Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism

Meeting Note
September 2014

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ICCT — International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague

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Introduction

With the violent attacks of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) gaining traction in Iraq and Syria and a media campaign that is nearly as aggressive, the need for effective counter-narrative strategies to prevent the spread of violent extremism and terrorism is more relevant than ever. While ISIS has since broken away from mainstream Al-Qaeda leadership, its origins in relation to Al-Qaeda have helped it quickly establish some legitimacy and authority among those they wish to radicalize and recruit. ISIS has also benefited from roots in Al-Qaeda in terms of inheriting a developed communications strategy, which ISIS has altered and improved to better fit their needs. This can be seen in the release of two online issues of Dabiq magazine during Ramadan (July 2014) and the press attention given to ISIS-related hashtags on Twitter such as #All-EyesOnISIS or #CalamityWillBefallUS. In fact, recent discussions of Dabiq attribute a significant number of the magazine's messages to narratives from the former leader of the Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi.[1] In other words, the narrative of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" relies in part on the narratives of Al-Qaeda. Thus, any analysis of the media strategy of ISIS, or attempts to counter its narrative, should also include an analysis of the organization that preceded it.

In an attempt to address some of the past and present concerns regarding counter-narratives against Al-Qaeda and related organizations, Hedayah (the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism — The Hague (ICCT) organized a one and a half day roundtable expert meeting on "Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism" in June 2014. The meeting brought together approximately 25 leading experts in the field that work in Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Georgia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. The discussions at the meeting built on a recently published background paper written by ICCT Research Fellow, Dr. Alex P. Schmid, in order to provide a starting point to identify the challenges with existing governmental and non-governmental counter-narrative frameworks against the violent extremist narrative espoused by Al-Qaeda, and to propose a number of ways forward.[2] The general outcomes of the expert meeting and recommendations for ways forward are described in the remainder of this meeting note.[3]

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1 "Hot Issue: Dabiq: What Islamic State's New Magazine Tells Us about Their Strategic Direction, Recruitment Patterns and Guerrilla Doctrine." The Jamestown Foundation. http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_ne%20ws%5D=42702 &cHash=0efbd71af77fb92c064b9403dc8ea838#.U-iV6E3lrIU (accessed September 16, 2014).

2 Schmid, Alex. "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge." ICCT. http://www.icct.nl/download/file/AP-Schmid-Al-Qaedas-Single-Narrative-January-2014.pdf (accessed September 16, 2014).

3 The recommendations in this meeting note are based on discussions at the expert meeting and analysis by the author, and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of Hedayah or ICCT.

TYPES OF NARRATIVES

Before discussing the message, messenger, target audience and medium of counter-narratives, the participants established a baseline of the different types of counter-narratives relevant to Al-Qaeda and related organizations.

Positive/Alternative Narratives

Experts at the meetings discussed the terminology being used with regards to countering violent extremist narratives, noting that counter-narratives imply responding and reacting to these narratives. Participants warned that by only focusing on counter-narratives, Al-Qaeda has the upper hand, and that only reacting is doing too little, too late. It was recommended that so-called counter-narrative efforts should focus more on creating proactive, positive and alternative narratives.

Strategic Counter-Narratives

Strategic counter-narratives for broad audiences may be useful for governments or large, multi-lateral organizations wishing to condemn violent extremists and their efforts. However, participants also noted that, while strategic counter-narratives are often a necessary response to a crisis or an attack, these narratives are not necessarily intended on reaching the individuals that are already supporting Al-Qaeda and similar organizations.

Ethical Counter-Narratives

These types of narratives point out that violent action is not a moral way of achieving aims. They may be useful if the messenger has ethical or moral influence over the target audience. These arguments may not be religious in nature, but rather point out the commonalities between all humans, and call for a better cooperation between all nations and peoples.

Ideological and Religious Counter-Narratives

This type of counter-narratives may be useful if the messenger has religious authority in the target community. In the case of Al-Qaeda, this includes Islamic scholars, imams and community-based religious leaders. Participants noted that governments making religious arguments, especially Western governments, can be counter-productive, and the (credibility of the) messenger is especially important in this case.

Tactical Counter-Narratives

Tactical counter-narratives are those that emphasize that violence in the long run is often less effective when compared to more peaceful methods, and not useful to an organizations' overall reputation and objectives. This type of narrative can be used by a variety of messengers, including governments and community-based organizations. The main obstacle to success for this type of narratives is in providing an alternative that still allows for the individual, group or organization to potentially achieve their goals in a non-violent way.

Humor and Sarcasm

Participants noted that humor and sarcasm may be useful in de-legitimizing the narrative of violent extremists in certain instances. Participants gave the example of the film Four Lions as a pop-culture way of delegitimizing the violent extremist narrative through humor. However, it was also mentioned that there had been little work done in terms of assessing the impact of that film or how it was received by the public through a CVE lens. It was also suggested that using humor may not reach the intended target audience, and only reinforce the absurdity of terrorism to the general public that already does not support Al-Qaeda and similar organizations.

IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

Setting Clear Objectives

Participants noted that one of the most essential components of designing a counter-narrative is to start with defining the objective. This was said to be important for both determining the content of the narrative, and also for measuring whether or not the narrative is effective. Participants identified several possible objectives of counter-narratives, including:

• Preventing violent extremism (changing behavior, namely violence and incitement)
• Preventing extremism (changing minds)
• Protecting one's country or region from violent extremist influence
• Preventing the violent extremist narrative from spreading

Learning from Al-Qaeda's narrative

Participants also discussed the need to learn from the Al-Qaeda narrative, and start with a clear understanding of the multi-layered messaging of Al-Qaeda before entering the counter-narrative development process. It was recommended that the content of counter-narratives should systematically and directly address the different components of the Al-Qaeda narrative. Discussions mentioned several key components of the Al-Qaeda narrative, including:

1. That a cherished world is under threat;
2. It is obligatory to defend that world from contamination;
3. That the treat has reached a critical point or crisis;
4. That violence is the only way to overcome the threat/contamination;
5. That action is obligatory according to Islam;
6. And that those fighting for the cherished world will receive a heavenly reward for doing so.

Participants agreed that some of these could be potential entry points in terms of counter-narratives, depending on the local context and

messenger.

Participants discussed some elements of the Al-Qaeda narrative that should also be incorporated into the counter-narrative, where relevant. The Al-Qaeda narrative is easy to understand, adaptable, and has a strong emotional and religious appeal. Al-Qaeda is also quick to respond to current events, and counter-narratives should be just as quick. Participants noted that if there is not a response within 24 hours to an event or action, this is perceived by the public and target audience as a non-response. Al-Qaeda's narrative also provides a clear solution (violence against the "enemy" to achieve its aims) to a real or perceived problem, which is often lacking in current counter-narratives. In other words, a call to action is an important component of any counter-narrative or positive/alternative narrative against Al-Qaeda.

Participants also noted that a clear, simple message is often more effective. In other words, there is no need to tell the whole story in order to get the message out; the message can leave the audience to make certain assumptions and interpretations on the missing details. However, it was also noted that the Al-Qaeda narrative is thought-provoking and generates debate, and counter-narratives should therefore not be overly-simplistic.

Some of these lessons in terms of the Al-Qaeda narrative are also applicable to countering the ISIS narrative, particularly online. For example, the ISIS narrative uses strong emotional messages, carried out through posting photos on Twitter and in Dabiq of their perceived successes and the atrocities of its enemies. ISIS has also developed a strategy for responding quickly to current events and using social media to recruit and radicalize. ISIS uses the Twitter app called the "Dawn of Glad Tidings" to inform its followers on the latest news of the group, and more importantly, create a synchronized Twitter

campaign through user accounts that is capable of sending thousands of tweets controlled by one or two media managers into cyberspace in an instant.[4] This means that ISIS has mastered the ability to get the message out quickly, and with very little effort. Recent statistical analysis of #AllEyesOnISIS corroborates this suggestion—that a low number of tweeters using this hashtag accounted for a large amount of the hashtag's activity.[5] Finally, the ISIS narrative utilizes a clear, and perhaps more tangible call to action than even Al-Qaeda can claim; joining the organizations means traveling to Iraq or Syria to fight in an ongoing physical battle.

Flexibility and Creativity in Counter-Narrative Design

In designing counter- and positive narratives, participants noted that there needs to be more of an emphasis on flexibility; narratives will not be perfect the first time, and more should be done in terms of allowing the narratives to be shaped and changed in an organic process. However, it was mentioned that creative and flexible narratives are often challenging to produce, particularly if the narratives are being funded by bureaucratic government agencies. In order to adhere to standards of measurement and evaluation for this type of funding, counter-narrative designers often do not have enough flexibility to respond creatively.

In the current context of ISIS and the speed of social media interactions, flexibility seems to be especially applicable. Grassroots counter-narratives movements against ISIS have seemingly capitalized on this strategy; responding to ISIS trapping the Yezidi community in the mountains and advances on Erbil in early August 2014 with #Yezidis/#Yazidis and #TwitterKurds respectively. Moreover, as a response to the beheading of American journalist James Foley by ISIS members, the hashtag #ISISMediaBlackout began trending

on Twitter.[6] The hashtag has maintained some popularity after the subsequent beheadings of American journalist Steven Sotloff and David Haines, a British citizen and aid worker.

At the expert meeting, there was also a discussion regarding using counter-narratives as a starting point for interactive debate. However, it was also pointed out that this interactive debate requires listening, and a real response to the narrative that considers the points being made (rather than complete rejection). This sort of two-way discussion is only possible, however, if there is secure space to do so in terms of accessibility to the violent extremist narrative, and legal ability for messengers to interact.

With regards to creativity, the participants also noted that expertise on messaging, particularly internet messaging, already exists in the private sector, for example, through marketing firms, technology companies and public relations strategists. Participants recommended that the private sector be included with policymakers, practitioners and the community in the discussion of creating specific counter-narratives against Al-Qaeda. It was recommended that all of these actors be convened to work together to create a better and more effective counter-narrative.

MESSENGER

Local messengers

Participants generally agreed that credible voices at the grassroots level are needed to counter the everyday messaging of violent extremist organizations. Participants also emphasized that face-to-face interactions are still very important, even in a society where Internet access is high. One participant recommended that social network analysis may be useful in determining how ideas spread within a

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4 Berger, J.M.. "How ISIS Games Twitter." The Atlantic. http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/ (accessed September 16, 2014).

5 "Analyzing the ISIS." War on the Rocks. http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/analyzing-the-isis-twitter-storm/ (accessed September 16, 2014).

6 The Washington Post. "#ISISMediaBlackout goes viral following purported execution of James Foley." Washington Post. http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/08/19/isismediablackout-goes-viral-following-purported-execution-of-james-foley/ (accessed September 16, 2014).

community, and that this analysis would be a good baseline for identifying the appropriate messengers.

Victims of Terrorism

There was general agreement that the stories of victims of terrorism can be powerful voices against the violent extremist narrative. However, it was also noted that the effectiveness of these narratives have not decisively been shown, and – given the sensitive nature and potential detrimental effect of such initiatives on victims' physical and emotional well-being – more research was needed to determine if victims' narratives prevented individuals from joining violent extremist organizations or encouraged them to move away from political violence.

Former Violent Extremists

Participants also discussed whether or not former members of violent extremist organizations were effective messengers for counter-narratives. Whilst there have been past attempts at incorporating formers' narratives into counter-narratives (for example, the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) Network), there are also many obstacles in engaging in discourse with former Al-Qaeda operatives, both practical and legal ones. Participants suggested that it was difficult to find former Al-Qaeda members who are willing to speak out against the organization. It was also noted that there are many legal obstacles to engaging with former violent extremists who are incarcerated, which means that willing former members are not always reachable. It was also discussed that in some cases formers do not want to participate in counter-narratives because they want to put that part of their life behind them, and do not want to remind others of their previous activities.

Youth

Participants agreed that youth in most contexts are not just recipients of counter-narratives, but can be powerful generators of counter-narratives. One participant mentioned that crowd-sourcing on social media or other online platforms could be one way of generating and delivering youth-based content for counter-narratives.

Governments

There was also a discussion regarding the idea that governments are not always the most credible voice. On the other hand, participants remarked that governments generally have a large degree of authority over the general population, and their narratives may be effective at reaching a larger audience. Finally, it was also noted that government action may be more powerful than words, and governments should consider the performative effect of their actions and the (counter-) narrative these feed into. In other words, counter-terrorism measures and responses to a situation are alternative or counter-narratives by themselves.

Protecting the Messengers

There was also a discussion of protecting the safety and security of those who present the counter-narratives and alternative narratives as being a high priority for those working on the topic. Direct engagement in a battle of ideas against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates can put individuals and groups in danger of being targeted, both physically and emotionally. For example, outspoken civil society or religious leaders may become targets of future attacks. Former violent extremists may be seen by Al-Qaeda as traitors, and could quickly become a target if their personal security is not guaranteed. Moreover, when working with victims of terrorism who speak out against violent

extremism, it is important to keep in mind that they might be subject to harassment in online forums or social media. Similarly, the stories and narratives of victims and survivors of terrorism can be emotionally draining, and facilitators should be careful that they are not re-traumatized by telling their story too many times.

It was strongly agreed that there should be special care to ensure humane and sensitive treatment towards those volunteering to be messengers for counter-narratives to Al-Qaeda, including those involved in videos and messages online. This includes involving the messenger in pre-production strategy and design; ensuring the products offer a rounded and honest reflection of them rather than being an exaggerated view for the purpose of achieving CVE aims; allowing messengers to maintain editorial control of products they feature in; ensuring the messengers are part of the production process rather than a commodity; ensuring their physical safety; providing support and shielding against inevitable trolling and online attacks that will emerge; and giving them the opportunity to be part of the roll out and delivery process.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Participants agreed that in terms of the target audience, there should be a focus on the communities that relevant actors identify as vulnerable to violent extremism. These communities could be geographically based (i.e. local), or globally based (i.e. online, social media etc.). Communities might also include those who feel connected to a war or conflict in a foreign country, regardless of the individuals' country of origin or nationality.

The main recommendation that came out of the discussions with regards to the target audience was that more research is needed to understand how a specific target audience responds to certain ideas. This research can help tailor the arguments and narratives to the audience.

Questionnaires about the target audience may be one tool that could accomplish this. It was also suggested that the target audience should be involved at all stages of developing the counter-narrative to enhance the effectiveness of that counter-narrative's reception.

Finally, it was noted that in terms of Al-Qaeda's strategy for their own target audience, Al-Qaeda and similar organizations have goals on three levels. First, they aim to gain passive support from the general public, at very least that the general public does not actively aide their enemy. Second, they aim to recruit sympathizers to their cause. Finally, they seek to turn sympathizers into active supporters. With these three goals in mind, participants recommended that counter-narratives should address these different target audiences, and approaches should be adapted accordingly.

Medium

Discussions on effective mediums for counter-narratives resulted in a general agreement that there is too much focus on the Internet as the medium for counter-narratives. While participants agreed that the Internet alone, including social media, is an effective tool, they also noted that radio, SMS, newspapers and print media are still major and sometimes the main forms of communication in many countries. Therefore, the medium itself should, as with other components of the counter-narrative, be adapted to fit the local context. There was also a discussion of finding the right entry points into the community for counter-narratives. The message has to be available in the spaces (physical and virtual) that are frequented by the target audience in order for it to have any effect.

Participants also noted that the medium of the narrative is not limited to forms of media; that some violent extremists also use cultural elements and symbols, including public rallies, popular

bands and concerts, t-shirts, figurines, flags and symbols. In other words, participants recommended that countering the narrative of Al-Qaeda and similar organizations also means creating alternative symbols, images and cultures. The use of creating a culture has been especially prevalent in ISIS' media campaign as of late—ISIS banners have been seen in numerous countries around the world, including in Europe and the United States, and there have been reports of ISIS t-shirts, figurines and flags available for purchase online.[7]

Along these same lines, participants noted that celebrities and sports stars may be effective in producing counter-narratives from a cultural aspect. Participants discussed how music could be an effective tool for counter-narratives. However, at the same time some participants noted that in some cases, some types of musical expression are forbidden by Al-Qaeda leaders, and may not be as effective at reaching the target audiences.

Participants suggested that in terms of the Internet, counter-narratives should also include counter-imaging and counter-videos. The Al-Qaeda narrative utilizes images with strong emotional appeal, including graphic violence used against those they deem as innocent; counter-narratives may be effective if they exploit the injustices that Al-Qaeda uses to achieve their aims. With regards to YouTube videos, it was recommended that the videos remained short and to the point; unnecessary information risks losing the attention of the viewer. Participants recommended that thumbnails and ads could be utilized to help connect viewers to material that provides more information, and that the comments section of YouTube videos is often just as important as the video itself.

Programs and Projects on Counter-Narratives

Participants agreed that there have been many meetings on communications and counter-narratives, but there is very little to show in terms of tangible outcomes and concrete follow-up. Moreover, there is currently no sustainable or long-lasting effort to create and coordinate counter-narratives.

Participants generally expressed their concern over the lack of real programs working on counter-narratives to violent extremism (including Al-Qaeda), and funding associated with these programs. In order to address this concern, the participants' brainstorming produced more than a dozen different project ideas. Some of the project and program outlined are more concrete (planned), while others are in initial stages. The main highlights are listed below:

1. Communication Exposition for CVE

Hedayah and the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) plan to host a Communications Exposition to bring together approximately 200 technical experts, government officials, civil society and community leaders, and communications experts too share tools, strategies and products for countering the narrative of violent extremists, including Al-Qaeda.

2. Testing the effectiveness of the Test EMI-20 instrument on Al-Qaeda narratives and counter-narratives.

This tool is designed to assess the presence of extremism, but needs rigorous testing before it can be distributed. The tool can be found here: http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf.

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7 "The Perfect Gift for the Jihadi on Your Shopping List." Vocativ. http://www.vocativ.com/world/iraq-world/can-now-buy-isis-hoodie-online/ (accessed September 16, 2014).

3. Providing social media training against hate speech and hate crimes and other manifestations of extremism.

One existing program aims to teach youth skills to build their own counter-messages that are aimed at their peers in their own communities. The project now is aimed at preventing travel to Somalia and Syria in the US context, but could be expanded to other localities, where relevant.

4. Expanding on grassroots counter-narratives online to include animated videos for distribution on social media.

This program is in a pilot stage, and is currently being tested. Utilizing some of the existing online animation tools, these videos focus on refuting Al-Qaeda narratives by challenging their facts and raising questions about their interpretations of current affairs. They also focus on raising doubts of violent extremist actions. Because they are produced using existing online animation tools, they can be generated quickly in response to current events (See: www.abdullahx.com).

5. Training local actors on technical capabilities of counter-narratives.

This sort of training could include capabilities on smart phones (such as video recording), social media tools, or online animation and translation tools. Participants also emphasized that once a training program is established, training should focus on training trainers as force multipliers. Governments and the private sector can work together to design the training program in a way that is tailored to local audiences, while using the latest technical capabilities.

6. Creating dialogue within the communities on violent extremism to generate counter-narrative content.

This could be done in a number of ways. For example, one participant suggested presenting a case study on how an individual is radicalized (based on a real-life case) and discussing with the community how they could/would/should intervene to prevent violent extremism, as well as the tools they would need to intervene. Another suggestion would be to present an actual narrative (such as a video, magazine or speech) of Al-Qaeda to a group of youth or students, and asking the audience to identify the main differences between the Al-Qaeda narrative and their own religious understanding. This could be followed by a discussion focused on creating counter-narratives. A third suggestion, which is based on an existing program, brings groups together from opposing communities in a conflict whereby both sides have a vested interest in peace. Together, they can produce those counter-narratives that would be most effective at overcoming further polarization and conflict between the two groups.

7. Engaging journalists and civil society to work together on how stories are presented in the media.

One participant suggested a roundtable of media representatives with civil society representatives to discuss the ways in which media conveys ideas in their community that is in support of, rather than working against, efforts to counter violent extremism. Another participant suggested to provide training on conflict-sensitive journalism to journalists reporting in areas of violent extremism.

8. Creating a central hub for information on counter-narratives.

This would include tracking existing narratives and creating a platform for community dialogue on counter-narratives. This could also potentially include a data hub of information on the target audiences that would be selected for receiving the

counter-narratives. The hub could also include a training component for communities (especially youth) for tracking target audiences online.

9. Developing legal tools for allowing communities to work on counter-narratives

This includes promoting a legal space for individuals and groups interested in countering the Al-Qaeda narrative to do so in a way that does not make those working on the counter-narratives in terms of interacting with hard Al-Qaeda messengers seem like a security threat.

10. Lecture series on violent extremism and related topics with university students.

In areas where recruitment into Al-Qaeda occurs in universities, a lecture series that debates and debunks myths of Al-Qaeda may be useful. This lecture series would allow students to engage in critical debates of the morality, legality and effectiveness of the actions of Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, including the atrocities of the violence that Al-Qaeda uses against other Muslims.

11. Systematic unmasking of Al-Qaeda's claims and half-truths.

This counter-narrative campaign would de-legitimize Al-Qaeda by fact-checking the claims and premises of Al-Qaeda on an on-going basis and debunking claims by Al-Qaeda based on theological, historical, humanitarian argumentation.

12. CVE messaging through sports league.

Utilizing sports leagues as a way to reach the community, the messaging campaign of the current program has three main components. First, the messaging campaign directly involves local sports leagues (existing) and trains coaches on CVE messaging. Second, the messaging campaign takes advantage of the live matches, where players themselves are also trained on CVE messages in pre- and post-match presentations. Third, the live broadcast of the matches on TV and radio provides an additional opportunity for the CVE messages to be reinforced and projected.

13. Mobile theatre troops in madrasas and orphanages.

This helps to address youth recruitment into Al-Qaeda by developing live theatre performances to address push and pull factors in rural areas where the Internet, social media, radio and TV are less effective. The theatre focuses on face-to-face engagement with youth, and engages the youth in discussions of violent extremism (particularly suicide bombing) based on the local context.

CONCLUSION

The meeting clarified that countering the narrative of Al-Qaeda is at least as important as controlling and diminishing its violence, since Al-Qaeda's narrative brings new recruits into its ranks. The meeting also elucidated some important recommendations and tools for setting up and improving counter-narrative frameworks, as well as tangible programs that could be carried out in the counter-narrative field. Moreover, as shown with examples from ISIS and their media campaign, these suggestions and tools may also be applicable beyond the main Al-Qaeda group, and also apply in other manifestations of violent extremism.

Attractive alternative narratives can contribute to the prevention of radicalization and recruitment if they are delivered to the target audience by trusted sources. It is vital that such narratives are based on parallel actions that alone can bestow credibility to a narrative. It was agreed that working on the community level was key; community leaders that are informed of potential radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism in their own communities are better partners in efforts to counter violent extremism in those communities. Current thinking and action on counter-narratives and alternative narratives is still fragmented and program development and implementation under-resourced. Governments can provide the tools and resources for monitoring and countering extremism, assist communities in creating a space for counter-narratives, be open and transparent in their efforts to stand up to Al-Qaeda and related organizations, and address genuine and realistic grievances that may contribute to radicalization and recruitment.