UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM, GLOBALLY, AND IN AFRICA?

▪ There is no consensus on how violent extremism should be understood.

▪ This is may not be a bad thing because of the multi-faceted nature of violent extremism. Using different theoretical, analytical, and empirical methods and perspectives can help advance our understanding of what drives violent extremism.

▪ The most common analytical tools to the study of violent extremism are differentiated by three levels of analysis: the micro-level (the individual level), the macro-level (broader political and social contexts), and group-level (how violent extremist groups organize, govern, and build legitimacy).

MICRO-LEVEL APPROACHES

- The focus on radicalization at the individual level rose to prominence after the terrorist attacks of September 11 in the United States. Researchers, policy-makers, and the public tried to understand "how did seemingly ordinary young men become radicalized?"

- The hope was that understanding individual trajectories to terrorist action can help identify potential signs of radicalization, which will help inform the work of intelligence agencies, security officials and also civil society actors.

- There are two main micro-level models that have shaped the learning on individuals' radicalization. The first one depicts radicalization as a linear process. The second one criticizes the idea of radicalization as an incremental and predictable process.
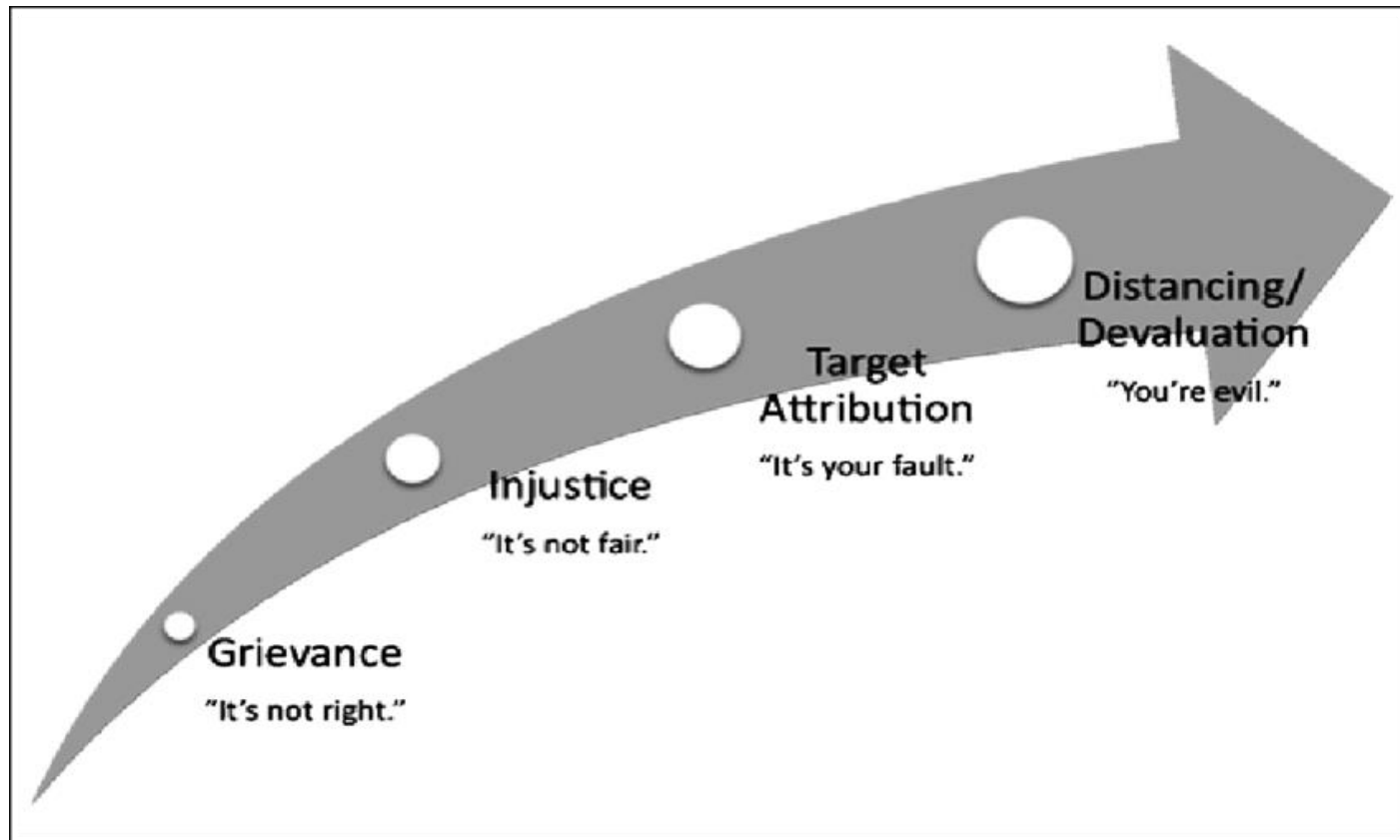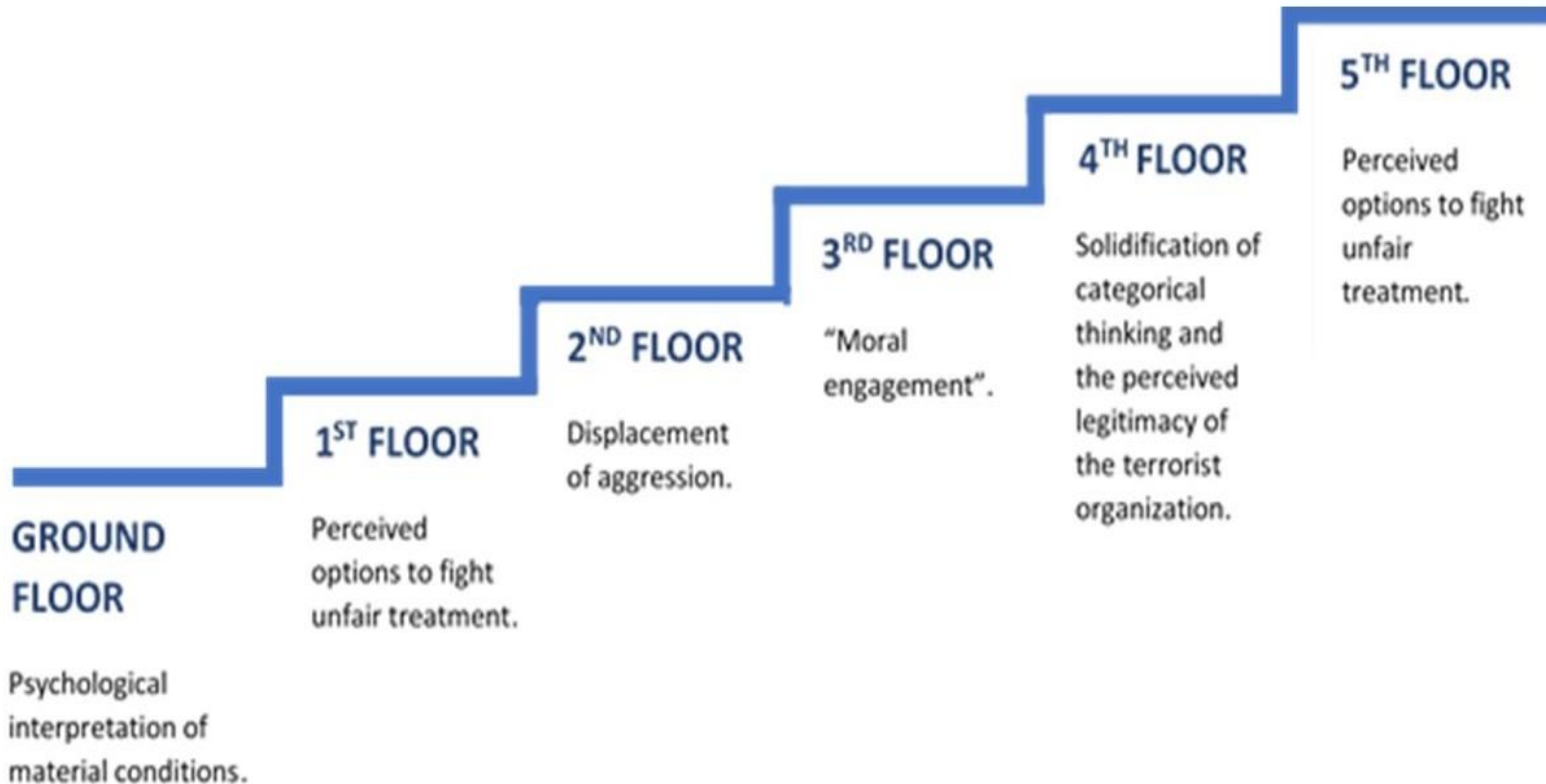
STAGES OF RADICALIZATION MODEL

- Linear models have been influential in setting the stage for research on how individuals radicalize and joint violent extremist groups.

- The most notable work on radicalization occurred in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001.

- Randy Borum, (2003) argued that there "do appear to be some observable markers or stages in the process that are common to many individuals in extremist groups and zealous adherents of extremist ideologies, both foreign and domestic.

- Borum described this trajectory of ideological radicalization and progression to violence in four neat stages:

Grievance
"It's not right."

Injustice
"It's not fair."

Target Attribution
"It's your fault."

Distancing/Devaluation
"You're evil."

- Another influential model of radicalization was offered by psychology professor Fathali M. Moghaddam (2005) who developed the "Staircase to Terrorism," a "metaphor of a narrowing staircase leading to the terrorist act at the top of a building."

5TH FLOOR
Perceived options to fight unfair treatment.

4TH FLOOR
Solidification of categorical thinking and the perceived legitimacy of the terrorist organization.

3RD FLOOR
"Moral engagement".

2ND FLOOR
Displacement of aggression.

1ST FLOOR
Perceived options to fight unfair treatment.

GROUND FLOOR
Psychological interpretation of material conditions.

- Quintan Wiktorowicz (2005) also provided his own stage model of radicalization. But his model emphasizes "the concept of a "trigger" event that leads to a final step of violent participation."
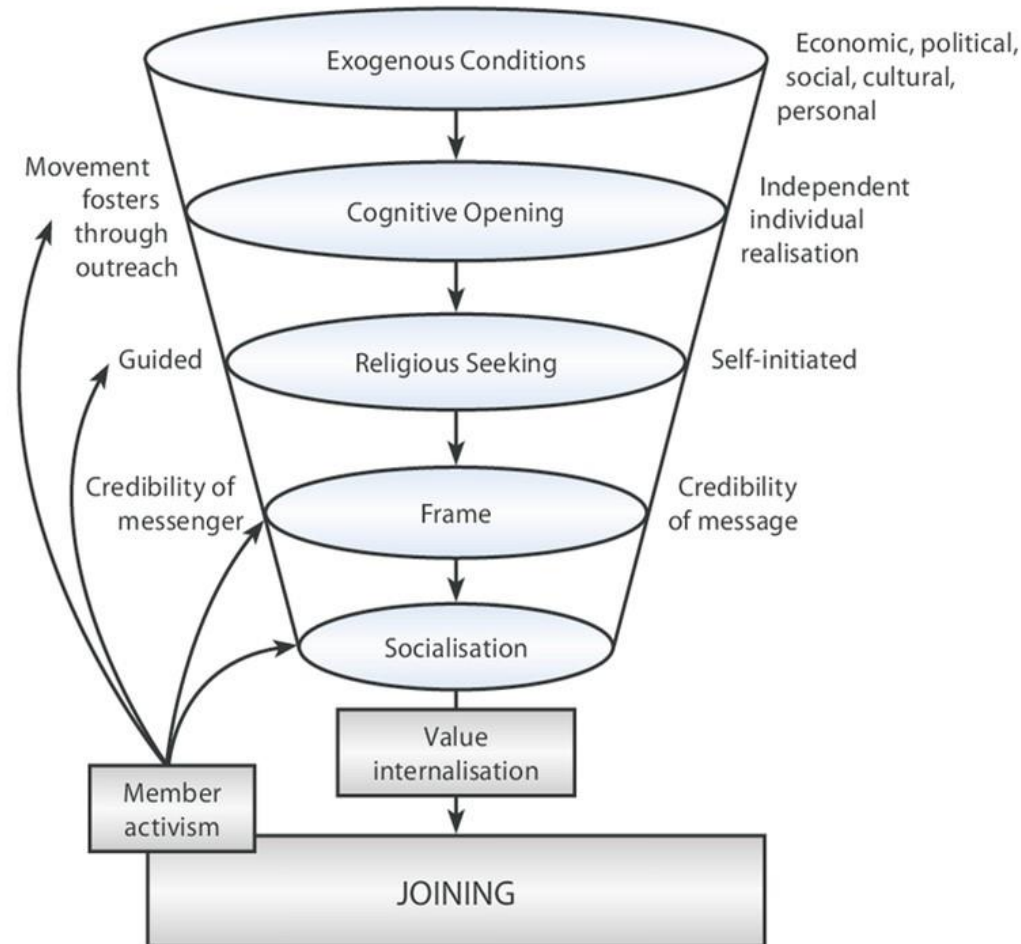
- All these linear micro-level models simplistically depict radicalization as process where individuals follow an orderly and predictable progression to extremist violence.

- The different models offered the tantalizing potential of detecting signs of radicalization, which has naturally attracted the interest of law enforcement agencies.

- The New York Police Department Model (2007), which identified 4 "stages of radicalization prior to planning a violent act," is noteworthy in this regard.

Pre-Radicalization → Self-Identification → Indoctrination → Jihadization → Terrorist attack
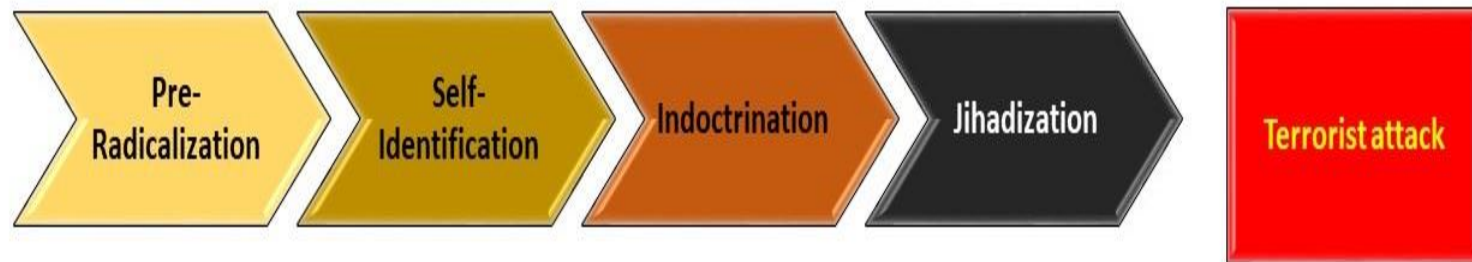
PROBLEMS WITH LINEAR MODELS

- Radicalization is a multidimensional phenomenon that involves "overlapping psychological, social, and environmental dynamics that vary over time based on the individual."

- There is also increasing evidence that radicalization of ideas needs to be distinguished from radicalization of action.

- It is also false to assume that violence is a direct result of radicalization.

MACRO-LEVEL TOOLS

- The nature of VE is distinct in environments pervaded by fragility and conflict.

- Identifying the larger structural dynamics at play and the interplay among them in a given environment is important in understanding VE.

- Drivers can be distinguished between "push factors" (group-based marginalization and discrimination, poor governance, prolonged and unresolved conflicts) and "pull factors" (individual motivations and personal relationships, the appeal of a particular leader, and the draw of social networks).

EVIDENCE BASE FOR COMMON ASSUMPTIONS ON THE DRIVERS OF VE IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT PRONE ENVIRONMENTS

Drivers of VE	Evidence Base
Group-based discrimination and marginalization	Supported
State predation and oppressive security sector institutions	Supported
Government failure to provide public safety	Supported
Government failure to provide basic services	Supported
Poverty and deprivation	Mixed
Education level and Unemployment	Not supported

NATURE AND DYNAMICS OF VEOS

- Understanding how structural factors enable VE to thrive requires considering how they relate to conflict dynamics on the ground.

- This in turn requires an examination of the strategy and decisions-making of VEOs.

- Research on how VEOs organize and govern is still in its infancy.