thought through to minimize potential unintended consequences.

Has the violent extremist had prior interactions with law enforcement personnel?

If so, how did they react to the engagement?

Were there any negative outcomes because of the interaction?

*What are the aspects of the violent extremist that the investigative team may be able to empathize with? See **Section Three** for further discussion of developing an empathetic approach.*

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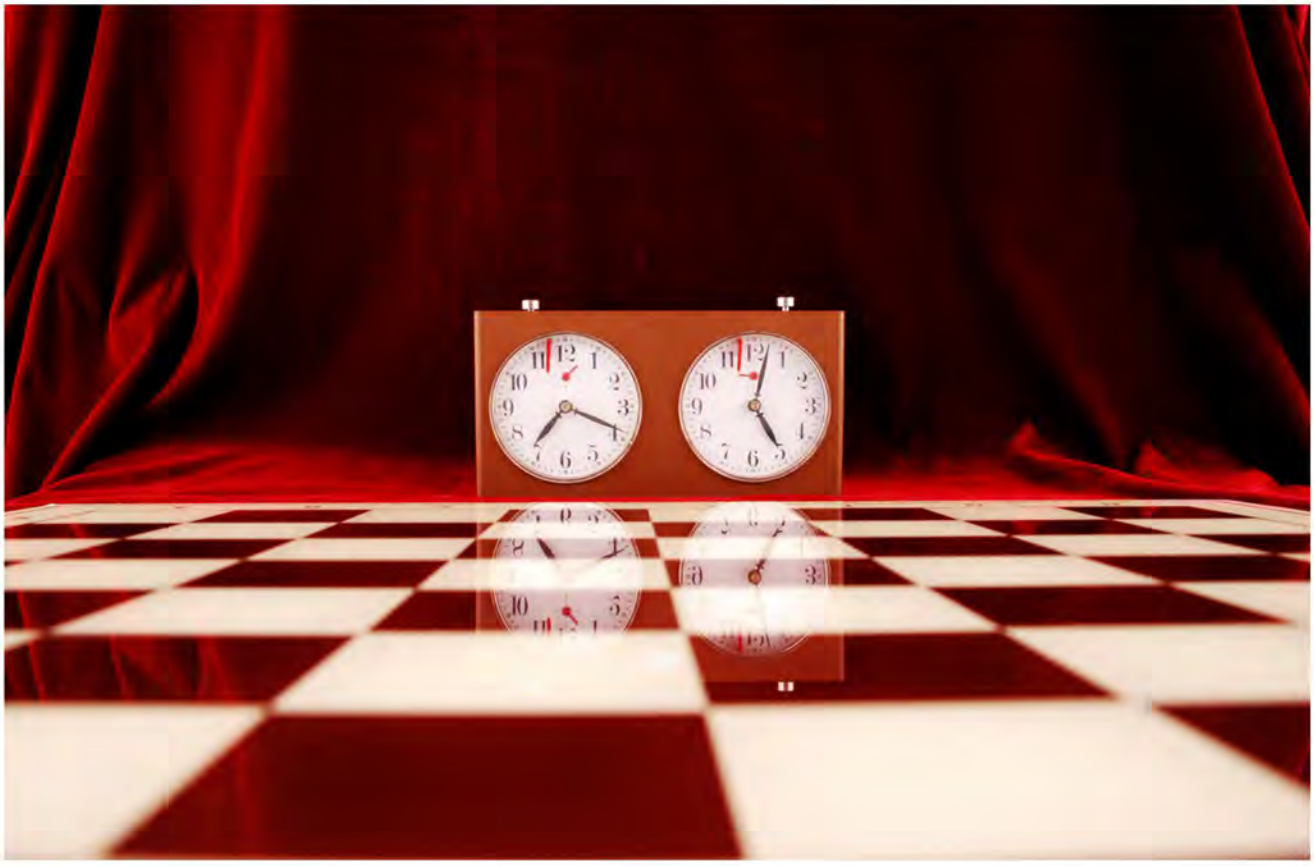

SECTION THREE

EFFECTIVE INTERACTIONS AND INDIVIDUALIZED INTERVENTIONS

Understanding the behaviors of someone who may radicalize, mobilize, disengage, or deradicalize is critical to preventing threats of ideologically motivated violence. Just as or even more important is understanding how to interact successfully with those individuals. Operational experience and time spent interviewing such individuals have given the BAU insight into the key ingredients necessary for a successful interaction with individuals involved in or formerly involved in violent extremism. This section highlights lessons learned for law enforcement personnel, practitioners, and bystanders who may encounter violent extremists.

LAW ENFORCEMENT INTERVENTIONS

As introduced in **Section Two**, successful law enforcement outcomes require thoughtful interactions and tailored interventions with individuals who may be radicalizing and/or mobilizing. The BAU has found most successful intervention efforts are coupled with identifying and addressing the individual's unmet needs. These unmet needs often stem from the push, pull, and personal factors that led the individual down the path to radicalization and mobilization in the first place. Feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness, lack of structure, a need for personal significance, or other personal struggles may be factors contributing to the radicalization process (see **Section One** for further discussion of push, pull, and personal factors). Any identified unmet needs must be fulfilled in a purposeful and productive manner by something other than violent extremist ideology.

The BAU recognizes the significance and impact of law enforcement interactions–both positive and negative—as perceived by a violent extremist. Therefore, the importance of individualized interactions that take a long-term TATM perspective cannot be overstated. Single interactions, in aggregate, can ultimately lead to a mitigated threat, especially when law enforcement interacts empathetically with the violent extremist over a protracted period.

When thinking about successful outcomes, it is important to understand that "success" may look very different from one case to the next, and that the end goals toward successful resolution may change within a particular case over time. The goal of implementing TATM strategies is to reduce the risk of violence by addressing an individual's unmet needs or motivations (i.e. grievance), but some threats of violence are so severe as to warrant arrest and incarceration. In these cases, involuntary disengagement through imprisonment is sometimes the best option. In the BAU's experience, involuntary disengagement results in the removal of an individual from their constant immersion in violent extremist material and networks, resulting in the cognitive opening needed to begin the deradicalization process. The BAU's interviews of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses have found that incarceration provides exposure to broader views, people, and/or communities, which ultimately allows extremists to consider alternative, non-violent ideas and belief systems. In these interviews, offenders often described their incarceration period as an opportunity to reflect on their personal priorities (e.g., the importance of family or other key relationships in their lives), seek spiritual or religious guidance from leaders who adhere to non-violent views, or develop more productive interests and/or skills which ultimately can lead towards the identification of existing or development of new protective factors.

Finn*, who was interviewed prior to release from prison for terrorism-related offenses, noted that interactions with fellow inmates who held moderate religious views provided an opportunity for him to examine his own beliefs. He described an unconscious process where he came to realize he was holding on to something that provided him no benefit. This self-reflective process resulted in his increased tolerance of individuals holding different views from his own and ultimately gave him the space to reprioritize and repair relationships with his family and children. Noting competing priorities in relation to violent extremist activities, Finn observed that "when you see someone who is working full-time and taking care of their kids, they don't have time to mess with that shit."

Another individual, Garrett, who was interviewed prior to his release from prison for terrorism-related offenses, also noted similar themes regarding exposure to broader views during incarceration. He stated, "when you believe and are indoctrinated in something, you just make excuses and keep on believing in it." While in prison, he was exposed to what he called "the politics of Islam" and began to question his understanding of the religion. He adopted a broader view and began exploring other religions, which Garrett believed would not have been possible without incarceration exposing him to his own naivete and misunderstanding of the Islamic community.

**To protect the identities of the individuals whose stories are described throughout Beyond Belief, BAU assigned each an alias name.*

EMPATHY IN INDIVIDUALIZED INTERACTIONS

The demonstration of empathy is a skill that should be practiced and honed by law enforcement and practitioners in every interaction with a person suspected of moving towards violent action. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another while remaining non-judgmental. This ability to understand another's situation and emotions is essential to building rapport and trust with concerning individuals who are contemplating targeted violence, as well as bystanders who may be able to prevent it. The BAU has found that when interviewing violent extremists and witnesses, it is important to establish a trusting relationship that evokes honesty. Empathy is the bedrock of that relationship.

Empathy can always be practiced and improved. Being aware of one's own level of empathy towards others is necessary to evaluate how effectively one can empathize during an interaction. Empathy does not come easily. Many personal barriers to empathy exist, including an underdeveloped empathic skillset, being distracted by personal stressors, implicit biases, and more. Knowing oneself and being conscious of the importance of empathy is essential when planning engagements with potential violent extremists. Contrasting beliefs, values, and life experiences are inherent barriers to empathy between members of different groups. These contrasts are inherent to counterterrorism practitioners, especially when interacting with someone who hold a violent extremist ideology. Despite these differences, all people have commonalities. It is important for law enforcement and practitioners to identify these commonalities and work to empathize effectively with others.

As the reader, have you ever asked yourself "am I empathic?"

Has anyone ever mentioned your level of empathy or lack thereof?

Do you consider yourself an active listener, or do you find your attention drifting when someone is speaking more than you? During a conversation, are you formulating responses while others are still speaking? Do you listen so you can respond, or do you listen so you can understand? Do you paraphrase what was said so they know you are listening and so you know you understand?

Do you identify the emotions people are feeling while describing something to you? What about the emotions they must have felt during the situation they are describing?

Empathy is not Sympathy

While both sympathy and empathy are appropriate behaviors, they are not the same, nor are they equal. In practice, sympathy is recognizing a person's experience or situation and acknowledging it. Empathy is taking the time to listen, to clarify what is not completely understood, and elicit details to help feel what another person feels or felt during a given moment. Empathy is work.

The following **scenario-based exercise**, inspired by a case involving a violent extremist who conducted a mass attack, illustrates the differences between sympathy and empathy:

You are a law enforcement officer investigating threats of violence and violent extremist groups. You receive a telephone call from a concerned mother (see page X for the significance of family reporting). She is worried about her teenage son. She tells you about her concerns and his personal history that includes his father committing suicide, his struggles to "fit in," his potential struggle with sexual identity, and obsession with guns. You speak with the mother and hear her out, you ask follow-up questions for clarification and determine that talking to her son is warranted. You arrange an in-person interview. Prior to the interview you do your due diligence and check to see if he has ever been in trouble and if you can identify any concerning online behavior.

On the day of the interview, you prepare as you have for all past interviews: you are on time, dressed professionally, and ready to investigate. You speak with her son in his room. While you are speaking with him you notice some concerning materials on his computer screen and throughout his room. You tactfully ask about the materials, and the young man becomes defensive and denies any connection to the materials or belief in any extremist ideology. You can tell from the state of his room, the way he carries himself, and the way he communicates that he is a bit of an outcast, but other than the concerning materials and what the mom said, you do not see any criminal activity nor anything that leads you to believe he is a danger to himself or others. Throughout the interview, you maintain your professionalism and do your best to build rapport, however, the interview does not feel like it is the best you have ever done, and he does not seem to lower his defensive wall. You conclude the interview, leave him your card, and encourage him to call you if he has any further information or questions for you. You return to the office to write your report and share your findings with your team. You share what you learned and the concerns you do and do not have for the young man. What you did not realize is that during the interview the boy was much more uncomfortable and distressed by the interaction than you sensed.

A couple of days later, you are at work. It is a normal day: you are fielding calls, writing reports, and planning future interviews and meetings. You have a family issue you need to address, a bit of a distraction but not something preventing you from being at work and doing your job. Your phone rings, and it is the juvenile from the interview. He is upset. He complains about you visiting him unannounced and does not understand why you felt it necessary to speak with him. Clearly your prior interaction is weighing on him more than you thought. He thinks you misinterpreted the materials you saw in his room, and he emphatically denies being radicalized. You also believe he was embarrassed about the issue of his sexuality even though he does not bring it up. You did not expect this phone call, feel a little caught off guard, and if you are being honest- a little defensive. In this moment you feel pressure to respond, but since you are learning about empathy, you reflect on the situation and place yourself in his shoes. Clearly, he is a troubled young man whose behavior has become so concerning that his mother called the police.

For the sake of this exercise, imagine you are the young man. Your mother reported you to the police. You were caught off guard by the law enforcement visit. You did not have the opportunity to make your room presentable to strangers the way you prefer. Law enforcement observed personal materials related to your unconventional interests, and you are worried about what they think of you. Not to mention the fact that you know the role of the police is to arrest people; you are worried you will be arrested. You have stewed on this experience for two days and decide you are going to call the officer to express your frustration to him.

Now, was it easy to place yourself in that situation? Or is it so foreign to you that you did not know where to start? If the latter, do you think this is a barrier to empathy? Understanding your capacity for empathy and your limitations is necessary prior to any interview or engagement.

For sake of argument, let us say you could not imagine yourself in that situation. You had plenty of friends growing up, never struggled with your sexuality, and had a great relationship with your mother. During this unexpected phone call, what can you empathize with? We are all human and have experienced a spectrum of emotions throughout our lives. We know what stress, confusion, fear, and betrayal feel like. Do you think he felt any of those emotions while you were in his personal space at the behest of his mother? Do you think that emotional storm influenced how he communicated with you?

After two days of processing what happened, he is calling you and now you have an opportunity to glean more information than you did the first time you spoke with him. On far too many occasions, members of the public and law enforcement have had contact with someone that later went on to violate the law or worse, engage in a violent act. How can you do the work to empathize with him during the phone conversation?

Consider the following potential responses:

Response One: You know you did not even have to talk to me, right?

Response Two: Hey man, you are not the first person I have ever had to talk to and were surprised by my presence, I get it, you were stressed, I was just doing my job. We good?

Response Three: I can see why you are upset. I know it is not everyday people have the police come to their house unannounced to talk to them and it can be stressful and sometimes intimidating. I am glad you called.

Response one blames the young man for the situation. It implies none of that would have happened if he simply told you he did not have anything to say. A complete failure of empathy.

Response two shows some sympathy for his situation but also offers a quick exit from the call.

Response three could potentially start a very long conversation and set up another interview or produce information not obtained during the first interview.

Inherent throughout this exercise and commentary is the need for law enforcement and practitioners to continuously hone their skills. If given an opportunity to obtain more information from someone of concern, no matter the perceived level of threat, we must seize the opportunity with intentionality and, of course, with empathy.

Lowering Your Guard

The scenario above demonstrates multiple examples of barriers to empathy. As discussed throughout this section, it is easier to empathize with someone who shares similar life experiences. Generational gaps can also compound this difficulty, and even the most seasoned law enforcement officer and practitioner may struggle to empathize when dealing with a youth perseverating on violent extremism. This generational challenge, along with the litany of other obvious and discreet differences, can reinforce the social and cognitive separation between a radicalized individual and the investigative team.

One way for law enforcement and practitioners to combat perceived differences, whether cultural, social, religious, ideological, or generational, is to center themselves and focus on the present moment during their interactions with a suspected violent extremist. For example, in the prior scenario, the young man unexpectedly reached out with a phone call during an inopportune time for the officer. The fact that he reached out at all is a significant behavioral clue worthy of one's full attention and should trigger curiosity. Law enforcement and practitioners must direct their full attention when speaking to anyone brought forth by the public out of concern for violent extremism, especially by one's parents or other close bystanders who may be overcoming high barriers to reporting.

Eliciting honest answers to tough questions is paramount when the public's safety is at stake

Setting aside personal distractions and biases when interviewing a violent extremist is critical for empathy to take place. When preparing for an interview, law enforcement and practitioners should have a plan on how they will be able to empathize with the interviewee, just as much as how they will steer the conversation towards the crux of the issue at hand. Eliciting honest answers to tough questions is paramount when public safety is at stake. Without effective empathetic conversation, that is unlikely to happen. If one does not know where to start, begin by acknowledging the individual's humanity.

I Need More Empathy

The goals of this section were to provide a better understanding of empathy, how it is different than sympathy, and encourage law enforcement and practitioners to use it effectively. For those seeking to further their empathic skill, ways to improve empathy have been identified. A study by Thomspon and Gullone (2003) found reading emotional fiction can help develop empathy. Another study by Poorman (2002) suggests role playing to develop empathy. The fact of the matter is empathy cannot be exercised and improved without knowing it exists, how important it is, and choosing to be empathic. Like any other skill, one must be aware of it, practice it, and—most importantly—choose to implement it when it matters most.

BYSTANDERS, THIRD-PARTY INTERMEDIARIES, AND THIRD-PARTY MONITORS IN COUNTERTERRORISM CASES

Bystanders, third-party intermediaries, and third-party monitors play a critical role in proactive counterterrorism and violence prevention efforts. These individuals are best positioned to identify and report concerning behaviors indicating a person may be mobilizing or otherwise planning violent extremist action.

Bystanders

Bystanders are individuals whose relationship and/or level of interaction with a violent extremist enables them to witness or become aware of activities or behaviors that may indicate the individual is moving toward extremist violence (Borum & Rowe, 2021). Some bystanders may try to counter a person's concerning behavior and, therefore, are not simply onlookers or spectators as the term traditionally applies. Bystanders can be peers, family members, community leaders (e.g., religious figures, teachers, coaches, work supervisors) or strangers. When exposed to concerning behaviors, bystanders must recognize that the behavior is concerning or problematic and then report the concerns to others and/or to law enforcement for further investigative action (Borum & Rowe, 2021). Due to this role, bystanders are a key piece of terrorism and violence prevention, serving as force multipliers for counterterrorism stakeholders.

According to research by the BAU, 62% of lone offender terrorism cases in the United States had at least one bystander aware of the offender's support for violence in furtherance of an extremist ideology (Richards et al., 2019). In addition, the BAU found that in 25% of lone offender terrorism cases, at least one person knew of the offender's research, planning, or preparation for their attack; and in 18% of cases, at least one bystander was aware of the offender's specific attack plans. In cases where bystanders were known to have been exposed to concerning behavior, the same study by the BAU found that 69% took some sort of action to address the behavior, while 23% took no action. Richards et al., (2019) found that bystanders in lone offender terrorism cases communicated their concerns in the following ways:

PERCENTAGE	ACTION
54% of Cases	Directly to Offender
40% of Cases	To Family Members
19% of Cases	To Friends (Peers)
2% of Cases	Anonymous Tip

Note: some bystanders addressed concerns in multiple ways so percentages sum to more than 100%.

Bystander Relationships and their Reporting Decisions

Violent extremists preparing to act on their beliefs often expose the bystanders around them to concerning behaviors.

Bystanders closest to the violent extremist, such as family and friends, often have the clearest perspective of the person's behavioral changes, struggles, and stressors. Family and friends are the most likely people to be able to tell that something is wrong. However, family and friends are also the least likely to report concerns to authority figures. Instead, they most often chose to address concerns directly with their violent extremist friend or loved one.

After discussing their concerns, many bystanders feel they have addressed the problem, and do not further intervene or report concerns to an authority figure. This can be for a variety of reasons, including that the bystander is satisfied with the violent extremist's response. Friends and family may also feel that the violent extremist is not capable of violence or is unlikely to do so.

Obstacles to reporting can also be present. These obstacles include bystander fatigue, victimization, sympathy, and neglect (see **Appendix B**). Barriers to reporting are known to be much higher for friends and family of violent extremists.

Consequently, the decision to report concerns about an individual by their loved one or peer is complicated and challenging.

When a family member or friend is the reporting party to law enforcement, this report should be seen as an urgent matter. By the time a loved one or peer is willing to ask for help from authorities, they have likely seen multiple concerning behaviors over time or a concerning escalation in behavior. Rarely do friends or family chose to come to authority figures with concerns first, and they may feel they have exhausted non-law enforcement avenues for help.

All things being equal, the BAU generally considers a report by a parent to be much more potentially urgent than a report of concern by a stranger. The BAU recommends taking steps to quickly evaluate the reported concerning behavior when a loved one raises the alarm. When family members or friends are treated as standard reporting parties, especially if multiple loved ones have highlighted their concern, the significance of the reporting can be lost, and the consequences could be tragic.

Family and friends are key bystanders who are positioned to see changes early and help authorities intervene positively. As such, the significance of such reporting needs to be recognized and actioned by all relevant stakeholders involved in preventing acts of violent extremism.

One study by the NCTC and FBI found that most bystanders to violent extremists were family members (41% of all bystanders identified) and peers (39%). In addition, only 32% of the bystanders who observed concerning behaviors reported their concerns to law enforcement (NCTC & FBI, 2022). In the BAU's experience, peers and family members are the least likely bystanders to intervene when they are exposed to concerning behavior. This highlights the challenge in eliciting proactive reporting from individuals who have a close, interpersonal relationship with a potential violent extremist.

The BAU's operational experience has shown that bystanders who are exposed to concerning behaviors may face multiple barriers to reporting, such as not recognizing the

behavior as concerning, minimizing the significance of the behavior, and/or fearing they or the individual of concern may get in trouble. These concerns require law enforcement and practitioners to educate potential bystanders about the types of concerning behavior that warrants reporting to law enforcement, how to navigate reporting such behavior(s), and what law enforcement's next steps will be following bystander reporting. Much of the BAU's research and experience suggest that people often believe speaking directly to the individual or discussing concerns with friends or family members is sufficient. While this is certainly an important aspect of intervening when concerns arise, more can be done to delineate a potential threat within the community. Bystanders must be informed and educated about outside resources available to them, so that they do not carry this burden alone. The BAU encourages law enforcement to shepherd the use of non-traditional mitigation options available within the community when concerns are brought forward before they escalate to a point that requires arrest.

The FBI's Prevent Mass Violence campaign provides the public with concerning behaviors based on BAU research.

The BAU has identified the following best practices for violence prevention practitioners when interacting with potential bystanders:

- Tailor approaches to bystanders thoughtfully by considering their unique relationship with the violent extremist and the type(s) of information they may know about the violent extremist.
- Assess bystanders' willingness and capability to assist.
  - For each bystander, strive to understand whether they want to assist practitioners with providing support to the violent extremist.
  - Additionally, practitioners must assess whether the bystander has the energy, time, and/or ability to successfully support the concerning individual.
- When interacting directly with bystanders, consider personal biases, any unique cultural contexts that may exist, and ways to connect with them empathetically.
- Treat all bystanders with respect; avoid or minimize situations that may lead to feelings of humiliation, guilt, or shame.
- Clearly describe the team's concerns to relevant bystanders and educate them regarding the specific behavior(s) they should watch for. Have a clear conversation with bystanders about what type(s) of behavior may signal an imminent threat, or a need to contact the investigative team.
- When possible, provide multiple methods for bystander(s) to report, should they become concerned.

Recommendations for individualized bystander engagement.

Third-Party Intermediaries and Third-Party Monitors

Third-party intermediaries (TPIs) and third-party monitors (TPMs) are also key players in the mitigation of mobilization. While each is slightly different, TPIs and TPMs are people whose relationship with the violent extremist allows them to recognize potential mobilization toward violence and use an established reporting mechanism to report their concern.

TPMs are individuals whose regular interactions with a violent extremist position them to become aware of concerning behavior indicative of violent extremism or other violent intent. Once established, TPMs can serve a critical role in identifying new or escalating concerns. In addition to monitoring and reporting concerning behavior, TPIs are individuals who potentially have influence over a violent extremist and are trusted by counterterrorism professionals to take coordinated action in support of goals to prevent violence.

The BAU's operational experience have resulted in several best practices and other broad considerations for establishing TPIs or TPMs:

Identify any individual who appears best positioned to observe future warning signs or other concerning behaviors exhibited by a specific potential violent extremist. Ideally, this individual demonstrates prosocial behavior to the person, is positioned as a bystander for the medium-to-long-term and is willing to remain engaged with the individual.

Educate the identified TPI or TPM regarding specific behaviors that are of concern to law enforcement, to include specific behavioral changes, escalation in behavior, or other concerning behavior that would indicate potential interest or planning for extremist violence.

Collect existing information from the TPI or TPM regarding the person's research, planning, preparation or other pre-attack behaviors – emphasizing warning behaviors that indicate potential imminence.

Provide the identified TPI or TPM with clear instructions, communication methods, and points of contact should concerns arise or escalate.

Think long-term by considering how to maintain avenues of communication, with provisions for alternative points of contact or reporting avenues in the event that established mechanisms become obsolete or ineffective over time.

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SECTION FOUR

MENTAL HEALTH AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM: CONSIDERATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

In the BAU's experience, many mental health practitioners have not routinely worked with individuals who have been driven by violent extremism. In fact, many have not been trained on what violent extremism is, let alone how to mitigate someone consumed by a violent extremist ideology. In the past, the BAU has experienced hesitancy from mental health practitioners to acknowledge or address the individuals' personal struggles, often due to the lack of understanding on how unaddressed personal struggles or needs can create a gateway to violent extremist ideology and radicalization. If that gateway to radicalization, as well as the comfort and structure provided by the ideology, are not acknowledged by the mental health practitioner, then an opportunity for mitigation could be lost. When terms such as extremism, radicalization, or deradicalization are discussed, many mental health practitioners distance themselves from such cases, stating they cannot help and do not have a referral they are able to give. Unfortunately, this lack of training and confidence in addressing violent extremism has left a significant void in available mental health services for such individuals of concern. Despite these challenges, the BAU's experience with individuals fixated on violent extremism has shown there are foundational mental health elements present that all mental health practitioners are familiar with.

As discussed in **Section One**, an individual does not wake up one day and become consumed by violent extremism. Rather, radicalization is an individualized process that happens over time. The violent extremist ideology serves a purpose to that person and may meet an unmet need or needs. When the BAU consults on someone who appears to have become radicalized, one of the first questions explored is identifying what unmet needs are present. If the individual's primary unmet need can be determined, then a potential starting point for mitigation has been identified.

Based upon the BAU's experience with violent extremists, this section is intended to share a practical approach for mental health practitioners to consider before concluding they do not have the training or expertise to assist someone connected to violent extremism who may be seeking change.

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY WITH THE "Y"

As intimated in Kruglanski et al., (2022) significant quest theory, an unmet need is a push factor towards an ideology that meets those needs. For example, in some cases an individual may be feeling alone, helpless, hopeless, and experiencing stressors on various dimensions. When looking at the beginning of this radicalization process, there may be a point where the individual was seeking recognition and support. When such needs are unmet, however, the individual may feel lost or unwanted, which ultimately leads them to a "Y" or fork in the road.

In the BAU's experience, some individuals who are experiencing the push/pull towards a violent extremist ideology do not feel they receive the attention or assistance they are seeking from others. Rather than feeling acknowledged and needed by those around them, they feel invisible and as though they do not belong. A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need, and one of the more common unmet needs seen at the BAU. Belonging provides individuals with emotional security, validation, and connection. When people lack this sense of belonging, it can lead to significant psychological consequences, including feelings of isolation, loneliness,

and worthlessness. Furthermore, a perceived lack of belonging often disrupts an individual's identity formation and sense of purpose, leaving them vulnerable to adopting maladaptive coping mechanisms or gravitating toward ideologies or groups that promise a sense of inclusion, even if those associations are harmful. This vulnerability underscores the critical importance of fostering environments–whether familial, social, or therapeutic–where individuals feel valued, understood, and connected with others. For mental health practitioners, addressing unmet needs related to belonging can be transformative in helping individuals build resilience and develop healthier social connections.

The potential consequence of unmet needs, long-term, is the development of shame. Shame is a set of complex ideas about the self, a deeply ingrained and often debilitating emotion that can profoundly impact an individual's psychological well-being (Barret et al., 2016). First, it is about accepting failure; the consequence of the evaluation of one's actions, thoughts, and feelings. Second, the self-evaluation is global versus when one feels embarrassed, which is situational. The phenomenological experience of the person feeling shame in oneself is that of a wish to hide, disappear, or die. This experience is highly negative and painful. Gilligan's (2003) extensive work with violent criminal offenders suggests that deep-seated feelings of shame and humiliation are central to the motivation behind violent acts. Gilligan posits that individuals may resort to violence as a means to restore self-esteem and counteract feelings of inferiority. Mental health practitioners can play a crucial role in addressing shame by providing a safe, nonjudgemental space for people to explore shame's roots and impact, reframe their experiences, and develop self-compassion.

A perceived lack of belonging often disrupts an individual's identity formation and sense of purpose.

In some cases, the BAU has seen individuals begin to dabble with violent extremist ideologies to garner attention from their family and friends. Unfortunately, those key supporters can be blind to the concerning activity conducted by the violent extremist. Some violent extremists experience trauma and struggle to understand what happened to them, while others experience loss through a divorce, death, relationship ending, significant family or life change, and/or incapable guardians (see **Appendix B**) who are preoccupied and distracted by their own struggles (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness). By understanding the individual's "Y" in the road, where changes happened and the unmet needs presented, the mental health practitioner can begin to comprehend why the individual has found inspiration in ideological driven violence.

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

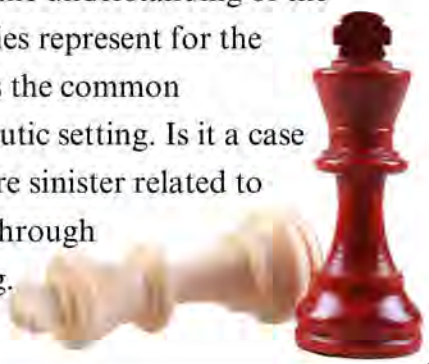
There are several mental health factors to consider when understanding the individualized process of radicalization, as discussed in **Section One**. Symptomatology connected to specific mental health or developmental challenges such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, obsessive-compulsive, and autism spectrum can leave an individual more vulnerable to seeing the world in black and white. This dichotomous way of thinking creates vulnerabilities for radicalization due to the comfort provided by the structure that violent extremist ideologies can bring to the individual. Thinking in a black and white way simplifies an otherwise chaotic world and allows unmet needs of structure and control to be met. When someone is stuck in this black and white thinking, they may not seek out more socially acceptable ways of providing structure for their daily living needs, such as the support of loved ones, building skills in navigating complex situations, or therapy to address anxieties. Like Alex, whose radicalization process was discussed in **Section One**, these individuals may find themselves alone and online, seeking answers without any discussion or challenges to the legitimacy of those answers they find.

IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY, AND I

The BAU's interviews of former violent extremists have shown for many people who join violent extremist communities, those communities may represent the first time they find a sense of identity, community, and purpose. Mental health practitioners should imagine, therefore, how therapy could assist in addressing unmet needs connected to belonging. One way is by starting with understanding the individual's perceived positives attached to the violent extremist ideology. With any behavior, it is important to understand the rewards associated with such behavior before one can pursue potential alterations. For example, if an individual struggles with social interaction or understanding societal cues, the online network of these communities may allow connection and belonging for the first time. Many former violent extremists described the powerful impact of having—often for the first time—friends who they felt listened to and accepted them, and who were motivated by or inspired by their rhetoric. For someone who has been on the outside looking in, trying to connect with others but finding in-person contact challenging, this sense of community presents a rewarding and safe alternative. Dr. Robert A. Fein, consultant psychologist to the BAU, has noted that being a "someone" versus a "no one" can be intoxicating, and this positive feedback loop may help continuously push that individual towards the violent extremist community.

The BAU has found that it is important for mental health practitioners to assess if an individual has an unmet need of being a "someone." If so, practitioners can work with the individual to identify socially acceptable ways to meet this need, such as a specific course of study or career. This functional analysis of behavior can not only assist the practitioner in understanding the individual's needs but can also go a long way in building rapport. This rapport can be strengthened by starting with the individual's perceived positives of their beliefs, instead of focusing on the negative aspects of their ideology, which may also give practitioners key insights into potential cognitive distortions to work on throughout the therapeutic process.

Practitioners may also encounter individuals who blend multiple violent extremist ideologies together. During a congressional hearing in 2020, former FBI Director Christopher Wray called this phenomenon "salad bar extremism." For practitioners, it is the understanding of the common thread between those ideologies, or what those ideologies represent for the individual, that is important. When an obsession with violence is the common denominator, it is important to address this fixation in a therapeutic setting. Is it a case of hurt people wanting to hurt people, or signs of something more sinister related to antisocial or psychopathic symptomology? One will only know through discussion, therapeutic intervention, and/or psychological testing.



The BAU has observed that violence can make people feel powerful, and some individuals with a history of untreated trauma or unresolved issues find comfort in the feelings of power and control that comes with violence. Regardless of violence's origin and personal meaning, it is an important factor to address while recognizing the individual may be resistant to such discussions at first. As with any sensitive topic, rapport and trust needs to be established before genuine discussions can occur.

OFF-RAMPING, BILLBOARDS, AND EXIT

Disengagement and deradicalization (see **Appendix B**) should be considered in every countering violent extremism strategy. Stopping behaviors of concern, whether by the person or through intervention from the criminal justice system, is only one part of a good strategy. When deradicalization is discussed, mental health practitioners sometimes struggle with the concept and what it means in a therapeutic setting. Stripping away all the emotion attached to the word and focusing on the individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behavior is suggested. Deradicalization is a voluntary process akin to addressing other challenges and mental wellness issues proactively in a therapeutic setting. Without addressing the "why?" behind the violent extremist interest and behavior, the person could struggle to implement lasting change if those motivational drivers are not addressed.

The BAU suggests that when mental health practitioners are asked to assist with an individual's deradicalization process, start by identifying the "why." Start with a discussion about the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behavior related to the violent extremist ideology. Acknowledge the benefits they may have received from the connection to the violent extremist ideology and possibly the associated community, the loss associated with leaving that ideology behind, and the obstacles to their future-oriented goals they may have faced because of their ideology. Deradicalization is an individual-driven and gradual process. It takes time to sort out the complex motivations and personal drivers. In therapy, deradicalization can be assisted by a gradual smoothing of rough edges through the processing of contradictions and obstacles the ideology presents for long-term goals.

As discussed in **Section Two**, many former violent extremists have told the BAU that their deradicalization required shedding the violent extremist identity and finding a new identity. While assisting the process of deradicalization, it is important for the mental health practitioner to understand the difficulty and significance of someone removing a part of their identity. A person's identity encompasses their experiences, values, and beliefs. It is how one sees themselves, how one sees the world around them, and how one perceives others to see him or herself.

As an exercise, think of aspects of your own identity.

How do you identify personally, professionally, and interpersonally?

Now imagine someone asking you to rid yourself of any part of that identity.

Do you think it will be a fast and easy process? Or do you think it is something that would occur over time through alternative experiences?

It is important to understand that this will not be a linear process. It will take patience and understanding. At times during the therapeutic process, it may feel as though the individual is stuck in a "one step forward, two steps back" situation. This back-and-forth process is not unique to deradicalization. It occurs often when maladaptive behavior patterns or dysfunctional beliefs are challenged during psychotherapy. When individuals are presented evidence that counters their beliefs, the instinctive reaction is often to engage in belief perseverance, meaning rejecting the incompatible evidence, searching for additional evidence to support the belief, and

clinging harder to that belief. Managing expectations during this process is crucial. Understand this is a normal part of change and setbacks happen even with the most experienced mental health practitioners. Expectation management is also important for the individual patient involved in the therapeutic process. It may be helpful for mental health practitioners to have a discussion with their patient to help them understand that change is a gradual and often confusing process.

The therapeutic process creates opportunities to reframe situations, offering the individual a broader perspective. One way the therapeutic process can help is by encouraging the individual to consider, based on their perspective and personal history, what to look for on the horizon that could create challenges. A metaphor for this would be potholes ahead on the road of life. In the threat assessment and threat management process when trying to mitigate someone who is progressing toward violent extremist action, billboards and exit ramps are needed to help the person see other alternatives to violence. Dr. Gregory B. Saathoff, consultant psychiatrist to the BAU, has observed that "our job as threat assessors is to provide billboards that encourage the person to the take the exits." Mental health practitioners can work toward creating these same billboards and exit ramps during the therapeutic process. Doing so will increase the individual's awareness of how to navigate around the potholes ahead in their life that may be created by his or her violent extremist ideology. Through psychotherapy, mental health practitioners can help unlock options for the individual that once were not perceived as available, which can assist in the deradicalization process.

TRANSFERENCE, COUNTERTRANSFERENCE, AND BIASES

Another important aspect of the therapeutic relationship is being mindful of transference and countertransference. There are many biases associated with violent extremists, and exploring those biases and understanding what violent extremism evokes personally will allow the mental health practitioner to approach the therapeutic process with empathy and can help eliminate, or at least reduce, negative transference. To be empathic during this process, it is important for the mental health practitioner to understand what violent extremism means to them personally, and to have considered how that definition could be different than the individual patient they are assisting. For example, the mental health practitioner may view someone who has radicalized to a violent extremist ideology as being manipulated, groomed, or brainwashed, but the individual patient may not share these same views. Rather, they may view their participation in the violent extremist ideology or activity as being enlightening and empowering. If that is the case, mental health practitioners must find a way to appropriately bridge that gap so the individual patient can feel understood.

The BAU has found that one important aspect of understanding a violent extremist's point of view is by considering cultural context. Cultural mindfulness is a critical part of any therapeutic process, and if a cultural context exists that is beyond a mental health practitioner's understanding, he or she is obligated to educate themselves. This serves multiple purposes when providing therapy to someone who may hold violent extremist beliefs: it increases cultural mindfulness and empathic attunement, thereby ensuring the best care possible. It reduces incorrect assertions or interpretations by the mental health practitioner, and it reduces the chance the mental health practitioner will excuse maladaptive behavior by assuming it is based on culture.

RETHINKING DERADICALIZATION THROUGH A COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL APPROACH

The BAU encourages a cognitive-behavioral approach to deradicalization involving an individualized understanding of the violent extremist individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a therapeutic environment. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has long been used to treat depression and anxiety through psychotherapy that focuses on how an individual's thinking patterns affect their emotions and behaviors (Beck et al., 1979; Ellis, 1987; Hayes, 2019; Linehan, 1993). CBT focuses on changing these thinking patterns so the individual can better manage their emotions and alter their behaviors to manage problems and stressors encountered daily more effectively. CBT throughout its evolution is one of the most empirically validated forms of psychotherapy, which makes it the gold standard in many clinical settings. Further, CBT has grown to be an instrumental part of treating substance abuse disorders or addictive disorders where obsessive compulsive behaviors are present. Relapse prevention models with a cognitive behavior focus have been instrumental in treating addictive struggles such as substance abuse, eating disorders (restricting diet or overeating), and sexual addictive behaviors related to sex offenders (Marlatt & Gordon, 1985). Many of those same cognitive behavioral aspects can be used when addressing violent extremist ideology. For example, seemingly unimportant decisions (SUDS) have been defined as the decision points where the choice will lead the person either closer to abstinence or closer to relapse. The difficulty is that often the person is unaware of the choice's importance because it may seem unimportant (Jenkins-Hall & Marlatt, 1989). Utilizing these same relapse prevention concepts could be helpful when addressing violent extremist ideology. An example of potential SUDS for a violent extremist may be the decision to continue associating with like-minded friends, despite potential negative consequences. SUDS can be a slippery slope but are often rationalized away by individuals as a benign situation.

Emphasizing the importance of balance and self-care is paramount for long-term success.

In addressing violent extremism with a cognitive-behavioral focus and relapse prevention concepts, mental health practitioners should consider monitoring problematic thinking, emotions, and behavior that—if addressed—could greatly improve the individual's life. In CBT, problematic thinking is described as cognitive distortions. Cognitive distortions are habitual errors in thinking where events are usually negatively biased. Some common cognitive distortions are rationalization, minimizations, and denial (Burns, 1989; Dozois & Beck, 2008). Addressing cognitive distortions or unproductive thinking, and the impact those thoughts have

on the individual's behavior, can be done gradually and respectfully through discussion of contradictions. The BAU has observed that this type of thinking often serves as protective for the individual and can be part of why their involvement in violent extremism has continued. Despite this perceived protective nature, the "feel goods" associated with the violent extremist ideology and behavior should be considered. As described above, there are aspects of the violent extremist ideology, associations, and/or behaviors that the individual finds rewarding and a positive part of their life. Acknowledging these benefits while trying to help them find other ways to experience those same rewarding experiences in more socially acceptable ways should be the focus. Finally, emphasizing the importance of balance and self-care is paramount for long-term success.

Another related concept to cognitive distortions is extreme overvalued beliefs (EOB), defined as "rigidly held, non-delusional beliefs that are motives behind acts of terrorism and mass shootings." EOBs are differentiated from delusions and obsessions. In this situation, the extreme overvalued beliefs could be incorrectly seen by mental health practitioners who are not familiar with EOB to be more thoughts consistent with a delusional system or psychotic process (Rahman, 2018).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is another behavioral-based therapeutic approach that may be useful to assist someone in moving forward as they shift away from violent extremism. ACT focuses on reducing the impact and influence of negative thoughts and feelings (acceptance) while taking action to build a meaningful life (commitment) that aligns with one's core values (Hayes, 2019). ACT aims to help individuals with the following: increase psychological flexibility, understand one's values and use them to guide them to do things that will enrich their lives, teach the psychological skills that will enable one to handle difficult thoughts and feelings effectively, appreciate the fulfilling aspects of life, and understand how their thoughts and behavior are either supporting or hindering their life goals (Hayes, 2019).

ACT can be a valuable approach for individuals who hold violent extremist beliefs, as it focuses on psychological flexibility and value-driven behavior rather than directly challenging specific ideologies. In the BAU's experience, violent extremism can thrive on rigid belief systems, emotional avoidance, and an over-identification with group identities. ACT addresses these by helping individuals develop mindfulness skills to observe their thoughts and feelings without judgment, thus reducing the grip of rigid worldviews on their identity. In therapy, ACT encourages individuals to accept difficult emotions, such as anger, fear, or guilt, without being dominated by them. This acceptance reduces the emotional intensity that often fuels violent extremist behavior. By focusing on personal values, ACT helps people reconnect with a broader

sense of purpose that aligns with prosocial goals. Over time this approach may weaken the hold of various violent extremist beliefs by replacing them with behaviors that are consistent with the individual's deeper, more humane values. Additionally, ACT's emphasis on committed action can empower individuals to take steps toward a meaningful life outside of the violent extremism context. These steps could include rebuilding relationships, engaging in constructive community roles, or pursuing education and employment opportunities. Through this flexible and non-confrontational process, ACT provides a pathway for individuals to disengage from harmful belief systems and reintegrate into society in a constructive way.

MENTAL ILLNESS

Many can fall for the stereotype that people who are motivated by violent extremism must be mentally ill. This stereotype is contradictory to what the BAU's research on targeted violence and terrorism has demonstrated. Offenders who have committed acts of targeted violence and terrorism had a diagnosable mental illness only 25% of the time (Silver et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2019). When compared to the general population, similar levels of mental illness are present: 22.8% of U.S. adults experienced mental illness in 2021 (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). A causative connection between mental illness and violent extremism has not been found by the BAU. Therefore, it important that the focus be on mental wellness. As such, it is recommended that mental health practitioners focus on the individual and their specific drivers as a contributing factor towards their interest in violent extremism, and how to strengthen their mental wellness and address vulnerabilities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR MENTAL HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

It is the BAU's hope that mental health practitioners will continue to seek more information on these concepts and realize they can help address violent extremist beliefs through therapeutic channels. Approaching the treatment from a cognitive-behavioral approach can help in understanding the individuals' push, pull, and personal factors as well as their unique thoughts, feelings, and behavior that are keeping them from moving away from violent extremism. Mental health practitioners should prepare to assess and address a violent extremist individual's potential unmet needs, unresolved trauma, dichotomous thinking, and structure-seeking behavior. Moreover, mental health practitioners should address the question of: "what and who does the individual need for success?" Focusing efforts on the individual's personal growth and expansion of their personal relationships can provide the individual with options to move away from violent extremism and embrace a worldview colored with hope.

The following points are offered as key practical considerations:

- Individuals contemplating change through the therapeutic process recognize they need help but are struggling with "how to," many times due to underlying personal struggles and issues.

- Change starts with understanding the individual and through building rapport and trust in the therapeutic process. Identify the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviors unique to the individual and the struggles that are likely at the core of what has been impeding positive change. In the BAU's experience, many times unmet needs related to unresolved trauma, lack of belonging, or unknown identity are key areas at the beginning of these individual journeys to radicalization. Asking where the "Y" or fork in the road was for this individual, and where their baseline of behavior and interests changed, can be key to opening doors that would otherwise remain closed and, in some cases, locked.

- Mental health practitioners have a role and responsibility as community members to help strengthen mental wellness and address people's vulnerabilities to violent extremism. Practitioners can assist by helping individuals make positive changes, therefore supporting the deradicalization process. Focusing on the individual's worth and their needs is important. It is what mental health practitioners routinely do in the therapeutic process every day.

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SECTION FIVE

JUVENILE CONSIDERATIONS

The BAU has observed that investigators working to prevent violence in their communities are encountering juveniles* with violent extremist beliefs more often every year. Cases involving these individuals present challenges to traditional investigative methods and often require creative thinking to move the juvenile toward a *path of hope*. The following observations, opinions, and suggestions are the result of the personal investigative experience, educational background, specialized training, and research on juvenile violent extremists conducted by members of the BAU and others."

**The BAU considers individuals less than 18 years of age to be juvenile subjects.*

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

In the psychosocial development model spanning birth to late adulthood, Erik Erikson (1950) identified the fifth of eight human development stages as identity vs. role confusion. Erikson found that between the ages of 12 and 18 years old, adolescents seek to establish meaning, uniqueness, and a sense of identity. Identity development is a normal process; however, this stage of life renders some juveniles vulnerable to the adoption of violent extremist beliefs (Borum & Patterson, 2019). A juvenile's search for identify and belonging, combined with the internet, may result in exposure to gore and violence, as well as violent extremist ideas spanning a range of ideologies. Challenges, therefore, arise in parsing between exploration associated with normal human development versus concerning behavior indicating problematic associations with violent extremism. This important distinction can be particularly challenging in the context of online statements and behaviors.

In the BAU's experience, juveniles vulnerable to radicalization often experience overlapping clusters of push, pull, and personal factors, along with challenging life circumstances. Feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and powerlessness are common themes observed in these investigations. The BAU assesses the desire to belong and peer influence are two of the primary compelling "pull" factors in the juvenile radicalization process. Often, juveniles feeling extremely lonely seek belonging in anti-social online spaces, which then introduce them to violent extremist concepts.

Lack of supervision, lack of structure, and lack of productive ways to fill time also present openings to violent extremist ideologies. The BAU has found that some adolescents are strongly impacted by online radicalizing influences, to include extremist propaganda, violence and gore, and content related to previous violent extremist attacks. See **Figure 3** for common themes.

In multiple cases involving juvenile subjects, fixation on violence and gore was found to be a predominant driver in the initiation and maintenance of the individual's violent extremist beliefs. In these cases, propaganda created by foreign terrorist organizations was initially attractive to the juveniles due to the abundant gore and violent content, but over time indoctrinated the juvenile to the belief system and became ideologically interesting when they explored further online content along the same vein.

Figure 3

Juvenile Radicalization Themes

- Attraction to violence and gore
- Online exposure to extremism
- Perceived injustice/grievance
- Seeking a sense of purpose
- Sense of belonging
- Seeking structure
- Susceptibility due to youthful mindset
- Too much free time

RISK-TAKING BEHAVIOR

An important consideration when investigators or mental health practitioners encounter juveniles interested in violent extremism is the significant changes and challenges that accompany the typical adolescent experience. These challenges include cognitive changes, identity and personality development, peer influence, and development in psychosocial maturity. Adolescents are more likely than children or adults to engage in risky behaviors due to developmental changes in their decision-making processes (Guy, 2021). While risk-taking can provide positive experiences, such as building confidence, it can also have detrimental consequences. The dual systems model of adolescent brain development offers a well-supported explanation for these age-related patterns. According to this model, adolescent risk-taking arises from changes in two brain systems that develop independently yet interact in significant ways: the incentive processing system, which drives reward-seeking behavior, and the cognitive control system, which underpins self-regulatory abilities like impulse control (Steinberg, 2008). The cognitive control system matures later, resulting in a developmental gap that influences decision-making.

The search for identity and belonging can make adolescents vulnerable to "ideology shopping," particularly when they struggle to find acceptance.

Adolescent decision-making is also shaped by their maturity of judgment, which encompasses three key components: responsibility, involving self-reliance, independence, and identity clarity; perspective, referring to the ability to consider multiple viewpoints and contextualize decisions within broader contexts; and temperance, which is the capacity to manage impulsivity and anticipate consequences (Guy, 2021). These developmental processes occur alongside adolescent exploration of identity, sense of self, and their place within peer groups. The search for identity and belonging can make adolescents vulnerable to "ideology shopping," particularly when they struggle to find acceptance within their real-life social circles. This susceptibility is heightened when juveniles experience perceived rejection or a lack of belonging, making them more prone to influence by online recruiters or extremist ideologies. The combination of developmental factors, emotional vulnerability, and a desire for belonging underscores the importance of addressing these risks during this critical stage of development.

MYTH: JUVENILES ARE LESS CAPABLE OF VIOLENCE

For some juveniles, online exploration of violent extremism simply reflects attention-seeking behavior and attempts to elicit care and concern from loved ones. However, juvenile behavior is not always that simple. The BAU's experience involving juveniles underscores the reality: radicalization potential and the threat of violence cannot be dismissed simply due to age. The BAU has observed numerous cases in which adolescents have embraced violent extremism and engaged in research, planning, and preparing for violence, or demonstrated their intent to mobilize in other ways. Often, the first time a juvenile is violent is when they commit an act of terrorism or targeted violent attack. Therefore, traditional law enforcement methods such as reviewing criminal history details are likely to yield negative results. This lack of derogatory information may bias investigators towards minimizing the threat picture leading to an inaccurate assessment of dangerousness.

Further, when assessing a threat, it is important to consider and check all biases. For example, a juvenile of concern may remind investigators of another young person they know who did not progress towards committing a violent act, leading to a lower assessment of the threat. Another common bias observed by the BAU occurs when investigative teams cannot imagine a juvenile becoming violent, due to stature, personality, or another observation, and therefore assess a lower threat based on their personal perceptions of the juvenile's capability. There are many cases of juveniles who maintain secrecy, manipulate others, acquire weapons, build explosive devices, and/or kill others, so it is important to consider each individual case independently in terms of the totality of risk and mitigating factors present.

A juvenile charged with attempting to provide material support to terrorists indicated that law enforcement's intervention impacted his mobilization process when investigators advised his parents not to allow him to obtain a passport. This newly imposed travel restriction resulted in the juvenile becoming more fervent in his beliefs, reinforced his perception that the world was against Islam, and ultimately led to a shift in his focus from travel to attack plotting. The juvenile formalized plans to target a high-profile religious figure during an upcoming visit to the juvenile's city of residence.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

The BAU's experience supporting juvenile violent extremism cases has shown that parents and/or guardians serve as essential partners when it comes to short and long-term management of the individual of concern. Parents, guardians, and/or other close family members often have the closest view of the juvenile's behavior, given their day-to-day proximity, and can provide helpful context regarding the juvenile's life history and any change(s) over time. Case teams almost always need parent or guardian involvement when attempting to intervene with or manage threats posed by juvenile violent extremists, especially when an arrest is not a viable option.

In some cases, the troubling or behaviorally disruptive actions of juvenile violent extremists can overwhelm the abilities of their parents or guardians. Parents or guardians may already feel mentally and emotionally exhausted after having explored all potential avenues and options to support their child. Moreover, they may be consumed with their own life struggles and/or unmet needs, rendering them incapable of addressing the needs of their son or daughter alone. Practitioners should take a moment to thoughtfully consider the context of the parents or guardians and their willingness and capability to assist in moving the juvenile away from violent extremism. As discussed in **Section Three**, developing empathy is critical when engaging with both the juvenile and family members if law enforcement and practitioners are to manage this potential threat safely and effectively in a holistic manner.

On the other end of the spectrum, the BAU has seen cases where the parents or guardians are shocked by the juvenile's support for violent extremism which can result in a wide variety of responses. These responses can include, but not limited to, denial, shame or guilt, concern, or anger. In addition, operational accord can be negatively impacted by the parent's perception of law enforcement, availability of mental health resources, their personal support for the violent extremist ideology, or their perception of the process as being punitive to their child. Parents or guardians may also side with the juvenile if they deny the concerning behavior exists, or feel the juvenile is misunderstood or is the victim of unfair targeting and/or bullying by outsiders. To maintain an empathetic and respectful interaction, law enforcement and practitioners should prepare for likely reactions by parents or guardians when thinking about conducting an interview, conducting a search, or implementing other forms of intervention.

Part of this preparatory process involves assessing the parents or guardian's capability to provide long-term support to the case team and practitioner(s). As touched upon previously, capability can be influenced by financial resources, access to care (such as health insurance,

physical proximity), language barriers, cultural stigma, and more. Capability can also be reduced when parents or guardians are neglectful or abusive; overwhelmed by life circumstances; unsure where to get help; or are unaware of what behavior is concerning. In such circumstances, law enforcement and practitioners should strive to increase capability by addressing the parent or guardian's unmet need by facilitating access to community and educational resources.

When juveniles become involved in violent extremism, it is important for those around them to establish clear boundaries regarding problematic behaviors. Investigators should be aware parents or guardians may struggle to establish boundaries if a traditional structure in the household doesn't already exist. Traditional structure in the household includes regular meals, performing homework, engaging in social interactions, and adhering to scheduled bedtimes. Establishing structure to hold juveniles accountable to new boundaries can be challenging when they do not recognize the importance of consistent standards or the significance of the bad behavior.

Central to boundary setting is the lack of visibility by many parents or guardians into the juvenile's online activity. Monitoring online exposure to violent extremist content requires interpersonal and technical skills that some parents or guardians may lack. Such inadequacies can often lead to juvenile violent extremists spending considerable time isolated from others and exploring online content without proper adult supervision. In the BAU's experience, this isolation or lack of supervision creates the optimal condition for online radicalization to occur. Therefore, educating and emphasizing the importance of boundaries and structure related to the juvenile's online activity is paramount. Practitioners should also consider discussing with the juvenile and the parent or guardian what the juvenile encounters online, so that responsible adults can offer their insight and perspective. These interactions can result in a better understanding of the intersection of the juvenile's real-life behavior and their online violent extremist activity for a more accurate threat picture.

INTERVIEWS AND INTERACTIONS WITH JUVENILE VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

The BAU's recommendations regarding interactions and interventions with violent extremists (see **Section Three**) largely holds true with juveniles, but there are some nuances and additional considerations for law enforcement and practitioners to consider. When interviewing juvenile violent extremists, law enforcement and practitioners should seek to gain a holistic understanding of the circumstances beyond the violent extremist beliefs, including developing an understanding of the unique push, pull, and personal factors that may be at play. By identifying and understanding these factors, law enforcement and practitioners may be able to develop more effective strategies to address root issues.

When interviewing juvenile violent extremists, law enforcement and practitioners should expect to encounter a variety of responses. In the BAU's experience, juveniles may seek to divert attention away from their behavior of concern with excuses such as "I was joking," "I'm just LARPing" (live action role-playing), or "I was being edgy." Moreover, they may claim they are being bullied, or shift blame onto others in their peer group. The BAU has also observed some juveniles range from surprisingly honest about their violent extremist interest or activities to extremely deceptive. Regardless of the position they take, it is important to corroborate any information reported by the juvenile, their parent, and/or guardian after every interview.

Like any interview, the outcome can be negatively oriented, positively oriented, or somewhere in between. Some juveniles are not deterred or "scared straight" by law enforcement interaction or admonishment, but rather they can become more resistant, secretive, and committed to violence. Others may realize their behavior was wrong and/or illegal resulting in a change of their behavior after this realization. In one example, a former violent extremist, who had been admonished as a juvenile, described his experience with Islamic State related content as being readily available online. Due to the ease and availability of this content online, he did not realize that supporting the group was wrong and carried potential negative consequences. Further, he had a significant physical disability and felt socially isolated. He told the BAU that members of the extremist group presented themselves as his true friends. It was only after being interviewed by law enforcement in an empathetic manner, that he finally realized the criminal nature of his online behavior, and that his "friends" were only trying to recruit him.

It may be difficult to determine a juvenile's level of engagement with violent extremism after just one interview. As described previously, juveniles are undergoing constant change. Investigations that span multiple years may see differences in mood, character, and interests as time goes on. Such transitions may not be an indicator of deliberate deception or obfuscation, but rather the natural changes experienced by all juveniles as they develop. Investigative teams should always seek out multiple sources of information when evaluating whether a juvenile violent extremist has truly shifted in their behavior and/or violent extremist beliefs.

JUVENILE VIOLENT EXTREMISTS: OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Exploration may not equate to radicalization.

Due to the natural identity-seeking process undergone by every young person, juveniles may explore violent extremist ideologies or antisocial topics, including participating in online spaces or groups related to violent extremism. Practitioners must assess whether the juvenile has taken on a violent extremist identity, and mitigation may involve assisting the juvenile with taking on other, more prosocial, identities.

How long has the juvenile been consuming or engaging with violent extremist material?

How much time, energy, and effort does the juvenile dedicate to violent extremism-related content and/or activities?

Does the juvenile appear fixated on violent extremism or content? How much time do they spend participating in or consuming other content, interests, or activities?

Does the juvenile have friends, real-life or online, who do not participate in violent extremism?

Understand the juvenile beyond the extremist beliefs.

As with adults, supporting a juvenile violent extremist's movement away from their violent beliefs and activities requires understanding them holistically. While gathering information related to the juvenile's threatening or concerning violent extremist behavior is important, consider additional sources of information that will help the team identify and mitigate the individual's push, pull, and personal factors.

What is occurring in the juvenile's life? What are their interests, hobbies, day-to-day schedule, etc.? Are they involved in a friend group (in real life or online)?

How does the juvenile self-identify? How do they solve problems or cope with stress or setbacks?

What unique personal factors or characteristics may be pushing or pulling the juvenile toward violent extremism?

Are the parents or guardians willing and capable of providing support? Is there a need for additional intervention or education for the parent or guardian?

Understand both online and in real life (IRL) behavior.

An important factor in assessing a juvenile's movement toward violent extremism involves determining whether and to what extent there is a discrepancy between online behavior and real-life behavior and circumstances.

Does the juvenile demonstrate consistent interests, activities, and circumstances across their online and real-life behavior? What are the contradictions?

Does the juvenile appear to espouse violent extremism only in certain contexts?

Could their interest in violent extremism be explained by a desire to fit in with a specific peer group?

What sources of information are available to corroborate information obtained regarding online and real-life statements?

Radicalization may not lead to mobilization (See Section One).

Practitioners must identify not only whether the juvenile is radicalized to violent extremism, but also whether they are seeking to act in support of violent extremism. This support may involve seeking to conduct an attack, travel overseas, disseminate propaganda, or other activities.

What push, pull, and personal factors could influence the juvenile to move toward mobilization? Are those factors stable, or likely to change?

Are there any significant life stressors or challenges that the team can predict?

What observable behaviors are present that may indicate the juvenile is moving toward violent action?

Are there signs of research, planning, or preparation for an attack?

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LOOKING FORWARD: THE LAW ENFORCEMENT-ACADEMIA PARTNERSHIP

The current understanding of radicalization has only recently incorporated the impact of artificial intelligence or AI's ability to manage, sort, and spread extremist narratives around the world. In the past, the battle for American hearts and minds was shielded by physical geography and tempered by democratic institutions. Today, narratives by terrorist organizations from afar can echo in American households instantly, undermining freedom of speech and the social fabric of democracy. The power of social media algorithms enables terrorist organizations to disseminate disparate extremist content onto the internet and let AI gather and present this content in a manner tailored towards each user's state of mind or unique viewing preference. The BAU has observed the conditions for radicalization mutate from in-person to online networks and—now—towards autonomous singular nodes (i.e. the lone-ly offender) where no contact with a violent extremist group member is needed. Social media and AI's decentralization of radicalization is gradually supplanting traditional grooming methods used by violent extremists with AI's own agnostic method of hijacking a user's emotions. This concerning progression, which has begun to muddle classical radicalization with a novel autogenic process, behooves us to take another look at the emotional and psychological drivers of an offender's online extremist identity and their real-life social identity from the beginning. Thus, the future line of effort to incorporate the internet and AI's complicity in the study of violent extremism must be made through the examination of actual law enforcement records, timely access to violent extremist offenders, and a multidisciplinary perspective comprised of law enforcement and academic researchers. In this way, new findings will be timely and appropriate to inform the technical, tactical, and strategic decisions made by all stakeholders when managing cases of violent extremism in the new technological era.

For law enforcement personnel, it's important to note the BAU has concluded there is no demographic profile of someone predisposed to radicalization and mobilization. The BAU does not look for "types" of individuals who may indicate a likelihood to engage in violent extremism. This conclusion is based on years of experience while sitting in a unique position with a live, real-time, panoramic vista of violent extremist behavior demonstrated by ideologically motivated and non-ideologically motivated offenders. The idiosyncratic nature of radicalization demands future research be based on actual law enforcement reports and records when examining the true tipping point from extremist thought to violent action. Recommendations and behavioral insights derived purely from open-source documents by untrained individuals from the media or the public are destined to fall short of revealing helpful and practical insights into online radicalization and real-life mobilization.

In the past, noble attempts to delineate this tipping point towards mobilization have been conducted through qualitative analysis of incarcerated individuals, which is often performed years (even decades) after their capture. During the intervening era, a transformation of personal and social identity may take place, resulting in the documentation of unintended artifacts, to include possible errors shaped from recall bias and perception management. While data gleaned through such traditional methods have been valuable, a significant portion of the BAU's own effort on this front was initiated while social media platforms and AI were still in their formative years. Hence, renewed efforts on this topic may yield different findings, especially if more timely access to offenders can be facilitated by all relevant stakeholders who are involved in the U.S. justice system.

One potential means towards greater knowledge is through the enhancement of law enforcement partnerships with academic researchers. Establishment of a law enforcement-academic nexus as a best practice could demonstrate an improved theory-to-praxis framework and position researchers closer to the time of disruption or violent extremists' incarceration. In the future, greater proximity and access by such experts could potentially allow a more accurate cataloging of the stressors, push-pull factors, unmet needs, fantasies, expectations, mindset, and decision-making processes that a traditional law enforcement interview may not uncover. Moreover, new themes or patterns gleaned through such partnerships that deviate from historical findings, in light of social media and new technologies, will necessitate a rigorous review by those trained in scientific methodology to make such discoveries valid.

The benefits of quickly capturing fragile and perishable information in an empirical scientific manner are obvious. It may highlight ephemeral elements (e.g., emotions, perceptions, attitudes, etc.,) that a traditional retrospective interview may miss. It also has the potential to illuminate the offender's mindset in its purest state before emotions dissipate, and self-reflection and guilt have blurred the details of the offender's journey to violent extremism. Furthermore, a partnership between law enforcement and academia could create opportunities to collect real-time qualitative data at the height of a violent extremist's journey, and then to re-collect this data again months or even years later to compare the findings. Such qualitative comparisons hold the potential to enhance our current understanding of the spectrum of motivations attached to radicalization, mobilization, forced disengagement, and deradicalization.

Another benefit of a combined approach is the expanded capacity to identify seemingly unrelated research that can be applied towards the field of preventing violent extremism. The BAU's emphasis on shame as an important emotional driver is one such example where law enforcement relies heavily on work done by academics who are not exclusive to the criminal justice field. For instance, the nuanced examination of shame by Gausel et al. (2016) highlights shame's paradoxical nature through two theoretical pathways: 1) related to a threat of social image leading to self-defensive motivation (e.g., avoidance or cover-up) and 2) related to a moral failure leading to pro-social motivation (e.g., restitution or contrition). This complex analysis is admittedly something law enforcement personnel would not normally pursue on their own. However, recognizing and applying Gausel et al.'s work to the study of violent extremism by an academic researcher could examine the possibility that shame as a risk to social image and rejection might be associated with non-ideologically motivated attackers; while shame from moral failure might be associated with the radicalization process for ideologically motivated attackers. Thus, the cross-cutting application of their theory could potentially offer an improved explanation as to why shame may be a common emotion experienced by both types of attackers, but through different theoretical pathways. Such musings could be thoroughly evaluated under the purview of a law enforcement/academic partnership, while its ramifications in the online space be explored for useful indicators.

It's important to note that despite public perception, U.S. law enforcement has a successful track record of partnering with non-traditional stakeholders for the sake of preventing violence. Some early examples date back to the 1990s when the Los Angeles Police Department's Threat Management Unit helped establish the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP). ATAP's membership consist of an eclectic group of experts, including psychologists

and attorneys, to combat targeted violence together. Also in the late 1990s, U.S. Secret Service Special Agent Bryan Vossekuil joined forces with psychologist Dr. Robert Fein, Ph.D., for the Exceptional Case Study Project which examined 83 offenders to discern patterns of pre-attack behaviors which now informs law enforcement and practitioners to prevent most forms of targeted violence (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999).

More recent examples of this synergy can be seen in the Memphis Police Department Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) model and in the multidisciplinary threat assessment and threat management (TATM) model which have been developed and deployed by myriad local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies throughout the country. In both models, law enforcement personnel partner with non-traditional stakeholders (e.g., mental health professionals, social workers, etc.,) to provide a collaborative response against mental health crisis and impending violence. According to the University of Memphis CIT Center, over 2900 CIT programs are active throughout 46 states (University of Memphis, 2024). Similarly, in 2025, at least 40 FBI field offices reported assisting with the development of 150 TATM teams across the nation and having at least one TATM-trained Special Agent (i.e. Threat Management Coordinators) in every FBI field office. Such examples are proof of law enforcement's capacity to embrace outside disciplines and evolve their own practices to protect the American public when necessary. The integration of academic methods with law enforcement operations should be no different.

The way forward calls on law enforcement and academia to navigate the halls of the U.S. justice system together. Both perspectives and skillsets are required to push the envelope of knowledge beyond our current beliefs. The complexity of radicalization, disengagement, and deradicalization described throughout this monograph speaks to the need for more rigorous and timely data to delineate the autonomous radicalization of vulnerable individuals in the United States, particularly in the era of social media, misinformation, and AI. In closing, it is the patriotic duty of all stakeholders, old and new, to address violent extremists by boldly pioneering new policies and relationships among experts in different institutions to better protect schools, the workplace, and this great country we call home.

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APPENDIX A

SYMPOSIUM ON RADICALIZATION, DISENGAGEMENT, AND DERADICALIZATION AGENDA

AUGUST 10 - 13, 2021

DAY ONE

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Paul Haertel, Assistant Director, FBI Critical Incident Response Group

Disrupt Without Damage: An FBI Case Study

Gregory Saathoff, M.D., FBI BAU

What is a 'Risk Factor' for (Violent) Extremism?

Paul Gill, Ph.D., University College London

VE Risk Assessment and Consensus Working Assumptions on Radicalization from the Multi-National RMWG

Randy Borum, Psy.D., University of South Florida

Keynote Remarks

Lord John Alderdice, House of Lords

The Varieties of Religion & Secrecy in American White Power Groups

Damon Berry, Ph.D., St. Lawrence University

Emerging Platforms for Radicalization, Algorithms, and Financing

Megan Squire, Ph.D., Elon University

Panel Discussion: Transnational Radicalization

Sam Jackson, Ph.D., University at Albany

Joseph Decie, Ph.D., Defense Intelligence Agency

Daniel Milton, Ph.D., West Point

Audrey Alexander, Ph.D., West Point

Motivating Offenders to Engage in Change: A Multidisciplinary Perspective

Caroline Logan, Ph.D., University of Manchester

DAY TWO

The Psychology of Disengagement

John Horgan, Ph.D., Georgia State University

Radicalization, Disengagement, and a Look at Probation

Mike Jensen, Ph.D., University of Maryland

Reintegration: The Role of Probation Officers and Others

Jessica Stern, Ph.D., Boston University

DAY TWO (CONTINUED)

Disentangling Risk and Protective Factors in the Assessment of Extremist Violence: an Empirical Study

Janet Warren, DSW, University of Virginia

Attitudinal Inoculation to Prevent Extremism

Kurt Braddock, Ph.D., American University

Terrorism and the Role of Mental Disorders (Panel)

Robert Fein, Ph.D., FBI BAU

Gregory Saathoff, M.D., FBI BAU

Reid Meloy, Ph.D., University of California San Diego

Paul Gill, Ph.D., University College London

DAY THREE

House Rules and Welcoming of Formers*, Presentations by Seven Formers

Reflections on Al-Qai'da

Peter Bergen, CNN

DAY FOUR

A Cognitive-Emotional Model for Understanding Right-Wing Extremism

Peter Simi, Ph.D., Chapman University

Psycho-Social Support Interventions Online: Engaging Audiences at Risk of Violence Extremism Across the US

Vidhya Ramalingam

Ongoing Work from the last RMWG Meeting Regarding Charleston, 2017

Caroline Logan, Ph.D., University of Manchester

Paul Gill, Ph.D., University College London

Randy Borum, Psy.D., University of South Florida

Solution Building by Subject Matter Experts and Practitioners

Everyone

Core Group Discussion on Tactical and Strategic Products

Everyone

Closing Remarks

**To protect the anonymity and stories of the former violent extremists who chose to share their experiences at the Symposium, they were only present during the block for their story, then departed the virtual meeting. Formers did not listen to the others' discussions.*

APPENDIX B

KEY TERMS

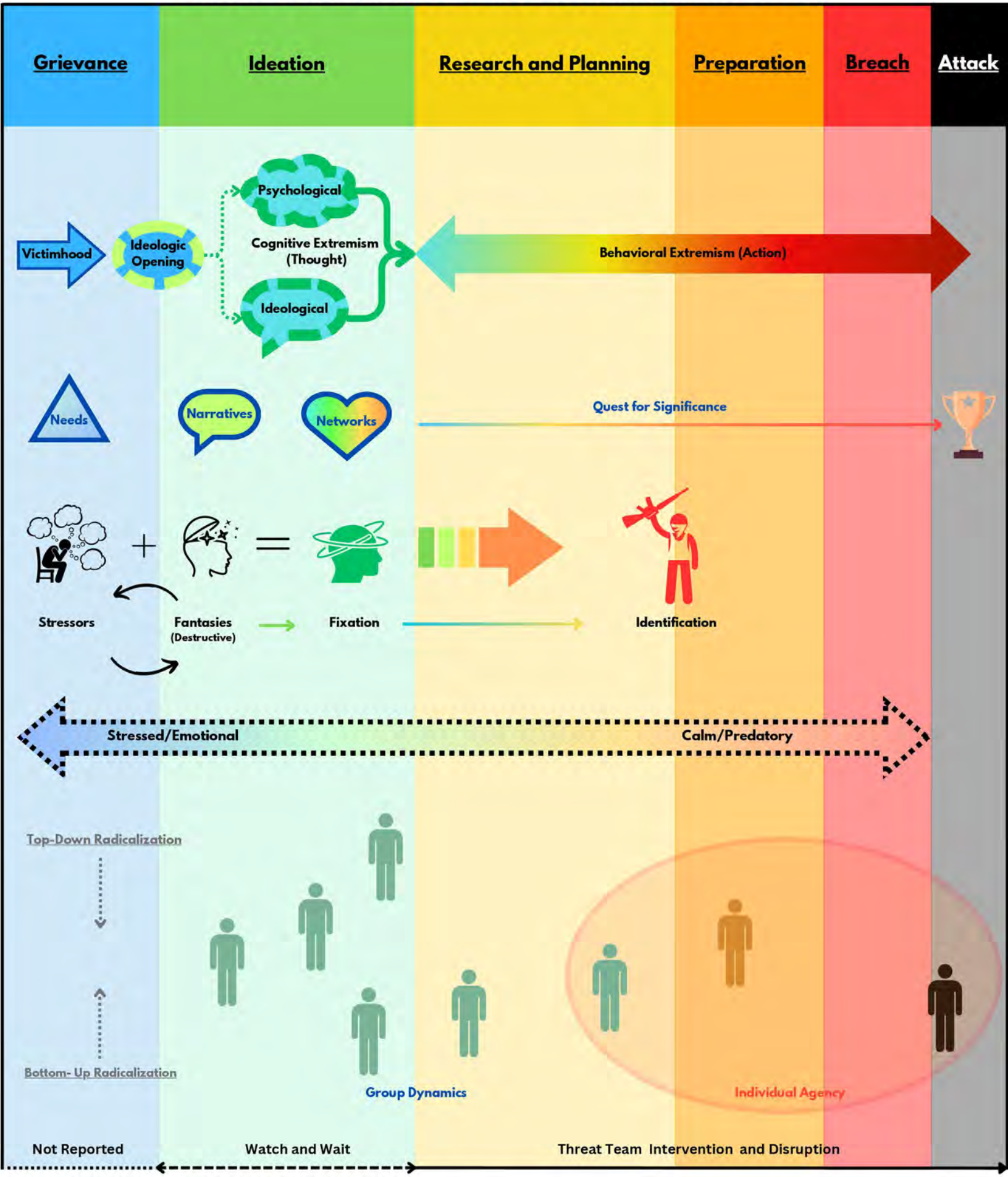
The following terms have been culled from BAU's research, experience, and collaboration with law enforcement, academic, and mental health practitioners. These terms reflect a consistent vocabulary used across the violence risk and threat assessment disciplines.

- **Bystander**: individuals such as family members, peers, authority figures, and strangers whose relationship and level of interaction with a person of concern enables them to witness or otherwise become aware of activities or behavior that may indicate radicalization or mobilization to violence. This awareness or witnessing of activities and behavior separates a bystander from a co-conspirator who engages in the activities or colludes with the person of concern.
  - **Bystander Fatigue**: passivity, inattention, or resignation to alarming behaviors observed by individuals who have a close, interpersonal relationship with a person of concern due to their prolonged exposure to the person of concern's behavior over time.
  - **Bystander Neglect**: disregard for a person of concern and/or their activities or concerning behaviors after witnessing or otherwise becoming aware of concerning behaviors.
  - **Bystander Sympathy**: understanding or agreement with the person of concern's belief system or purpose by an individual who witnesses or becomes aware of a person of concern's activities or concerning behaviors.
  - **Bystander Victimization**: abuse, intimidation, mistreatment, or direct threats by the person of concern to an individual with a close, interpersonal relationship who has observed concerning behaviors or activities.
- **Deradicalization**: process through which an individual abandons or rejects extremist beliefs and ideology. This process involves a fundamental change in an individual's belief structures that support one's commitment to a terrorist group's violent ideology.
- **Disengagement**: process through which an individual abandons extremist activity. An individual may continue to engage in radicalized behaviors (such as consuming propaganda) but is not engaged in behaviors associated with terrorist operations.
- **Echo Chamber**: an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with his or her own beliefs, so that the individual's existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered.
- **Fixation**: any behavior that indicates an increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or a cause.

- **Grievance:** (see Pathway to Violence definition)
- **Hybridized Ideology**: an individualized belief system that incorporates elements from two or more political, religious, or social belief systems.
- **Identification**: (in the context of a potential threat) any behavior that indicates a psychological desire to identify with previous attackers.
- **Ideological Promiscuity**: the "trying on" of multiple, sometimes conflicting, belief systems.
- **Incapable Guardian**: The legal guardian of a person of concern (POC) who consistently lacks or is otherwise unable to utilize the resources or skills needed to identify, manage or address the POC's behaviors of concern, which may precipitate or exacerbate the threat picture. This guardian may be temporarily or permanently unable to meet the needs of the POC due to circumstances beyond their control, including but not limited to their own mental health, medical, or financial issues. Where appropriate, supplementing the guardian's resources or capabilities is often a necessary step in implementing threat assessment/threat management (TATM) strategies or a specific threat management plan to assist the guardian in addressing obstacles. This definition was created to be used for TATM purposes and should not be confused or associated with any state or federal legal definition of an incapable guardian, as it relates to custodial matters in juvenile or family court.
- **Leakage**: the intentional or unintentional expressions, whether they are communicated to others, which seem to convey thoughts, feelings, or intentions to do harm to a target.
- **Legacy Token**: a letter, video, blog, or other communication created by an offender who orchestrates the delivery of the token to claim responsibility for the attack, articulate the motivation behind the attack, and enhance notoriety, often with the goal of inspiring others. Legacy tokens differ from manifestos in the personalized nature of the token and the impression management undertaken by the offender.
- **Manifesto**: a communication from an author planning to commit an act of violence in furtherance of a political or social goal which contains the author's beliefs and opinions often intending to justify his or her actions, created for an audience and accessible by that audience; for the purpose of convincing members of the audience and inspiring them to action. Writings that are solely autobiographical in nature, planning documents containing lists of weapons and targets, or personal journals are not considered manifestos.
- **Mobilization**: the movement from thought and intent to commit an act of violence to the active planning and overt steps of preparing to commit an act of violence.
- **Novel Aggression**: refers to the first time an individual commits an act of violence that appears unrelated to any behavior occurring on the pathway to violence. The novel aggression tests the individual's ability to become violent.

- **Pathway to Violence:** a non-linear process consisting of any behavior that is part of the research, planning, preparation, or implementation of an attack. The pathway consists of grievance, ideation, research/planning, preparation, breach, and attack.
  - **Grievance**: a real or perceived injustice to self or to a group. Grievances do not have to be rational or logical and may make sense only to the offender.
  - **Ideation**: entertaining ideas specific to the utility and acceptability of violence as a means to address the subject's particular grievance.
  - **Research/Planning**: seeking information about a target to facilitate an attack, which can include surveillance, Internet searches, testing security around a target, and researching methods of attack.
  - **Preparation**: after deciding on a course of action and conducting the necessary background work, the subject prepares for the actual attack. Behaviors may include acquiring weapons, assembling equipment, arranging transportation, observing significant dates, rehearsing, conducting final act behaviors, or costuming.
  - **Breach**: a situation where usual security measures at a target have been circumvented by a subject.
- **Radicalization**: the process through which an individual transitions from a nonviolent belief system to a belief system that actively advocates, facilitates, or uses unlawful violence – which is seen as necessary and justified to affect societal or political change. All radicalization does not lead to violence. It is the acceptance that violence may be necessary and/or justified (cognitive radicalization).
- **Risk**: refers to the likelihood or potential of an event occurring. In the context of the potential for an act of violence, risk refers to an individual's general capacity and tendency to be violent, regardless of whether the violence is reactive or planned.
- **Stressors**: events, personal factors, or environments that an individual might consider demanding, challenging, and/or threatening.
- **Threat**: a statement of an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on a specific individual, group, or location. In the context of an individual, a threat is a person likely to cause damage to another individual, group, or location.
- **Threat Assessment**: a fact-based method of assessment/investigation that focuses on an individual's patterns of thinking and behavior to determine whether, and to what extent, the individual is moving toward an attack on an identified target.
- **Threat Management**: a coordinated plan of direct or indirect interventions with the subject that, based on current information and level of threat posed, is designed to defuse the risk of a given situation at a particular point in time.

APPENDIX C
CONCEPTUALIZING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TATM

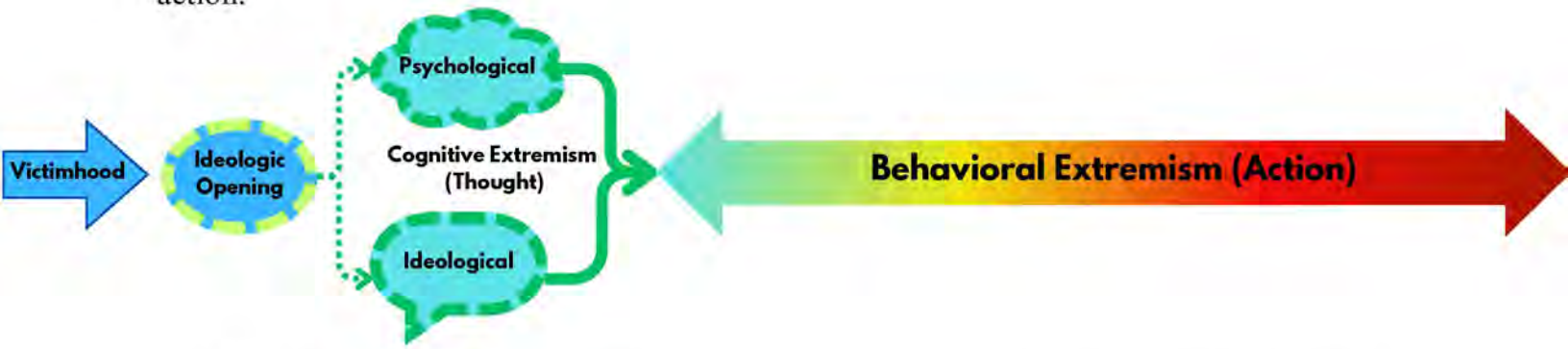


(Adapted from Calhoun and Weston, 2003; Quassim Cassam, 2021; Kruglanski et al., 2019; Dupue and Dupue, 1999; Meloy 2006)

THE MAPPING OF MODELS ALONG THE PATHWAY TO VIOLENCE:

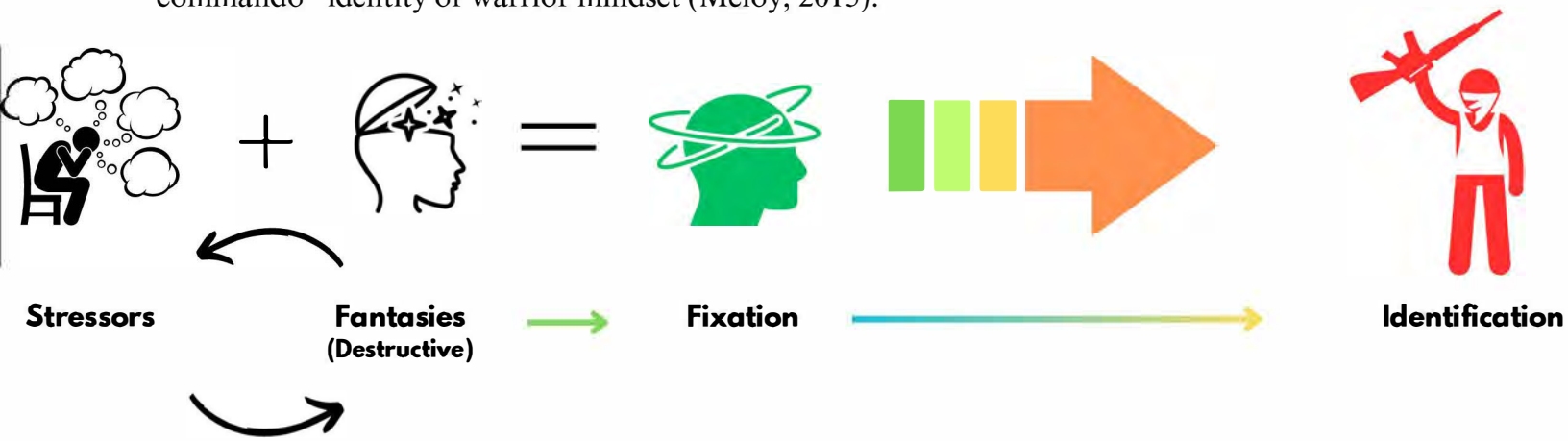
The Pathway to Intended Violence: The BAU's operational approach rests on the pathway to intended violence model which orients the practitioner towards the primary goal of preventing or disrupting an attack (Fein and Vossekuil, 1995; Calhoun and Weston, 2003).

Movement from Thought to Action: Cassam (2021) points out that extremist preoccupations often include feelings of victimhood and humiliation. Such emotions can lead to an ideological opening allowing for extremist thoughts to take shape and eventually extremist action to take place. Radicalization is a complex process and involves more than just ideology. However, this simplified depiction of the movement from radicalization towards mobilization is consistent with the observations of the BAU in that ideological extremism and non-ideological (i.e., psychological) extremism converge when moving towards behavioral extremism or violent action.

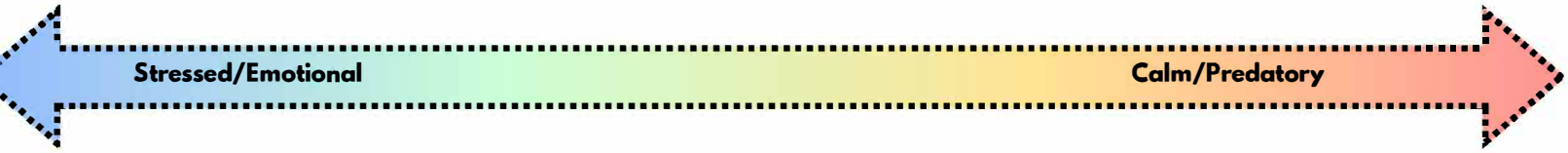


The Need for Social Worth: Kruglanski et al. (2022) provide a motivational construct through the significant-quest theory, which emphasizes a person's need to have social worth. The means to satisfy the unmet needs involve a supportive narrative and validation by one's network or group. In addition to the cultural, ethnic, and/or religious components that may shape the need for social worth, the BAU notes the importance of one's personality as it relates to committing violent extremist action. Within this framework, the BAU posits that personality (combined with capability) may ultimately play a deciding factor in the manner in which the quest for significance is undertaken.

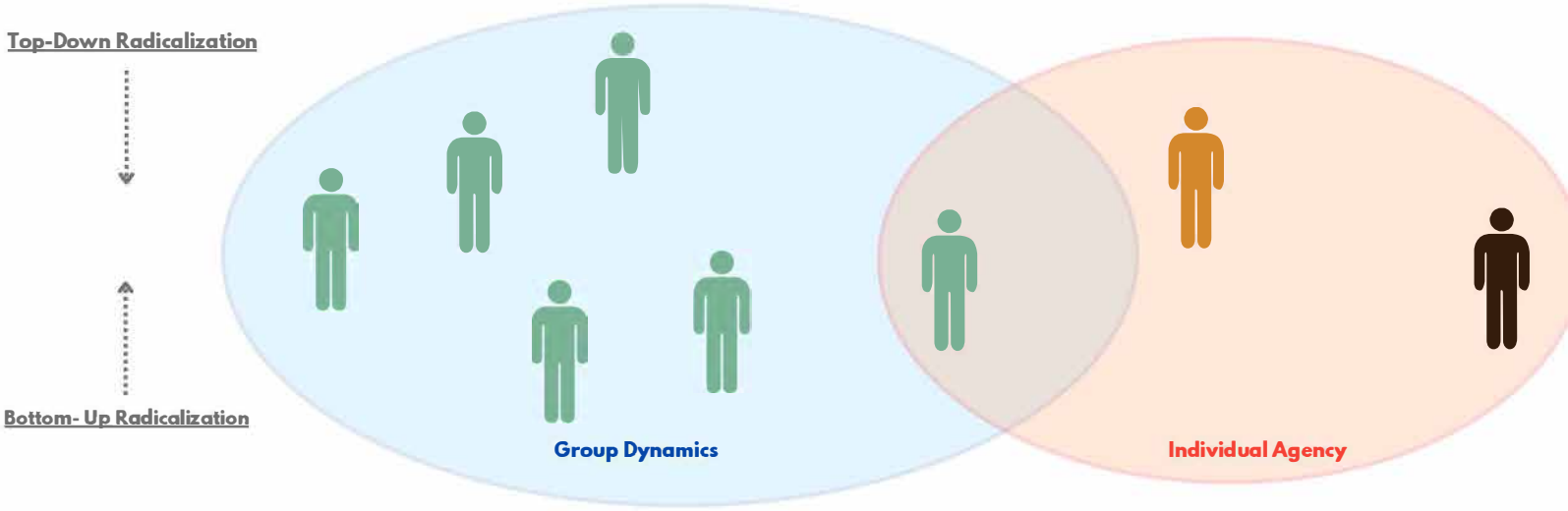
Fantasies: Both constructive and destructive fantasies are a normal part of the human condition. While constructive fantasies are balanced and shaped by charitable values, destructive fantasies emerge from repeatedly unsatisfied needs (Depue and Depue, 1999). A working theory by the BAU posits that destructive fantasies can lead towards fixation if they are reinforced by constant stressors in one's life. Similarly, Meloy et al. (2015) believe fixation is typically pathological when it is accompanied by a deterioration in social and occupational functioning. Both the BAU and Meloy have observed the movement from fixation to identification often increases the degree of threat posed by an individual. This is known as fixation and identification warning behavior within the field of behavioral threat assessment. It is important to note, identification warning behavior pertains to the adoption of a "pseudo-commando" identity or warrior mindset (Meloy, 2015).



Affective and Predatory: The stressed versus calm state of an individual is a relevant distinction in the field of behavioral threat assessment and is grounded in Meloy's (2006) bimodal theory of violence. It is often applied when distinguishing emotional or affective violence (which can be unpredictable) with predatory or targeted violence (which can be preventable). The adaptation of Meloy's theory as a continuum, when juxtaposed along the pathway to intended violence, reminds practitioners that sometimes violence can be an amalgamation of both affective and predatory drivers. This can be especially relevant when a noticeable shift along this continuum is observed during an investigation.



Group Identity: An identity movement does not become extreme until the in-group adopts hostile attitudes towards the out-group or groups (Berger, 2018). In this progression, group dynamics can play an important role in lowering the barriers towards committing violence. Despite such dangers, the BAU's observations have shown that groups are not necessarily as "tight" as others perceive them to be. The level of commitment to the group identity often varies among its members. Moreover, the BAU has found that some violent extremists do not thrive in group settings and may perceive a group's commitment to their chosen cause to be inadequate.



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Behavioral Threat Assessment Center
Quadrigis
Synergos
BAU-1
Ex Moribus Intelleges

APPENDIX D
BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS UNIT 1: SEAL MEANING

Lion – The lion is a very diverse symbol. Its most common traits are: majesty, strength, courage, justice, and military might. The lion is a symbol of kingly power and might, but as the lioness it is commonly related to the Great Mother and protection. Speaks to the duality of our mission – power/protection. The lion is prominently displayed at the National Law Enforcement Memorial in Washington, D.C., where bronze female lions and their cubs symbolize the protective role of law enforcement officers, while the male lions represent the use of force that is often required to enforce the law. This lion has been morphed with symbolism of Sigmund Freud.

Glasses – Beyond Freud, also symbolize clarity. Without the aid of glasses the picture may appear to be distorted and unfocused. With glasses, the true picture emerges and effective decisions can be made.

Cigar – Beyond Freud, is also reference to Winston Churchill and a symbol the courage of our convictions. Churchill conveys leadership by telling people what they need to know, rather than what they want to hear. Also, because of the longstanding international collaboration that informs our research and decision-making, the connection with Churchill demonstrate the international underpinnings both in how we learn but also who we advise. After all, one of the most well-known and expensive cigars around is called "the Churchill."

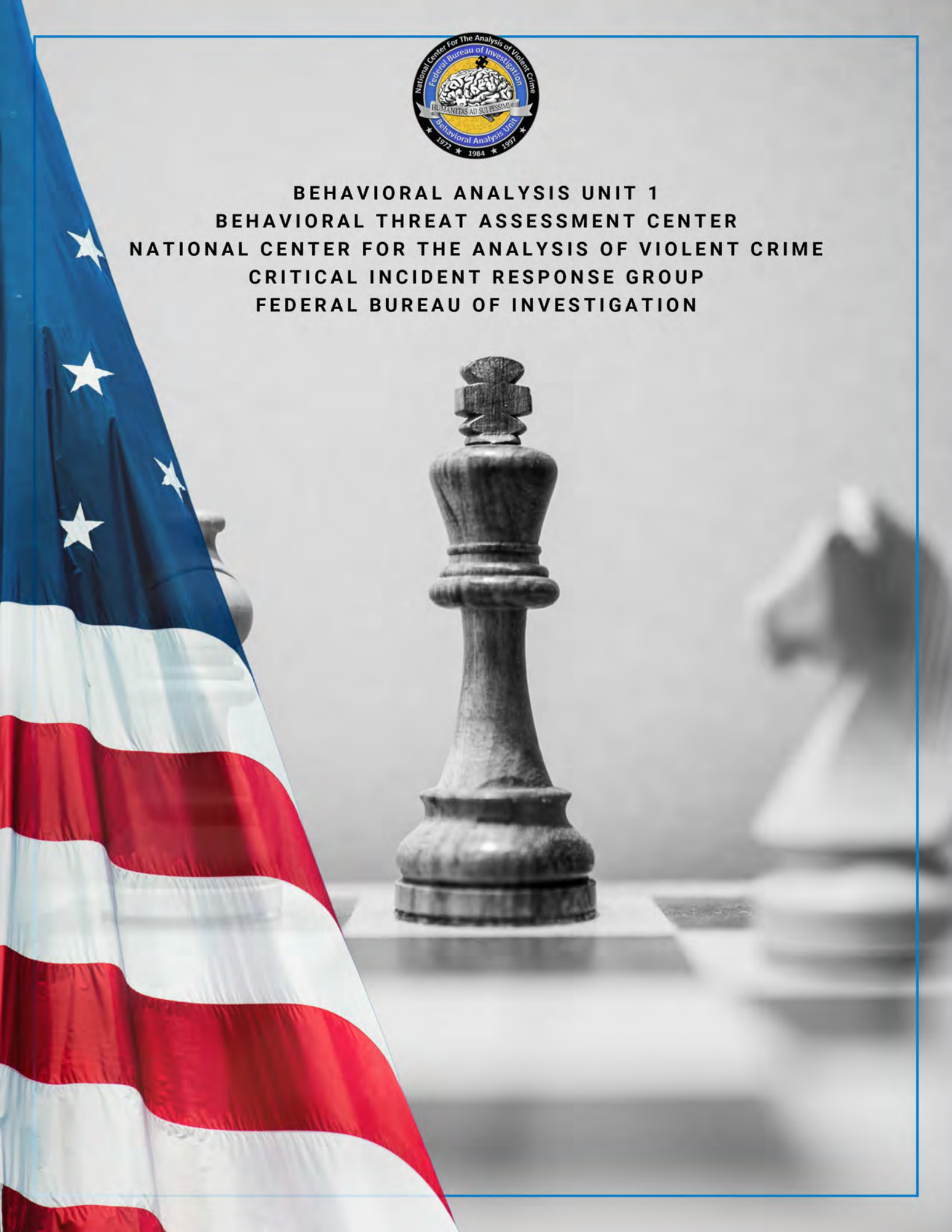
Bishop – We play chess while others play checkers. Strategic thinking, several moves ahead. Bishops usually gain in relative strength towards the endgame as more pieces are captured and more open lines become available on which they can operate – analogous to threat assessment where our capabilities are enhanced through more information and our options greater when open lines of communication can be established. A player possessing a pair of bishops has a strategic weapon in the form of a long-term threat to trade down to an advantageous endgame.

Scales of Justice – Traditionally, the scales relate to fairness in the judicial process - they indicate that each side of a case will be considered. From a Threat Assessment perspective, they represent our holistic analysis of the information (both enhancers and mitigators). They underscore that our decisions will be made by "weighing" the information in a comprehensive an structured manner. The seal also includes the symbols for psychology and medicine.

Quadrigis – Latin for "Team Up." Emphasizes unique team nature of BTAC.

Synergos – Latin for "Synergy." Emphasizes unique team nature of BTAC. Defined as the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects. Similarly, we are greater than the sum of our individual parts.

Ex Moribus Intelleges – Latin for "From behavior you will understand."



BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS UNIT 1
BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER
NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CRIME
CRITICAL INCIDENT RESPONSE GROUP
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION