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The Honorable Mark Takano  
Chair, Veterans' Affairs Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Bost, Ranking Member  
Veterans' Affairs Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Takano, Ranking Member Bost, Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee;

I am pleased to offer my thoughts and expertise on the problem of veterans' radicalization, in connection with your upcoming investigative hearing on March 31, 2022, entitled: "Helping veterans thrive: The importance of peer support in preventing domestic violent extremism." In what follows, I briefly comment on my own background and qualifications, highlight some features of the evidence for veteran radicalization, present our 3N model of radicalization and apply it to the problem of veteran radicalization, and finally indicate some directions for preventing or reversing veteran radicalization that follow from the 3N model.

### **Background**

First, by a way of introduction, a few words about my background pertinent to the problem of violent extremism. I am a social psychologist, with a research focus on human motivation. I have proposed several motivational theories that guided motivationally oriented research published in over 400 articles and books. Following 9/11 I was invited to join an NAS social science panel on the study of terrorism. After several months' work, we submitted to Congress a document titled "Making the Nation Safer" (2002)<sup>1</sup>. I then co-founded at the University of Maryland a DHS excellence center for the Study of Terrorism and the Response to Terrorism START, today one of the major world centers on this topic with extensive data bases on terrorism in all of its forms. I am currently a member of a NATO panel on the study of veteran radicalization in the militaries of different member nations, and am serving as a consultant on a research project on veteran radicalization under a grant funded by the NIH. Both the NATO panel and the NIH grant are guided by ideas derived from our 3N model described later in this document.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/10415/making-the-nation-safer-the-role-of-science-and-technology>

<sup>2</sup> Kruglanski, A.W., Belanger, J.J. & Gunaratna, R. (2019). *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*. New York: Oxford University Press.  
Kruglanski, A.W., Webber, D. & Koehler, D. (2019). *Radicals' Journey: German Neo-Nazis' Voyage to the Edge and Back*. New York: Oxford University Press.

I have carried out empirical field research on violent extremism in various conflict regions of the world including Sri Lanka where we conducted longitudinal research on 12,000 members of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the only (known to me) systematic research on a program of de-radicalization.<sup>3</sup> We published empirical research on radicalization in Philippine prisons<sup>4</sup>, the radicalization and deradicalization of German Neo Nazis, American domestic terrorists<sup>5</sup>, Pashtun supporters of Taliban<sup>6</sup> and Iraqi ISIS members<sup>7</sup>. Based on this work, and my work on the psychology of extremism more generally<sup>8</sup>, supported by multiple grants from DHS and DOD, I developed a model of radicalization and deradicalization, the 3N model mentioned earlier, that I am pleased to share with the Committee. Before so doing, however, a few words on the problem of veteran radicalization are in order.

### Signs of Veteran Radicalization

The committee is surely aware already of the multiple signs of radicalization among U.S. veterans and in ranks of the military. Here I mention briefly some highlights of the evidence with which I am familiar.

- (1) about 12% of people charged with federal crimes for actions on 1/6/2021 had military experience. 93% of them were veterans; the rest were active duty, reserve, or National Guard. More than 25% of them were commissioned officers and 44% had been deployed at least once. 37% of those charged who had military experience were associated with extremist groups like the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, making them four times as likely as rioters without military experience to have been part of such a group.
- (2) In 2005 and 2006, an investigator with the Department of Defense [DoD] identified 320 extremists in the ranks, but only two were discharged (Koehler, D. (2019).
- (3) Far-right terrorists are more than twice as likely to have military experience as “international terrorists” (i.e., militant jihadists), and four times as likely to have military

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<sup>3</sup> Webber, D., Chernikova, M., Kruglanski, A.W., Gelfand, M.J., Hettiarachchi, M., Gunaratna, R., Lafreniere, M.A., Belanger, J.J. (2017). Deradicalizing Detained Terrorists. *Political Psychology*.

<sup>4</sup> Kruglanski, A. W., Gelfand, M. J., Sheveland, A., Babush, M., Hettiarachchi, M., Ng Bonto, M., & Gunaratna, R. (2016). What a difference two years make: Patterns of radicalization in a Philippine jail. *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 9(1-3), 13-36.

<sup>5</sup> Jasko, K., LaFree, G., & Kruglanski, A. (2017). Quest for significance and violent extremism: The case of domestic radicalization. *Political Psychology*, 38(5), 815-831.

<sup>6</sup> Kaltenthaler, K., Kruglanski, A.W. & Knuppe, A.J. (in press). The Paradox of the Heavy-Handed Insurgent: Public Support for the Taliban Among Afghan Pashtuns. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*

<sup>7</sup> Dagher, M., Kaltenthaler, K., Gelfand, M.J., Kruglanski, A.W. and McCulloh, I. (in press). *ISIS in Iraq: The Social and Psychological Foundations of Terror*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Kruglanski, A.W., Szumowska, E., Kopetz, C., Vallerand, R.J., & Pierro, A. (2020). On the psychology of extremism: How motivational imbalance breeds intemperance. *Psychological Review*

experience as far-left terrorists. Moreover, military experience is strongly associated with holding leadership roles in the individuals' terrorist groups, particularly in far-right groups (Smith, B. L., Chermak, S. M., Damphousse, K. R., & Freilich, J. D. (2011). XI. Right-Wing Extremism and Military Service. Terrorism Research and Analysis Project:(TRAP): a Collection of Research Ideas, Thoughts, and Perspectives, 341.).

- (4) In 2018, Military Times reported that 22 percent of active-duty troops said that they had seen "examples of white nationalism or ideological-driven racism in the ranks." By the following year, that proportion had grown to 36 percent, including more than half of minority servicemembers, reporting witnessing such examples (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/02/06/signs-of-white-supremacy-extremism-up-again-in-poll-of-active-duty-troops/>).
- (5) Dr. Anne Speckhard director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) interviewed 50 current and former members of far-right, white supremacist, and hate groups, four of whom had military experience. About 30 others had directly recruited veterans into their groups or interacted with veterans in their group.

This research revealed that violent extremists recruit military members because :

- (a) They can provide weapons and other tactical training to the group
- (b) They bring a sense of discipline and structure to the group
- (c) They make the group look legitimate and patriotic.

This research also yielded that, military members join extremist groups because of:

- (a) Need to belong/identity/camaraderie after discharge
- (b) Attraction to noble cause/significance after discharge
- (c) Aggrievement toward the government for lack of support

### **The 3N Model of Radicalization**

The 3N model of radicalization assumes that the *conjunction* of Needs, Narratives and Networks is essential to the commitment to violent extremism. This model was formulated on the basis of our own empirical research with violent radicals in various conflict regions of the world, and it integrates prior theories of radicalization, and insights of other scholars that typically focused on one only of the three presently identified ingredients of radicalization, that is either on the Need component (in models focused on grievance or trauma), or on the Narrative component (in models focused on the ideology or the sacred values of the group) or on the Network component in models focused (terrorist networks, for example).

**The Need.** We assume that all three components are essential ingredients of radicalization. The need component is essential because all human behavior is motivated, an explanation that misses the need component therefore is absent the very core of a behavioral phenomenon (like radicalization). A current thinking about motivation is that all our behavior ultimately comes to serve one or more of basic human needs. Such needs are universal, and the basic need that underlies violent radicalization is the fundamental need for dignity, respect and social worth. We call it the **need for significance**.

**The Narrative.** Whereas the need for significance is universal, all people have it although they differ how much significance they desire, the way of satisfying that need are culture-dependent. It is the cultural narrative that tells you in what way you must act, and what must you do in order to feel significant. People become violent extremists when they are attuned to a narrative that states that the way to attain significance is to be willing to fight in defense of some sacrosanct or sacred value. The narrative thus informs people what to do in order to attain significance. Without the narrative that directs people's quest for significance to violence against some enemy, their quest for significance could be channeled in different directions, such as careers in business, science, sports, or the arts.

**The Network.** Finally, the network is crucial to radicalization because it consensually validates the narrative and it bestows significance, that is, treats as heroes or martyrs, individuals who translate the narrative into sacrificial actions. In the case of violent extremism, the network validates the narrative that (under the existing circumstances with an enemy at the gates who endangers ones group) the best way to attain significance is through aggression against that enemy.

Human beings are quintessentially social. Their attitudes and opinions are grounded in the norms, standards and values of the groups to which they belong. That is why the network element is so important in radicalization. Even the so called "lone wolf" terrorists weren't quite alone, in most cases they were in "wolf packs", small mutually reinforcing groups of friends or family, or indeed they imagined to be representing a group (as in the case of the lone wolf terrorist Anders Brevik who imagined that he represents the group of Knights Templar).

### **The 3N Model and Veterans' Radicalization**

From the 3N perspective, veterans are at particular risk for radicalization. Their likely motivation (the Need), their value system (the Narrative), and their social milieu (the Network) all combine to create such risk potential.

1. Consider the Need element. A major motivation driving people to join the military is the personal significance that the military service affords<sup>9</sup>. "Our men and women in uniform" are applauded in the main stream culture, and treated with gratitude and respect. Indeed, people often join the Army to "be the best they can be", to paraphrase the U.S. Marines recruitment slogan. In other words, their motivation for joining and serving often has to do with their desire for significance and dignity.
2. Leaving the army and becoming a veteran means losing the glory and luster of active military. Some high ranking officers are sought after and courted in the political and business circles and so are able to transition smoothly to attractive, significance affording civilian careers. Other veterans, especially at lower ranks, have a much harder time fitting in. Their loss of significance, and of opportunities for a significance affording

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<sup>9</sup> Kruglanski, A.W., Molinario, E., Jasko, K. Webber, D., Leander, N.P. & Pierro, A. (in press). Significance Quest Theory. *Perspectives in Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916211034825>

civilian career makes them susceptible to schemes and ideas that promise a quick restoration of significance. Radical narratives contain promises of significance that should be particularly appealing to veterans who suffer from a significance loss. Why?

- a. Because the radical narratives offer significance through violence for a cause, a value that is cherished (“sacred”?) in one’s society, like freedom, democracy, homeland, etc.

Violence is a primordial way of achieving significance across different species including humans. Universally, and across history, the military has been accorded much prestige and glory. William James, the father of scientific psychology has talked about the “romance of war”, The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre wrote about how through violence, colonized people’s can attain freedom and dignity, a view seconded by other major thinkers.

- b. Having served in the military, the fighting, aggressive arm of society, veterans are particularly attuned to a narrative that aggression for a cause is a path to significance. They are, therefore, likely to be particularly susceptible to the violence promoting narratives of the domestic terror groups and militias. But there is another reason why militant radical ideologies, especially far right ideologies are likely to be appealing to veterans, and this has to do with the third element of the 3N model, the social network.
3. Because the military service, and implied patriotism of those who served in the armed forces adds an aura of prestige to the militant organization, and because of the weapons expertise and other military skills they possess, veterans are likely to receive a particularly appreciative welcome in the extremist militias likely to appeal to their desire to restore their diminished significance.
  4. Still concerning the narrative element, many veterans may come from working class America who in recent decades suffered a considerable loss of significance. Decline in sense of middle classness due to wage stagnation from the 1970 to the 2010 was indeed remarkable. This social milieu is particularly vulnerable to the idea that some evil force is threatening White America and that therefore they are at risk and must defend themselves against the alleged enemies. It is thus likely to support the cause on behalf of which the radical movements call for violence against those evil forces.
  5. So for many veterans you have a confluence of forces that make violent radicalism attractive. It promises the restoration of lost significance that many veterans experience, and it offers a narrative that outlines a path to significance that is resonant to many veterans and that is consistent with the beliefs of their social milieu. The Need, the Narrative and the Network thus converge in making veterans at risk group for joining violent extremist groups of various kinds.

### **Countering/Reversing Veteran Radicalization: Implications of the 3N Model**

What are the implications of the 3N model for countering and/or reversing the process of veteran radicalization? The Need element is fixed. People’s need for dignity and significance is fundamental and cannot be eliminated or reduced. This means that any efforts aimed at reducing veterans’ attraction to violent extremism should be directed at the remaining two

parameters of the model, the Narrative and the Network. These two elements usually go together as it is the Network that rewards its members for supporting its narrative.

In the case of veterans the networks best equipped for the job of countering radicalization are the various veteran organizations including the VA. These are composed of veterans' brothers in arms that have "been there and have done that". They therefore have credibility for other veterans, and constitute an audience that matters to them and whose approval they are likely to appreciate. However, the task confronting these organizations is not merely to preach against violent extremism. Mere rhetoric is likely to fall on deaf ears if it does not address veterans' motivation that attracts them to violent organizations, that is, their need for significance. So, veteran organizations must find ways to engage veterans in activities that would promise them significance and dignity. Such activities could be undertaken within programs created by the organizations, for instance programs involving other veterans in the CVE effort. They could also consist of programs of vocational training allowing veterans to have a shot at meaningful careers in the civilian domain. Most importantly, however, the job is to make each veteran feel that they matter, that their happiness and satisfaction is important to their former comrades, that they are members of a group that cares for them, in short that they are worthy, appreciated and significant.

Thank you for holding this hearing and other ones on this important topic. Please feel free to send me whatever other questions or clarifications you feel are needed. I will be happy to assist you in addressing the issue of veteran radicalization and help in whatever ways I can.

Sincerely,

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