

# To the Fringe and Back: Violent Extremism and the Psychology of Deviance

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We outline a general psychological theory of extremism and apply it to the special case of violent extremism (VE). Extremism is defined as motivated deviance from general behavioral norms and is assumed to stem from a shift from a balanced satisfaction of basic human needs afforded by moderation to a motivational imbalance wherein a given need dominates the others. Because motivational imbalance is difficult to sustain, only few individuals do, rendering extreme behavior relatively rare, hence deviant. Thus, individual dynamics translate into social patterns wherein majorities of individuals practice moderation, whereas extremism is the province of the few. Both extremism and moderation require the ability to successfully carry out the activities that these demand. Ability is partially determined by the activities' difficulty, controllable in part by external agents who promote or oppose extremism. Application of this general framework to VE identifies the specific need that animates it and offers broad guidelines for addressing this pernicious phenomenon.

*Keywords:* violent extremism, deviance, terrorism, motivation

Violent extremism (VE) counts among the most vexing challenges confronting the world today (Zarif, 2015). Experts increasingly agree, moreover, that there is no military solution to this problem, for no matter how many militants are killed or apprehended, scores of others rush to fill their place (Office of

the Press Secretary, 2014). The perplexing question, therefore, is what prompts the massive volunteering of young men and women to violent organizations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Equally important are the questions of how individuals who have radicalized already can be deradicalized and returned to moderation.

In this article, we offer a theory addressed at these issues. Though important recent work has examined VE (Atran, Axelrod, & Davis, 2007; Horgan, 2009; Sageman, 2004; Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009), a number of fundamental issues on this topic remain unresolved concerning the motivational dynamics leading to extremism, the role of ideology in radicalization, the contribution to this phenomenon of social networks, and the place of personality predispositions in this process. We approach these issues within a broad analytic framework that treats VE as a special case of extremism writ large, distinguished by the unmitigated perpetration of aggression for a cause. Accordingly, we first discuss the general phenomenon of extremism as such, and then consider in depth the special case of VE.

## What Extremism Is: Defining the Phenomenon

The term *extreme* is defined as “exceeding the ordinary, usual or expected” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1986, p. 441). To be sure, not every behavior that is unusual, or out of the

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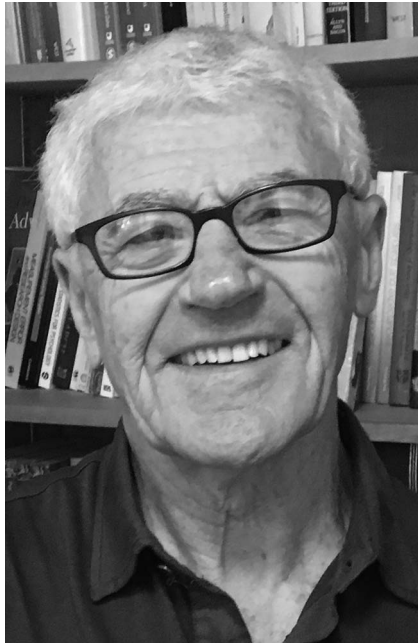
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ordinary, qualifies as extremist. An individual from a different culture may enact behaviors that are uncommon in a given setting, or a disabled individual may be prevented from acting in ways that characterize a majority of people, without such instances being considered extremist. Rather, we reserve the term *extremism* for a *willful deviation from the norms of conduct in a given context or situation*. Such norms describe what most people in a given society would do in the same circumstances.

According to the present definition, varied types of behavior are classifiable as extreme. Bungee jumping or wing-suit flying, for example, are “extreme” because they entail risks (to health and survival) that relatively few persons undertake. Anorexic diets are extreme because they involve acts of self-denial that most people eschew, and VE encompasses activities (e.g., the killing of innocents) that *deviate* from norms of conduct condoned in most civilizations and religions. Extreme actions that most people eschew may occur on the spur of the moment under the influence of intoxicating substances. Finally, not all extreme behaviors are violent or destructive. The humanistic works of Mother Theresa or of Albert Schweitzer, for instance, represent acts of self-denial that very few persons venture, which makes them extreme. In the present article, we cast a broad analytic net to capture all such diverse types of extraordinary behavior.

### Why Does Extremism Happen?

Any behavior, including its extreme forms, is a function of two general factors: *motivation* and *ability* (Kruglanski et

al., 2012). Motivation represents the *internal* determinant of behavior. It contains the factors of value and expectancy that under proper circumstances translate into a goal (Kruglanski et al., 2014), which prompts the selection of a behavioral means to its attainment. Ability is the behavior’s *external* determinant. It expresses the degree of actual control an individual has over the behavior in question (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). In the sections that follow, we consider how motivation and ability determine extreme behavior in general, and VE in particular.

### Motivational Balance and Imbalance

A major determinant of extremism is *motivational imbalance*, the degree to which a given need comes to dominate the others. We assume that moderate behaviors, exhibited by majorities of people, are guided by a set of basic biological and psychogenic needs (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fiske, 2004; Higgins, 2012; Maslow, 1943); these reciprocally constrain behaviors enacted on their behalf. In other words, behaviors that satisfy one need while undermining another would tend to be avoided. For example, the need for esteem and admiration may be seen as best served by heroism in battle, yet concerns for safety and the survival instinct may prohibit such risky heroics. Because people generally strive to satisfy their fundamental needs, they tend to stay within a restricted behavioral range that these constrain; this results in the moderate pattern of conduct defining the behavioral norm displayed by majorities of persons. In this manner, motivational dynamics at the individual level translate into social patterns in which majorities of persons (the “mainstream”) exhibit moderation and minorities (the “fringe”) display extremism.

### Psychological Asymmetry of Extremism and Moderation

Empirical evidence supports the notion that people exhibit a preference for moderation over extremity. For example, average stimuli are liked more than extreme ones (e.g., Halberstadt & Rhodes, 2003), and traits of moderate intensity are liked better than ones that are very low or very high (Koch, Imhoff, Dotsch, Unkelbach, & Alves, 2016). Our motivational-imbalance assumption, whereby extremism involves partial oblivion to individuals’ fundamental needs, explains not only why extreme behaviors are exhibited by a minority of people but also why extremism tends to be short lived, relatively speaking, though different “extremisms” vary on the temporal scale of their duration. For example, membership in militant far-right organizations lasts on the average of 10 years (Bjorgo, 2002), the pursuit of criminal lifestyle is typically brief (Ridgeway, 2014), and revolutions often lead to counterrevolutions and end up with a “domestication” of erstwhile revolutionaries. Thus, there



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exists an asymmetry between extremism and moderation, in that the latter is more appealing overall and psychologically easier to sustain than the former.

## How Extremism Starts and How It Ends

### Triggering Motivational Imbalance

For most persons, the initial point of departure is the mainstream. No one is born a revolutionary, a terrorist, or an extreme dieter. To become an extremist, something must transpire along the way to trigger the motivational imbalance that induces deviance. This may take place when persons realize on their own or are persuaded by others that their important need has been neglected, and that an opportunity presents itself to gratify it. Addressing the need in question may then assume high priority, overshadow other considerations, and allow the contemplation of extreme behavior. For instance, under intense hunger, individuals may carry out such counternormative acts as scavenging for food, stealing, or eating substances or articles considered disgusting or inedible.

Often, the frustrated need is social in nature. For instance, when frustrated, the need for love and relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) may drive individuals to so called “crimes of passion” in violation of societal norms and legal codes (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007). The desire to appeal to potential mates may promote the adoption of an extreme diet aimed to improve one’s appearance, and so forth.

Extremism is a matter of degree, defined by the *extent* of motivational imbalance among individuals’ basic needs.

Where a given focal need looms considerably larger than its alternatives (vs. less so), it affords greater freedom from their constraints (Köpetz, Faber, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2011). In turn, liberation from constraints permits extreme behaviors that would be prohibited otherwise. For instance, volunteering to help out in a soup kitchen in order to feel good about oneself or making a monetary contribution to charity are less extreme than volunteering for the Peace Corps or devoting one’s life to the poor. Simply, the former behaviors entail more limited degrees of self-sacrifice that allows also addressing one’s selfish concerns (one’s career, comfort, social relationships, or leisure).

### Restoring Motivational Balance

The opposite journey, back to moderation, is prompted by the same general factors (albeit in reverse) that produced the shift to the extreme in the first place. Just as the motivational imbalance underlies a fringe-bound shift, restored motivational balance underlies abandonment of the fringe and a reversion to the mainstream. Such balance restoration may happen through weakening of a once-dominant need, the strengthening of alternative concerns, and/or a realization that the extreme means does not serve the dominant need the way it was supposed to. For instance, a change in one’s life’s circumstances (e.g., marriage, family) might reduce one’s concern about sexy appearance presumably served by an extreme diet. Also, one’s overriding need for achievement may give way to concern about one’s health if one was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.

**Cognitive representations and the role of narratives.** Goals and means are cognitively represented (Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007; Kruglanski, 1996). Activation of the relevant cognitions may happen in various ways. Occasionally, one may form a goal–means schema on one’s own based on one’s independent experience and assessment; more typically, such a schema is contained in a culturally approved narrative (or ideology) to which individuals have been exposed, and that they have internalized. A narrative that privileges one type of value (e.g., money) over competing values can induce the commitment to extreme behavior because it selectively activates certain goals while neglecting others. Similarly, the shift back to motivational balance might be based on one’s own inferential process, but also on sociocultural narratives that advocate moderation. For instance, narratives that highlight the complexity of a value system (e.g., advocating work–life balance) may decrease the appeal of extreme behavior and restore moderation. Research by Tetlock (1984, 1986) has confirmed that moderate ideology was associated with a perception of multiple values as approximately equally important, whereas ideological extremism was associated with one value dominating over others.





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**The twin functions of social networks.** Another factor that may contribute to initiation and maintenance of extreme behavior in service of a goal is social network. Social networks fulfill two motivationally relevant functions for their members: informational and normative (cf. Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kelley, 1952). The informational function consists of validating a given goal–means schema as worthy of adopting. The normative function consists of *rewarding* individuals for enacting the schema-implied behavior.

**Informational influence.** The networks' informational influence consists of serving an epistemic authority whose consensual support validates a given narrative (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Kruglanski et al., 2005). Agreement of one's respected peers with its content is taken as evidence of its veracity, as does the charisma, credibility, and perceived expertise of a communicator who delivers the narrative. Just like extremist narratives, those that promote moderation often derive their persuasive power from the epistemic authority of their source, including the network of significant others whom the individual holds in high regard. Thus, a new friendship network may curb individuals' enthusiasm for extreme means and encourage them to embark on a renewed pursuit of mainstream activities. Similarly, extrication from the extremist network may facilitate leaving extremism behind, just as immersion in that network may have previously fostered a movement to the fringe.

It is noteworthy that the support of social networks or validation of given narratives by credible communicators, although often *helpful* in inducing a given motivational state, is not *essential* for that purpose. Specifically, individuals with high confidence in their own judgment, or with high self-ascribed epistemic authority, may not depend as

much on others for validation of their goals and means; they are less impacted by social networks and persuasive communicators, as they feel confident in their own assessment and are in no need of external validation (Kruglanski et al., 2005).

**Normative influence.** A social network's normative influence resides in its power to reward the individual for subscribing to network-espoused goal–means schema and implementing the activities that it suggests. Such rewards may consist of bestowal upon the individual of the group's approval and according them the status and acceptance that approval begets.

**The role of ability.** Beyond the motivation to carry out extreme behavior in service of a predominant need, individuals must have the ability to do so. Ability has two aspects: subjective and objective. The subjective aspect has to do with the individual's *expectancy* to be able to carry out the (extreme) activities, that is, to implement the goal–means schema in the prescribed manner. In psychological models of motivation (Atkinson, 1964; Kruglanski, 1996; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Lewin, 1951), expectancy (attainability) combines with value (desirability) to determine the readiness to initiate goal-driven behavior. However, whereas subjective ability determines the initiation of an activity, its completion will not take place without objective ability to see it through. For instance, some persons may suffer physical limitations that preclude their pursuit of an extreme behavior that is physically taxing, or they may lack the required know-how for such pursuit—for instance, the military training required of a revolutionary fighter. Although existing research suggests that a reduction of individuals' energetic resources reduces their ability to control their urges and increases their vulnerability to temptations of various kinds (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), including impulses to carry out extreme, socially unacceptable behaviors, the ability to *maintain* such extreme commitment most likely demands a high rather than low level of energetic resources.

Ability may also play a significant role in individuals' return to the mainstream. To leave the fringe behind, one may require the resolve and willpower to withstand the group pressure that often binds one to the extremist "attractor," and/or the competence to satisfy one's fundamental needs in the balanced ways prescribed by the mainstream. Thus, in order to be reintegrated into the society, a criminal may need to receive the appropriate vocational training and education, the drug addict may need to learn to subjugate her or his destructive habit, and the extreme dieter may need to acquire novel eating habits.

**Distinct roles of motivation and ability.** We finally assume that motivation and ability play distinct roles in extreme behavior. The degree of motivational imbalance determines the *degree* of extremism to which the individual



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may be ready to commit. In this sense, it sets an upper bound on potential extremism. In contrast, ability determines whether the individual is capable of reaching that upper point on the extremism continuum. Absent such an ability, people may need to resort to less extreme activities of which they are capable. Consider an individual who lacks the ability to pursue an extreme sport she/he is passionate about. In those circumstances, that person might instead become an extreme fan of a team in that athletic discipline, collect clippings about its champions and history, and so forth.

**Personality predispositions.** The process of initiating and maintaining a motivational imbalance or balance may be influenced by a host of stable individual differences. For instance, individuals who are chronically high on a given need (e.g., need for achievement, social approval, sensation seeking) should be predisposed to privilege it over others. Other personality factors may prompt persons to yield to the impetus to emit extreme behavior whenever it occurs. People high in the need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski, 2004) have been known to “seize and freeze” on accessible notions and to eschew weighing their alternatives. Thus, they may be more prone to remain committed to a focal goal even when it happens at the expense of other goals (Shah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2002). Highly acquiescent individuals may be more readily convinced than others by extremism-promoting narratives and networks, whereas individuals with a strong predisposition toward uniqueness may be more prepared than others to break out of the mainstream and explore the fringe regardless of social support (Imhoff & Erb, 2009). Of special relevance, Vallerand’s (2015) distinction between individuals who are *ob-*

*sessive* versus *harmonious* in their passion for a given pursuit directly taps a personality predisposition toward motivational imbalance versus balance, respectively. Indeed, a recent study by Bélanger, Lafrenière, Vallerand, and Kruglanski (2013) found that obsessively passionate individuals were significantly more likely than harmoniously passionate individuals to select extreme means relevant to their passion.

Some personality traits may be relevant to the initiation of extreme behavior, but not necessarily to its maintenance. For instance, although *impulsive* individuals may act without much hesitation on their temporarily dominant need, it is unlikely that they will be able to maintain their commitment for very long. The same should be true of other psychological variables associated with impulsive behavior, such as low self-control (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004) or low conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which may lead to increased appeal of extreme activities, but not necessarily to their maintenance.

In summary, the movement away from the mainstream and toward the fringe requires a shift toward a motivational imbalance wherein a given need dominates the others, and an extreme behavior is identified as the means of choice for satisfying that need. In addition to the motivational imbalance, extremism also requires an ability to carry out such deviant behavior. Similarly, the movement back to moderation requires a shift toward motivational balance and an ability to sustain such balance via appropriate activities. Next, we apply the analysis of extremism as a general phenomenon to the specific case of VE.

## Violent Extremism

The common features that VE shares with other forms of extremism are the shift toward *motivational imbalance* and the *ability* to sustain the extreme means to the dominant need. The features that characterize VE uniquely concern the specific need that animates it, and the use of violence as the extreme means for gratifying that need.

### Shift Toward Motivational Imbalance

**Quest for significance.** Earlier we posited that the move toward extremism is occasioned by a motivational shift in which a given need becomes dominant and trumps other common concerns. What might this need be in the case of VE? A considerable number of motivations relevant to VE have been identified in the literature (such as honor, vengeance, religion, loyalty to the leader, perks in the afterlife, feminism; e.g., Bloom, 2005; Stern, 2004). All of these are entirely appropriate descriptions of specific cases. But underlying them, there seems to exist a more general motivating force that we label the *quest for significance*. This is the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to



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merit respect (Kruglanski et al., 2013; Kruglanski, Chen, Dechesne, Fishman, & Orehek, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014). Psychological theorists have long realized that this quest constitutes a universal, human motivation variously labeled as the need for esteem, achievement, meaning, and control (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Frankl, 1969; Higgins, 2012; Maslow, 1943).

**Triggering the significance quest.** A major way to arouse a motivation is through *deprivation* of a need. Accordingly, the need for significance may be aroused via a perceived loss of significance, that is, through significance deprivation. Significance loss can sometimes happen due to *individual* humiliation, unrelated to any intergroup conflict. This is illustrated by cases of Palestinian women who volunteered for suicide missions after they had suffered a stigma in their personal lives (e.g., infertility, disfigurement, or allegation of an extramarital affair or divorce; Pedahzur, 2005). But humiliation can also arise in the context of intergroup conflict and result from personal losses perpetrated by the enemy. For instance, the Chechen “black widows” were rendered powerless, and thus were demeaned and humiliated by having their loved ones wrested from them by the Russian forces (Speckhard & Paz, 2012). Often, significance loss can stem from an affront to one’s *social identity*. For instance, Muslim immigrants in Europe who encounter widespread “Islamophobia” on the part of native Europeans (Kruglanski, Crenshaw, Post, & Victoroff, 2008; Sageman, 2004) may pervasively experience this kind of “put down.” Discrimination against one’s group and trampling of its sacred values (Atran et al., 2007) engenders a considerable significance loss by members of the group

(e.g., all Muslims); this is often skillfully exploited by the propagandists of Al Qaeda and ISIS, for example.

Often, motivational priming stems from a perceived *opportunity* to gratify the motive in question (Shah & Kruglanski, 2003). The pursuit of violence and self-sacrifice can be portrayed as an *opportunity* for a vast significance gain, a place in history, and the status of hero or martyr (Post, 2006). Significance loss or threat of loss may be intertwined with the opportunity for significance gain through attempts to eradicate or prevents the loss. Thus, humiliation of one’s group offers the possibility to strike back at the culprits, therefore leveling the playing field and demonstrating one’s power and, hence, significance.

**Willingness to use extreme means.** The motivational shift toward the quest for significance entails the relative suppression of alternative, common concerns. This liberates individuals to use whatever means they perceive as effective to satisfying their dominant need, regardless of how extreme these might be. Research by Dugas et al. (2016) found that the experience of significance loss was related to expressed readiness to suffer pain and to sacrifice one’s comfort for a significance-lending cause. Relatedly, research on sacred values repeatedly demonstrated that individuals were prepared to sacrifice material benefits on the altar of such values, which protection bestows the aura of significance on individuals (Atran et al., 2007).

Note that, in and of itself, the quest of significance does not necessarily promote violence as the means of choice. After all, some means to significance are quite socially accepted, namely, (a) moderate ones compatible with other common concerns, (b) extreme ones compatible with social norms, and (c) extreme ones that in fact *serve* major moral imperatives. In the category of moderate means belong routes to significance via the pursuit of excellence and achievements in various socially applauded domains such as science, art, and business. In the second category belong activities like extreme diets and extreme sports that involve self-denial that does not contradict important societal injunctions. Finally, in the third category belong self-sacrificial activities (e.g., those of missionaries and other humanitarians) that are venerated by the mainstream because they in fact serve cherished values. Nonetheless, as shown in the following section, violence appears to constitute a particularly common means to significance gain.

**Violence as means to significance.** There is something special about violence as a possible means to significance. It constitutes the primordial, raw, and direct use of power, inflicting hurtful *costs* on the targets of one’s aggression (Raven, 1993). Violence is the “great equalizer” capable of obliterating the significance of venerated individuals and turning them into disempowered victims. It is through violence or threatened violence that conflicts in the animal kingdom are typically resolved, and pecking order in animal hierarchies are established (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). To



a large extent, the potential for violence (i.e., military might) also determines the standing (hence, significance) of nations in the world arena.

Ample empirical evidence suggests that violence is often employed in the effort to restore one's compromised significance. Case studies of 15 school shootings show that they often occurred in response to social rejection (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). In our own work, we have found that significance loss leads to the adoption of extreme, group-oriented ideology and the support for violence; this has been shown in culturally diverse samples, including American respondents, Muslims in Spain and the Philippines, and Tamils in Sri Lanka (Webber et al., 2016). In a sample of ideological extremists in the United States, we found that those who experienced abuse, social rejection, or failure were more likely to resort to ideologically directed violence (Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2016). Analyses of the motivational patterns of suicide attackers revealed that the degree of violence in an attack was correlated with indicators of the attacker's motivation to gain significance (Webber, Klein, Kruglanski, Brizi, & Merari, 2015). Similarly, perceiving oneself as victim of anti-Muslim discrimination was associated with support for suicide bombing in Muslim diaspora populations (Victoroff, Adelman, & Matthews, 2012), and economic discrimination against minorities has been found to be a substantive predictor of domestic terrorism (Piazza, 2011).

These various examples show that many instances of significance loss are perceived as result of other people's actions. In such situations, when there is a clear target to blame for the experienced injustice, violence may be perceived as an appealing means with which to redress the undeserved harm. Indeed, analyses of violent acts have shown that their preponderance can be attributed to motives that—from the perspective of the perpetrator—are reactions to perceived unfairness that foster significance loss for the victims (Baumeister, 1999; Stillwell, Baumeister, & Del Priore, 2008). The determination to use violence in such situations might also serve to protect one from a future loss (Nowak, Gelfand, Borkowski, Cohen, & Hernandez, 2016), thus offering valuable deterrence as bulwark against future humiliations.

To be sure, the use of violence has a serious drawback as well. It runs afoul of societal norms common in most civilizations that expressly prohibit violence; such prohibitions recognize the destructive potential of violence and its propensity to undermine the social order in the long run (Freud, 1930/1991; Pinker, 2012). In light of the pervasive injunctions against violence, its use by individuals and societies calls for special justification. The two factors reviewed next—ideological narratives and social networks—are particularly common sources of such justification.

**Ideological narratives.** By highlighting the discrepancy between the imperfect present and the utopian future

(Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009), an ideological narrative sustains the motivational imbalance that drives extreme actions. Because it depicts the cause in terms of grand and far-reaching goals (e.g., “Liberté, égalité, fraternité”), behavior in service of those goals is no longer influenced by a cost-benefit analysis (Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007) simply because the awoken quest for significance renders such costs irrelevant.

In addition to invoking a supreme, significance-promoting goal, an ideological narrative delineates a set of legitimate means to pursue it. By creating an association between an important goal and violent means, extremist ideologies facilitate translating motivation into action, because they significantly reduce the difficulty of coming up with a specific plan to pursue the cause (Gollwitzer, 1999). One example of such a strong goal-means association is found in *culture of honor* narratives (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), whereby affronts must be countered with aggression against one's detractors. Research confirms that culture-of-honor states have more aggressive acts than non-culture-of-honor states (Brown, Osterman, & Barnes, 2009).

Finally, by identifying the culprits responsible for the unacceptable current state and depicting them as immoral and contemptible, ideological narratives eliminate another important constraint on violence: empathetic concern for the suffering of others. Two justificatory themes relevant to this strategy are particularly prevalent: (a) those based on employment of in-group/purity morality (Haidt & Graham, 2006), and (b) those based on the dehumanization of the intended targets of one's violence. The concept of in-group morality refers to the belief that whatever serves the group's interest is moral and ethically warranted (Haidt & Graham, 2006). In this manner, Islamic VE has stressed the notion that the West has been actively assaulting Islam and vying to eradicate it, and that, therefore, attacks against Westerners are morally justified and commanded by Allah (Al-Adnani, 2015). Moreover, justification of violence against civilians typically employs a language that delegitimizes them (Bandura, 1999), often by denying them human properties and portraying them as disgusting inhuman creatures (e.g., cockroaches, rats, pigs, or apes) that do not merit the consideration generally extended to humans (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006).

**The role of social networks.** Radical social networks can influence the intention to engage in violence by validating the importance of the goal and confirming that a violent means is an appropriate way to pursue it. Moreover, when important others are willing to engage in violent acts, they create a local norm, whereby violence is commendable, and its pursuit is rewarded by the group's esteem and reverence. Empirical research has confirmed that when a violent act is socially validated, people experience less guilt and distress than when it is questioned by important others (Webber, Schimmel, Martens, Hayes, & Faucher, 2013). Fi-

nally, by offering significance and acceptance, belonging to a group may become an end in itself, and thus increase members' willingness to undergo sacrifices for a collective cause (Willer, 2009). Empirical research by Swann and colleagues attests to the notion that when the group constitutes an important part of the self-concept, individuals are more likely to engage in extreme pro-group behaviors (e.g., Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010; Swann et al., 2009).

Note that validation of a justificatory narrative by a social network may not be absolutely essential for sustaining individuals' commitment to extreme violence. Some individuals may have such a strong sense of their own *epistemic authority* that they do not require concrete validation of their views by others; furthermore, they may have such a confident sense of self that they have little need for others' approval. Ted Kaczynski, the infamous Unabomber (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.) was a loner who spun his justificatory narrative for violence on his own (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). Similarly, Anders Breivik, the Norwegian who killed 77 persons in Oslo and on the island of Utoya in 2011 had no concrete network of social support and constructed his own justificatory narrative for the massacre (Knausgaard, 2016). Finally, the recent spate of "lone wolf" attacks in Israel, Europe, and the United States (Oliphant, 2016) suggest that the Internet and social media may serve the function of (virtual) social networks by inducing and validating individuals' notions concerning the relative importance of specific goals (e.g., earning glory by fighting for a given cause) and the appropriateness of the extreme means for their pursuit.

### Role of Ability in Turning to Extremism

**Skill.** VE on behalf of an ideological cause may require corresponding competencies and abilities. For instance, participation of foreign fighters in the ongoing struggle in Syria and Iraq requires the ability to reach those locations and circumvent tight travel bans designed to stem the flow of recruits to the militant organizations. Over the years, the Islamist organizations ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra have managed to set up effective smuggling networks that facilitate travel of their would-be volunteers, even as states in- and outside the region have increased their efforts to tighten travel restrictions (Schmitt & Sengupta, 2015).

Targeting policies of extremist organizations also determine the level of difficulty that the required activities entail; this has direct implications for the ability level needed to carry them out. Whereas the original targeting policy of Al Qaeda involved high-profile objects such as the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the USS Cole, or the U.S. embassies in Africa, the ISIS policy of inspiring attacks with minimal means (like hatchets, vehicles, or knives) and

unleashed against anyone anywhere has made the acts of extremism considerably easier and less demanding.

**Energy.** Leaving the comfort zone of the mainstream and embarking on risky extremism requires considerable zest and energy. Indeed, in general, violent extremists tend to be young and energetic. An analysis of 350 known terrorists from Middle Eastern, Latin American, West European, and Japanese groups revealed that the "composite terrorist" is a single male in his early 20s (Russell & Miller, 1977). Other terrorist groups reveal similar patterns (Gunnaratna, 2000; Ergil, 2000). It is difficult to isolate the variable of energy from the multiple factors correlated with age; nonetheless, given the challenges of VE, it seems plausible that youthful vigor and attendant optimism play a significant part in the relation between age and VE.

**Entitlement.** Finally, deviation from mainstream norms is easier for individuals with status and power, who often feel entitled to stray from the accepted patterns of behavior. Indeed, experimental studies suggest that when combined with frustration, a sense of one's own power increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior (Fast & Chen, 2009).

### Back to Moderation

**Restoring motivational balance.** Moving toward or away from VE are mirror images of each other, whether one or the other occurs depends on the field of driving and restraining psychological forces promoting extremism or moderation (Altier, Thoroughgood, & Horgan, 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2012). The allure of alternative means to significance and the relinquishment of VE may be prompted by the satisfaction of need for significance or resurfacing of alternative needs, such as those for affection, comfort, safety, and hedonic enjoyment that may have been suppressed to an appreciable extent during the individuals' active engagement in VE.

Case studies suggest that as extremists enter their 30s, front-line activism begins to feel forced and uncomfortable, especially once individuals have begun to seriously miss things such as a career, family, and a secure place to live (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013; Reinales, 2011). In addition, ideological justification for violence might "wear thin" in some cases, and individuals may be swamped by guilt about the mayhem they have perpetrated (e.g., Bubolz & Simi, 2015). All of these attest to different ways in which a motivational recalibration may take place and prompt individuals to abandon VE.

**Alternative means to significance.** There is evidence that relinquishment of VE is related to a shift in the individual's perception, whereby extremism no longer affords significance and/or alternative means to significance become available that seem superior to extremism. Illustrating the former process are numerous cases of exit from right-wing extremist groups, prompted by individuals' growing



sense that life in the violent organization, far from the idealistic picture that the ideological narrative had painted, is rife with intrigue, back stabbing, and mutual suspicion (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013). Similarly, some foreign fighters who joined the “holy war” in Iraq and Syria found out that they were reduced to menial tasks such as cleaning the toilets, while also being treated with disrespect by ranking ISIS members (Tomlinson, 2014). A different road to significance is through a newly afforded opportunity for employment, affording the touted “dignity of work”; indeed, research found that participants in a terrorist rehabilitation program were more likely to disengage from terrorism if they were provided with such an opportunity (Abuza, 2009) or if they realized that their activist involvement jeopardized their ability to land or maintain certain types of jobs (Simi & Futrell, 2009).

The luster of violent struggle—hence, its efficacy as a means to significance—may be dimmed by *defeat* and the abject failure of aggression to bestow glory on its perpetrators. For instance, the significant decline in support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which we observed in an extensive survey carried out with samples of former LTTE members (cf. Kruglanski et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2016), could be partially explained by the 2009 defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan military. This effectively eliminated the option of continued struggle and the hope of a significance-enhancing victory.

**Cognitive change and the role of narratives and networks.** Increased loyalty to a *different group* (Demant & de Graaf, 2010) or embracement of a *different cause* that rejects violence, induces individuals to disengage from a terrorist group (Reinares, 2011). Realization that the extreme activity fails to satisfy one’s quest for significance or a substitution of a univalent ideology by a narrative that embraces plural values (Tetlock, 1986) involves a change in the individual’s beliefs. Such change is occasionally instigated by individual’s own reflections; often, however, it is carried by explicit counternarratives to which the extremist is exposed. A major component of terrorist deradicalization programs in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, or Iraq have been dialogues with imams and ulama (Islamic scholars) designed to convince detainees that their violent pursuits are contrary to the teachings of Islam (El-Said & Harrington, 2010). The ultimate effectiveness of these programs in changing detainees’ beliefs about the legitimacy of violence has yet to be determined; nonetheless, the fact that thousands of their graduates were released into society implies that, at least in the organizers’ judgments, they no longer posed acute danger (Angell & Gunaratna, 2012; El-Said & Harrington, 2010).

Reframing extremists’ views about the justifiability of violence is often carried out by social networks that espouse contrary views on these matters. A significant role in this regard is played by the detainees’ families. Families often

oppose their relatives’ involvement in extremism and are natural allies in the struggle for their deradicalization (Koehler, 2013). Recruitment of families to the deradicalization effort has been a staple of the Saudi and the Singaporean rehabilitation programs (Al-Hadlaq, 2011; El-Said & Harrington, 2010; Gunaratna & Hassan, 2015). In the Saudi case, for example, families are entrusted with responsibility for the released detainee and cooperation with the government as to prevention of their reconnection with their extremist ex-comrades (Al-Hadlaq, 2011).

### Role of Ability in Returning to Moderation

**Skill.** A return to the motivational balance of the mainstream requires the ability to gratify one’s various needs in conventionally approved ways. Often, this necessitates the acquisition of a new skill set that would allow individuals to reintegrate into the mainstream society and become respected members of their community. An important aspect of various deradicalization programs, such as those in Saudi Arabia (Al-Hadlaq, 2011), Singapore (Gunaratna & Hassan, 2015), or Sri Lanka (Webber et al., 2016), was the provision of such skill sets via vocational education courses, general education courses, and language training.

**Energy.** The considerable demands of life on the fringe may reduce individuals’ ability to sustain it for long (Aho, 1988; Horgan, 2009). Indeed, evidence suggests that the role of *exhaustion* as a consequence of engaging in violent behavior is an important facet of the exit process (Gallant, 2014). Declining energies may also partially explain why growing older appears to be an important predictor of the relinquishment of violent activism (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2013).

**Entitlement.** To overcome the apprehensions that exiting the fringe may involve may require considerable personal confidence and fortitude. Such characteristics may characterize people in leadership positions, and with a sense of power and independence. In the same way that status and power enable individuals to initiate a violent movement that deviates from the mainstream, it may also enable them to return to moderation. The spontaneous 1997 deradicalization of the Egyptian Gammah Islamiyah, and the 2007 partial deradicalization of the Egyptian Al Jihad organization, were both initiated by the movements’ leaders, as was the Armee Islamique du Salut deradicalization in Algier (Ashour, 2008).

To be sure, high-powered persons within a violent organization might be particularly *unmotivated* to carry out a policy reversal toward moderation for fear of losing status and being criticized for inconsistency and poor judgment. Yet should they decide to do so, they may be more capable of promoting a general deradicalization than individuals with lesser standing.

**Personality characteristics.** Individuals may vary in their sensitivity to affronts or rejections (Downey & Feldman, 1996) and, hence, to the extent to which their significance quest is aroused by perceived insults or discriminations. In that regard, rejection-sensitive (vs. less sensitive) individuals may be more prone to radicalization than ones who are less rejection-sensitive. Similarly, some individuals may be more attuned to a militant organization's *narrative*. Because the latter is typically cast in categorical "black versus white" (us vs. them) terms, individuals who are high on the need for cognitive closure may find such ideologies more appealing and, hence, are more likely to radicalize than individuals who are low on the need for closure (Webber et al., 2016). Finally, individuals who are dependent or conformist may be more attuned to the *network* pressures toward radicalization than individuals who are independent and nonconformists (Merari, 2010). Thus, even though there may not be a unique personality *profile* that characterizes violent extremists prone to volunteer to extremist organizations, certain individual characteristics relevant to determinants of the radicalization *process* may certainly contribute to those persons' likelihood of radicalizing under the proper circumstances.

## Recapitulation and Conclusion

### The Present Theory

Because of its striking real-world manifestations, it is tempting to treat VE as a "one of a kind" phenomenon that is qualitatively distinct from other behavioral occurrences. But even though its specific combination of features is unique, VE shares significant psychological dynamics with other extremisms. Identifying those commonalities offers a general perspective on VE and promises new insights into its determinants. From the present perspective, extremism writ large has two fundamental components pertaining to *motivation* and *ability*, respectively. The motivational component is essential and unique to extremism. It involves a *motivational imbalance* in which a given need becomes dominant and suppresses other concerns. This removes the constraints that the latter typically impose on behavior and allows extreme actions to be contemplated as possible means to one's goals. For those behavioral means to be actually enacted, however, the individual must have the appropriate ability. In its objective sense, ability is related to the actual difficulty of carrying out the extreme activities, which, in turn, is significantly affected by staunch resistance to extremism by individuals and groups. The degree of motivational imbalance determines how far individuals are prepared to go on the extremism dimension. The ability component, in contrast, determines what degree of extremism is actionable, given the individual's competencies. In contrast to extremism, moderation is produced by a moti-

motivational balance in which individuals attend to their varied needs and select behaviors compatible with the constraints these impose.

Applying the foregoing general analysis to VE involved identifying the dominant motivation that undergirds its pursuit. Conceptual analysis, buttressed by empirical research (cf. Kruglanski et al., 2009, 2014; Webber et al., 2016), assigns this role to the quest for personal significance, and the desire to matter and to be recognized. The way of addressing the quest for significance (e.g., via violence) is cognitively represented in a goal-means narrative and appropriately validated. Some individuals construct their own narrative that they hold as valid. More typically, the relevant narratives are available in individuals' social environments (e.g., in social media, blogs, and chat rooms) and are supported by these persons' networks. Moreover, formation of extremist or moderate mind-sets is affected by a host of personality variables related, for instance, to individuals' tendency to prioritize momentarily salient needs over other concerns, susceptibility to persuasion, energy levels, and autonomy versus dependence. Whereas the motivational imbalance or balance and the ability to pursue those behaviorally are essential for development of the extremist and moderate mind-sets, their multiple determinants may partially substitute for each other so that none of them is completely necessary for their emergence. Our theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

### Alternative Approaches

In recent decades, social scientists have approached the issue of VE from diverse angles. A well-known attempt grounds the VE in such root causes as poverty, political repression, poor education (e.g., Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Kennedy, 1998), or relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970). A different approach offers psychological models of VE that explain it in terms of personality characteristics such as narcissism (Crayton, 1983), paranoia (e.g., Robins & Post, 1997), or authoritarianism (e.g., Ferracuti & Bruno, 1981). The rational actor model purports to explain VE in terms of a calculus of costs and benefits that accrue from extremism

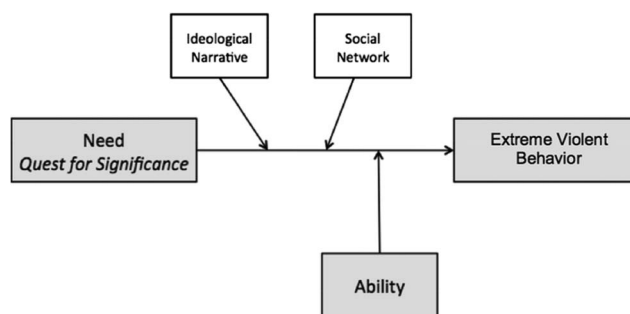


Figure 1. Model of underpinnings of violent extremism.

versus moderation (e.g., Crenshaw, 1990; Enders & Su, 2007; Perry, Berrebi, Brown, Hollywood, & Jaycocks, 2013). Social movement theory (della Porta, 2013) describes VE in terms of an unfolding processes of escalating policing, competitive escalation, and militancy. Finally, social network theory espouses the idea that radicalization and collective political action are intimately related to people's interpersonal relationships and connections to others committed to a violent ideology (e.g., Dean, 2007; Sageman, 2004).

Those various approaches to extremism share important elements in common with our analysis; in that sense, we build on past insights and "connects the dots" contributed by other scholars. Importantly, however, the present model offers a broader and more integrative conception than those of its predecessors. For instance, whereas some prior theories (the psychological models) focused on problematic personality development reducing individuals' sense of self-worth, we view developmental issues as one among several possible sources of feelings of humiliation and insignificance. Also, whereas some prior models highlighted one element in particular (e.g., the network element, the personality element, or the ideological element), the present model outlines how these different elements interact and come together. Thus, rational actor (cost–benefit) models address a motivational component without identifying the specific motivation underlying VE, and they do not relate it to the network or the ideological components as they may interact in promoting extremism. The root cause models specify conditions that might, under some conditions, lead to feelings of injustice and unfairness (cf. Gurr, 1970) without identifying the linkage of such feelings (of significance loss) or to the means of violence identified in a justifying narrative.

The present framework offers a general blueprint concerning possible interventions aimed to counteract or prevent VE. It suggests that (a) alternative, equally compelling means to significance must be identified and made available to radicalized individuals or those at risk for radicalization, (b) relevant *social support* against radicalization needs to be generated, (c) compelling counternarratives against the violence–significance link need to be generated, and (d) the ability of individuals to perpetrate violence for their cause must be thwarted by state policies (e.g., travel restrictions, elimination of funding sources) and military/policing actions aimed at defeating the extremists and causing them to fail.

Obviously, these general principles need to be carefully translated into specific policies and best practices in accordance with specific contexts of their application. Such translation should take into account whether a given project involves the deradicalization of *committed* extremists or a preventive counterradicalization for those *at risk* of succumbing to VE. Specific implementation of the general principles should be flexible enough to accommodate cul-

tural variation, as well as for differences in age and socioeconomic status of targeted individuals. The translation efforts would likely require considerable ingenuity, dedication, and investment of time and material resources. Yet failure to undertake them would allow the current waves of extremism to grow unabated. Given the danger they pose to world stability and security, countering them head on, based on the best available science, constitutes a truly global imperative.

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