Composite Violent Extremism: Conceptualizing Attackers Who Increasingly Challenge Traditional Categories of Terrorism

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Abstract: Scholars and counterterrorism practitioners have expressed increasing concern over violent extremists who display an amalgamation of disparate beliefs, interests, and grievances. Despite a proliferation of labels like "salad bar extremism," consensus on the nature of the problem is lacking and current understandings risk conflating what are in fact distinct types of extremism. Building on current literature and a detailed dataset, this article presents a new conceptual framework for understanding this phenomenon, consisting of an overarching concept of composite violent extremism (CoVE) and underlying typologies of ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent violent extremism. The article then proposes explanations for the apparent increase in these radicalization patterns.

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Introduction

Counterterrorism practitioners have increasingly drawn attention to acts of violent extremism which, in the words of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Christopher Wray, "don't fit into nice, neat ideological buckets."[1] In response to an apparent rise in such incidents, governments have begun expanding the scope of counterterrorism and prevention efforts. Multiple new initiatives, particularly in countries belonging to the Five Eyes intelligence sharing arrangement, seek to address violent extremist attacks carried out by individuals who appear to be motivated by an amalgamation of disparate beliefs, interests, and grievances. This is evident, for example, in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, the United Kingdom Prevent Programme's *mixed, unstable, and unclear* classification established in 2018, and the proliferation of fixated threat assessment centres as part of police counterterrorism functions within Australia since 2017.[2]

FBI director Wray described this phenomenon as "salad bar" extremism, a phenomenon in which individuals are seemingly motivated by a "weird hodgepodge blend of ideologies."[3] His recent testimony on the issue highlights the fundamental challenges of "trying to unpack what are often sort of incoherent belief systems, combined with kind of personal grievances."[4] Indeed, cases that fit the so-called salad bar paradigm (for which we will offer an alternative terminology shortly) are challenging to conceptualize and categorize in large part because it can be difficult to discern motives amid complex interplays of disparate beliefs, interests, prejudices, grievances, and personal risk factors.

An attack in Brooklyn, New York in April 2022 exemplifies this challenge. Frank James—who opened fire on a subway train during rush hour, injuring 29 people—had posted extensively online before his attack. Yet his voluminous online writings left authorities, experts, and the media alike scratching their heads about his beliefs. Some reports called him a black nationalist while others pointed to more disparate racist and misogynist ideas.[5] James openly exhibited a mixture of extreme racial animus (against white people, black people, Jews, and Latinos), anti-U.S. sentiments, and political grievances—none of which amounted to a coherent ideology or aligned with any distinct ideological movement.[6] Complicating matters, James also struggled with mental illness.[7]

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Was James's shooting spree an act of violent extremism? If so, what kind? This is a puzzle not only for practitioners. Scholars have likewise grappled with these ideologically unclear attacks as a potentially new paradigm of violent extremism. For well over half a decade, researchers have been trying to explain this phenomenon, employing terms like "ideological convergence," "fused extremism," "hybrid ideologies," "fringe fluidity," "ideology a la carte," and "choose your own adventure" extremism—all of which have slightly different meanings and some of which only loosely relate to the FBI's concept of salad bar extremism.[8] The scholarly attention given to these ambiguous attacks builds on traditions within terrorism studies of examining the ideological idiosyncrasies of lone actor terrorists and of noting similarities between lone actor terrorists and non-ideological mass murderers.[9] Moreover, the field has long debated the explanatory value of ideology, questioned whether ideology needs to be a defining characteristic of terrorism, and examined whether violent acts perpetrated in the name of an ideology are truly motivated by ideology.[10]

The increased prominence of these attacks that challenge established categories of violent extremism are of clear interest to the field of terrorism studies. This is evident in multiple ways, including from the proliferation of terms offered to cover such acts. But beyond acknowledgment that the phenomenon exists and is worthy of attention, the field lacks consensus about what it is and why it is occurring. Clear conceptualization, as a step toward better understanding the phenomenon, is necessary not only because of the operational and even legal problems such attacks pose for practitioners, but to contribute to efforts within terrorism studies to make sense of these incidents.

This article presents a new conceptualization of these vexing varieties of violent extremism and proposes potential explanations for their apparently increased frequency. The article first provides background on the increased attention given to such attacks in multiple countries and outlines several ways that practitioners and scholars have addressed the phenomenon thus far. We then explain the methodology behind the conceptual framework developed by our research team, which required conducting an extensive review of existing conceptual and theoretical efforts to address the acts encompassed by terms like salad bar extremism, and the creation of a detailed dataset of these incidents. This research involved reviewing hundreds of terrorism and violent extremism cases from 2010 to the present, eventually narrowing them to a small subset of individuals who threatened, plotted, or carried out acts of terrorism or violent extremism, or otherwise illegally supported a terrorist organization, and who appeared to adhere to a mixture of ideologies and beliefs.

The article then presents a conceptual framework, consisting of an overarching concept of composite violent extremism (CoVE) and an underlying typology of four categories developed to disaggregate the phenomenon: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent. It explains the typology's categories in detail, providing empirical examples of these four types of composite violent extremism. The article then proposes potential explanations for why these acts appear to be increasing in frequency, or at least gaining greater attention, examining factors such as the information environment and online space, violence and nihilism, and organizational decentralization and ideological fragmentation. By drawing on extensive original research to summarize the phenomenon, present a conceptual framework, and propose potential explanations, the authors hope that this article will assist practitioners and scholars by providing an empirically

grounded conceptual foundation that will advance understanding of new cases of composite violent extremism as they arise.

Background

In recent years, governments have begun expanding the scope of counterterrorism and prevention efforts to address ideologically ambiguous cases. DHS's *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (the CTTV framework) and the United Kingdom's mixed, unstable, and unclear (MUU) classification enable discussion of traditional terrorism alongside cases where an attacker lacks a clearly discernible ideology but where the intent and tactics resemble terrorism. Coupling terrorism with this more ambiguously motivated violence is in part intended to strengthen prevention efforts. As DHS's strategy stated, these phenomena "overlap, intersect, and interact as problems" and thus "necessitate a shared set of solutions."[11]

DHS's 2019 CTTV framework was the first time a U.S. national strategy recognized terrorism and targeted violence within the same threat landscape. According to the framework, "targeted violence refers to any incident of violence in which a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to the violent attack" (though it is worth noting that the framework also recommends the promulgation of an updated definition of the phenomenon of targeted violence).[12] The CTTV framework goes on to note that "unlike terrorism, targeted violence includes attacks otherwise lacking a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation, but that are of such severity and magnitude as to suggest an intent to inflict a degree of mass injury, destruction, or death commensurate with known terrorist tactics."[13]

The U.K.'s Prevent Programme addresses traditional terrorism but goes a step beyond the CTTV framework by creating a specific category for less clearly discernible ideologies. The Prevent Programme includes the MUU classification for individuals referred to the program whose ideology or motivations challenge traditional categorizations.[14] According to the program, MUU applies to cases "where the ideology presented involves a combination of elements from multiple ideologies (mixed), shifts between different ideologies (unstable), or where the individual does not present a coherent ideology yet may still be vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism (unclear)."[15]

Australian authorities have similarly demonstrated concern about ideologically unclear attacks, as shown by the proliferation of fixated threat assessment centers within state police counterterrorism functions. Fixated threat assessment 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.[16] These centers were not initially viewed as having a counterterrorism function, as they were largely concerned with individuals who were "fixated on a highly personal cause or grievance" rather than being ideologically motivated.[17] The United Kingdom established a Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC) in 2006 due to persistent threats to the Royal Family from unstable individuals. This FTAC remained largely separate from the country's counterterrorism efforts. Australia's adoption of fixated threat assessment centers, which began with the establishment of a center in Queensland in 2013, was initially modeled on the U.K.'s approach but increasingly came to involve a more explicit counterterrorism role.[18] For example, 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 beyond a concern over individuals with clear ideological motivations.[19] In this way, the recognition that counterterrorism tools were relevant in this parallel context resembles the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's inclusion of targeted violence in the CTTV framework.

These policy and operational frameworks are significant steps, but further refinement and iteration of the underlying concepts and ideas will be essential to keeping up with the threat. In particular, more attention needs to be paid to understanding trends and common characteristics *within* targeted violence, MUU, and fixated threats. Terrorism and extremism literature helps build out this picture to some extent. Well before Five Eyes countries took steps to expand the scope of counterterrorism and prevention efforts to include ideologically ambiguous cases, analysts began highlighting what they viewed as a broader trend of violent extremists with muddled beliefs. The literature consistently suggests a pattern of violent extremism cases exhibiting some level of mixing of ideologies and beliefs.[20]

As we noted earlier, there is no shortage of terms intended to cover similar phenomena to what Christopher Wray describes as salad bar extremism. The range of terms applied by researchers to this general concept is more than just semantics. These terms have subtle differences and collectively describe a wide range of cases, including individuals who convert from one ideology to another, individuals who merge various ideologies at once, individuals who adhere to one ideology but co-opt language and imagery from other ideologies, and individuals whose ideologies lead them to support other ideological groups. The range of distinct phenomena covered by these proliferating terms makes it necessary to disaggregate the phenomenon under debate and conceptually clarify the different types of violent extremism being discussed. Therefore, despite the important contributions of existing frameworks and literature on this topic, there is a need for further conceptualization.

To build on these contributions and better understand how cases like these fit within the violent extremism landscape, our team sought to develop a new conceptual framework with a clear overarching concept and a typology of subordinate concepts that disaggregated the different forms of violent extremism being observed. To reduce the risk of simply proposing new terms to cover activities that are already widely discussed, and to instead provide a solid intellectual grounding for understanding the acts that Wray and others are observing and the forms they take, we sought to engage in a careful process of conceptualization, as outlined next. The aim of this research effort was not to provide the final word on defining this phenomenon, but to provide a starting point, by presenting an empirically grounded conceptual foundation that others can build upon and to advance scholarly and practitioner understanding of these variations of violent extremism.

Methodology: Developing the Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework was developed both deductively and inductively, through an iterative process. The deductive component was built on existing frameworks and approaches in the literature. This involved a detailed review of how other authors sought to make sense of these ideologically unclear attacks, the terms they used, the definitions they offered, and the characterizations they made. From this, an overarching concept and descriptive typology were tentatively deduced and then repeatedly adjusted based on the empirical evidence gathered as part

of the inductive component.[21] No decision was made at the outset about whether the aim was for a unidimensional or multidimensional typology, as this would depend on the variations identified in the empirical cases examined for the inductive component.

The inductive component centered on the development of a dataset of terrorism and violent extremism cases involving individuals who appeared to adhere to a mixture of ideologies and beliefs. Cases of interest were initially identified through existing datasets of violent extremists and mass shooters (including PIRUS and The Violence Project) along with less structured searches through Google. Further research was conducted on each case before including an incident in the dataset. The inclusion criteria were initially left intentionally vague, but the approach was to research the details of each case and include those that broadly appeared to be examples of the unclear incidents that both scholars and practitioners were grappling with, having a mixture of ideologies, beliefs, interests, or grievances at play. The exclusion criteria were similarly kept vague at first, although incidents that occurred before 2010 were left out. From this initial approach, which cast a deliberately wide net, 94 cases were identified.

The range of cases was then narrowed through a process of developing more explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the cases truly constituted part of the phenomenon that the reviewed literature described. This meant ensuring that the included cases truly challenged established categories of violent extremism, rather than simply appearing unclear at first sight. This process in turn helped to develop the boundaries of the overarching concept. Cases where the individual's multiple beliefs neatly fitted into a discernible ideology were therefore excluded, as were cases that were determined by a court or law enforcement to have been primarily driven by mental illness. Mental illness and violent extremism were not treated as mutually exclusive, but cases *primarily* driven by mental illness were nonetheless excluded to reduce the risk of excessively stretching the definition of violent extremism and thereby adding to further terminological confusion. Two team members reviewed each case and, through this adjudication process, the dataset was narrowed down from 94 cases to 44.

For these remaining 44 cases, team members gathered detailed information from public sources, favoring primary sources and court material where possible, and coded the cases according to their apparent ideologies (including whether or not there appeared to be a single ideology), beliefs, interests, grievances, attacks they referenced, attackers they expressed admiration for, social media usage, and other factors potentially at play. This process required wading through considerable terminological confusion, including multiple brainstorming sessions in which the authors sought to come to agreement on clear definitions (outlined below) of terms like grievances, prejudices, and subcultures, and invariably grappling with the notoriously contested concept of ideology.

The 44 cases were initially categorized according to a tentative typology intended to encompass the differences observed in descriptions of these unclear attacks in the existing literature, thereby returning to the deductive component as part of the iterative process. The terms covered a wide range of different phenomena, as noted above, and therefore the cases in the dataset differed significantly in terms of whether any distinct ideology was discernible. For example, the dataset included cases of individuals with a clear ideology but amalgamated with other sentiments, or where the individual was willing to cooperate with violent extremists of other ideologies, through to cases where the individual appeared to be influenced by an amalgamation of sentiments that did

not amount to a discernible ideology at all. To capture these variations in the extent of discernible ideology, we developed a tentative unidimensional typology with three categories: syncretism, fusion, and convergence.

Based on the information gathered, the 44 cases were each placed into one of these three categories. However, several cases were then excluded after subsequent discussions which concluded that in some cases the overarching ideologies and beliefs were not truly disparate, or were simply instances of white supremacist ideology producing anti-government sentiments rather than being distinct beliefs, or were otherwise clear cases of right-wing extremism rather than an unusual amalgam of sentiments. Consequently, the 44 cases were reduced to 27. The true number of cases that fit the paradigm during the period covered in our research is certainly much higher than this, but lack of key information or other factors precluded many cases from the study. The cases included in our dataset were concentrated in the United States, but several occurred in the United Kingdom and Europe, and at least one involved an attempt to cross U.S. borders.

However, it was then found that most of the 27 cases fit into only one of the three categories (syncretism), despite considerable variation among the cases within this category. The authors thus concluded that the syncretism category was too broad and encompassed substantive differences, so it was divided into two further categories: mixed and ambiguous. The resulting typology of ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent is presented below.

Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE)

Ambiguous: No clearly discernible ideologies, a range of sentiments.

Mixed: Multiple discernible ideologies and a range of sentiments.

Fused: Discernible core ideology mixed with other sentiments.

Convergent: One ideology, overlapping interest and collaboration with other ideologies.

This process of excluding cases also helped to clarify the boundaries of the overarching concept of composite violent extremism. This process involved excluding several cases that other authors had treated as part of the phenomenon of ideologically unclear attacks, as the aim was not for it to encompass every possible case that current authors could be referring to. Indeed, some cases treated as ideologically unclear in the literature could instead be understood as reflecting the observer's lack of familiarity with the ideology exhibited. These cases were excluded despite featuring in the relevant literature, as the aim was to create an overarching concept that captured the essential characteristics of the phenomenon under discussion (those characteristics that prevented the cases from fitting neatly into established concepts), rather than risk creating a catch-all concept of excessive breadth and limited value.

This process resulted in a rich dataset of 28 cases of composite violent extremism. (An extra case was added after the discussions undertaken to clarify the concept, expanding the dataset from 27 to 28 cases; see Appendix A for the list of individuals included in the final CoVE dataset.) The dataset contained extensive information on the individuals involved and the actions they undertook, which could serve as a basis for developing deeper explanations of the phenomenon.

Most importantly, the process enabled the development of an overarching concept of composite violent extremism, with a clear understanding of its boundaries and the underlying typology of ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent violent extremism.

Composite Violent Extremism and Its Subordinate Categories

The framework's overarching concept is composite violent extremism, or CoVE. *Composite*, a term denoting something made up of various parts or elements, encompasses the concept of an amalgamated extremist outlook at the broadest level.[22] The four subordinate categories in the typology demonstrate the different types of amalgamation that composite violent extremism covers. However, it is important to clarify what the concept of composite violent extremism does not cover.

At one end of a spectrum, composite violent extremism does not encompass violent extremists who possess a discernible ideology that is not combined with other sentiments or cooperation with adherents of other ideologies. This means the concept does not cover the phenomenon of fringe fluidity, wherein an extremist switches *in full* from one ideology to another. It also means the concept potentially does not cover cases that would be examples of "unstable" under the MUU criteria, unless the ideological shifts did not encompass the wholesale adoption of new ideology but instead involved amalgamation in some form.

At the other end, composite violent extremism does not cover violent actors who do not remotely demonstrate any ideological adherence, which meant that many mass shooters were excluded. The purpose of developing the overarching concept was to capture the apparent new paradigm of violent extremism that has clashed with existing categories used by scholars and practitioners, not to simply broaden the concept of violent extremism so much that it would encompass all mass killers with multiple non-ideological grievances or motivations. The concept is therefore deliberately described as composite violent extremism rather than composite violence.

Within this conception of composite violent extremism are four distinct categories based on levels of ideological discernibility and the centrality of beliefs to an individual's worldview. Rather than attempting to categorize based on *motive*—which can be especially difficult to discern for extremists swayed by multiple beliefs—the CoVE framework categorizes based on *expressed or exhibited* beliefs that *appear to influence* an individual's worldview and outlook. Many of the cases our team analyzed did not exhibit clear motives, and it is important to examine the full range of beliefs that influence an extremist's worldview regardless of a single belief's relation to the motive of a specific attack, especially in the context of prevention efforts.

The categories of the typology are thus based on whether the individual expresses or exhibits easily discernible ideologies and the level to which expressed beliefs appear to be central to the individual's worldview. Inferences about how central the beliefs expressed by an individual are to their worldview depend on factors such as the extent to which an individual expresses the belief (e.g., posting about it online once versus repeatedly), whether the individual is connected to groups or movements sharing the belief, whether their chosen target aligns with the belief, and whether the individual self-identifies as an adherent of the belief. Though categorizing in this way still involves a significant amount of subjectivity, we assess this process as a clear and rigorous way to

discuss cases with high levels of ambiguity that might otherwise be left under-examined and uncategorized.

One reason that a level of subjectivity invariably remains in play is that the concepts used to develop these categories are themselves contested. This is most evident with the concept of ideology itself, which is "infamous for its superfluity of meanings."[23] For the CoVE framework, *ideology* is defined as a set of beliefs that form a coherent outlook. This includes clearly defined and discernible ideologies (e.g., neo-Nazism, jihadism) or any prejudice (e.g., racism, extreme misogyny) that shapes a worldview or lifestyle. In some cases, a subculture interest (e.g., extreme violence, "Columbiners") can function as an ideology when it rises to the level of fixation and clearly shapes an individual's behavioral patterns, worldview, and identity.[24] This is an unconventional definition of ideology, aimed at highlighting that there are traditional ideologies as well as functional ideologies: sentiments that operate like an ideology in the way they are central to a person's identity and shape an individual's worldview and actions.

This definition of ideology is, in part, consistent with the tendency in scholarly literature to favor broad conceptualizations of ideology rather than "narrower conceptualizations that present ideologies as highly systematic, idealistic or fanatical."[25] An advantage of these broad conceptualizations is that they "recognise that ideologies exist in mutually constitutive relationships with other ideational phenomena such as identities, norms and frames, rather than standing in explanatory competition with them."[26] However, this definition is also somewhat inconsistent with the broader literature in that functional ideologies do not necessarily involve explicit political claims.[27]

The CoVE framework also relies on specific definitions for sentiments, prejudices, grievances, subcultures, and fixations, as these terms are central to the defining requirements of the four categories of composite violent extremism. A *sentiment* refers to an expressed prejudice, grievance, or subculture interest. A *prejudice* refers to a distinct negative opinion that is expressed toward some defined outgroup. A *grievance* refers to a real or imagined wrong or other cause for complaint or protest, especially unfair treatment; a feeling of resentment over something believed to be wrong or unfair. A *subculture* refers to a community, often online, centered around a particular aesthetic or shared interest at odds with accepted norms (e.g., glorification of mass violence, Satanism). And a *fixation* refers to an obsessive interest in or feeling about someone or something.

With these underlying definitions provided, we can now elaborate upon the different types of composite violent extremism. As we noted earlier, the four categories are ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent. The ambiguous category applies to cases where the perpetrator does not exhibit an easily discernible ideology based on existing buckets (e.g., anti-government extremism), but rather an amalgamation of sentiments. The mixed category applies to persons who appear to hold multiple easily discernible ideologies, potentially alongside other sentiments. The fused category applies to persons who appear to hold a core ideology but also exhibit other sentiments that make the case difficult to neatly categorize using existing buckets. The convergent category applies to cases where an individual who holds one distinct ideology works with or supports another ideological group based on overlapping interests and grievances.

While the lines between these categories are blurry at times, this typology encourages greater consideration for nuance and the full breadth of a violent extremist's beliefs. To explain these categories in detail, this section elaborates on the definition of each of these four types of composite violent extremism, provides empirical examples, and discusses how to identify whether a given case fits within the category and any further implications.

Ambiguous

This category applies to violent extremists whose worldview does not appear to be influenced by any clearly discernible ideologies, but rather by an amalgamation of prejudices, grievances, and subcultures that may undergird various extremist ideologies (e.g., misogyny, racism, antisemitism, conspiracy theories, or mass violence). This includes individuals who express some level of support for an ideology (e.g., posting Nazi symbols) alongside other prejudices that make it difficult or impossible to discern a central belief system.

One example is an August 2022 attack in Bend, Oregon. 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. His journal and social media exhibited racist terms (against white people, black people, Jews, Asians, and Latinos) and expressions of hatred for "EVERYONE & EVERYTHING." Though Miller rejected being labeled an incel (involuntary celibate), his writings exhibited hatred and threats towards women and a unfulfilled desire for a partner common among incel communities. Miller also railed against the government, police, religion, and technology. He claimed inspiration from the 1999 Columbine school shooting.[28] The dizzying array of sentiments expressed by Miller, which resembled multiple ideologies but never amounted to coherent expressions of these ideologies, places him in the ambiguous category.

Another example of composite violent extremism that fits within the ambiguous category is Nikolas Cruz. On February 14, 2018, Cruz carried out a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida, killing fourteen students and three staff.[29] Cruz's worldview appears to have been influenced by a blend of prejudices, including racism and antisemitism (he posted repeatedly about his hatred for black people, Jews, Latinos, and Asians), Nazism and white supremacy (he had swastikas carved into his gun magazines and content on his phone referencing the KKK), Satanism (his backpack and photos found on his cell phone depicted the Satanist reference "666"), and a general interest in mass violence.[30] Cruz read extensively about acts of mass violence, including the 2016 jihadist shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the 2014 incel killings in Isla Vista, the 2012 Aurora movie theater shooting, and the 1999 Columbine attack.[31] The sum of Cruz's expressed sentiments does not point to a coherent ideology. Instead, his worldview appears to center around an amalgamation of prejudices and a general interest in violence.

Violent extremists who fit the ambiguous category can be identified by their expression (through their social media profiles, writings, and other sources) of an amalgamation of disparate prejudices, ideas, or grievances without a clearly discernible ideology. They often exhibit elements of an ideology but only inconsistently and interspersed with a variety of other beliefs or grievances, and their belief systems lack structure and consistency. Cruz, for example, lacked ideological

consistency, piecing together disparate ideas—a determination supported by a court psychologist's later findings. Violent extremists in this category make expressions that may resemble ideological adherence (and may be borrowed from multiple ideologies) but the range of their behaviors, writings, and personal belongings make it nonetheless difficult to pinpoint a specific or coherent belief system.

Ambiguous cases raise the thorniest dilemmas about whether they should be considered cases of violent extremism at all, as they are by definition the cases most lacking in discernible ideology. They can be seen as representing the outer limit of composite violent extremism, where the ideological underpinnings are so uncertain that the cases resemble non-ideological mass killers. Indeed, when individuals within this category perpetrate acts of public violence, it often results in political and media debates over whether the individuals were violent extremists or simply pathological—a debate that in itself represents a flawed dichotomy. In contrast, cases in the next three categories (mixed, fused, and convergent), tend not to raise questions about whether they were ideological and instead raise questions about what the extremist's ideology or ideologies were.

Mixed

This category applies to violent extremists whose worldview appears to be influenced by multiple distinct and discernible ideologies alongside other prejudices, grievances, or subcultures. This includes individuals who adhere to multiple discernible ideologies or a combination of traditional and functional ideologies. Three individuals across three countries represent examples of the mixed category of composite violent extremism.

In April 2021, French authorities arrested 18-year-old Leila B. for plotting a terrorist attack targeting a church in Montpellier on Easter weekend.[32] During a search of her residence, authorities found material for constructing explosive devices and a journal filled with sketches of symbols associated with jihadism (e.g., a depiction of an ISIS member holding a decapitated head) and neo-Nazism (e.g., swastikas and depictions of Nazi soldiers), alongside other evidence that she was connected online with both ideological movements.[33] She also exhibited a fixation on mass violence: She was obsessed with gore, Columbine, and serial killers.[34] Leila B.'s outlook appears to be based on a mix of ideologies blended with a general fixation on mass violence.

Andrea Cavalleri, arrested by Italian authorities in January 2021, also exhibited an interest in violent subcultures, writing about the "pleasure" he would feel carrying out a school shooting.[35] 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."[36] Beyond his evident adherence to neo-Nazi beliefs, Cavalleri was also a self-declared incel and stated his desire to carry out an attack motivated by this identity. At one point he wrote to a friend: "We will be the first Italian incels to take action."[37] Cavalleri's self-identification as an incel and his neo-Nazi ideology, along with attributing a desire to commit violence based on both, places him in the mixed category.

Finally, in October 2014, Zale Thompson attacked a group of NYPD officers with a hatchet, wounding two of them before being killed by police. The NYPD described the sentiments that Thompson expressed on social media as "anti-Western, anti-government, and in some cases anti-White," and the FBI said he sought "inspiration from foreign terrorist sources like ISIS, but there is also evidence he was focused on black separatist ideology."[38] Our analysis indicates that his outlook was influenced by two distinct and easily discernible ideologies: jihadism (he viewed extensive ISIS and al-Qaeda propaganda and posted on social media about jihadism) and black separatism (he had loose connections to black nationalist groups and advocated for black revolt).[39] Drawing heavily from these two ideological frameworks places him in the mixed category.

Violent extremists in this category can be identified by their expressions of multiple distinct and easily discernible ideologies through their behaviors (e.g., school behavioral records or arrests), writings (e.g., social media posts, manifestos), or personal belongings (e.g., books, flags). Leila B.'s inclusion in mixed was primarily due to her behaviors and active communication with members of the Atomwaffen group as well as ISIS. Another marker that an individual fits this category includes an expressed desire to attack based on different beliefs, such as Cavalleri stating he would like to be an incel attacker while also planning violence with neo-Nazis. Unlike Cavalleri, Thompson did not explicitly self-identify with both ideologies that we attributed to him, but his social media profile and writings exhibited adherence to multiple distinct ideologies.

A final way of identifying whether an individual fits the mixed category is if an attack or plot (or an individual's planning of multiple attacks) exhibits tactical elements or target selection drawing on multiple ideological strands. While the two (or more) ideologies that a mixed violent extremist embraces can have overlapping sentiments or biases, they need to be *expressed as two distinct ideologies*, and not as if one flows from the other. Particular caution is needed when deciding whether to treat anti-government or anti-U.S. sentiment as an ideology in itself, as many ideologies are accompanied by some level of anti-U.S. government sentiment that is not actually distinct from the ideology. It is certainly possible for anti-government or anti-U.S. sentiment to be an ideology in the mixed category, but they would need to be expressed separately from another ideology.

Fused

This category applies to violent extremists whose worldview is based on one clearly discernible ideology, but who appear to fuse this core ideology with other distinct prejudices or grievances. In cases that fit this category, there are clear indications of a core ideology but the presence of other sentiments complicates what might otherwise be clean bucketing (e.g., the individual's online footprint points to a single ideology but also contains references to other distinct sentiments).

In 2019, authorities in the United Kingdom arrested Jack Reed for planning a terrorist attack.[40] He reportedly wrote a manifesto with a list of targets to attack, including schools, pubs, council buildings, post offices, and a synagogue.[41] Reed fundamentally embraced neo-Nazi ideology. His journal contained Nazi symbols and admiration for Hitler and he initially came to authorities' attention when he expressed support for the British neo-Nazi group National Action.[42] However, Reed's core neo-Nazi outlook appeared to be infused with Satanism (he described his Satanic beliefs on an online forum, calling himself an "immoral individual," and also had references in his journal to the esoteric Satanist group Order of Nine Angles) and mass violence (he reportedly

expressed admiration for murderers Ian Brady and Charles Manson, and repeatedly visited websites related to the Columbine attack).[43] Though it is clear that Reed fits the neo-Nazi label, his interests in Satanism and mass violence complicate the picture—possibly explaining why some of the targets on his list did not appear to have connections to his neo-Nazi beliefs.

Scott Beierle carried out a November 2018 shooting at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, killing two women and injuring five before killing himself. The U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center used Beierle as a case study on misogynistic extremism, citing notes he left before the attack, his history of sexual harassment, and the content of the music he produced as evidence that incel and misogynistic beliefs fueled his worldview.[44] In other words, extreme misogyny was Beierle's core ideology, as it was fundamental to his identity and worldview. However, Beierle also exhibited racism and white supremacist prejudices. The National Threat Assessment Center reported that he "openly admired Hitler and Aryan Nations" and that "other members of online social networks referred to him as a Nazi." A few of Beierle's song lyrics and descriptions also reveal racist and white supremacist sentiments (one titled "To Arms!" calls for people to take up arms to defend the homeland from immigrants).[45] While Beierle exhibited extreme misogyny as a core ideology, categorizing him solely as such would be inaccurate.

Deciding whether a case of violent extremism fits within the fused category depends on whether the extremists demonstrate a primary fixation on one ideological framework or belief that dictates their behaviors, writings, or personal belongings while still exhibiting some level of adherence to other sentiments. The fused category, as opposed to ambiguous or mixed, is for individuals whose worldview is primarily centered around one idea. For Beierle, his history of sexual harassment, attack target selection, and lyrics evidenced that extreme misogyny was central to his worldview even though he also expressed racist sentiments. In the case of Reed, his writings and admiration for Nazism were clearly central but he nonetheless also exhibited some behavior, writing, or personal belongings that suggests an interest or less central belief in Satanism. This category primarily exists to allow for nuance in evaluating attackers who are more complex upon closer examination than they appear on the surface.

Convergent

This category applies to violent extremists who adhere to one distinct ideology that has convergent prejudices and grievances with other ideologies, and thus support or seek to work with other ideological groups without necessarily adhering to their ideology. One prominent example of this category was highlighted by Director Wray twice in his Congressional testimony about salad bar extremism.

The FBI arrested Michael Solomon and Benjamin Teeter, self-described members of the anti-government Boogaloo movement, for conspiring to provide material support to Hamas in September 2020. Teeter and Solomon sold weapons parts to an undercover agent whom they believed was a member of Hamas, and "expressed their desire" to manufacture fully automatic weapons for Hamas.[46] Teeter and Solomon clearly held anti-government ideology, but their beliefs led them to support Hamas based on shared anti-U.S. government sentiments and grievances. Their scheme was facilitated by perceived common prejudices and grievances with Hamas and was

primarily intended to generate funding.[47] They did not explicitly adopt jihadist ideology or pro-Palestinian beliefs.

This last category is narrowly focused on individuals who seek to work with other ideological groups but do not actually adopt another ideology. Individuals here express one consistent ideology or belief while taking active steps to work with members of an entirely distinct ideology to accomplish a goal, frequently one that is rooted in a common grievance. However, this category is indicative of a broader phenomenon of extremists who express support for attacks carried out by other violent extremists with different ideologies. For example, Damon Joseph—who was arrested in December 2018 for attempting to provide material support to ISIS and plotting an attack on a synagogue in Toledo—admired white supremacist Robert Bowers, citing the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh as an inspiration.[48] Likely based on a common enemy (Jews), Joseph praised a shooter with whom he otherwise did not share an ideology.

There were only two cases of convergent violent extremism in our dataset of 28 CoVE cases, but we decided that it was necessary to retain it as a separate category. Such cases fit within the concept of composite violent extremism, as they involve an amalgamation of sentiments that challenge established concepts, but the pragmatic (operationally focused) nature of the amalgamation makes them distinct enough from other variations of composite violent extremism to require a separate category. Moreover, the literature describes cases of convergence outside the time period with which our dataset was concerned. For example, a study by Gary Ackerman and Jeffrey Bale identified 22 cases of collaboration between Islamist extremists and left-wing extremists in Western countries between 1980 and 2008, although many of these were tentative and limited to instances of rhetorical support.[49] Similarly, Germany's banning of Hizb ut-Tahrir in 2003 was partly motivated by concerns over the Islamist extremist group's connections to the extreme right.[50] Therefore, while we identified few cases of convergent violent extremism in the dataset, we concluded that this nonetheless constituted a distinct and relevant type of composite violent extremism.

Toward Explanations of Composite Violent Extremism

The CoVE framework helps to both identify and disaggregate various acts of violent extremism that have challenged traditional categories in recent years. As noted above, the apparently increased frequency of such incidents has gained attention from scholars and practitioners, prompting analytical debate and the introduction of new policy frameworks in multiple countries. Yet before discussing potential causes of this apparent increase in incidents, it is worth examining whether this perception reflects the reality.

It could be argued that nothing new is occurring, and that this is merely an old phenomenon gaining new attention. After all, scholarly literature on lone actor terrorists has long noted the idiosyncrasies of their expressed beliefs. In 2003, for example, Jessica Stern observed that "[l]one wolves often come up with their own ideologies that combine personal vendettas with religious or political grievances."[51] It could therefore follow that the perceived increase in such incidents simply results from communities undertaking work on counterterrorism and countering violent extremism now being more aware than before of composite cases. For example, in the United Kingdom, the national coordinator for the Prevent Programme has noted that increases observed

in referrals related to the MUU category can at least partially be explained by "the fact that we are getting better at spotting and recording this type of behavior."[52]

Nonetheless, there are nearly three times as many cases in our dataset between 2017 and 2022 than between 2010 and 2016. We believe it is likely that a real change is occurring. While composite violent extremism is not a new phenomenon, it is certainly a real one and is likely growing. Moreover, it is a problem that practitioners are increasingly being asked to address, demonstrating the need for efforts to understand and help explain these variants of violent extremism.

However, there is a lack of consensus among analysts about how and why violent extremists come to hold composite beliefs. Some scholars believe there is a degree of intentionality on the extremists' part.[53] This is where the term salad bar extremism seems most applicable: people at a salad bar deliberately choose the combination of vegetables, condiments, and dressings based on their individual preferences. Other scholars believe that extremists come to adopt composite beliefs haphazardly from an amalgamation of inputs and feedback loops driven by our current information environment.[54] In our dataset, we observed cases that could support both explanations.

As the dataset lends itself to few definitive conclusions, not least because of the small number of cases, we do not seek to propose definitive explanations for the apparent increase in CoVE cases. Instead, we examined the existing literature for potential explanations and, where compelling, delved deeper into them by bringing in broader literature and identifying whether the proposed explanations were broadly consistent with cases in the dataset. The team settled on three potential explanations worthy of further exploration to explain why the CoVE phenomenon appears to be growing, which cover the information environment and online space; violence and nihilism; and the role of organizational decentralization in ideological fragmentation.

Information Environment & the Online Space

Much of the current literature on the phenomenon we are referring to as CoVE highlights the importance of the information environment. As Jakob Guhl, Moustafa Ayad and Julia Ebner note, multiple ideological trends have been "converging into ideologically elastic online subcultures."[55] Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes argue that "material infrastructure enables the muddling of ideological rationales.... The infrastructure of digital communication technology, at both engineering and design levels, makes motley ideological blends increasingly common."[56] There is an intuitive logic to this, as today's information environment—which broadly refers to the full spectrum of actors and systems that produce, share, and use information—is widely understood to play some role in reshaping people's beliefs and behaviors. The information environment is particularly impacted by online spaces (e.g., the internet and social media), which are quickly becoming the primary means by which people communicate and consume information. A 2021 Pew Research survey revealed that 86% of American adults get their news from digital devices, about half of whom read their news on social media.[57] The CoVE cases in the dataset had extensive online footprints and social media activity (on platforms like Facebook and YouTube) related to their beliefs, but not necessarily to a greater degree than the general population.

Social psychology research indicates that social media enables individuals to strategically "connect with like-minded others and distance themselves from people with conflicting belief sets."[58] This

would suggest that social media tends to be a place where people confine themselves to narrow viewpoints, rather than being exposed to a range of beliefs. But it is also true that people consume information in the current information environment like drinking from a firehose. The proliferation of news sites, social media platforms, and other online information channels readily available to internet users makes it easier than ever to passively consume and be shaped by vast amounts of information from a multitude of online actors and communities simultaneously. Though someone might join a certain online channel intentionally—based on their preexisting interests and proclivities—that person might just as easily stumble upon a forum or thread that piques a new interest. In some cases, it is possible to observe in retrospect how the online space creates an environment where worldviews are formed in both intentional and haphazard ways that produce idiosyncratic beliefs.

Lindsay Souvannarath—who plotted with a co-conspirator in 2015 to carry out a shooting at a mall in Halifax, Canada—described her radicalization process in a podcast interview, noting that it happened "by chance" through online communities. By her own account, Souvannarath became a National Socialist after she joined an online art community and connected with an artist who happened to be a National Socialist. Through this relationship, she gained exposure to the broader neo-Nazi community and came to accept this belief system.[59] Similarly, she initially became obsessed with Columbine because of online research she conducted for a short story she was writing. She wanted the story to include a shooting, and her research exposed her to Columbine subcultures, where she built friendships and gained exposure to the writings of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.[60] These online influences culminated in an attack plan that exhibited elements of both Nazi ideology and a fixation with Columbine. Souvannarath and her co-conspirator, whom she met online, targeted a mall in "a protest against capitalism, against consumerism, against greed" in the vein of their National Socialist beliefs, and planned to end the attack "just like Columbine" by shooting themselves on the count of three.[61] Fortunately, the attack was thwarted by the Canadian Border Services Agency when Souvannarath attempted to cross from the United States into Canada to carry out the plot.[62]

Lindsay Souvannarath's case highlights how individuals can be drawn into certain beliefs based on the networks and subcultures they choose to engage with online, but people can also be shaped by the information they consume exogenous to their own actions. The information environment—social media and news media in particular—is rife with information intentionally produced and disseminated to subtly influence people's beliefs and behaviors without their knowledge. Foreign adversaries—both state and non-state—are known to manipulate the information environment to exacerbate and exploit political, ideological, and other divides in American society. Adversaries benefit from advancing any narrative that challenges the status quo while driving further polarization. This type of "hostile social manipulation" or "virtual societal warfare" may generally lend itself to individuals being influenced by an amalgamation of inputs and narratives designed to stoke chaos and a sense of urgency to act.[63]

It is finally worth noting that in the current violent extremist ecosystem, outlooks and tactics co-influence each other, likely facilitated by the internet. Violent ideological content and information on particular attacks or attackers have never been more readily available online, which may make emulation and diffusion across ideological movements more common. One possible factor in this diffusion could be the contagion effect, which has been widely discussed in the literature on

terrorism. The terrorism contagion hypothesis posits that "violent radicalization operates in a system of social contagion where violent ideology and a template method to conduct terrorism transmits through cultural scripts created by each completed terrorist act."[64] In the context of CoVE, the online space could be facilitating a proliferation of "cultural scripts" that an individual can be influenced by simultaneously.

Violence & Nihilism

FBI Director Wray noted in his April 2021 testimony before the House Select Intelligence Committee that in many cases exhibiting composite beliefs, "it is more about the violence than the ideology."[65] Individuals primarily oriented toward violence could be attaching themselves to a range of beliefs that provide ideological frameworks or justifications for violence. Indeed, many of the cases we observed exhibited distinct interests in mass violence. Many extremists in the dataset extensively glorified mass violence and mass attackers, most commonly Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine shooting), Elliot Rodger (perpetrator of 2014 Isla Vista shootings), Timothy McVeigh (perpetrator of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), and Dylann Roof (perpetrator of the 2015 Charleston church shooting). At times the relationship between an interest in violence and an ideology was symbiotic. Leila B., for example, told investigators that she adhered to jihadism and neo-Nazism to "justify" her "fascination with violent death."[66] Still, this explanation raises further questions about whether and why individuals primarily oriented toward violence are a new or rising phenomenon, and whether this is novel to CoVE cases.

It is also possible that within the broader violent extremism ecosystem, violence and nihilism are becoming more central than ideology. Today's violent extremists may be coalescing more around opposition to the current system by adopting any violent anti-status quo belief, and less around specific desired ideological outcomes. From this vantage point, destroying the current system is of foremost importance, while determining what will replace it may be secondary or even irrelevant. Driven by a sense of urgency for change, violent extremists may be drawn to a range of belief systems that present perceived possibilities of success.

This explanation requires more study, but one case that illustrates the point is the Order of Nine Angles (O9A) and Ethan Melzer. O9A has a complex and often deliberately obscurantist belief system, but it can be understood as advocating for the destruction of Western society by any means necessary, encouraging adherents to bolster or even collaborate with movements like jihadism and neo-Nazism.[67] Melzer, a self-proclaimed O9A adherent, was involved in neo-Nazi channels online while plotting what he believed would be a jihadist attack against a U.S. military convoy in Turkey. He believed that this attack would draw the United States into another prolonged conflict and thus contribute to the collapse of the current U.S. political and social system. Further, a coalescence around nihilism and anti-status quo aesthetics could also explain why some factions of the white supremacist movement have adopted Satanism, which on its surface has little overlap with white supremacism.

Lastly, it is worth considering that if violence, nihilism, and a decreasing centrality of ideology do hold explanatory power, the July 2022 Highland Park shooting might be a foreshadowing of a future category of attackers that lies just outside the bounds of CoVE. Some analysts described the

attack using phrases like "ideological nihilism," referring to the attacker's participation in extreme violent subcultures in ideological terms.[68] The shooter, Robert Crimo, lacked apparent ideological affiliations or sentiments, but his online profile exhibited a range of violent fascinations. Attackers like Crimo who seem to be driven primarily by violent online subcultures do not fit within the CoVE framework because they lack ideological underpinnings, but whether and how they fit within the violent extremism space is yet to be resolved by scholars, analysts, and policymakers (though Crimo's case seemingly fits DHS's *targeted violence* category).

Decentralization & Ideological Fragmentation

The online space is also contributing to the formation of decentralized extremist movements and networks, which may in turn decrease the ideological singularity and purity that comes with centralized command in an organized offline group.[69] In the context of ever-evolving online movements and subcultures, it could be increasingly difficult for groups to maintain control or influence over ideology. Again, this is apparent in the white supremacist movement, where groups like Atomwaffen and National Action became fractured over the adoption of subcultures like Satanism that spread through the movement online.[70]

Google's tech incubator Jigsaw, which conducts research on issues related to violent extremism, touched on this move away from formal groups to decentralized online networks in the February 2021 issue of its magazine *The Current*. Based on interviews with former extremists, the magazine discusses how online networks enable individuals to join the white supremacist movement without exclusively adopting the ideology. Jigsaw theorizes that "the internet lowers barriers for those curious about a supremacist idea to anonymously learn about it, lurk in supremacist spaces online, and eventually interact with others as part of loose, informal networks." One result is that this "enables supremacists to pick and choose which aspects of supremacist ideology resonate and engage selectively with those ideals… supremacists no longer have to find a group with which they fit; there is less friction to joining the distributed movement because they can retain idiosyncratic beliefs."[71]

Terrorism experts have also discussed the importance of this shift and its impact on ideology and beliefs. In July 2020, Colin Clarke and Bruce Hoffman wrote an analysis of the "next American terrorist," emphasizing increasing decentralization and ideological fragmentation. Writing that "bureaucratic organizations with hierarchical leadership structures and clearly defined objectives have been supplanted by loosely networked movements with amorphous goals that exist across the ideological spectrum," they suggest that "a confluence of ideological affinities is more powerful in inspiring and provoking violence than the hierarchical terrorist organizational structures of the past."[72] Almost all of the cases in our dataset were lone actors, similarly suggesting that the phenomenon may be related to a lack of organizational control, consistent with broader literature on the idiosyncrasies of lone actor terrorists.

Ideological fragmentation seems like a natural extension of this decentralization and may play some role in how individuals come to adopt composite beliefs. Affinities and prejudices like antisemitism undergird numerous ideologies, which researchers have suggested enables extremists to move from one distinct ideology to another. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman point to this in their discussion of fringe fluidity, a radicalization pathway where individuals

"transition from the embrace of one form of violent extremism to another" based on ideological overlap, including prejudices shared by the two forms of violent extremism.[73] Applying this to the context of CoVE, if decentralized online movements enable individuals to increasingly choose aspects of ideologies that resonate with them, it is possible that extremists are loosely adopting various ideologies simultaneously by adhering to fragments of each that overlap.

Conclusion

This article has presented a new conceptual framework for understanding the incidents often referred to by labels such as salad bar extremism. The need for clear conceptualization was straightforward. An apparent surge of unclear attacks has challenged established categories of violent extremism and drawn both scholarly and practitioner attention for doing so. Along with new policy frameworks, particularly in Five Eyes countries, there has been a proliferation of valuable analyses highlighting and seeking to explain these incidents.

However, this heightened attention has come at some cost in coherence and clarity. There has been terminological profusion, a lack of consensus on the nature of the phenomenon, and sometimes a tendency to conflate quite distinct activities and processes. This raises several analytical risks that the CoVE framework addresses.

One risk of analysts failing to have a clear conceptualization of these puzzling incidents is that they will simply get swept into established categories, with the nuances lost. An opposing risk is that such events would not be recognized as resembling violent extremism at all. The concept of composite violent extremism addresses these risks, encompassing many of the incidents referred to by the salad bar metaphor or other terms, while also having clear 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, due to demonstrating an amalgamation of disparate ideologies or associated sentiments, rather than being a catch-all concept for any violent attack that might initially appear puzzling. For example, Patrick Crusius has been described as an example of salad bar extremism, based on the argument that his pro-environmental statements are at odds with his expressed white nationalist ideology. However, Crusius's pro-environmental expressions can also be understood as eco-fascist sentiments that fit within the historic tradition of white nationalism, making Crusius's expressions recognizable within an established category.[74] The CoVE framework is designed not only to provide greater conceptual clarity to the wide array of extremisms captured by the salad bar metaphor, but to prevent mis-categorization of incidents that actually do fit within traditional understandings of violent extremism.

Moreover, much of the value of the CoVE framework lies not in the overarching concept but the underlying typologies. A homogeneous concept with no sub-categories—which is how salad bar extremism is seemingly widely understood today—carries its own risks, such as the risk of overlooking the ideological similarities that many incidents share with recognized violent extremist movements. The CoVE framework reduces that risk through the categories of convergent and fused, which ensure that, despite noting the composite elements, the dominant ideology expressed by the violent extremist is considered rather than overlooked. Similarly, the mixed

category allows for the identification of synergies between different extremist ideologies that could otherwise be missed. The inclusion of the ambiguous category addresses a different analytical risk, that of overlooking violent extremist cases that closely resemble non-ideological mass killers.

The CoVE framework was developed both deductively by building on the growing body of literature on the phenomenon and inductively through a dataset of empirical examples, which initially cast a wide net but was narrowed down to 28 cases that could credibly be considered violent extremism that genuinely challenges established categories. The overarching concept of composite violent extremism established the framework's boundaries and its defining conditions, based on the amalgamation of ideologies or accompanying sentiments. Under this lies the unidimensional descriptive typology of ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent variants of composite violent extremism. The framework is not intended to represent the final word on the phenomenon but to establish a starting point, intended to be of value to scholars and practitioners in multiple ways.

For example, an immediate benefit of the framework is that clearly conceptualizing these unclear incidents makes it easier to count them, and thereby identify the extent to which the current experience of such incidents is genuinely novel. While ideological idiosyncrasies are not new, by applying the CoVE framework to a dataset of incidents in Western countries since 2010 we believe it is likely that such incidents have become more frequent in recent years.

Another benefit to the CoVE framework is that accurate accounting of the totality of an individual's profile could assist prevention efforts. For instance, a range of ideologies, sentiments, grievances, and vulnerability factors can influence people's propensity to conduct an act of violence across the four categories of CoVE. Given that prevention efforts are apparently most effective when they are as individualized as is practical and can speak directly to relationships, grievances, and the individual's ideologies, a more granular understanding of the evolving radicalization cocktail could render prevention efforts more effective. Further, CoVE's categories could allow for greater tracking of the most effective methodological approaches for each subtype.

We are not suggesting that the CoVE framework resolves all the conceptual dilemmas raised by the apparent increase in violent incidents with ideological idiosyncrasies. The field of terrorism studies has wrestled for decades with questions of what ideology is, what counts as a single discernible ideology, and how important ideology should be to definitions of terrorism. Such debates are not resolved by the CoVE framework. Similarly, the larger explanatory questions of what causes lie behind these violent incidents and their recently increased frequency remain an active area of research.

Promising avenues of inquiry noted in this article for explaining composite violent extremism include the transformation of the information environment through digital connectivity and social media, attractions to violence and nihilism as ends in themselves, and ideological fragmentations associated with organizational decentralization. However, this does not preclude other explanations. For example, as most CoVE cases in the dataset involved lone actors, it is worth inquiring to what extent the phenomenon encompassed by CoVE reflects trends specific to lone actor terrorism rather than group-based terrorism. Alternatively, the prominence of CoVE cases within the United States after 2016 suggests a potential relationship with broader domestic political

turmoil and ideological realignments of the era. The CoVE framework can assist explorations of these and other explanatory efforts, particularly due to the disaggregation it provides.

The CoVE framework addresses many dilemmas raised by the lack of consensus, and at times clarity, in current discussions of the various forms of violent extremism referred to by concepts like the salad bar metaphor. It provides an empirically grounded conceptual foundation for practitioners and scholars to build on and make further sense of those violent incidents that have consistently proved both tragic and puzzling.

Appendix A

Appendix A lists the names of each extremist in the dataset and the year of the individual's attack or arrest.

1. Joseph Jeffrey Brice, 2010
2. Roman Otto Conaway, 2010
3. Anson Chi, 2012
4. Zale Thompson, 2014
5. Lindsay Kanittha Souvannarath, 2015
6. John Houser, 2015
7. Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer, 2015
8. Nicholas Young, 2016
9. James Jackson, 2017
10. Clark Calloway, 2017
11. William Edward Atchison, 2017
12. Nikolas Cruz, 2018
13. Corey Johnson, 2018
14. Scott Paul Beierle, 2018
15. Elizabeth Lecron, 2018
16. Jack Reed, 2019
17. Brian Issack Clyde, 2019
18. Connor Betts, 2019
19. Tobias Rathjen, 2020
20. Ethan Melzer, 2020
21. Michael Robert Solomon & Benjamin Ryan Teeter, 2020
22. Neely Petrie-Blanchard, 2020
23. Andrea Cavalleri, 2021
24. Leila B., 2021
25. Coleman Blevins, 2021
26. Frank James, 2022
27. Thomas Develin, 2022
28. Ethan Miller, 2022

[1] Christopher Wray, "Hearing on Global Threats," testimony before House Select Intelligence Committee, April 15, 2021.

[2] U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (September 2019); United Kingdom Home Office, "User Guide to: Individuals Referred to and Supported Through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales," November 18, 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales; Paul Farrell, "NSW Police Establish 'Fixated Persons' Unit to Help Counter Lone Wolf Terror Attacks," *The Guardian* (London), April 26, 2017; John Silvester, "How police prevent obsessives, pathologically wronged from doing harm", *The Age* (Melbourne), March 12, 2021.

[3] *A Review of the President's Fiscal Year 2023 Funding Request for the Federal Bureau of Investigation*, *Before Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies*, 117th Cong. (2022) (statement of Christopher Wray, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation); *Hearing on Global Threats, Before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee*, 116th Cong. (2020) (statement of Christopher Wray, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation).

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