Hedayah
countering violent extremism

THE CVE CYCLE

AN INDIVIDUAL TRAJECTORY

CRISTINA MATTEI

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ABOUT HEDAYAH

Hedayah was created in response to the growing desire from members of the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum and the wider international community for the establishment of an independent, multilateral center. During the ministerial-level launch of the GCTF in New York in September 2011, the U.A.E offered to serve as the host of the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism. In December 2012, Hedayah was inaugurated with its headquarters in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.

Hedayah aims to be the premier international center and operational platform for expertise and experience to counter violent extremism by promoting understanding and sharing of good practices to effectively serve as the true global center to counter violent extremism.

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THE CVE-CYCLE

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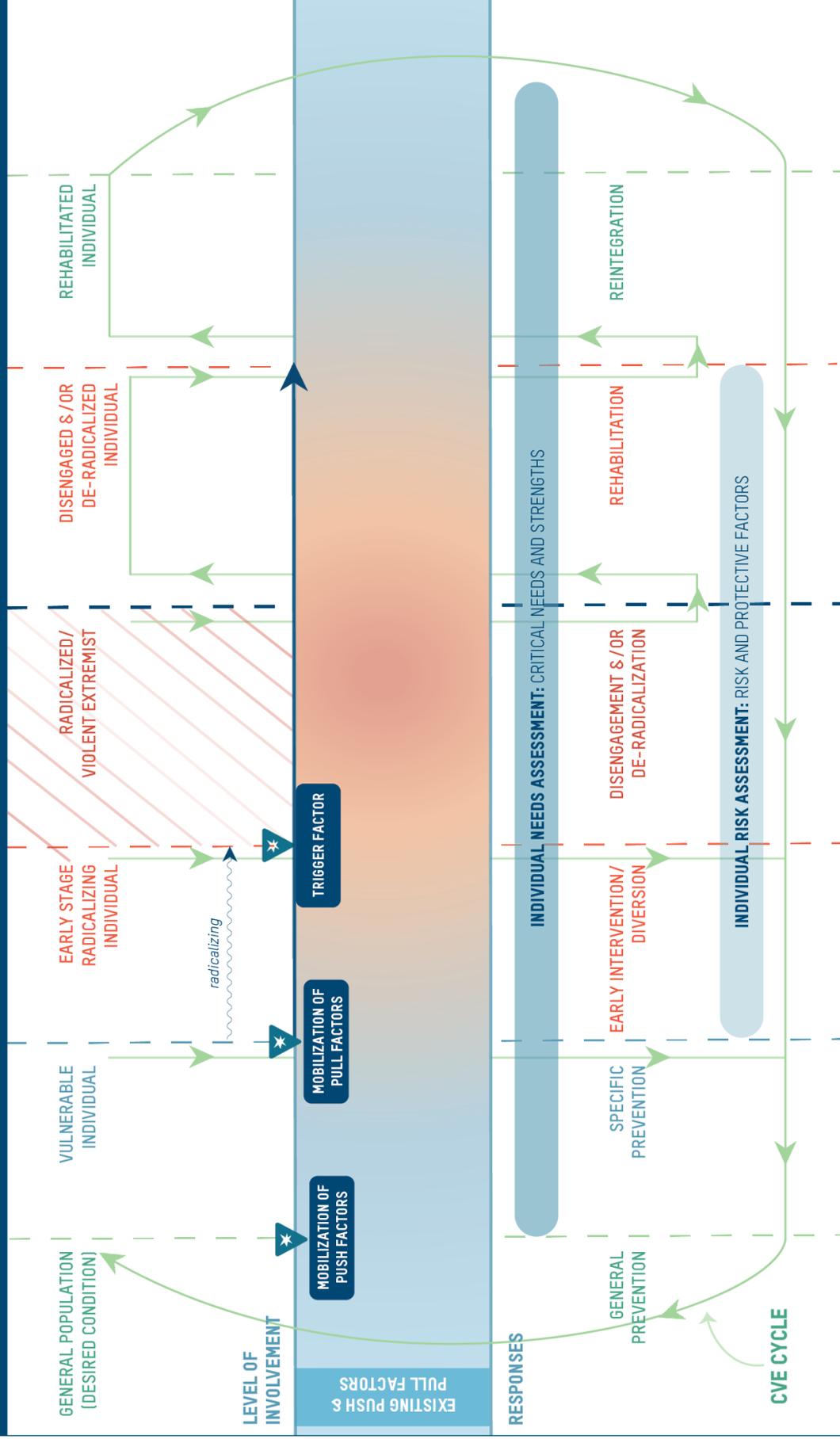
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INFOGRAPHIC ON THE CVE CYCLE

Figure 1: The CVE-Cycle – An Individual's Trajectory to Desired Conditions

I. INTRODUCTION

'Radicalization leading to Violent Extremism' (RLVE) can be defined as a process (horizontal blue arrow in **Figure 1**) in which an individual increasingly moves towards adopting violent means in the pursuit of ideological objectives. The process is individual in the sense that it depends on individual circumstances such as personal motivations, history, background, individual social context/networks. RLVE is also non-linear, meaning that its stages are not in an automatic progression.[1] This means, for instance, that an individual who is 'early stage radicalizing' might never become an actual violent extremist. RLVE is also said to be influenced by macro-level push and pull factors[2]. In short, RLVE is a process dependent on the combination of individual circumstances and potential macro-level factors.

Practitioners and policymakers are often required to develop responses to reduce RLVE in their country or community of reference. Such responses can target the general population (General Prevention) or the affected individual(s) and his/her groups of reference[3]. In this latter case, there could be challenges to successful implementation, if resources for appropriate analysis are not sufficient and tools and practices are not validated. Notably, the lack of agreement on CVE concepts, roles and responsibilities or types of tools may create issues. This paper attempts to address the complexities that some CVE practitioners (e.g. social workers, psychologists, teachers, law enforcement, civil society practitioners, community and/or religious leaders) and policymakers often face by introducing a simplified but effective Framework (**Figure 1**) which aims to assist CVE practitioners in developing appropriate interventions. In particular, special emphasis is given to individual-focused interventions that guide vulnerable and radicalized individuals to desired conditions (e.g. not radicalized) within the general population[4]. In short, this paper aims to sensitize CVE practitioners – and to a lesser extent, policymakers- on relevant types of responses and related tools, when working in CVE.

The Framework incudes General Prevention (targeting general population) as a first pillar and subsequently introduces the concept of the CVE-Cycle (green arrows in **Figure 1**), defined as the specific trajectories that a vulnerable and/or radicalized individual would need to follow in order to reach desired conditions. A trajectory is not always the same (in **Figure 1** there are multiple potential routes) as it depends on the initial position of the individual with respect to RLVE. The trajectory is also conceived as 'a cycle' since it aims to guide the individual from his/her current stage (e.g. early stage radicalization) back to desired conditions

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[1] Center for the Prevention of Radicalization leading to Violence, The Radicalization Process, https://info-radical.org/en/radicalization/the-radicalization-process/

[2] In CVE, it is common to distinguish between "push factors": structural conditions of a society such as unemployment and corruption; and "pull factors": psychological and social factors of violent extremism that are attractive (USAID, 2011).

[3] There are different types of groups relevant to an individual. A group can be defined as two or more individuals who are connected by social relationships (Forsyth, 2006).

[4] In this framework, 'general population' may refer to two concepts: 1) mainstream society as whole; 2) groups relevant to a specific individual such as primary groups (e.g. family and friends), secondary groups (e.g. co-workers, specific community), or reference groups (e.g. groups the individual aspire to belong or refer to) as well as other types of groups relevant to the individual.

(e.g. not radicalized). In short, this framework suggests that there are a number of potentially effective responses that can be implemented to prevent and/or disrupt the RLVE process and guide – when possible - the individual(s) to desired conditions. Such conditions are associated with strong resilience against RLVE. For example, this is when the potential influence of macro-level factors is null or under control or when individuals possess sufficient protective factors to cope with that.[5] It is worth noting that what is desirable for the individual pertains to the specific situation, and that the same solution is not always suitable for all. It is also important to highlight that it is not always possible to achieve these desired conditions within the individual's original groups of reference, especially if the groups of reference still present negative influences and/or contributed to the individual issue. In this context, 'group dynamics' analysis could help practitioners understand how to reach desired conditions for the specific case[6] and how to identify alternative groups, if needed.

II.   THE CVE-CYCLE FRAMEWORK: TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS

This section describes each stage of the framework, including the suggested type of response(s). The CVE-Cycle Framework should be read from left to right.

1. General Prevention

The first section of the Framework does not focus on the individual level (i.e. the CVE-cycle). Instead, it addresses the general population and indicates interventions that take place through General Prevention. The Framework starts from the assumption that within the wider society and the specific communities there are macro-level factors (push and pull factors) that may have a radicalizing effect on some individuals. The extent to which such factors might exercise influence on single individuals very much depends on personal cognitive openings[7] and individual factors (e.g. personal history, background, motivations, and individual groups of reference).[8] In this context, practitioners and governments may put in place general preventative interventions with the aim to mitigate the potential influence of macro-level factors and/or increase the overall social resilience and cohesion. In this phase, the objective is to reduce the impact of potential RLVE across the society and its sub-groups in a wide sense without a specific individual as a recipient of the intervention. In other words,

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[5]   Protective factors can be defined as "positive influences that can improve the lives of individuals. These may decrease the likelihood that individuals engage in criminal behaviors (…). Building on existing protective factors makes individuals and communities stronger and better able to counteract risk factors", (Government of Canada, Public Safety Canada, Risk and Protective Factors). Also, In the specific context of CVE, protective factors, may be also defined as characteristics "that reflect a person's commitment to conventional norms against terrorism, and that involve activities incompatible with terrorism and militant extremist" (Borum, 2015, p.66).

[6]   Group Dynamics is the study of relationships and dynamics between individuals in a specific social group (intragroup dynamics) or between social groups (intergroup dynamics) (Lewin & Lippitt, 1947). Group dynamics can help practitioners understand how social phenomena – including RLVE- spread within a specific community or among communities, affecting the specific individual

[7]   Personal grieving or stressful life can create the conditions for the individual to be more open to external influences. Such openings are called cognitive openings in social movement theory (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017).

[8]   The presence of push and pull factors in a specific context does not necessarily imply the presence of vulnerable individuals. It is not valid to categorize an individual as vulnerable simply because of his/her belonging to certain groups. For example, in the case of marginalized ethnic minorities, individuals are not necessarily vulnerable because they belong to that specific group. In fact, an individual belonging to a marginalized ethnic minority, may possess strong 'coping strategies' that could compensate for the existing circumstances.

the general population stands as the beneficiary and the overarching objective is to preserve social cohesion and resilience against RLVE.

Examples of general preventive interventions include peace-building activities that work on undermining macro-level push and pull factors, educational or vocational activities that may reduce unemployment and economic marginalization related to violent extremism, activities focused on community resilience mechanisms, activities fostering critical thinking skills, counter-messaging and positive alternative messaging and specific group-focused interventions. In other words, all those practical interventions that mitigate the identified push and pull factors or build social resilience. These activities can be CVE-specific, in that they are designed for CVE purposes, or CVE-relevant, in that they were designed to provide societal benefits in other areas (e.g. prevention of gang-related crimes, reduction of poverty, conflict prevention and enhanced social cohesion), but also carry CVE results (Chowdhury Fink, Romaniuk & Barakat, 2013).

2. Specific Prevention

The second stage of the Framework shifts the attention from the general population to the individual. This is where the concept of the CVE-cycle (green trajectory in **Figure 1**) is introduced. The target population for this stage is the so-called vulnerable individual and the suggested response is Specific Prevention.

In this case, when a specific macro-level 'push' factor (e.g. macro-level high rate of unemployment) particularly affects an individual (e.g. the individual develops a grievance because of prolonged unemployment) and when the individual does not possess sufficient protective factors (e.g. coping mechanisms), the individual can be qualified as vulnerable ("mobilization of push factor" in **Figure 1**)[9]. Such identification would need to happen as a result of a systematic assessment[10] of the individual's critical strengths and needs as well as the individual's group dynamics. In this case, the individual would not necessarily be vulnerable to radicalization.[11] Rather, vulnerability, as defined here, is meant as a susceptibility to a number of different deviant behaviors, including those that do not pose a threat to national security.[12] However, if at the macro-level there is, for example, a powerful violent extremist narrative (pull factor) and if there is a charismatic recruiter within the individual's groups of reference (e.g. community), the chances of specific vulnerability to radicalization might increase. Notably, the vulnerable individual may become susceptible to one of the narratives promoted by the violent extremist group (e.g. economic incentives, sense of 'brotherhood' and belonging).

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[9]   It is worth noting that there is not always an exact correspondence between macro-level factors and individual cases of vulnerability.

[10] This paper does not explore the existing types of referral systems and is not specific on how first engagements between individuals and practitioners should happen. However, in general, there are three ways to establish a contact and perform an assessment: 1) the individual or his/her family seeks help from practitioners; 2) the individual is referred to social care centers by third parties; 3) practitioners identify potential vulnerable individuals in the community and seek to establish a contact.

[11] There is no causality between a certain vulnerability (e.g. prolonged unemployment) and RLVE.

[12] For example, the individual may be more susceptible to involvement in drug-related criminal behavior, vandalism, organized crime but also to behaviors that are not necessarily considered illegal.

In order to mitigate individual vulnerability and prevent any possible attraction towards the pull factor, practitioners should shift the focus of their intervention from the 'general population' to the identified 'individual(s)'. In other words, it is necessary to build an appropriate, tailored and contextualized response that targets the individual circumstance. In this regard, a suggested approach to investigate critical needs and develop effective responses is the individual needs assessment process[13] (see 'Individual Needs Assessment', **Figure 1**). Such process is usually performed through the use of validated tools and protocols. However, it is worth noting that it is not necessary for the evaluation of needs to be sophisticated in order to be valid. Even contexts or practitioners with limited resources or experience may be able to perform basic assessments. The information collected by the needs assessment process is meant to inform the specific preventive intervention and provide an overview of individual needs and critical strengths. 'Specific Prevention' requires a needs-focused approach in the sense that it should aim to identify individual unmet needs[14] before they are met by potential violent extremist recruiters. It should also aim to deconstruct existing violent extremist narratives that might become appealing to the specific individual(s). At this stage, there are not enough information to presume that the vulnerable individual is specifically at-risk of radicalization. This is why it is advisable for practitioners to develop their intervention through a needs-focused (and not a risks-oriented[15]) approach. Risks-oriented approaches would start from the premise that the individual is susceptible to RLVE. However, such premise may be inaccurate and unjustified, unless and until a proper assessment indicates a specific vulnerability to radicalization.

Examples of Specific Prevention interventions include individualized psycho-social support that strengthen protective factors, vocational trainings and educational activities meant to increase personal resilience against potential RLVE. Specific Prevention also refers to interventions that build positive alternative narratives relevant for the individual case. It is worth noting that although the intervention may be meant for a specific individual (or group of identified individuals), in terms of implementation, such interventions may still involve the rest of the mainstream population and the groups or environments surrounding the individuals (e.g. social networks, peer-groups, family and community). In fact, it is crucial to consider the individual and his/her groups of reference in a holistic manner to ensure sustainable results[16]. Although it may involve the wider society and the groups of reference, Specific Prevention differs from General Prevention since the ultimate beneficiary is the vulnerable individual and not the wider population.

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[13] Individual needs assessment is a systematic process that analyzes the needs or gaps between current conditions and desired conditions. The approach is defined 'individual' because it is useful to develop a response in individual case management. The first step in a needs assessment process is to establish a contact to capture useful information on the individual case.

[14] An unmet need may represent a potential risk in the future (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

[15] In this context, *risks* refer to violent extremism-related risks, and not general risks.

[16] Focusing on the surrounding environment and groups is also key to identifying the best strategy for the individual case. For example, an analysis of the primary and secondary groups may reveal that it is not advisable to promote the individual's connection with his/her original social network, if the network is proven to exercise a negative influence.

3. Early Intervention/Diversion

Early Intervention/Diversion strategies shift the attention from general concerns of vulnerabilities to concerns of radicalization. If a needs assessment process indicates that the vulnerable individual is: 1) attracted to a pull factor (e.g. a specific violent extremist narrative), 2) indirectly expresses the desire to join a violent extremist group and/or 3) is in contact with a violent extremist group member, then the circumstances require the implementation of a risk assessment process[17] in addition to the needs assessment performed in Specific Prevention (see 'Individual Risks Assessment', **Figure 1**). The reason is that the individual might have already entered the early stage of RLVE (the horizontal blue arrow, **Figure 1**). If radicalization is at all present, practitioners would need to: a) evaluate risks of actual/further radicalization, b) evaluate potential risks posed to society and c) outline relevant mitigation strategies. Radicalization is detectable –if at all- by needs & risks assessments. While needs assessments processes can be easily implemented, risks assessment processes should be handled by experienced and qualified social practitioners due to potential misdiagnosis and counter-productive consequences. As mentioned, assumptions that the individual is going down the path of RLVE should be avoided in the absence of these processes.

An individual who have just entered the RLVE process may be referred to as an 'early stage radicalizing' individual. This may be the case of an individual who embraced certain aspects of the violent extremist narrative (e.g. verbally committed to violent extremism) and/or started to progressively withdraw from his/her old habits or social and familial circles. It is difficult to properly define 'early stage radicalization', as this phase also depends on the context of reference. It is also a stage characterized by extreme volatility, meaning that it is possible for the individual to proceed towards full commitment to violent extremism.

It is advised to utilize needs and risks assessments in a coordinated manner, in case of suspected early stage radicalization. For example, the information collected through needs assessment processes should be utilized and leveraged for the risks assessment process to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts. In this phase, it is paramount for practitioners to still keep a focus on individual needs as this is critical to developing exit strategies. In fact, assuming that RLVE also depends on the individual needs that have been intercepted and met by violent extremist groups, a response that does not include a strategy to address those needs is likely to be ineffective. In this stage, it is equally important to focus on de-constructing the narratives and the incentives provided by the potential violent extremist group. In short, 'Early intervention/Diversion' is likely to work if practitioners are able to provide alternatives to fulfill specific needs, while mitigating risks within the individual

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[17] Risks assessment processes or tools have been widely used in criminal justice and aim to provide a method for examining the likelihood of harm and for informing treatments and responses, based on available information. In other words, the analysis measures the presence and combination of specific risk factors. Risk factors can be defined as attributes (e.g. belief, appearance, experience, environment) that increases the likelihood of the outcome being measured occurring. While risk factors may predict the likelihood of the outcome, they should not be confused with indicators that instead help to signal the presence of the outcome being measured. It is equally important to say that the presence of risks factors or indicators does not mean the individual will necessarily partake in the concerned behaviors. Risks factors are usually categorized as *static risk factors* (unchanging elements such as gender, or criminal record) and *dynamic risks factors* (elements that can be changed through rehabilitation or treatment such as relationships, attitudes, personal beliefs) (RTI International, 2018).

environment and deconstructing potential violent extremist narratives that appeal to the individual. In this phase, the framework assumes that the individual is still in the pre-criminal space (i.e. the individual is not necessarily fully committed to the violent extremist ideology or behavior[18]). This means that practitioners may still be able to guide the individual to desired conditions in a relatively simple way (see the short CVE-Cycle/green arrow connecting 'early stage radicalizing individual' to 'general population/desired conditions', in **Figure 1**).

Examples of 'Early intervention/Diversion' are interventions that challenge ideological premises or restore cognitive skills, pro-social activities or promotion of alternative platforms to achieve personal goals (e.g. economic or social aspirations), reconciliation with families and communities and, in general, all the responses that might contribute to meet critical needs and increase personal resilience against further radicalization. The objective of these interventions is to disrupt RLVE and divert the individual towards other routes to meet his/her needs. In this phase, like the previous one, practitioners should be able to leverage community assets and develop a good understanding of groups' dynamics and trends around the individual(s), in order to ensure long-term positive results.

4. Dis-Engagement and/or De-Radicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

The last three stages of the Framework should be taken together because they involve an individual who has partaken in violent extremist behaviors or activities (perpetration or active support of violence). While vulnerable and early stage radicalizing individuals can be guided back to desired conditions through the interventions described in the previous sections, individuals who are highly committed to the ideology and/or have already engaged in violent extremist acts would need to undergo three phases (see the long green arrow/CVE-cycle from 'radicalized/violent extremist' to 'general population/desired conditions', **Figure 1**). These phases are:

1. Disengagement and/or De-radicalization[19]
2. Rehabilitation[20]
3. Reintegration[21]

In the Framework, an individual who shifts from early stage radicalization to actual violent extremism (committing and actively supporting) is considered committed to violent extremism. This stage represents the ultimate product of RLVE. Individuals included in this category are not necessarily violent in the traditional sense: there are cases of highly-ideologically committed individuals who do not necessarily perpetrate acts of violence.

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[18] It is important to note that across different national contexts what is considered to be "pre-criminal" varies considerably.

[19] Dis-engagement refers to the individual rejection of the violent extremism group or violent means (physical and/or cognitive), while De-radicalization refers to the rejection of the overall ideological objective that the violent extremist group pursues (Horgan, 2008).

[20] Rehabilitation may refer to a set of behavioral-cognitive practices as well as preparatory activities (e.g. mentoring, vocational trainings) for social reintegration. Rehabilitative practices are widely used in criminal justice and prison settings in preparation for social reintegration. In particular, *Desistance Theory* looks at rehabilitation and social reintegration as parts of an overall approach which ensures that an offender ceases any criminal behaviors and is functionally reinserted into society (Graham, & McNeil, 2017, pp 433-451).

[21] Reintegration refers to re-establishing social and/or familial ties (when possible) as well as functional and positive participation in society (Holmer & Shtuni, 2017).

However, their strong commitment to violent extremist ideologies makes them equally dangerous. These latter individuals might actually be beyond effective intervention, or at least will pose greater difficulty for disengagement and/or de-radicalization programs (Boucek, 2008). On the other side of the spectrum, there are also individuals who may have been motivated by incentives other than ideology (e.g. economic incentives, acquired social status). Practitioners who deal with this category must implement needs and, most importantly, risks assessment processes to understand individual motivations, likelihood of harm and develop appropriate responses.

The time an individual might take to fully embrace violent extremism ('radicalized/violent extremist' in **Figure 1**) are situational and context-specific. Circumstances that prompt a personal change- including in RLVE- have been well described in the Kurt Lewin change theory model (unfreezing- change- freezing) in which individuals break their status quo (unfreezing), accept the conversion (change) and consolidate it (freezing) (Lewin, 1947). In addition, some scholars argued that RLVE is a process of socialization into violent extremism (Wilner, & Dubouloz, 2011) and like all processes of socialization, it may require more or less time depending on the individual case. Further complexity is added by the fact that RLVE is a non-linear process, which means that an early stage radicalizing individual may in fact never reach the stage of being fully socialized into violent extremism (perpetrating and actively supporting).

In the CVE-Cycle Framework, an individual fully embraces violent extremism after what is called a 'trigger factor' (See **Figure 1**). Such factor is defined as an element that exacerbates the RLVE process and pushes the individual into active willingness to commit to violent extremism. Others have described this as a "tipping point" (UNDP, 2017, p. 73) which can be defined as a real or perceived traumatic event at the individual level[22]. It is important to mention that this perspective presumes that the individual is already vulnerable to some extent. In other words, the trigger factor simply exacerbates the pre-existing individual condition. However, this is not necessarily the only way an individual can become a violent extremist. For example, in the case of forced recruitment, individuals may commit violent extremist acts and only later fully commit to the ideological and/or social norms of the violent extremist group.

These responses are particularly important to ensure that the individual receives the appropriate support to fully reject violent extremism and he/she gets a chance for social reintegration. At this stage, it is also key to prevent the community's potential misperception that CVE aims to socially reintegrate individuals who are still committed to violent extremism. This public view can be quite common due to misinformation on CVE and can severely damage the work of practitioners. Despite short-term jail sentences not allowing for full dis-engagement and rehabilitation, social reintegration in CVE should target individuals who have been fully dis-engaged/ de-radicalized and have already initiated a path of rehabilitation.[23] The use of accurate language may seem like a futile exercise, but it gains relevance when

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[22] For example, a violent attack against a community may represent a traumatic experience that pushes vulnerable or radicalizing individuals to fully commit to violent extremism.
[23] Given lack of resources for implementation and monitoring, these responses may not be always properly implemented.

working in the reintegration space with the involvement of civil society. Community acceptance is in fact a crucial element to ensure successful reintegration and prevent recidivism of the individual into RLVE. As such, in the last stage of the framework ('Reintegration' in **Figure 1**) practitioners would also need to develop interventions to ensure there are appropriate policies for community acceptance and individual personal and socio-economic preparedness.

In theory, violent extremists who properly underwent the first two phases (1. disengagement and/or de-radicalization; 2. rehabilitation) should not pose a challenge to national security and should be in a good position for reintegration into society. However, it is also important to say that there are evident challenges in today's practice when evaluating cognitive and behavioral changes in individuals affected by violent extremism. In particular, one of the challenges is represented by the difficulties in evaluating the "shift" in ideology. In this context, while there are several debates on the feasibility and ethics of Dis-engagement over De-radicalization (and vice-versa), the intention of this paper is not to prescribe any specific formula. Depending on the context of reference but, above all, on the results of the individual risks and needs assessment processes, Dis-engagement, De-radicalization or both may be needed.

Finally, although the purpose of the CVE-cycle is to lead the affected individual to desired conditions in the society, it is not always possible to reintegrate individuals if they are not responsive to Dis-engagement/De-radicalization and Rehabilitation and/or when they still pose a threat to society. It is also not always possible to reintegrate the individuals in their original community or groups of reference. This means that ultimately some of the individuals cannot and will not be socially reintegrated or will be socially reintegrated within a different context.

III. CONCLUSION: THE CVE-CYCLE AS A FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICY-MAKERS

The complexities in developing and implementing appropriate CVE interventions prompted the development of this Framework. Notably, the Framework is a model that systematizes the essentials for CVE. In addition to suggesting specific individual-focused responses, the paper highlights the importance of analyzing the macro-level factors in order to inform general preventive interventions at the society level. Finally, the Framework clearly highlights the importance of assessment processes. On this point, it is crucial to sensitize CVE practitioners on the dangers of misdiagnosis and biased interpretations of vulnerabilities. Individuals within specific groups can be stigmatized by misplaced interventions because of inaccurate underlying assumptions. Such assumptions should never replace an assessment process addressing macro-level factors, individual factors and related groups-dynamics. On the same note, it is critical to note that RLVE cannot be exclusively tackled by policies at the macro-level and that follow-up implementation, understanding of individual context and practical interventions are key. In particular, the individual level is crucial and CVE practitioners should at the very least have a basic understanding of it.

This Framework is an indicative guidance for those contexts where CVE is still a challenge in terms of identification of target populations and interventions. It draws upon well-established concepts in CVE and does not intend to define RLVE and CVE responses in a prescriptive sense. To conclude, it can represent a useful reference for practitioners and policy-makers who need more systematization with respect to the existing factors, responses, and processes in CVE.

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