

COMPOSITE VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A RADICALIZATION PATTERN RESHAPING TERRORISM

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This memo is based upon the framework and arguments advanced in the article “Composite Violent Extremism: Conceptualizing Attackers Who Increasingly Challenge Traditional Categories of Terrorism,” authored by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Andrew Zammit, Emelie Chace-Donahue, and Madison Urban and published in Studies in Conflict & Terrorism.¹

In April 2022, Frank James opened fire on a New York subway train during rush hour, injuring 29 people. James’ voluminous online writings left authorities, experts, and the media scratching their heads about his motives. Some reports called him a Black nationalist, while others pointed to more disparate racist and misogynist ideas.² James expressed hatred toward white people, Jews, and Latinos as well as anti-American sentiments and political grievances — none of which amounted to a coherent ideology or truly aligned with any distinct ideological movement.³ Complicating matters, James also struggled with mental illness.⁴

Was James’ shooting spree an act of violent extremism? If so, what kind? Scholars and practitioners have grappled with the increasing prominence of attackers like James who are ideologically idiosyncratic or even incoherent. In congressional testimony from 2022, for example, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray spotlighted extremists who hold a “weird hodgepodge blend of ideologies,” noting that this trend is producing challenges in “trying to unpack what are often sort of incoherent belief systems, combined with kind of personal

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1. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Andrew Zammit, Emelie Chace-Donahue, and Madison Urban, “Composite Violent Extremism: Conceptualizing Attackers Who Increasingly Challenge Traditional Categories of Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, March 29, 2023. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2194133>)

2. “Brooklyn Subway Shooting Live Updates: ‘My Fellow New Yorkers, We Got Him,’ Mayor Eric Adams Hails Subway Arrest,” *New York Post*, April 14, 2022. (<https://nypost.com/2022/04/12/brooklyn-subway-shooting-live-updates-of-nyc-attack/>); Jonah E. Bromwich, Ashley Southall, Ali Watkins, and Kirsten Noyes, “Suspect Drifted from City to City as His Videos Hinted at Violence,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/13/nyregion/frank-james-subway-shooting.html>)

3. Kat Bouza, “They Made Me More Dangerous Than Anyone Could Ever F-cking Imagine,” *Rolling Stone*, April 13, 2022. (<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/frank-james-new-york-brooklyn-subway-shooting-social-media-posts-1336740>)

4. Michael Kunzelman, Michael Sisak, and Bernard Condon, “Police Search for Motive in Brooklyn Subway Suspect’s Videos,” *Associated Press*, April 14, 2022. (<https://apnews.com/article/brooklyn-subway-shooting-suspect-frank-james-3dd89992f00410e3522aa0085a819bfc>)

grievances.”⁵ Unpacking such belief systems has proven difficult, however. One fundamental problem is that scholars and practitioners have lacked the conceptual tools necessary to comprehend extremists who defy neat categorization.

To fill that gap, this report explains a concept we developed: *composite violent extremism* (CoVE). The report then introduces its four subtypes: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent extremism. The CoVE framework can help practitioners and scholars better conceptualize the evolving nature of extremist threats that America’s top law enforcement officials have identified as concerning but difficult to understand.

EXPANDING RECOGNITION OF IDEOLOGICALLY COMPLEX EXTREMISTS

In recent years, numerous attackers have challenged established categories of violent extremism. The perpetrators’ idiosyncratic ideological perspectives have spawned numerous attempts to explain the phenomenon. In the United States, in addition to FBI Director Wray’s repeated references to what he calls “salad bar” extremism, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued its 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (CTTV), which broke new ground by treating the previously distinct concepts of terrorism and targeted violence as part of the same threat landscape. Unlike terrorism, targeted violence extends to the realm of “attacks otherwise lacking a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation” but still causing mass injury, destruction, or death.⁶ For DHS, coupling terrorism with targeted violence represented an attempt to strengthen prevention efforts. The CTTV framework notes that terrorism and targeted violence “overlap, intersect, and interact as problems” and thus “necessitate a shared set of solutions.”⁷

In the United Kingdom, British counterterrorism officials created a category for ideologies that are mixed, unstable, or unclear (MUU), a catch-all term, like salad bar extremism, that is meant to include all extremists who combine multiple ideologies (mixed), shift between ideologies (unstable), or lack a coherent ideology (unclear).⁸ In January 2023, the Home Office disaggregated MUU into more granular categories to aid the determination of “whether a tailored package of support is necessary and proportionate to address the vulnerabilities.”⁹ The Home Office’s new labels include “conflicted,” “no specific extremism issue,” “high counterterrorism risk but no ideology present,” “school massacre,” and “incel” (involuntary celibate), among others.¹⁰

5. Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Christopher Wray, “A Review of the President’s Fiscal Year 2023 Funding Request for the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” *Testimony before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies*, May 25, 2022. (<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/a-review-of-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2023-funding-request-for-the-federal-bureau-of-investigation>); Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Christopher Wray, “Worldwide Threats,” *Testimony before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee*, September 24, 2020. (<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Wray-2020-09-24.pdf>)

6. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence,” September 2019, page 4. (https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf). Targeted violence was first defined in: Robert A. Fein, Bryan Vossekuil, and Gwen A. Holden, “Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence,” *U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice*, July 1995. (<https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/threat-assessment-approach-prevent-targeted-violence>)

7. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence,” September 2019, page 11. (https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf)

8. Mark Townsend, “Anti-Terrorism Programme Must Keep Focus on Far Right, Say Experts,” *The Guardian* (UK), May 22, 2022. (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/22/anti-terrorism-programme-must-keep-focus-on-far-right-say-experts>)

9. UK Home Office, “Official Statistics: Individuals referred to and supported through the Prevent Programme, April 2021 to March 2022,” January 26, 2023. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2021-to-march-2022>)

10. Ibid.

Australian authorities have demonstrated concern by establishing “fixated threat assessment centers” within state police counterterrorism offices. These centers aim to protect the public from individuals with an “obsessive preoccupation with a person or some idiosyncratic cause, which is pursued to a pathological degree” that can result in violence.¹¹ Despite their lack of explicit focus on ideological extremists, these fixated threat centers have increasingly played a counterterrorism role. In 2017, both the New South Wales Police and Victoria Police established fixated threat assessment centers within their counterterrorism commands, showing that Australian counterterrorism approaches were broadening to address individuals without clear ideological motivations.¹²

Outside of government, scholars are also grappling to understand the apparent increase in attacks that challenge traditional categorizations. These experts have introduced a variety of terms to the discussion, including “ideological convergence,” “fused extremism,” “hybrid ideologies,” “fringe fluidity,” “ideology a la carte,” and “choose your own adventure” extremism.¹³ Some of these terms have utility, while others conflate distinct extremist orientations. None offer a robust framework that encompasses the full range of non-traditional extremist beliefs, which is the purpose of CoVE.

THE COMPOSITE VIOLENT EXTREMISM (COVE) FRAMEWORK

Composite violent extremists have worldviews composed of multiple distinct ideologies, sentiments, grievances, and fixations. Whereas the FBI director’s salad bar metaphor suggests that extremists consciously choose the components of their belief systems (just as one consciously chooses the ingredients at a salad bar), the concept of composite violent extremism does not assume intentionality. The CoVE framework reflects an empirical approach. Its foundation is a set of 28 cases of composite violent extremism selected from a much larger dataset of violent extremists active since 2010. Researchers evaluated all 28 attackers to determine their discernible ideologies, prejudices, grievances, or fixations and how central an expressed belief was to their worldview. The researchers observed that ideological amalgamation happens in multiple ways, leading them to conclude that four primary buckets can be used to classify extremists under the CoVE framework: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent. This memo describes each of the four in turn.

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11. Michele T. Pathé, Timothy Lowry, Debbie J. Haworth, Danae M. Webster, Melodie J. Mulder, Paul Winterbourne, and Colin J. Briggs, “Assessing and Managing the Threat Posed by Fixated Persons in Australia,” *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 2015. (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2015-27947-001>)

12. Paul Farrell, “NSW Police Establish ‘Fixated Persons’ Unit to Help Counter Lone Wolf Terror Attacks,” *The Guardian* (UK), April 26, 2017. (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/apr/26/nsw-police-establish-fixated-persons-unit-to-help-counter-lone-wolf-terror-attacks>); Premier of Victoria, the Honorable Daniel Andrews, “New Threat Assessment Centre to Keep Victorians Safe,” October 3, 2017. (<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/new-threat-assessment-centre-to-keep-victorians-safe>)

13. Julien Bellaiche, “Connecting the Fringes: Neo-Nazi Glorification of Salafi-Jihadi Representations Online,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, August 24, 2021. (<https://gnet-research.org/2021/08/24/connecting-the-fringes-neo-nazi-glorification-of-salafi-jihadi-representations-online>); Ariel Koch, “The ONA Network and the Transnationalization of Neo-Nazi-Satanism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, January 12, 2022. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2024944>); Jesse J. Norris, “Idiosyncratic Terrorism: Disaggregating an Undertheorized Concept,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, June 2020. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918296>); Milo Comerford and Sasha Havlicek, “Mainstreamed Extremism and the Future of Prevention,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, September 2021. (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ISD-Mainstreamed-extremism-and-the-future-of-prevention-3.pdf>); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, “Fluidity of the Fringes: Prior Extremist Involvement as a Radicalization Pathway,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, January 7, 2019. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1531545>); Paige Pascarelli, “Ideology à la Carte: Why Lone Actor Terrorists Choose and Fuse Ideologies,” *Lawfare*, October 2, 2016. (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/ideology-%C3%A0-la-carte-why-lone-actor-terrorists-choose-and-fuse-ideologies>); Kurt Braddock, Brian Hughes, and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “The Post-9/11 Fight Against Extremism Must Take On Propagandists’ Tricks, Not Just Ideology,” *MarketWatch*, September 11, 2021. (<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-post-9-11-fight-against-extremism-must-expand-to-attitudinal-inoculation-11631285779>)

AMBIGUOUS

The first category, ambiguous, describes individuals who express multiple prejudices and grievances without adhering to any coherent belief system. These individuals will often display some elements of a recognizable ideology but will do so inconsistently.

An August 2022 attack in Bend, Oregon, illustrates this tendency. Ethan Miller — who opened fire in a grocery store, killing two people before taking his own life — exhibited a range of racist and misogynistic prejudices alongside other extreme sentiments. In his journal and on social media, he used racist terms for white people, black people, Jews, Asians, and Latinos and expressed hatred for “EVERYONE & EVERYTHING.”¹⁴ Although Miller rejected being labeled an incel, his writings conveyed hatred and threats towards women and an unfulfilled desire for a partner — hallmark traits among incels. Miller also railed against the government, police, religion, and technology. He even claimed inspiration from the 1999 Columbine school shooting.¹⁵ The dizzying array of sentiments that Miller expressed resembled multiple ideologies but never amounted to coherent expressions of these ideologies, placing him in the ambiguous category.

One might question whether such attacks constitute cases of violent extremism at all. In practice, they represent the outer limit of composite violent extremism, where the ideological underpinnings are so uncertain that the cases resemble non-ideological mass killers.

MIXED

The mixed category applies to violent extremists whose worldviews appear to be influenced by multiple ideologies at relatively equal levels. Alongside multiple ideologies, these extremists may express other prejudices, grievances, or subculture affinities that complicate placing the attacker into a single category.

Andrea Cavalleri, arrested by Italian authorities in January 2021, drew motivation and inspiration from two ideologies: neo-Nazism and his self-declared incel ideology. Cavalleri exhibited an interest in violent subcultures, writing about the “pleasure” he would feel carrying out a school shooting.¹⁶ He was arrested for allegedly establishing and serving as the leader of a neo-Nazi organization “with the aim of recruiting volunteers and planning extreme and violent acts for subversive purposes ... inspired by the American supremacist group Atomwaffen Division and the Nazi Waffen-SS.”¹⁷ Beyond his evident adherence to neo-Nazi beliefs, Cavalleri stated his desire to carry

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14. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Andrew Zammit, Emelie Chace-Donahue, and Madison Urban, “Composite Violent Extremism: A Radicalization Pattern Changing the Face of Terrorism,” *Lawfare*, November 22, 2022. (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/composite-violent-extremism-radicalization-pattern-changing-face-terrorism>)

15. “Oregon Safeway Shooter Claimed Inspiration from Columbine, Expressed Harsh Resentment Toward Women,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, August 29, 2022. (<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Far-Right/-Far-Left-Threat/oregon-safeway-shooter-claimed-inspiration-from-columbine-expressed-resentment-toward-women.html>); Jessica McBride, “Ethan Miller, Bend Safeway Shooter: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know,” *Heavy*, August 30, 2022, (<https://heavy.com/news/ethan-miller-bend-safeway-shooter>)

16. Paolo Frosina, “Il Delirio del Suprematista di Savona: ‘Hitler Come Cristo Guida Luce’. La Missione di una Guerra la Razziale ‘Contro Negri e Degenerati’ [The delirium of the supremacist from Savona: ‘Hitler as Christ guides light’. The mission of a racial war ‘against negroes and degenerates’],” *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (Italy), January 23, 2021. (<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/01/23/il-delirio-del-suprematista-di-savona-hitler-come-cristo-guida-luce-la-missione-di-una-guerra-la-razziale-contro-negri-e-degenerati/6075257>)

17. “Terrorismo: Arrestato 22enne Suprematista e Negazionista [Terrorism: 22-year-old arrested for supremacist propaganda],” *Italtpress* (Italy), January 22, 2021. (<https://www.italpress.com/terrorismo-arrestato-un-22enne-per-propaganda-suprematista>)

out an attack motivated by his incel identity. At one point he wrote to a friend, “We will be the first Italian incels to take action.”¹⁸

Violent extremists in the mixed category can be identified by their expressions of multiple distinct and discernible ideologies through their behaviors (e.g., arrests or school behavioral records), writings (e.g., social media posts, manifestos), or personal belongings (e.g., books, flags). The two (or more) ideologies that a mixed violent extremist embraces can have overlapping sentiments or biases. However, to place an individual in the mixed category, the ideologies need to be expressed as distinct rather than having one flow naturally from the other.

FUSED

The fused category describes violent extremists who orient themselves largely around a single core ideology but also express sentiments associated with other ideologies that complicate an otherwise clean bucketing.

For instance, Jack Reed, convicted in Britain in November 2019 of six terrorist offenses, fused his core neo-Nazi ideology with satanism and interest in the Columbine massacre.¹⁹ Reed’s embrace of neo-Nazism was clear from his journal, where he drew Nazi symbols and expressed admiration for Hitler. He also supported the British neo-Nazi group National Action.²⁰ However, he showed additional interest in satanism, describing his satanic beliefs in an online forum and referencing the esoteric satanist group Order of Nine Angles in his journal. Moreover, Reed repeatedly searched online for content about the Columbine shooting and repeatedly viewed content related to Anders Breivik, the perpetrator of the 2011 Norway terrorist attacks that claimed 77 lives.²¹ Compared to Andrea Cavalleri, Reed is less ideologically complex and possesses a core ideology of neo-Nazism. However, his interests in satanism and Columbine complicate the picture and differentiate him from your average neo-Nazi, thus placing him in the fused category.

The fused category ensures that the role of extremists’ dominant ideology — when they have one — is taken into account. This reduces the risk of inadvertently playing down the threat posed by broader violent extremist movements like white supremacy, a risk that exists when such incidents are grouped into catch-all categories like salad bar extremism. The fused category primarily exists to allow for nuance in evaluating attackers who are more complex upon closer examination than they appear on the surface.

CONVERGENT

Convergent, the final type of composite violent extremism, is for individuals who embody the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This category applies to extremists with different ideologies who work together to pursue mutual interests without adopting one another’s outlook.

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18. Francesco Marone, “Black Sun: A Case of Radicalization Between Neo-Nazism and Incel Ideology,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, January 27, 2021. (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/black-sun-case-radicalization-between-neo-nazism-and-incel-ideology-29063>)

19. Lizzie Dearden, “One of UK’s Youngest Terror Plotters Named After Losing Anonymity Battle,” *The Independent* (UK), January 11, 2021. (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/neo-nazi-terror-plot-durham-jack-reed-b1785650.html>)

20. Faye Brown, “Terrifying Drawings Found in Bedroom of Neo-Nazi, 16, Convicted of Terrorism,” *Metro* (UK), November 20, 2019. (<https://metro.co.uk/2019/11/20/terrifying-drawings-found-bedroom-neo-nazi-16-convicted-terrorism-11189596>)

21. Daniel De Simone, “Durham Teen Neo-Nazi Became ‘Living Dead,’” *BBC* (UK), November 22, 2019, (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tyne-50397477>); Faye Brown, “Terrifying Drawings Found in Bedroom of Neo-Nazi, 16, Convicted of Terrorism,” *Metro* (UK), November 20, 2019. (<https://metro.co.uk/2019/11/20/terrifying-drawings-found-bedroom-neo-nazi-16-convicted-terrorism-11189596>)

An example of convergence is the case of Michael Solomon and Benjamin Teeter, two self-proclaimed members of the Boogaloo Bois, a U.S.-based anti-government movement, who agreed to sell weapons to an individual they believed was a member of the terrorist organization Hamas.²² They did not convert to Islam, nor did they join Hamas. Rather, the partnership blossomed through shared anti-U.S. sentiments and a pragmatic money-making scheme.²³

While the convergent category applies only in cases where individuals holding different beliefs choose to work together, it points to a broader phenomenon where extremists express support for attacks carried out by those with different ideologies. For example, Damon Joseph cited the white supremacist Robert Bowers, the 2018 Tree of Life synagogue shooter, as inspiration for his plot to provide material support to ISIS and attack a synagogue in Toledo.²⁴

Within the CoVE framework, the convergent category ensures that cases of cross-ideological cooperation are not ignored due to their lack of ideological blending. Convergent cases fit within the concept of composite violent extremism because they involve an amalgamation of sentiments that challenge established concepts.

OPERATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COVE FRAMEWORK

The CoVE framework is intended to help practitioners and scholars better conceptualize a type of violent extremism that America's top law enforcement officials have identified as both concerning and difficult to understand. The theory that animates CoVE holds implications for the full range of domestically focused counterterrorism efforts, including trend analysis, prevention, deradicalization/disengagement efforts, the posture of law enforcement, and policy-oriented research.

To date, assessments of idiosyncratic cases of radicalization have not been sufficiently granular to allow practitioners or scholars to understand the underlying radicalization dynamics. The four categories of violent extremism this paper delineates make clear the differences among the various attackers who might otherwise fall under the "salad bar" label. Employing these categories will enable analysts and scholars to track trends more effectively over time.

PREVENTION AND DERADICALIZATION EFFORTS

A more granular understanding of composite violent extremism could render prevention efforts more effective. Interventions tailored to the different types of composite violent extremism may improve communication, encourage cooperation, and build rapport and trust between the radicalizing individual and the available support system.²⁵ Moreover, CoVE's categorizations could allow for better tracking of the most effective prevention approaches for each subtype. Similarly, CoVE's categorizations can inform disengagement and deradicalization efforts for individuals already involved in violent extremist activities.

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22. Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, Thomas Wilberg, FBI Special Agent, *United States v. Solomon*, 0:20-cr-00193-MJD-ECW, September 3, 2020, pages 8 and 14. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1313661/download>)

23. U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, "Two Self-Described 'Boogaloo Bois' Charged with Attempting to Provide Material Support to Hamas," September 4, 2020. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-self-described-boogaloo-bois-charged-attempting-provide-material-support-hamas>)

24. Affidavit in Support of Complaint and Arrest Warrant, J. Troy Amundson, FBI Special Agent, *United States v. Joseph* (Filed S.D. Ohio, 2018). (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1118401/download>)

25. Allison G. Smith, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, "Risk Factors and Indicators Associated with Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us," June 2018. (<https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/251789.pdf>)

LAW ENFORCEMENT

The CoVE framework's ability to consider an individual's complete ideological and grievance profile intersects with law enforcement efforts in two main ways. First, the framework can help identify potential targets of violence. For example, a mixed extremist who holds both radical environmentalist and extreme misogynist views might consider attacking both a gas pipeline and a women's college. Second, the framework can capture a more complete scope of events that could trigger violent acts. For instance, if a neo-Nazi were also an adherent of QAnon-related conspiracy theories — a pattern that fits the “mixed” subtype — that individual might respond to two different sets of triggers. By contrast, a fused extremist with one core ideology combined with other sentiments might have a narrower range — albeit potentially still broader than if that person held just one ideology.

POLICY RESEARCH

The CoVE framework is not intended to represent the final word on the phenomenon but is meant to serve as a starting point that should be of value to scholars and practitioners in multiple ways. The CoVE framework can drive policy-oriented research by a range of stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, social media companies, mental health professionals, and civil society leaders.

An immediate benefit of the CoVE framework is its facilitation of better data collection practices. Clearer conceptualization of idiosyncratic violent extremists makes it easier to observe trends and assess the extent to which cases are genuinely novel. For example, if the number of ambiguous violent extremists is increasing but fused violent extremists are decreasing, researchers could conduct targeted research into potential causes.

There are multiple avenues that researchers might pursue to better understand the causes underlying the apparent growth in composite violent extremism. One possible cause is the changing information environment. The case of Lindsay Souvannarath, who plotted with a co-conspirator to carry out a shooting at a mall in Halifax, Canada, highlights how individuals can be drawn into certain beliefs via online networks and subcultures. Souvannarath became radicalized after joining an online art community and connecting with another artist who was a National Socialist. She was further exposed to neo-Nazi beliefs and developed a fixation with the 1999 Columbine school shooting, culminating in an attack plan that exhibited elements of both Nazi ideology and homage to Columbine.²⁶ Further research into how individuals absorb and blend grievances and ideas they find online could shed light on evolving patterns of radicalization.

The internet may also be contributing to the formation of decentralized violent extremist movements and networks, decreasing the ideological consistency that comes with centralized organizations. In the context of ever-evolving online movements and subcultures, it could be increasingly difficult for groups to maintain control or influence over ideology.²⁷

The CoVE framework could also facilitate the examination of attraction to violence for its own sake and nihilism. FBI Director Wray noted in his April 2021 testimony before the House Select Intelligence Committee that for

26. Jordan Bonaparte, “The Story of Lindsay Souvannarath - 2 - Life Before Choosing Death,” *Nighttime*, February 7, 2019. (<https://www.nighttimepodcast.com/episodes/lindsay-souvannarath-2>)

27. Bruce Hoffman, “The Next American Terrorist,” *Cipher Brief*, July 2, 2020. (<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/united-states/the-next-american-terrorist>)

many individuals exhibiting composite beliefs, “it is more about the violence than the ideology.”²⁸ Many extremists in the CoVE dataset glorified mass violence and mass attackers, most commonly Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine shooting), Elliot Rodger (perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista shootings), Timothy McVeigh (perpetrator of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), and Dylann Roof (perpetrator of the 2015 Charleston church shooting).

CONCLUSION

This memo presents a new conceptual framework for understanding ideologically idiosyncratic attackers and incidents. In the absence of clear conceptualization, these attackers and incidents may be improperly categorized, obscuring relevant motives and risk factors. Alternatively, such incidents may not be recognized as instances of violent extremism at all. The concept of composite violent extremism addresses these risks while offering clear analytic and conceptual boundaries.

These boundaries are important because the concept of composite violent extremism is designed to capture acts of violent extremism that genuinely challenge established categories, not just those that initially appear puzzling. CoVE can be a framework for understanding and classifying a broader range of ideological actors, and it can aid efforts to tailor prevention and detection efforts to combat this growing threat. It provides an empirically grounded foundation for practitioners and scholars to build on so they can make further sense of violent incidents that have consistently proved both puzzling and tragic.

Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)

FDD is a Washington, DC-based nonpartisan research institute focusing on national security and foreign policy.

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28. Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Christopher Wray, “Hearing on Global Threats,” *Testimony before House Select Intelligence Committee*, April 15, 2021. (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?510634-1/house-select-intelligence-committee-hearing-global-threats>)