



National Coordinator  
for Counterterrorism

# Countering Violent Extremist Narratives



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# Preface

The National Coordinator for Counterterrorism in the Netherlands employs a ‘comprehensive approach’ to combating terrorism. This approach holds that combating terrorism can only be effective when repressive measures are complemented by preventive policy. In order to prevent terrorism, the government is tackling radicalisation and recruitment, which increase the risk of terrorist attacks. Both local and central government are taking measures to identify, prevent, isolate, curb and intervene in processes of radicalisation and recruitment before it is too late.

Much has been written about radicalisation processes and their causes, yet the only consensus in this field is that there is no predictive profile of those who buy into violent extremist narratives. This means that in order to identify radicalisation, one must be able to recognise the content and expression of the violent extremist narrative. This does not mean that acceptance and reproduction of the narrative is in itself the primary driver of radicalisation, only that it is the sole recognisable feature.

The reasons for individuals to buy into and act upon a violent extremist narrative are subject to much debate and little agreement. Suffice it to say that substantial resources are being invested in order to tackle exploitable grievances and strengthen the resilience of vulnerable groups, the latter of which involves deepening the acceptance of the pluriformity of ideas as an essential element to democratic society. This form of prevention focuses on the vulnerability of possible receivers of the narrative and – in line with the comprehensive approach – thus complements the repressive measures directed at the senders of the narrative.

One way to increase the resilience of potential receivers to the violent extremist message, given that eradicating the availability of extremist narratives in the information age is unrealistic, is to diminish the attractiveness of the narrative. This could be done, for example, by undermining the credibility of the sender, exposing contradictions in the narrative, or by promoting alternatives by those best suited to do so. In order to inform possible future policy in this new field of counter-narratives, I organised an international expert meeting in June 2009 in The Hague, where specialists in the field explored ways to achieve this goal of diminishing the attractiveness of violent extremist narratives.

A summary of the findings of this expert meeting is included in the introduction of this publication, which is a compilation of articles reflecting the ideas presented and discussed at the expert meeting. This publication is intended to stimulate and inform the policy debate regarding countering violent extremist narratives.

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# Introduction

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On June 4 and 5 2009, the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism in the Netherlands (NCTb) and the Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC) at Campus The Hague of Leiden University, together with the British and the Canadian embassies in The Netherlands, organised the Expert Meeting 'Counter-narratives and the performative power of counterterrorism' in The Hague. It brought together a group of approximately fifty academics, experts and government officials to discuss the issue of 'counter-narratives' and the extent to which they can and should be an appropriate means for countering modern terrorism, as well as to examine possible strategies to deploy this method in the future. This introduction will first give a succinct overview of the issues discussed, the conclusions drawn and the recommendations made at the expert meeting, in order for the reader to gain a more detailed insight into the context out of which the various chapters in this volume originate.

## Summary of findings and conclusions of the expert meeting

During the expert meeting, it became clear that within jihadist extremist narratives, one can differentiate between *four* distinct, though not mutually exclusive, narrative layers, that can be identified through studying statements and texts of individual terrorists and extremist organisations. Applying these categories to modern, jihadi terrorism, the following narrative layers can be identified:

- Firstly, a *political narrative* can be discerned that concerns themes like the crimes of the West and its supported proxies, the global suppression of certain (religious) minorities and the inequitable distribution of income, welfare or land. Violent extremists succeed in telling a very persuasive, politically subjective story, often without aspiring to be part of the political solution themselves;
- Secondly, extremists utilise a *moral narrative* by continuously portraying concepts such as liberal democracy, the freedom of speech and gender equality as unachievable, hypocritical Western ideals. They emphasise that these so-called liberties have only resulted in the moral degradation of Western societies (where they refer to the moral decay bred by the propagation of sexual promiscuity, the replacement of God's sovereignty and laws by that of the people, the growing indifference bred by individualism and the neglect of family, the destruction of youth by the distribution of drugs and alcohol, etc.);
- Thirdly, *religious discourse* is employed to further delegitimise the West and advance the perception that fighting against the immoral West is a just cause. Jihadi terrorists often succeed in utilising a persuasive theological argument that sanctions the use of violence against enemies of Islam; an argument they claim to be valid globally and to be an individual duty upon every Muslim. Muslims are thus being forced to choose sides: if you do not approve the scriptural narrative as described, you apparently oppose it and therefore do not prove yourself to be a good Muslim;
- Fourthly, a *social, heroic narrative* is also part and parcel of jihadist extremist narratives. Jihadists use this type of narrative to exploit feelings of social exclusion among young men and women in a global culture of celebrities. They present jihadism and the struggle against the West as perfect fulfilment of their yearning for adventure, heroism, glamour and admiration, by emphasising romantic notions of brotherhood of arms and exciting life in camps.

It was generally agreed upon that the most prominent narrative is the political one. The real issues at stake seem to be mainly political; the religious narrative is primarily used to overcome moral hesitations to use violence. This of course is the outsider analysis; Jihadists themselves would not make this distinction and are generally sincere in their conviction that the political follows from the religious.

The content of a counter-narrative should be tailored to the kind of narrative(s) it tries to oppose. In the case of countering the *political narrative*, it must for instance be made clear that there is no such thing as a Western conspiracy to dominate the world and to oppress Islam, whilst pointing towards the values of the Western political process and the many investments made in the developing world. A *moral counter-narrative* should stress the immorality of killing and the use of violence. Furthermore, it should take issue with, but recognise the narrative that the West is in moral decay. In response to the *religious narrative* of violent jihadists, the fact that (mass) murder is against Islam and contradictory to the faith must be highlighted. It is important to create public dialogue on the issue of jihad and its many implications. To further undermine the extremists' religious narrative, it is advisable to point out the many civilian Muslim casualties that are caused by jihadist suicide bombers and other forms of attack. This should also be stressed in the case of a *social counter-narrative*, since there is nothing heroic nor glamorous about killing innocent civilians and sleeping in caves. One could even go a step further and effectively ridicule these romantic and heroic notions openly, in order to undermine the extremist social, heroic narrative.

However, it must at the same time be stressed that not taking any action and/or refraining from communicating a certain message or counter-narrative is also a narrative in itself. In fact, this might sometimes even be an advisable approach, considering the many unintentional consequences a well-meant counter-narrative strategy might have.

Additionally, beside distinguishing between the four extremist narrative layers and their subsequent counter-narratives, the importance of differentiating between various levels of scale was emphasised on multiple occasions during the meeting. When developing a counter-narrative, it is critical that one clearly defines the target audience (individual, group or society as a whole) and the level on which to engage (local, national or global level). The target audience and the level of engagement determine among others the content of the message, the tone of voice and the appropriate channels for sending the (counter-) message, be it via governmental outlets or selected partners. In other words, a political counter-narrative initiative aimed at a large group of people worldwide would obviously require a different approach than a comparable initiative within a local context aimed at the individual level.

Most experts attending the meeting agreed that it is pivotal to bring people into the political arena and acknowledge their grievances, if only purely by giving them a voice and listening to them. For governments, this would require maintaining a subtle balance between the extreme of reaching out too far towards the people feeling aggrieved by the government's policies (and by doing so possibly being perceived to imply that these policies have failed in their objectives), and the other extreme of not acknowledging those grievances at all (and by doing so running the risk that large groups of people within society may start to feel alienated). President Obama's speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009 serves as an example of a proactive and well-timed approach to this issue, in which an eloquent balance was struck between acknowledging feelings of injustice and hatred and recognising certain experiences, without apologising or accusing anyone. However, deciding who to include and who to exclude may be problematic: anarchic or otherwise non-democratic groups are generally not considered valuable additions to the liberal democratic system.

Furthermore, the success of a counter-narrative strategy depends highly on the credibility of the sender employed. In many cases, governments are not the most suitable actors, as they may lack the necessary credibility among the target audience and represent policies that may be perceived as inconsistent with the

message sent. An alternative would be to use other organisations (for example NGOs or local community leaders) as intermediaries to bring the message across more effectively. However, one must take note of the difficulties some of these other actors might have when working together with governments. For instance, whilst politics needs to be transparent and politicians require attention for what they are doing, certain other actors rather wish to conduct their work silently and independently, so as not to lose their credibility.

More generally, it was deemed impossible and unwise for Western governments to aspire to control and employ a central (counter-)narrative. *Impossible*, because they are often not deemed trustworthy or credible, because they lack the glamorous appeal of some of the other actors, and because they simply lack the control over all the different individuals, groups and organisations that, both consciously and subconsciously, are engaged in public diplomacy and are sending out a message of their own. *Unwise*, because inconsistencies in governmental policies, for instance between domestic and foreign policy or various government agencies, are inevitable and likely to be picked up by antagonists anyway. What governments can do is:

- via various carefully chosen partners, promote multiple narratives;
- facilitate these partners financially, logistically or content-wise;
- be open and frank about inconsistencies;
- support dialogue and peaceful discussion;
- stimulate the Muslim community to take ownership of certain areas of the issue;
- acknowledge grievances; and
- appreciate that in a democratic society there will and should always be a pluralism of narratives and discourses.

Lastly, the experts agreed that different senders should be utilised for the different types of counter-narratives. Whilst government leaders, communication experts and policy advisors are well suited to deal with the political counter-narrative, key members of civil society, representation groups and community leaders are more credible as actors in a moral counter-narrative strategy. Since there was general agreement on the idea that government should steer clear of religious discussion, it is advisable to have Mullahs, Imams and Muslims in general engaged against the jihadist religious narrative. In the case of a social counter-narrative, social workers, young Muslim peers, families and former violent extremists should be supported to promote the message that there is nothing heroic about a violent extremist's chosen path and reconnect radicalising individuals with the society at large.

#### Structure of the volume

The interesting roundtable discussions and thought-provoking presentations during the expert meeting inspired the NCTb and the CTC to compile this volume, in which the various chapters reflect and further develop the ideas presented and discussed during the meeting.

In chapter 1, Beatrice de Graaf utilises the case of the German Federal Republic to illustrate the unintentional messages governments often unwittingly produce via their counterterrorism policies – messages that can sometimes completely contradict the official counter-narrative. Rogelio Alonso analyses the various counter-narratives put forward by different actors in their attempt to confront and neutralise ETA's interpretation of events in chapter 2. Next, Bob de Graaff turns to the importance of redefining the 'us' and the 'them' in the discourse surrounding and influencing counterterrorism approaches of Western governments. In chapter 4, Alex P. Schmid examines al-Qaeda's ideology and offers various recommen-

datations for successfully countering the organisation's 'single narrative'. Subsequently, Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley offer a detailed analysis of the different audiences and the different levels of acceptance of the 'Global Jihad narrative' in chapter 5. This is followed by a contribution by Michael Jacobson, who examines the valuable lessons for counter-narrative programmes that may be learned from cases of terrorist dropouts. In chapter 7, Tom Quiggin looks into the case of Momin Khawaja, who was arrested in 2004 in Ottawa for his supporting role in a United Kingdom based terrorist plot – a case that involves an unprecedented record of extensive emails and blog posts in which Khawaja himself describes how he came to be radicalised and why he thought violence was both necessary and justified. Next, Max Taylor and Gilbert Ramsay turn to the issues of violent radical content and the relationship between ideology and behaviour, highlighting various areas that require further research in order to formulate an effective counter-narrative strategy. In chapter 9, Tim Stevens examines how new media are both an obstacle and an opportunity for governments wishing to counter extremist narratives, and offers recommendations for engagement with new media and identification of appropriate platforms. Next, Sadik Harchaoui highlights the role of social diplomacy in combating violent extremism in chapter 10, and stresses the importance of a heterogeneous counter-narrative strategy. In the final chapter, Toaha Qureshi and Sarah Marsden explore the ways in which grassroots organisations may counter violent extremist narratives via educational and social project, and identify the key components to successful local engagement with youths at risk of radicalising.

# 1 Counter-Narratives and the Unintentional Messages Counterterrorism Policies Unwittingly Produce: The Case of West-Germany<sup>1</sup>

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*'All counter-terrorism is a stage, and all counter-terrorists merely players'*  
(paraphrasing Shakespeare)

## Introduction

Governments produce both deliberate and involuntary (and less conscious) narratives when countering terrorism. The thesis of this chapter is that such unintended messages can be much more powerful and consequential than is realised; in fact, they can completely contradict the intended official counter-narrative. To substantiate this hypothesis, the author looks at the experience of the German Federal Republic in the 1970s and beyond, when state and society were confronted with the Red Army Faction (RAF) and similar left-wing 'revolutionaries' like the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June movement or the Red Zora.

## Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's social democratic counter-narrative against terrorism

The RAF was founded in 1970 by Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and the already well-known publicist Ulrike Meinhof.<sup>2</sup> Until 1974, West Germany's central government, headed by the Social-Democratic Party's leader, Chancellor Willy Brandt, was not very active in developing a central counterterrorism approach, nor a counter-narrative strategy. This was, in part, due to the fact that the Federal Republic had been divided by the victors of the Second World War into strong regional states that governed their internal affairs rather autonomously and also dealt with terrorist incidents on their territory in ways they saw fit. Furthermore, the lack of initiative was also due to the fact that the left-liberal coalition, and especially Brandt, did not want to place domestic national security issues too high on their reformist agenda.<sup>3</sup>

The first to make an effort to instigate a form of national coordination on combating domestic terrorist violence was Horst Herold, director of the Federal Criminal Office (BKA) since 1971. He was the first in Europe to introduce computers and data-mining techniques in the investigation process. Herold also recognised the importance of conveying a message to the public at large, as many citizens felt intimidated by the militants of the RAF and affiliated organisations. His response to the bombing, shooting and kidnapping campaign of the RAF was 'to demonstrate state power'. This meant, *inter alia*, the use of road-blocks, Most Wanted-posters and the massive and visible deployment of helicopters, police units and area searches. The wave of arrests in the summer of 1972, when all the first generation RAF members were traced and apprehended, gave Horst Herold's approach credibility and widespread public support. It also earned him the nickname 'Kommissar Computer'.<sup>4</sup>

Only after Willy Brandt's successor in the German Chancellery, Helmut Schmidt, entered office in 1974, and especially after CDU politician Peter Lorenz was kidnapped in 1975, the central government took counter-terrorist matters more firmly in its own hands.<sup>5</sup> At this point, a genuine and original political counter-narrative was being developed.

Helmut Schmidt, a Social Democrat, was not keen to evoke the old sentiment of the 'War against partisans and vandals', as many officials within the BKA, the security apparatus and the conservative parties (CDU & CSU) were eager to do. Rather than looking for support for his approach among the conservative hardliners, Schmidt stressed the value of the '*Gemeinsamkeit der Demokraten*' ('communality of democrats'). His main concern – and the message he wanted to spread – referred to the protection of democracy and the rule of law. He therefore rigorously rejected all unconstitutional proposals that were made. While over 67% of the

population demanded the introduction of the death penalty, he refused to submit to such pressure. There were even more radical proposals, for instance a proposal by a police union to issue rewards of 50.000 German Marks for anyone who killed a terrorist.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as the Bavarian president of the CSU, Franz-Josef Strauss, even called for reprisals against RAF prisoners and their relatives. 'Not with me', was Helmut Schmidt's response to such proposals. He was of the opinion that such emergency measures would result in 'morally cracking the people'.<sup>7</sup>

Schmidt consciously invoked the concept of a 'militant democracy', as elaborated by Karl Loewenstein and Karl Mannheim, a concept that was in line with a ruling of the West-German Constitutional Court.<sup>8</sup> By using such a framework, the Chancellor was able to indicate that the German Federal Republic was not involved in a battle of the revolutionary Left against a (neo-) Fascist Right, as the RAF suggested, but instead suffered an attack on the liberal democratic order, prompted by a marginal group of terrorists. All parties were targets and therefore all were required to repel these attacks collectively.<sup>9</sup>

This specific counter-narrative entailed the idea that the German Federal Republic was a constitutional democracy, that it had (and should have) the necessary power to combat any (perceived) threats to the democratic order and that citizens took their duties and obligations seriously, as Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg, Hans Filbinger, stated in the funeral speech for three police officers who had been killed during the kidnapping and abduction of Hans-Martin Schleyer, president of a powerful industrial organisation.<sup>10</sup> In a statement issued on 15 September 1977, the government appealed to all young West-Germans, calling upon them to respect democratic principles and asking them to 'acquire and internalise a democratic sense of citizenship within our society'.<sup>11</sup>

#### Successes and failures

This was a sensible and convincing message: it cut through the Left-Right divide, inviting people of all parties to join forces in defence of the democracy. Moreover, it gave the government the necessary authority to defend the political system. However, there were also certain drawbacks. First of all, this specific counter-narrative closed the political debate for all radical ideas and convictions. In other words, there was no political space left to vent and debate non-mainstream positions. This situation was worsened by the constitutional requirement that, for a political party to enter parliament, a minimum of 5% of all votes cast in an election had to be reached – a threshold that had been set after 1945 in the light of the Weimar experience. Secondly, it created a situation in which citizens were viewed as being for or against democracy, with no room for manoeuvre, political abstinence, or any ideologically more differentiated position. This ideological closure had very real social consequences: following the 'Anti Radicals Decree' of 1972, persons who were not deemed to be loyal to the state and the democratic system could be excluded from a career in the civil service. Thousands of public employees were vetted, including school teachers, and many were disqualified from civil service – rulings which frustrated many careers and are still in force today.

Another weakness lay in the fact that the opposition did not accept the open invitation to join the 'communality of democrats'. Furthermore, it dismissed every nuanced tone in the political debate on radicalism as being 'soft on terrorism'. In the German states where the right-of-centre CDU-CSU parties were in control of the local governments, the conservative parties dismissed professors who showed some degree of 'understanding' for the revolutionary radicalism of many young students. At the same time,

members of the CDU-CSU kept attacking the ruling left-liberal coalition because of its allegedly soft stance towards those who wanted to change society by violent actions. The Christian Democrats, most notably CDU's party leader Helmut Kohl, deliberately evoked associations of chaos and democratic weakness and blamed the government for its 'inability to govern'. He painted the spectre of 'political vandalism' and a relapse into 'the bad period of the Weimar Republic'.<sup>12</sup> Berlin's parliamentary CDU party chairman Heinrich Lummer spoke of a 'degeneration of democratic morals and principles'. Even Federal President Karl Carstens (CDU) warned of a 'weak state that, like in 1933, could not defend itself against its enemies'.<sup>13</sup>

However, apart from this politicisation of the debate on how to tackle terrorism, the most serious weaknesses of the ruling government's counter-narrative pertained not to its contents, but to the way the security forces, the regional authorities, the judiciary and the governing parties themselves were undermining their own narrative with actions that appeared to contradict their declaratory policy of adherence to democratic values and the rule of law.

#### Signifiers and legends

In the context of counterterrorism politics, the concept of 'signifier' refers to a variety of occurrences, happenstances, failures or situations in which a certain meaning is attached to elements of government policy.<sup>14</sup> The term 'legends' indicates the collective meaning that is linked to the signifier under consideration (as in 'urban legend'). It can relate to stories narrated and distributed in response to significant events, within the 'radical scene' itself, or within society at large. The signifiers can be real events. However, the (urban) legends – and the significance attached to them – are often gross exaggerations or distortions of what really happened. Terrorists, their supporters or sympathisers, as 'entrepreneurs of violence' are prone to intentionally overemphasise certain elements in order to construct 'injustice frames' out of significant occurrences.<sup>15</sup>

Then, what were the signifiers and legends surrounding German counterterrorism efforts in those years? A very important signifier was created from, and caused by, a police failure as early as 1967, when Benno Ohnesorg, a young student, was shot dead by a Berlin police officer named Karl Heinz Kurras during a demonstration against the visit of the Persian Shah and his wife.<sup>16</sup> Kurras was immediately cleared of all charges. At the time, the circumstances surrounding the shooting were never fully clarified. However, in May 2009, in an ironic twist of history, information surfaced that pointed out that Kurras was, after all, not a 'Fascist cop', but a Stasi informer, working for the secret service of the German Democratic Republic.<sup>17</sup> The legend attached to this police killing is encapsulated in an exclamation, attributed to Gudrun Ensslin: 'The fascist state is back, they are out to kill us all, so we have to arm ourselves!' One of the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> June Movement – the organisation that was founded on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 1972 – Ralf Reinders, explained why his group had opted for this name five years after the death of Benno Ohnesorg: 'Everyone knows what the 2nd of June means. By including this date in the name, people are forever reminded of the fact that they were the first to shoot!'<sup>18</sup>

Another series of signifiers were the new laws that were passed by parliament between 1974 and 1976.<sup>19</sup> Criminal procedures were made more strict, the RAF defence team was downsized, while at the same time the conditions for prosecuting and sentencing terrorists were upgraded. In 1976, a new paragraph (Para. 129a) was included in the German Penal Code, making 'forming a terrorist organisation' a punishable offence. As a result, not only the direct perpetrators, but also associates and accomplices providing logistical support

could be prosecuted for terrorist crimes. In addition, the new law regarding 'Kontaktsperre' ('contact-' or 'communications-ban'), passed on 30 September 1977, allowed the police and judicial authorities to isolate jailed RAF members completely from the outside world, even banning them from communicating with lawyers and close relatives. 'Terror against the judiciary or terror by the judiciary?' the Hamburg news magazine *Der Spiegel* asked ominously.<sup>20</sup> The imprisoned RAF members and their supporters made good use of these highly symbolic laws and engaged in hunger strikes to protest against their treatment, solitary confinement, alleged sensory deprivation and the whole system of 'political justice' (a reproach associated with the Nazi period).<sup>21</sup> Through such efforts to portray the state as one that did not hesitate to engage in torture, a second generation of terrorists was created. New members were recruited through the solidarity committees that took up the cause of those imprisoned for 'political' reasons. Others came from among protest demonstrators supporting the imprisoned RAF leaders. They engaged in a new series of attacks, the culmination of which was the kidnapping of the industrialist H.-M. Schleyer and a supporting action by Palestinian militants, involving the hijacking of the Lufthansa plane Landshut in September-October 1977.<sup>22</sup>

The most damaging signifier however, was the climax of the 'German autumn', namely the collective suicide of imprisoned RAF terrorists of the first generation in October 1977. The nationally and internationally predominant image of stern German governmental actions had already been constructed based on the TV footage of the high-security Stammheim prison, the previous suicide of Ulrike Meinhof and the numerous hunger strikes that RAF prisoners had carried out. Although the government of Helmut Schmidt had gained broad public support for the liberation of the hostages by the German elite team GSG-9 in Mogadishu, this did not alter the fact that in the eyes of a sizeable minority, the survival of democracy in the German Federal Republic was considered to be in serious peril.<sup>23</sup>

These doubts gained even more substance when four of the remaining first generation RAF leaders were found dead (and in one case wounded) in their cells of the Stammheim prison, the day after the Landshut hostages in the hijacked plane in Mogadishu were liberated. Although Brigitte Mohnhaupt, the new RAF leader, later admitted that she knew from the beginning that Baader and two of his colleagues had taken their own lives, at that time she immediately crafted the 'legend' that they had been murdered by 'the government'. She and others portrayed this as another step in the direction towards a totalitarian police state. This legend managed to trigger a series of new terrorist actions in the years to come - attacks that continued with a decreasing frequency and severity until the early 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

Only after the Stammheim drama did the German government initiate serious attempt to try to 'neutralise' the left-wing legends with new counter-narratives of its own. As a consequence, political polarisation and mutual recrimination among the parliamentary parties declined. Accusations of being 'weak' were no longer made, and the government led by Chancellor H. Schmidt could at last relax somewhat. The social-liberal political coalition that had, up until then, acted relatively defensively, gradually came out of its shell. In 1978, President Walter Scheel stated that the polarisation and the widespread tendency to denunciate alleged terrorism sympathisers anonymously to the police had to end. The 'private sphere of fellow citizens' was to be respected once again, by the police forces as well as the citizens themselves.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, in 1978, the new liberal Interior Minister, Gerhard Baum, published a series of TV interviews in book form – interviews he had conducted with Horst Mahler, a lawyer defending the RAF terrorists.

In these dialogues, he discussed the political aspirations of the left-wing 'revolutionaries' and exposed their failures in an open and honest debate.<sup>26</sup> Through this courageous step, it became clear to almost anyone except the most fanatic 'true believers' that the alleged relapse of West Germany into fascist behaviour had been a huge exaggeration. Freedom of speech prevailed throughout the country, and there were plenty of opportunities to criticise the new security measures. Furthermore, the government asked Horst Herold to step down as head of the BKA in 1981. Predominantly due to the data-mining programs Herold introduced, the BKA and the German counterterrorism policy had become tainted with the association of an Orwellian 'surveillance state'.<sup>27</sup>

Subsequently, the federal prosecution offered collaborating terrorists a crown witness arrangement – this was however kept secret for some time. It was not until 1991 that Minister Klaus Kinkel formalised this arrangement and – following the Italian experience with the *pentiti* ('those who repented') – also offered lenient treatment to sympathisers and supporters in exchange for a truce (contrary to Italy, the West-German authorities excluded from this provision all terrorists that had been sentenced for major offences; only the ones with lower penalties could profit from this offer).<sup>28</sup> This offer divided the remaining terrorists; some of them did come forward and provided useful information, thus allowing the authorities to roll up much of what remained of the RAF. However, the aftermath of German terrorism was protracted and only in 1998 did the RAF officially disband itself. It is worth noting that this closure was not primarily the result of governmental counter-narratives or clemency offers, nor was it the result of the pressure of prosecution. It resulted just as much, and perhaps even more, from the end of communism in East Germany, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> What also mattered was that extremists who in the 1970s had endorsed the revolutionary ideals of the RAF had found, since the 1980s, new outlets for their militant energy via non-violent civil society organisations and in the rising political party of the Greens.

### Conclusion

What lessons can be learned from the German experience in countering the narrative of left-wing terrorism between 1968 and 1998? Four German lessons stand out:

1. The declaratory policy of official narratives is less persuasive than the actual practical experience of terrorists and their sympathisers in their encounters with state and society – experiences gained from security measures, police approaches, and (ab-)uses of the law;
2. Democratic governments need to recognise and understand the way terrorists and their sympathisers try to capitalise on the practices and, even more so, on the malpractices of the organs of the state that are responsible for maintaining law and order;
3. Governments need to be cognisant of the fact that not only terrorists try to play politics with the government's sometimes ill-considered counter-measures; opposition parties also try to gain political capital from the confrontation between terrorists and the state and contribute to the polarisation in society while also being engaged in myth-making and the creation of urban legends; and
4. It is only possible to counter such legends, connected to all kinds of possible signifiers, when these signifiers are first clearly identified. Efforts to separate fact from fiction probably produce more results than constructing central (counter-)narratives that will have little effect at best or are considered state propaganda at worst – thereby further antagonising radical elements in society.

Consequently, these 'German lessons' suggest that governments should not embark on inventing new, offensive counter-narratives. It is doubtful that the government is the right party to launch a credible

counter-narrative. The message of parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and association should be enough. However, it would be sensible to invest energy and resources in neutralising existing myths and legends. Those neutralisers are much more important: they can serve to dry up the pool of new terrorist recruits, take away justifications for new attacks and, in doing so, undermine the potential legitimacy of terrorists' calls to arms.

Terrorism is theatre, Brian M. Jenkins observed in the 1970s. The same holds true for counterterrorism. The public forum is the stage, and governments, political parties, civil society, media, and citizens are all actors, performing one role or another. We would do well to keep in mind that what matters is not only what we think we do, but how our performance is received and perceived by various audiences. The terrorist is a performer. Yet counterterrorism too is about performance: it involves not only target hardening, surveillance, prevention and pursuit. It also involves the production of images and stories and the debunking of legends, such as the myth that the 'West' is seeking the submission of cultural, religious or ethnic minorities.<sup>30</sup> Before governments formulate and proclaim their own central narrative against such myths, as is often advocated by counterterrorism experts,<sup>31</sup> the authorities should become fully aware of the unintentional and unconscious messages they propagate – messages that are often exaggerated by terrorists and their sympathisers. Only when democratic governments succeed in shattering the myths and half-truths propagated by terrorists and their sympathisers, will they manage to take the wind out of the sails that keep terrorism alive and well.<sup>32</sup>

- 1 Based on the forthcoming study B. de Graaf, *De strijd tegen terrorisme in Nederland, Duitsland, Amerika en Italië*, Boom, Amsterdam, 2009. English translation to be published in 2010 under the title *Counterterrorism as performance. The presentation and perception of counterterrorism in the Netherlands, Germany, the United States and Italy*. Part of this chapter has previously been published as 'Counter-Narratives and the Unrehearsed Stories Counter-Terrorists Unwittingly Produce', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 5-11.
- 2 Cf. B. Peters, *Tödlicher Irrtum. Die Geschichte der RAF*, Argon Verlag, Berlin, 2004; S. Aust, *Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex*, Goldmann Verlag, Munich, 2008.
- 3 See M. Dahlke, *Der Anschlag auf Olympia '72. Die politischen Reaktionen auf den internationalen Terrorismus in Deutschland*, Meidenbauer Verlag, Munich, 2006, pp. 25-7; K. Weinbauer, 'Terrorismus in der Bundesrepublik der Siebzigerjahre' in B. Bouvier et al. (eds.), *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, no. 44, 2004, p. 225; Cf. M. Dahlke, 'Der blinde Fleck. Transnationaler und nationaler Terrorismus auf dem Weg zum "Deutschen Herbst"' in J.-H. Kirsch & A. Vowinkel, (eds.), *Zeitgeschichte-online: Die RAF als Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2004, p. 8., retrieved 2 September 2008, <[http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/portals/\\_rainbow/documents/pdf/raf/dahlke\\_dbf.pdf](http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/zol/portals/_rainbow/documents/pdf/raf/dahlke_dbf.pdf)>.
- 4 K. Weinbauer, 'Zwischen Partisanenkampf und "Kommissar Computer". Polizei und Linksterrorismus in der Bundesrepublik bis Anfang der 1980er Jahre' in J. Weinbauer et al. (eds.), *Der linke Terrorismus in der Bundesrepublik*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, pp. 244-70.

- 5 Cf. M. Dahlke, "'Nur eingeschränkte Krisenbereitschaft". Die staatliche Reaktion auf die Entführung des CDU-Politikers Peter Lorenz 1975', *Vierteljahresheft für Zeitgeschichte*, no. 4, 2007, pp. 641-78; M. März, *Die Machtprobe 1975. Wie RAF und Bewegung 2. Juni den Staat erpressten*, Forum Verlag, Leipzig, 2007.
- 6 Dahlke, "'Nur eingeschränkte Krisenbereitschaft"', p. 654.
- 7 G. Bönisch & K. Wiegrefe, 'Massive Gegendrohung', *Der Spiegel*, no. 37, 2008, pp. 48-53.
- 8 K. Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time. Wartime Essays of a Sociologist*, Routledge, London, 1943; K. Loewenstein, 'Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights', *American Political Science Review*, no. 31, 1937, pp. 417-33 & pp. 638-58.
- 9 Dahlke, "'Nur eingeschränkte Krisenbereitschaft"', p. 650.
- 10 Cited in N. Büchse, 'Von Staatsbürgern und Protestbürgern. Der Deutsche Herbst und die Veränderung der politischen Kultur in der Bundesrepublik', p. 318, in H. Knoch (ed.), *Bürgersinn mit Weltgefühl. Politische Moral und solidarischer Protest in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren*, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen, 2007, pp. 311-32.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- 12 See W. Hennis, P. Graf Kielmansegg & U. Matz (eds.), *Regierbarkeit: Studien zu ihrer Problematisierung*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 1977.
- 13 'Carstens sieht im Terrorismus eine Hauptgefahr', *Weserkurier*, 29 September 1977.

- 14 In social-constructivist discourse analysis, 'signifiers' are empty shells, to which meaning is attached, thus constructing a discourse. L.J. Phillips & M. Jørgensen, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Sage, London, 2002, pp. 50-1. Here, the concept of signifiers is being interpreted less in a social-constructivist sense than in an empirical-historical manner. In this context, signifiers are not only terms, but also incidents and occurrences, that subsequently are interpreted and filled with meaning by actors in the public and political discourse.
- 15 D. Della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State. A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 60-1 & p. 195.
- 16 Cf. U. Soukup, *Wie starb Benno Ohnesorg? Der 2. Juni 1967*, Verlag 1900, Berlin, 2007.
- 17 In May 2009, Kurras was exposed as an *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* (an informal collaborator, i.e. an informer) of the East German Ministry of State Security, the so-called Stasi. It is not clear whether Kurras also acted as an agent provocateur, under orders of the Stasi, to destabilize the young Republic. So far, no evidence to that effect has surfaced from the files. German experts on the matter, such as Aust, Kraushaar or Timm, leave that possibility open, but are cautious. From Stasi-files, it appears that the Stasi itself considered Ohnesorg's death as an accident. Kurras was depicted as 'very much in love with guns'. Cf. also 'Vielleicht war es nicht die NS-Vergangenheit', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 23 May 2009; 'Kurras gesteht IM-Tätigkeit', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), 24 May 2009; 'Der Schuss, der die Republik veränderte', FAZ, 24 May 2009; 'Es wäre trotzdem zur Protestbewegung gekommen', FAZ, 27 May 2009; 'Spy Fired Shot That Changed West Germany', *New York Times*, 26 May 2009.
- 18 R. Reinders & R. Fritzsche, *Die Bewegung 2. Juni 1967. Gespräche über Haschrebellen, Lorenz-Entführung, Knast*, Edition ID-Archiv, Berlin, 1995, p. 39.
- 19 See E. Foth, 'Terrorismus vor Gericht', *Deutsche Richterzeitung*, September 2001, p. 388-98.
- 20 *Der Spiegel*, 18 November 1974, no. 47, p. 1. See also the article 'Es werden Typen dabei kaputt gehen' in *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 21 G. Diewald Kerkmann, "'Im Vordergrund steht immer die Tat...". Gerichtsverfahren gegen Mitglieder der RAF', *Rechtsgeschichte*, no. 7, pp. 139-52; See also for example the various contributions in W. Dressen (ed.), *Politische Prozesse ohne Verteidigung*, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, Berlin, 1976.

- 22 For an overview of the developments during the 'Deutscher Herbst' see Aust and Peters.
- 23 See R. Wassermann, 'Sicherung oder Aushöhlung des Rechtsstaates?' in J. Augstein et al. (eds.), *Terrorismus contra Rechtsstaat*, Hermann Luchterhand, Darmstadt/Neuwied, 1976, pp. 125-62.
- 24 See for example A. Lehning, H. Wielek & P.H. Bakker Schut, *Duitsland: voorbeeld of waarschuwing? West-Duitsland een politiestaat, of "de geschiedenis herhaalt zich"*, Wereldvenster, Baarn, 1976.
- 25 Quoted in Weinbauer, 'Zwischen Partisanenkampf und "Kommissar Computer"', p. 262.
- 26 The interview was published in *Der Spiegel*, no. 53/1979. For the extended version, see A. Jeschke & W. Malanowski (eds.), *Der Minister und der Terrorist - Gespräche zwischen Gerhart Baum und Horst Mahler*, Rowohlt Verlag, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1980.
- 27 The compilation by the Bundesministerium des Innern (ed.), *Hat sich die Republik verändert? Terrorismus im Spiegel der Presse, Arbeitsstab Öffentlichkeitsarbeit gegen Terrorismus im Bundesministerium des Innern*, Bonn, 1978, includes several newspaper articles, in which a level of understanding for the government's attitude is requested. See also Weinbauer, 'Zwischen Partisanenkampf und "Kommissar Computer"', pp. 261-6.
- 28 A. Vollmer, 'Die Kinkel-Initiative und das Desaster von Bad Kleinen', *Taz*, 3 August 1993.
- 29 Peters, p. 715.
- 30 See W.D. Casebeer & J.A. Russell, 'Storytelling and Terrorism: Towards a Comprehensive "Counter-Narrative Strategy"', *Strategic Insights*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1-16.
- 31 See suggestion in Anonymous, *Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law, "Theoretical Treatise on Counterterrorism Approaches"*, 19 October 2007, Deliverable 10, Work package 6 [Executed as project within the European Commission's 'Sixth Framework Programme'], p. 18 & pp. 24-5.
- 32 See also M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, p. 176; R. Gunaratna, 'Strategic Counterterrorism: The Way Forward', in J. Ellis (ed.), *Terrorism*, MIPT, Oklahoma, 2006, pp. 63-73.

## 2 Counter-Narratives against ETA's Terrorism in Spain

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### Introduction

The Basque terrorist group *Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (ETA), meaning 'Basque Homeland and Freedom', has been one of the most enduring terrorist organisations in Europe. Formed in 1959, ETA claimed its first killing in 1968. From then onwards the Spanish state faced an intense terrorist campaign that today still persists, albeit with a diminishing intensity. ETA's protracted campaign of violence has, by August 2009, been responsible for 858 deaths and thousands of injuries,<sup>1</sup> making it the second most lethal terrorist organisation in Europe after the IRA.

Starting in the late 1960s, Spain has faced a terrorist campaign by ETA, an organisation which is part of what has been referred to as the third wave of modern terrorism.<sup>2</sup> ETA has espoused an ethno-nationalist ideology on the basis of which it has legitimised its campaign for over thirty years. The political, social and cultural context in which this terrorist group emerged provides some explanation as to the origins of its violent campaign. Despite significant changes that have occurred in these contexts during the last three decades, the threat of terrorism still continues in Spain.

Throughout its protracted campaign, ETA has put forward several narratives and interpretations of the conflict in order to justify terrorism against a democratic society. This chapter will examine some of the narratives expressed by the terrorist group and endorsed by its sympathisers. Furthermore, the chapter will look at the counter-narratives put forward by different actors, both consciously and subconsciously, and both directly via strategic messaging and indirectly as part of more 'hard power' counterterrorism policies and actions, in their attempt to confront and neutralise ETA's interpretation of events. As such, the chapter will analyse the counter-narratives put forward by the following actors: successive Spanish administrations and Basque governments, Spanish and Basque political parties, and civil society both in the Basque Country and the rest of Spain. Assessing the role played by these actors enables the establishment of the failures and successes of the counter-narratives put in place in the battle for legitimacy against ETA.

### From dictatorship to democracy: countering the roots of the terrorist narrative

ETA's violence emerged in the context of the Franco dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975). The democratic deficit during the regime led some Basque nationalists to demand a violent response that led to the formation of ETA. The group constituted a radicalised expression of Basque ethnic nationalism, a doctrine elaborated in very traditionally religious and racist terms at the end of the nineteenth century. The ultimate goal within this ideology is the creation of a new state referred to as *Euskal Herria*, the ethno-linguistic area claimed by Basque separatists as their homeland. This entity would be made up of the three Spanish provinces that make up the Basque Country (Guipuzkoa, Alava and Vizcaya), as well as another Spanish province outside the Basque Autonomous Community (Navarre), and the French parts of Labourd, Soul and the Lower Navarre portions of Pyrénées Atlantiques.

New left ideas exerted some influence over the ideology of ETA, particularly in the early days of the terrorist group, when separatist and irredentist aims were often mixed with socialism. Nonetheless, ETA's nationalist aspirations prevailed inside the group, with the ultimate goal of turning the Basque Country into the unified and monolingual state *Euskal Herria*. ETA's main objective has not changed throughout the years, in spite of the important changes that Spanish society has undergone since the demise of the Franco dictatorship.

The death of the dictator in 1975 was followed by very significant political reforms.<sup>3</sup> Spain established new democratic political institutions and a new legal framework, opening the way for the democratisation of the country. This democratisation process can be seen as one of the most effective counterterrorism measures, (indirectly) countering the way in which ETA phrases the conflict and translates this to a narrative accordingly. The democratic deficit that characterised Franco's regime provided a fertile ground for ETA.<sup>4</sup> However, once the state engaged in a serious process of democratisation and reform that evolved in tandem with its security policies, the support for terrorism decreased. Consequently, ETA's ability to portray the political context as one identical to the dictatorship was seriously damaged.

In 1978, a new Spanish Constitution was endorsed by the electorate, initiating a period of decentralisation of the state. An autonomous region of the Basque Country was established that encompassed the Spanish provinces of Gipuzkoa, Alava and Vizcaya, with a population of over two million.<sup>5</sup> A statute of Autonomy for the Basque Country was approved by referendum in 1979, creating institutions for territorial self-government.<sup>6</sup> The statute had the rank of constitutional law and delegated extensive powers to the Autonomous Community known as País Vasco or Euskadi, including a separate internal revenue system, a regional police force under the command of the Basque executive branch, and full responsibility for education and health. The Basque parliament set up in 1980 enjoys autonomous taxing authority and has very broad powers in areas such as the economy, the justice system, education, and culture. A Basque police force, called Ertzantza, was created, and the Basque vernacular, Euskera, was recognized as one of the region's official languages. The flag and the anthem of the major Basque nationalist party, the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV), became the official symbols of the Euskadi Autonomous Community. The process of administrative decentralisation initiated by Spain in that period has been described as 'unparalleled in the rest of Western Europe' and 'tantamount to a revolution'.<sup>7</sup>

Such significant decentralisation effectively contributed to the erosion of support for violence in the Basque Country and to the consolidation of democracy in the region.<sup>8</sup> This consolidation was aided by the increasing professionalisation and modernisation of the state security agencies, which had previously been viewed with distrust by the public because of their association with the authoritarian Franco regime.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, between 1975 and 1977, nearly 900 ETA members and collaborators, who had been exiled or imprisoned under the dictatorship, were freed. At the same time, the creation of the Spanish National Court in 1977 constituted a fundamental jurisdictional change: from that moment on, terrorist crimes would be dealt with by judges instead of military courts.

The Basque parliament constituted the main component of an elaborate structure aimed at defusing tensions in the region. Political normalisation could be seen in the Basque party system: the first democratic elections, held in 1977, confirmed the domination of government institutions in the region by Basque nationalists.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to what ETA's narrative asserted, Basque nationalists were not any more deprived of the control of their own affairs. It is true that ETA would still claim that Basque nationalists remained suppressed by the central Spanish government, which remained sovereign. However, the decentralisation of the state did damage ETA's narrative, which argued that nothing had changed in Spain after the death of the dictator.

In fact, as Basque society was able to envisage a consolidation of democracy in the near future, some ETA members who had joined the group with the aim of overthrowing the dictatorship were willing to

renounce violence, as their main objectives had been satisfied. Although democratic reforms were still in progress, it could be argued that key ETA demands were met after the death of Franco, once an amnesty was granted and the Statute of Autonomy implemented following its broad endorsement in referendum.

Under those circumstances, in 1982, Spain implemented social reinsertion measures based on individual pardons for persons prepared to distance themselves from the terrorist organization. Those activists willing to move away from terrorism were allowed into society and their sentences shortened, enabling their early release from prison. In those cases when the individuals had not been convicted yet, a blind eye was turned once they expressed their desire to end their involvement in terrorism.<sup>11</sup> As part of this initiative, there were several instances in which former terrorists also received some financial and professional support in order to facilitate their resettlement away from ETA.

The success of the state's counterterrorism policies was evident in the disbandment of ETA-pm (*ETA político militar*), a splinter group of the main terrorist faction which brought violence to a close between 1981 and 1983. The disengagement of ETA-pm activists demonstrated that Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy was on its way and that the political context in which ETA's violence had emerged was not the same any more. Many of the grievances that had led some individuals to join the terrorist organisation under the Franco regime had been addressed. Therefore, such a successful turn of events reinforced a very effective counter-narrative against ETA's interpretation of the politics and history of the country.

#### Fighting ETA's terrorism with terrorism: a setback in the battle for legitimacy

The effectiveness of the democratisation process as a means of countering ETA's narratives however diminished due to the illegal violence that was directed against ETA from certain quarters. During the initial years of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, thirty individuals were killed by right wing groups during an unstable period in which left wing extremists were also active. This violence was used by ETA to justify its terrorist campaign, arguing that Francoism was still alive. Subsequently, during the late seventies and early eighties, ETA launched frequent terrorist attacks against individuals whom the terrorist organisation accused of being part of right wing groups – accusations that were often unfounded.

In addition to the instances of violence mentioned above, from 1983 to 1987 a terrorist campaign was carried out against suspected members and supporters of ETA by a shadowy organisation known as GAL (*Grupo Antiterrorista de Liberación*). The actions carried out by GAL, an illegal group that was secretly formed by police officials who recruited mercenary assassins from among organised criminal organisations in France and Portugal, resulted in the killing of 27 individuals.<sup>12</sup> Soon thereafter, the accusations of 'state terrorism' became a key component of the discourse reproduced by ETA and its sympathisers. They gained a considerable level of support for their position and for their criticism of the involvement of the Spanish state, in the person of policemen and several leading Socialist Party politicians, who were eventually sentenced as a result of their relationship with GAL.

Although judicially it has never been proven that the Spanish prime minister personally instructed others to set up GAL, such suspicions remained in many circles, including ETA's, providing ample resources for the terrorist group's propaganda. This was indeed a very damaging episode for the Spanish government's counter-narrative of democratisation against ETA. The damage was partially reduced when the judiciary applied the rule of law to the policemen, gangsters and politicians that had been involved in setting up and

financing GAL. They received severe court sentences for their illegal activities with regard to GAL, which served as proof that Spain was a functioning democracy where the separation of powers was respected. Furthermore, families of the GAL victims received monetary compensation through funds from the state budget, a procedure similar to the financial support provided for relatives whose loved ones were killed by other terrorist organisations, including ETA.

However, the GAL-affair contributed to 'ETA's ideological rearmament' and when the rule of law was applied against those involved in GAL, ETA and other nationalist actors still refused to perceive it as a normal functioning of a democratic state.<sup>13</sup> After spending several years in prison, some of those involved in GAL benefited from sentence remissions that allowed them to have their time in prison shortened. This was the case, for example, with General Enrique Galindo, who in 2000 was sentenced to 70 years in prison for his involvement in the disappearance of two ETA members in 1983. In 2004, prison authorities granted Galindo a third grade status that allowed him to serve his sentence away from prison in a more flexible regime defined as semi-freedom. This judicial decision was criticised by ETA and other nationalist actors as a biased political decision. Joseba Azkarraga, at the time the Justice Minister of the Basque Government, denounced Galindo's release as the 'price' that the government was allegedly paying for guaranteeing the general's 'silence', since he did not accuse anybody else of being involved in the crimes for which he was sentenced.<sup>14</sup>

A similar feeling of impunity, also damaging to the credibility of the Spanish state's counter-narrative, spread among ETA's sympathisers when the police and the justice system failed to find and condemn those responsible for the 1984 killing of Santiago Brouard, a leading politician of ETA's political wing, *Batasuna* (Unity). In 1993 and 1997, several members of the Spanish national police force were put on trial, accused of being involved in the crime, but they were all acquitted in 2003.

The activities of GAL were used by ETA to justify its terrorist campaign, although ETA has never actually been willing to disband or renounce violence itself: ETA's determination to carry on has remained before and after the emergence and disappearance of GAL. The terrorist group has used the experience of GAL as an example of the continuance of an anti-democratic context that would remain in Spain despite the democratisation process put in place in the country after the end of Franco's dictatorship. This has been quite a recurrent issue in ETA's propaganda that has, nonetheless, failed to find widespread support among the larger Basque society.

#### Consolidating democratisation and ETA's gradual diminishing support

As progress was being made in the democratisation process, popular support for violence decreased. This support gradually decreased to the extent that violence today only attracts support among a small minority of the population in the Basque Country. A successful outcome of the Spanish state's counterterrorism policy has been that Basque citizens have rejected ETA more strongly year after year.<sup>15</sup> Such an argument represents in itself an effective counter-narrative against ETA, since it reveals how ETA's legitimacy has been diminishing as the legitimacy of the Spanish state and everything that it stands for increased.

As demonstrated by regular surveys, a majority among the Basque population reject ETA's violent methods, a rejection that is also significantly present among those who vote for ETA's political wing, *Batasuna*. Surveys reveal a significant shift in public support for ETA over the years. In 1978, nearly half of Basque

adults interviewed for public opinion polls had described ETA members as patriots or idealists, and just 7% called them common criminals. In contrast, as early as 1989, less than one quarter of Basque citizens referred to them in any favourable terms, and more than twice as many as in 1978 viewed members of ETA simply as criminals.<sup>16</sup> To this extent the evolution of public support until 2008 has been very negative for ETA, as the following table shows.

Table 1. Evolution of public support for ETA in the Basque Country<sup>17</sup>

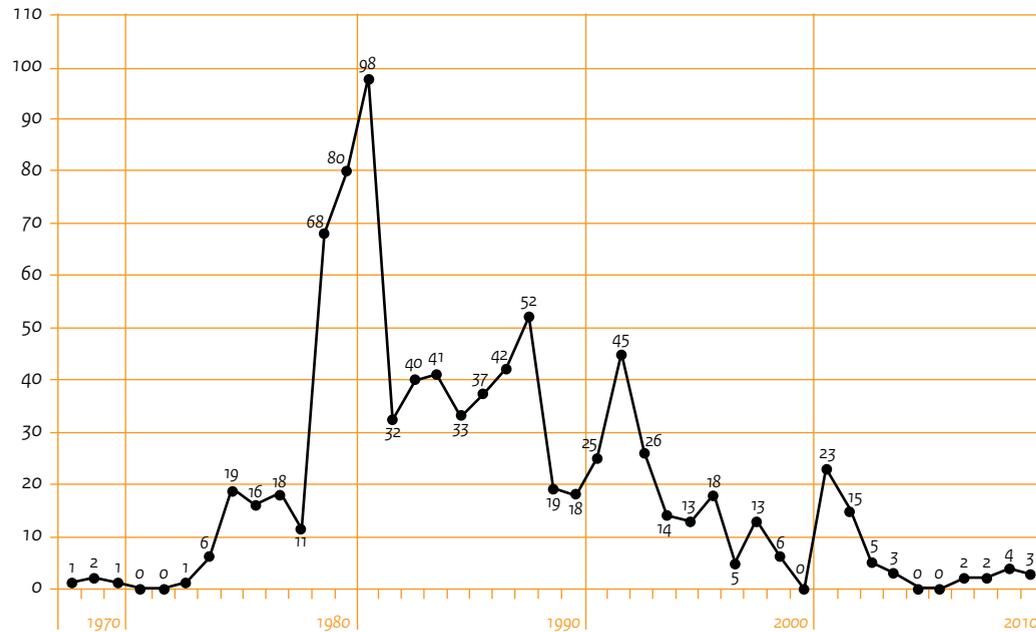
	1978	1979	1989	1993	1996	1999	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Patriots	13%	17%	5%	9%	8%	13%	3%	4%	5%	6%	4%
Idealists	35%	33%	18%	13%	16%	36%	21%	20%	21%	20%	19%
Manipulated/											
Bigots	33%	29%	11%	25%	12%	11%	11%	10%	8%	6%	6%
Lunatics/ Terrorists	11%	8%	16%	14%	32%	23%	42%	46%	50%	39%	36%
Criminals/ Murderers	7%	5%	16%	21%	21%	8%	17%	12%	8%	19%	18%
Doesn't know/ Doesn't answer	1%	8%	34%	18%	11%	9%	6%	8%	8%	11%	17%

The waning of votes for ETA's political wing in general elections held over the years, confirms the decreasing support for violent nationalism among the Basque people: 15 % (1979), 14.8 % (1982), 17.8 % (1986), 16.8 % (1989), 14.6 % (1993), 12.3 % (1996).<sup>18</sup>

A further indicator for the decreasing support for ETA are the strong turnouts public demonstrations demanding an end to terrorism have had since the mid nineties.<sup>19</sup> Public surveys also show that the majority of Basque society feels that violence is no longer needed to pursue political objectives; this belief is held even by a majority (67%) of those who declare themselves to be voters for political parties closely linked to ETA.<sup>20</sup>

These figures indicate that the Spanish state has been able to counter with considerable efficiency ETA's interpretation of the political and social context in Spain and the methods it uses to gain its objectives. The democratisation process which has consisted of the reform measures that have been outlined above can thus be regarded as a counterterrorism measure containing within it a very relevant and powerful counter-narrative. This process has been reinforced by several discourses that have weakened ETA's narrative. One of them emphasises the fact that the majority of ETA's victims have been caused by the terrorist organisation not during Franco's dictatorship, but during the period of democratisation, as the following table illustrates:

Figure 1. Casualties caused by ETA's terrorism 1968-2010 (until October 1)



### Obstacles for countering ETA's narrative: the role of Basque nationalists

ETA has striven to establish a link between the dictatorship and the democratic system, denying that Spain has seriously engaged in a democratisation process like the one that has been described. However, the terrorist group has failed to convince a majority of the population that the country has not reformed and modernised. This has seriously weakened an important part of ETA's rationale, since ETA claimed that it had taken up arms to put an end to Franco's dictatorship. The fact that ETA's campaign has intensified during the democratic period has brought to the surface an important motivation for ETA to carry on their attacks.

It has to be remembered that those who became members of the Basque terrorist group had taken up the ideas of an ethnic nationalist ideology based on the exclusion of those who were not seen as nationalists. As opposed to other nationalist expressions of a civic type, Basque nationalism, as embraced by ETA's activists, was a strongly ethnic ideology that encouraged the exclusion of citizens who would not espouse certain fundamental values. The Basque culture and language were key elements of this ethnic identity championed by nationalists in the region and by ETA's members. ETA was and still is a nationalist terrorist organisation that aims to achieve the independence of an entity referred to as Euskal Herria. Therefore, ETA shares aims with other nationalist parties that, nonetheless, publicly disagree with the violent means used by the terrorist organisation.

This is the reason why the role of nationalist democratic actors is particularly relevant when it comes to countering ETA's narrative. This was acknowledged by Juan María Atutxa, a leading figure in the main nationalist party in the region, the PNV, who was also president of the Basque parliament between 1998 and 2005. In an interview published in 1993 he pointed out that 'a nationalist combating ETA can damage it more at its root and at its heart', since that would be the best way of neutralising ETA's argument about 'the vassalage' of the Basque people by Spain.<sup>21</sup>

To this extent, the Spanish state's strategy vis-à-vis Basque nationalism has been based on an attempt to strengthen what was traditionally considered as 'moderate nationalism', or 'constitutional nationalism', as represented by the PNV. The Spanish state's counter-narrative against ETA's grievances led democratic players in Spain to accept the hegemony of the PNV in Basque politics, since it was believed that this would be a relevant sign of political normalisation that would eventually weaken ETA's support.

The first democratic elections in 1977 confirmed the hegemonic control of government institutions by the PNV. However, the 1984 electoral results forced nationalists to negotiate a coalition agreement with the PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, Spanish Socialist Workers Party). In 1986, the decrease in the PNV's vote was followed by a split in the party, which led to the creation of a new nationalist formation, *Eusko Alkartasuna* (EA). The electoral victory of the PSOE opened up a new period in Basque politics in which only coalition governments were possible. Nonetheless, nationalists were always in control of successive governments until 2009, when a socialist was appointed head of the Basque government for the first time.

Under those circumstances, democratic actors instigated another initiative aimed at weakening ETA's extremist narrative. A wider political consensus led to the signing of the 1988 Antiterrorist Pact of Ajuria Enea by all the political parties represented in the Basque Parliament, with the exception of ETA's political wing, originally founded as *Herri Batasuna* (HB, United People). However, this agreement between nationalist and non-nationalist, which guaranteed a common approach against terrorism, was replaced in the mid to late 1990s by a new system of alliances following the PNV's decision to build a pan-nationalist front with HB in exchange for a cessation of violence by ETA.

Effectively, ETA's truce in 1998 coincided with a radicalisation of constitutional nationalism. ETA's ceasefire in that year came about after the terrorist organisation secretly reached a pact with the PNV in which the nationalists agreed to 'abandon all the agreements with the forces whose objective is the destruction of Euskal Herria and the building of Spain (PP and PSOE)'.<sup>22</sup> This significant shift was complemented by a historical departure away from the traditional PNV policy when the party's National Assembly of January 2000 approved a new programme explicitly recognising the right to self-determination as its supreme aspiration.<sup>23</sup> These controversial decisions demonstrated that Basque nationalism was moving in the opposite direction to the one that was expected by the main Spanish democratic parties, who had hoped that the PNV would distance itself from ETA while getting closer to the victims of the terrorist group.

This alliance provided legitimisation for the wing of Basque nationalism that supports violence, since it effectively received the endorsement of main democratic players. The elections for the Basque parliament in October 1998 demonstrated the PNV's intention to unite the different forces of Basque nationalism, including those supportive of terrorism. Once more the electoral results had made it necessary for the PNV to get the backing of another party if the nationalist candidate was to be elected president of the region.

On this occasion, constitutional nationalists rejected a coalition with the socialists and, in fulfilment of their pact with ETA, signed an agreement with its political wing EH (formerly *Herri Batasuna*).

Furthermore, in 1999, a new body was set up under the name of *Udalbiltza*, which, as stated in the first point of the pact between ETA and the PNV, would be a 'sovereign and supreme institution' with the objective of 'overcoming the current institutional and state framework'.<sup>24</sup> *Udalbiltza* brought together nationalist councillors representing municipalities from the whole of Euskal Herria. As Llera has observed, the 'homogenous ethnicity' of such a space left no room for the political pluralism that dominates Basque society.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, this new institutional expression of the pan-nationalist front attempted to replace the 'consociationalism' that Basque society requires to reflect its plural outlook with a political cleavage based on opposing national allegiances.<sup>26</sup>

This nationalist strategy runs counter to the reality of the Basque Country, since, as social surveys consistently show, the majority of Basque society opts for a dual and non-exclusive Basque and Spanish identity. This dual identity represents a key component of the Spanish state's counter-narrative in response to the extremist narrative used by ETA that portrays the Basque people as homogenous and as exclusively having a nationalist ideology. The fact that the main Basque nationalist party denies such plurality strengthens ETA's narrative, opening the door to a discourse that identifies those Basques who do not define themselves as nationalists as enemies of the Basque people and consequently as legitimate targets of ETA's terrorism.

The nationalist ideology has very often acted as a unifying factor, bringing together different sections of Basque nationalists irrespective of their position in relation to the use of terrorism. Over the years, constitutional nationalism has constantly reproduced a narrative based on a deep feeling of victimhood that has also benefited ETA. Although democratic nationalist parties have regularly condemned ETA's violence, they have shared ETA's narrative that criticises an alleged lack of democracy that is argued to still prevail in Spain.

As a way of example, in 1994 Xabier Arzalluz, the PNV president from 1980 to 2004, clearly stated his belief in the inability of non-violent nationalists to pursue their objectives through peaceful means as a result of the Spanish government denial of the rights of the Basque people. His party, he argued, was a 'nationalist party that pursues the unity of the Basque people and its right to self-determination'. However, he continued, Spain was denying to nationalists the possibility of pursuing those objectives without violence: 'Do not go about saying that you can defend anything without violence, because when we defend something that emerges from our own freedom [self-determination], something we nationalists believe in, everybody turns against us because they belong to another nation'.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, the Spanish state has had to counter narratives shared by both violent and non-violent nationalists, which they attempted by emphasising that denying the dual identity that is part and parcel of Basque society has fed the hatred towards Basque citizens who define themselves as being both Basque and Spanish. Furthermore, the Spanish state needed to counter the Basque nationalists' delegitimisation of the autonomous framework that represents a key component of the democratisation process. Whereas the Spanish state's counter-narrative has emphasised the importance of the consolidation of the Basque autonomy as a space for coexistence in which the nationality question ceases to dominate political life, Basque nationalists continue to question the democratic credentials of the autonomy that the PNV has

administered since its inception until 2009. It was in this year that for the first time a non-nationalist politician was appointed head of the Basque government after the electoral success of the Socialist party in the Basque Country.

The view of the former president of the PNV, Xabier Arzalluz, summarises the basis of the narrative put forward by Basque nationalists. He believed that 'for nationalists the way forward is with the left *abertzale*<sup>28</sup> and not exactly with the PP or PSOE', parties with which he had refused to cooperate, because he considered that with them they would find themselves 'more and more in an increasing lukewarm autonomy'.<sup>29</sup> This approach has benefited ETA by strengthening the politics of ethnic-blocs, posing a serious challenge for the Spanish government's efforts to counter the violent extremist narrative.

#### Banning the terrorist's political wing: a challenge for countering ETA's narratives

Another important challenge for the credibility of the Spanish counter-narrative against ETA emanated from the banning of the terrorist organisation's political wing. Such a draconian measure seemed difficult to justify in the context of the European Union, despite the need for it, as would be later corroborated by several courts in Spain and abroad. In June 2009, the European Court of Human Rights endorsed the banning of *Batasuna* enforced by the Spanish authorities in 2002. The ruling of the Court upholding the Spanish government previous decision constituted a significant endorsement of its counterterrorism strategy and the narrative of democratisation.

The Court's ruling defused the main arguments put forward by ETA, arguing that 'the dissolution corresponded to a pressing social need'. It added that 'the national courts had arrived at reasonable conclusions after a detailed study of the evidence before them, which had allowed them to conclude that there was a link between the applicant parties and ETA'. It went on assuring that 'in view of the situation that had existed in Spain for many years with regard to terrorist attacks, those links could objectively be considered as a threat for democracy'. In consequence, the Court considered that 'the acts and speeches imputable to the applicant political parties, taken together, created a clear image of the social model that was envisaged and advocated by the parties, which was in contradiction with the concept of a democratic society'.<sup>30</sup>

The legislation that banned ETA's political wing had been strongly criticised by the totality of nationalist parties in the Basque Country, including the PNV. Irrespective of their party allegiance, nationalist representatives agreed on defining the banning of *Batasuna* as a violation of political rights and liberties. Subsequently nationalist parties joined forces in the Basque parliament and voted against the banning. Sympathizers of ETA saw nationalist's disagreement with the legislation put forward by the Spanish government as evidence of the lack of freedom and democracy suffered by Basque citizens. This was a view that many nationalists from the principal party in the region, the PNV, also endorsed, as illustrated by the Basque government's decision in September 2003 to formally accuse the Spanish state of violating articles 6, 7 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, in February 2004 the European Court of Human Rights unanimously agreed to reject the Basque government's claim regarding the banning of ETA's political wing.

The position espoused by the Spanish state was based on the Spanish Supreme Court statement of March 2003, which argued that the benefit derived from the banning of ETA's political wing was the protection of

democracy and the safeguard of citizens' rights in the Basque Country. This view was contrary to the Basque government's demand before the European Human Rights Court, arguing that fundamental rights and liberties had been suspended as a result of the banning of a political party. In a clear attempt to distort the real nature and intention of the banning of Batasuna, this measure had been presented by the majority of nationalist politicians as a denial of civil rights of a section of Basque society. The term *apartheid* was widely used by ETA's sympathisers to describe the situation caused by the banning of the party that had traditionally supported the terrorist organisation.

Representatives of the main nationalist parties in the region lent some credibility to the alleged discriminatory intentions of the Spanish state, as illustrated by the demonstration held in Bilbao in June 2002 that was backed by all nationalist formations under the following slogan: 'For all the projects, for all the ideas, for all the people. No to the banning'. Nevertheless, the Spanish state was successful in countering such a distorted narrative with arguments similar to those summarised by Sawyer: 'political parties are obliged to operate within the bounds of the Constitution and of established notions of democracy. If a given party, in aligning itself with a terrorist organisation, chooses not to do so, it may not, then, invoke those same constitutional principles as shield nor seek legal refuge in the very provisions that it has chosen to violate.'<sup>31</sup>

The banning of Batasuna came after ETA had been pursuing a systematic campaign of violence and intimidation against Basque citizens who did not share their nationalist ideology. The extent of these threats and abuses of human rights had led the Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón to accuse ETA and Batasuna of pursuing a campaign of ethnic cleansing in an attempt to promote the 'deputation of the census' in the Basque Country through the elimination of those citizens who would not support a nationalist hegemony.<sup>32</sup>

The ideological hunt that derived from such a rationale resulted in the premeditated harassment and intimidation of thousands of people, as estimated by the Basque NGO *Gesto por la Paz* (Gesture for Peace).<sup>33</sup> Among those threatened by ETA were also journalists, a situation that led The International Press Institute to strongly criticise ETA's attacks on the freedom of expression.<sup>34</sup> As a result of this state of affairs, the Spanish government efficiently gained the support of the European Parliament, which explicitly condemned ETA's human rights violations on several occasions.<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, the Spanish counter-narrative also benefited from the endorsement of prominent intellectuals from across the globe that in 2003 denounced the terrible conditions under which local elections took place in the Basque Country due to the terrorist threat. Bernard-Henri Lévy, Gunter Grass, Gianni Vattimo, Jorge Edwards, Michael Burleigh, Nadine Gordimer, Paolo Flores d'Arcais, Paul Preston, Mario Vargas Llosa and Susan Sontag, among others, criticised the undemocratic conditions in which non nationalist citizens in the region had to vote as well as their lack of freedom to exercise such a fundamental right.<sup>36</sup>

These circumstances led Juan José Ibarretxe, the head of the Basque government at the time, to recognise in January 2003 that in the Basque Country, 'human rights are violated in a terrible and barbaric way'. In his opinion, 'ETA continues killing and violating the most fundamental right, the principle without which there is no other right, the human life'.<sup>37</sup> Such a critical acknowledgment exposed the weakness of the narrative put forward by Basque nationalists, who had clearly instrumentalised the banning of Batasuna to reinforce a nationalist discourse aimed at delegitimising Spanish democracy. This was illustrated by a PNV document published in April 2003, which called for the restoration of democracy since it alleged that the

Basque people are 'ruled against their will' by an 'external majority' represented by the non-nationalist parties.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, and contrary to this nationalist narrative, the dramatic deprivation of individual rights suffered by victims of ETA's terrorism was a powerful message that obtained a very important backing in the fight against ETA. This message effectively contributed to the marginalisation of ETA, both internally and abroad.

The decisive and active mobilisation of civic society against ETA's terrorism since the late nineties, through peaceful and massive demonstrations in the streets, has represented a key asset to the credibility and the success of the Spanish state's counter-narrative against ETA. Those who are and who have been the targets of ETA's terrorism have not responded with violence but with peaceful means. Had they followed the example of terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland that have wrongly justified their violence as an alleged defence of their community, the situation in the Basque Country would have worsened considerably. Basque society has prevented its 'Ulsterisation' thanks to the peaceful resistance of those who have been the victims of ETA's terrorism.<sup>39</sup>

This type of response was extremely beneficial to the success of counter-narratives against ETA, since it demonstrated that ETA itself is to blame for the remaining democratic deficit within Basque society. The peaceful response by victims of ETA's terrorism highlighted that a significant percentage of the population still fears participating in politics due to ETA's threats,<sup>40</sup> and that ETA's coercion keeps many citizens from exercising their political and civil liberties fully.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the Spanish state was able to portray the banning of Batasuna and that of the parties that have followed it as a necessary measure taken in the defence of democracy, which is entirely in line with the letter of the law.

### Conclusions

For more than four decades, Spain has suffered ETA's terrorism. Throughout this time, the country has gone through major political and social transformations that have taken the nation from a dictatorship to a consolidated democracy. This successful transition has provided one of the most effective arguments in the battle for countering the narratives used by ETA to justify its terrorist campaign. The democratisation of the country has seriously undermined the legitimacy that the terrorist group had enjoyed within certain sections of the Basque population years ago, and has led to a decline in ETA's terrorist activities after its peak in 1981. However, ETA nevertheless continues with its violence and continues to demand self-determination of the region described by Basque separatists as *Euskal Herria*. The autonomy of the Basque Country endorsed by the majority of the Basque population is not accepted by ETA, whose main aim has remained until today the achievement of full independence from Spain.

Nonetheless, the quality of the democratisation process undertaken by Spain has guaranteed a majority support for its democratic institutions and system throughout the whole nation, including the Basque Country. This endorsement has allowed all the different actors involved in confronting ETA to develop successful counter-narratives that have deepened the marginalisation of those who advocate political violence. However, the isolation is not yet complete, demonstrated by the fact that ETA is still able to put forward credible messages at least among a certain section, although a minority, within the Basque Country.

Despite the successes achieved in this area, democratic nationalist parties in the region still share aims with ETA, albeit rejecting the violent means advocated by the terrorist group. This coincidental approach is

not irrelevant, since it is exploited by the terrorist group in its battle for the legitimacy of violence against the Spanish state and society. Democratic nationalist parties do share ETA's objectives, but also some of the grievances that ETA uses to justify its campaign of terrorism. This is the reason why the Spanish state's counter-narrative is considerably damaged by the denial of democratic nationalist parties in the Basque Country to fully distance themselves from ETA's narrative and objectives. Unfortunately, one of the failures of the Spanish counterterrorism strategy throughout the years has been the lack of a unified and solid counter-narrative supported by all democratic players, including democratic nationalists. In the absence of such a coherent and unanimously supported counter-narrative, ETA is still able to find some legitimisation, providing the terrorist group with some relief despite the efficiency of antiterrorist measures that have managed to weaken the group significantly.

It is precisely this effectiveness of coercive antiterrorist measures that provided, sometimes deliberately and sometimes unconsciously, one of the most successful counter-narratives against ETA. Tactical and strategic questioning of the effectiveness of violence has been a constant feature within ETA for decades of existence. This has been encouraged by the intense pressure that the state has applied on ETA and its network of support over the last decade. The fight against ETA on all fronts is aimed at encouraging new dissent after more questions arose over the efficacy of terrorism as a tactic and the possibility of putting an end to it. The questioning of the effectiveness and utility of the terrorist campaign was influenced by the serious weakening of ETA, caused by the counterterrorism policy that was applied after the two main political parties in Spain reached an important consensus on the matter in 2000.

At the end of that year, the Popular Party (*Partido Popular*), the party in government at the time, and the main opposition party, the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) signed the 'Pact for Freedom and against Terrorism' (*Pacto por las Libertades y contra el Terrorismo*). Under this Pact, the two parties agreed to 'work towards the disappearance of any attempt at direct or indirect political legitimisation of violence', and to ensure that 'under no circumstances should terrorist violence result in any political advantage or gain whatsoever'. The Pact also stated that 'the dialogue typical of a democratic society must take place among the legitimate representatives of the citizens in the context of and in accordance with the Constitution and the laws of the State and, of course, without the pressure of violence'.<sup>42</sup>

The strong consensus in support of the Pact enabled the State to apply pressure on ETA simultaneously on political, law enforcement, social and judicial fronts, obtaining very effective results.<sup>43</sup> Strengthened cross-border cooperation between Spain and France brought about the rapid and ongoing dismantling of terrorist cells, followed by successful prosecutions of ETA members in both countries.<sup>44</sup> New legal provisions set forth increased sentences for terrorist crimes, particularly in the case of offences perpetrated by youngsters involved in urban violence in the streets of the Basque Country as part of ETA's destabilisation strategy. At the same time, the banning of ETA's political wing in 2002 seriously restricted the terrorist group's political and social control and deprived it of a very useful source of income. Spanish courts ruled that the party was part of a network of organisations ultimately run by ETA which complemented its terrorist actions, all forming part of a movement with shared objectives and membership.<sup>45</sup>

The evidence of the multifaceted nature of the terrorist movement led to the outlawing of the organisation's political wing and to measures aimed at the array of groups and associations that were knowingly providing resources to ETA. All this was complemented by the enactment of new legal provisions that regarded praise

for or justification of terrorism and the humiliation of victims of terrorism and their relatives as terrorist offences. Likewise, it was decided that anyone convicted of terrorist crimes would be ineligible to hold any public office position for a minimum of twenty years.

This combined action, both on the more coercive counterterrorism as well as on the counter-narrative front, seriously damaged ETA's ability to operate and also reduced its popular support and the organisation's capacity to mobilise supporters and activists. ETA's internal documentation and statements by former members of the terrorist group reveal how damaging the government's integrated strategy was to ETA. These successes have proven to be key factors in the further development of an efficient counter-narrative against ETA. All of them have reinforced the idea that ETA's terrorism is widely delegitimised and that terrorism has high political, social, ethical and human costs even for the terrorists. The fact that this has also been acknowledged by ETA itself and former members of the group has provided a strong argument in favour of the Spanish government and its counter-narrative against ETA's objectives and tactics.

- 1 For a characterisation of ETA's victims and an analysis of the evolution of ETA's patterns of victimisation, see R. Alonso, 'El nuevo terrorismo: factores de cambio y permanencia' in A. Blanco & R. del Aguila (eds.), *Madrid 11 M. Un análisis del mal y sus consecuencias*, Editorial Trotta, Madrid, 2005, pp. 113-50.
- 2 D. Rapoport, 'The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism' in A.K. Cronin & J.M. Ludes (eds.), *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 2004, pp. 46-73.
- 3 F. Reinares & R. Alonso, 'Confronting ethnonationalist terrorism in Spain: political and coercive measures against ETA' in L. Richardson & R. Art (ed.), *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C., 2007, pp. 105-32.
- 4 See for example A. Elorza et al., *La Historia de ETA, Temas de Hoy*, Madrid, 2000.
- 5 Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country or Statute of Gernika (*Estatuto de Guernica*) of December 29, 1978.
- 6 For a historical overview of politics in the Basque Country, see F.J. Llera, 'Conflicto en Euskadi Revisited' in R. Gunther (ed.), *Politics, Society, and Democracy. The Case of Spain*, Westview Press, Colorado, 1993, pp. 169-95.
- 7 D. Conversi, 'Domino Effect or Internal Developments? The Influences of International Events and Political Ideologies on Catalan and Basque Nationalism', *West European Politics*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1993, p. 264.
- 8 See for example B. Tejerina, 'Protest cycle, political violence and social movements in the Basque Country', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2001, pp. 39-57; and L. Mees, 'Between votes and bullets. Conflicting ethnic identities in the Basque Country', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 24, no. 5, 2001, pp. 798-827.
- 9 Ó. J. Jiménez, *Policía, Terrorismo y Cambio Político en España, 1976-1996*, Tirant lo Blanch, Valencia, 2002.

- 10 For a summary of electoral support and results in the Basque Country throughout the democratic period, see J.L. Barbería & P. Unzueta, *Cómo Hemos Llegado a Esto. La Crisis Vasca*, Taurus, Madrid, 2003, pp. 306-16. The resulting party system has been characterised ever since 1980 by high levels of fragmentation and polarisation, as well as by the fact that voter behaviour consistently shows significant differences across provinces and types of elections. Although the major Basque nationalist party, the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, or PNV, has often received the largest fraction of valid votes overall, Basques have become deeply divided over their support for nationalist and non-nationalist parties. Moreover, nationalists are a minority in Navarre. Support for radical nationalist parties related to ETA, such as *Herri Batasuna* (HB, United People) and *Batasuna* (Unity), has fluctuated between 4 and 18 percent of the electorate in the three provinces of the Basque Autonomous Community, depending on whether the elections were regional or general in nature. Electoral support for Basque nationalist parties among French Basques is quite minimal.
- 11 Up to the year 1986, a total of 144 ETA members had accepted the social reinsertion measures offered by the Spanish authorities. By 1995, the total amount of individuals who had opted for these measures was 370. From that moment onwards, there were very few new cases of persons accepting to be part of the social reinsertion programme. See F. Domínguez, *De la negociación a la tregua. ¿El final de ETA?*, Taurus, Madrid, 1998, pp. 221-9.
- 12 For an analysis of GAL, see P. Woodworth, *Dirty Wars, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2001.
- 13 'Caso Brouard', *La Vanguardia*, 28 June 2003.
- 14 'Azkarraga: "ahora sabemos cuál es el precio"', *Gara*, 7 January 2005.

- 15 Data reported in *Euskobarómetro*, a regular survey conducted by the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of the Basque Country, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.ehu.es/cpvweb/paginas/euskobarometro.html>>. The survey conducted in 2008 revealed that full explicit support for ETA amounted to only 1%; even among those who declared themselves to be voters of the political wing of ETA, such support was extremely low at 2%.
- 16 F.J. Llera, *Los Vascos y la Política. El proceso político vasco: elecciones, partidos, opinión pública y legitimación en el País Vasco, 1977-1992*, Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao, 1994, pp. 97-119; J.J. Linz, *Conflicto en Euskadi*, Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 1986, pp. 617-65.
- 17 Data available only for the years included in the table. Source: *Euskobarómetro. Estudio periódico de la opinión pública vasca. Series temporales Mayo 2008*, Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao, 2009, p. 46.
- 18 These are the Batasuna results of the general elections held in the last decades. Batasuna called for abstention in 2000 and was outlawed two years later, which prohibited the party from competing in future elections. See Barbería & Unzueta, pp. 306-16.
- 19 M.J. Funes, 'Social Responses to Political Violence in the Basque Country: Peace Movements and their Audience', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1998, pp. 493-510; E. Uriarte, *Cobardes y Rebeldes. Por Qué Pervive el Terrorismo*, Temas de Hoy, Madrid, 2003; C. Martínez Gorriarán, *Movimientos Cívicos. De la Calle al Parlamento*, Turpial, Madrid, 2008.
- 20 *Euskobarómetro. Estudio periódico de la opinión pública vasca*, Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao, 2006.
- 21 Interview with Juan María Atutxa published in *El País*, 15 February 1993.
- 22 *Gara*, 30 April 2000.
- 23 *Reconocer el ser para decidir*, Annex approved in the III PNV's National Assembly, *El País*, 14 January 2000.
- 24 *Gara*, 30 April 2000.
- 25 F. Llera, 'La red terrorista: subcultura de la violencia y nacionalismo en Euskadi', p. 292 in A. Robles Egea (ed.), *La sangre de las naciones. Identidades nacionales y violencia política*, Universidad de Granada, Granada, 2003, pp. 265-96. As social surveys consistently show, the majority of Basque society opts for a dual and non-exclusive Basque and Spanish identity.
- 26 According to a social survey carried out in 2000, only 29% of Basques favoured independence. This option was favoured by 95% of EH voters and 43% of PNV and EA supporters. The majority of Basque society, as well as the majority of those who support the PNV, were in favour of autonomy. See Llera, p. 287. This feeling in favour of independence has not increased significantly over the years, as demonstrated by the regular surveys carried out by *Euskobarómetro*. According to this survey, in 2009 independence was favoured by 24% of the Basque population.
- 27 'Pide el derecho de los vascos a buscar su destino "en Europa, España o solos"', *El Mundo*, 4 April 1994.
- 28 The term *abertzale* – patriot – is generally used to refer to nationalist parties such as ETA's political wing. Arzalluz has been a dominant figure in Basque nationalism for the last thirty years. He was replaced as the PNV's president in January 2004 and is still highly influential within the party.
- 29 Interview with Xabier Arzalluz, *Deia*, 10 December 2000.
- 30 European Court of Human Rights, Press release issued by the Registrar on 30 June 2009, after the Chamber judgment *Herri Batasuna and Batasuna v. Spain, Etxeberria and others v. Spain, Herritarren Zerrenda v. Spain*, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?action=html&documentId=851942&portal=hbkm&source=externalbydocnumber&table=F69A27FD8FB86142BF01C1166DEA398649>>.
- 31 K.A. Sawyer, 'Rejection of Weimarian Politics or betrayal of democracy? Spain's proscription of Batasuna under the European Convention on Human Rights', pp. 1580-1, *American University Law Review*, vol. 52, no. 6, 2003, pp. 1531-82.
- 32 The judicial report containing these allegations was fully reproduced in the main Basque newspaper, *El Correo*, October 2002, retrieved 1 November 2009, <[http://servicios.elcorreodigital.com/vizcaya/pg021018/actualidad/politica/200210/17/RC\\_auto\\_garzon.html](http://servicios.elcorreodigital.com/vizcaya/pg021018/actualidad/politica/200210/17/RC_auto_garzon.html)>.
- 33 'Gesto por la Paz estima que 42.000 personas sufren la amenaza directa de los etarras', *El País*, 9 November 2002.
- 34 'El Instituto Internacional de Prensa denuncia los ataques de ETA contra la libertad de expresión', *El Correo*, 19 March 2003.
- 35 See for example various reports on the situation of fundamental rights in the European Union, dated 22 March 2004 - (2003) (2003/2006(INI)) - and 21 August 2003 - (2002/2013(INI)).
- 36 *iBasta ya! Iniciativa Ciudadana, Euskadi, del sueño a la vergüenza*, Ediciones B, Barcelona, 2004, pp. 363-4.
- 37 Quoted in *El Correo*, 9 January 2003.
- 38 'De la ofensiva electoral a la guerra político judicial', April 2003, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.eaj-pnv.com>>. There are plenty of examples of speeches and articles by nationalist politicians comparing Spanish democracy with Franco's dictatorship as a means of attacking the legitimacy of the Statute of Autonomy.
- 39 For an analysis of the differences between the Basque and Irish contexts, see R. Alonso, 'Pathways out of terrorism in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country: the misrepresentation of the Irish model', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2004, pp. 695-713; and R. Alonso, 'Leaving Terrorism Behind in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country: reassessing anti-terrorist policies and the peace processes' in T. Bjørge & J. Horgan (eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind. Individual and Collective Disengagement*, Routledge, London/New York, 2009, pp. 88-112.
- 40 *Euskobarómetro. Estudio periódico de la opinión pública vasca*.
- 41 Elections in the Basque Country are still held under the threat of violence. This is for example illustrated by the reactions of a group of Belgian MPs when they visited the area during the campaign of the 2009 regional elections. They denounced the serious deprivation of civil rights suffered by politicians and voters of non nationalist parties, criticising the Council of Europe for allowing such an irregular situation within the European Union. The members of Parliament were interviewed by Belgium's National Radio and the full transcription can be read at <<http://www.paralalibertad.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=26157&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0>>
- 42 For an analysis of the background to the Agreement and the dramatic events that contributed to creating the context in which the Agreement was seen as a very necessary measure, see A. Elorza, *La hora de Euzkadi. Disidencias I. Artículos y Ensayos*, Galaxia Gutenberg, Barcelona, 2003, pp. 149-284.
- 43 R. Alonso & F. Reinares, 'Terrorism, Human Rights and Law Enforcement in Spain', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 17, no. 1-2, 2005, pp. 265-78.
- 44 F. Domínguez, 'ETA, las políticas antiterroristas', *Cuadernos de Alzate*, no. 33, 2005, pp. 153-67; and F. Domínguez, *Josu Terrera. Una vida en ETA*, La esfera de los libros, Madrid, 2006, pp. 310-5.
- 45 For a thorough analysis of the complex system of organisations linked to ETA, its actions and the nature of such a relationship, see J.M. Mata, *El nacionalismo vasco radical. Discurso, organizaciones y expresiones*, Universidad del País Vasco, Bilbao, 1993.

### 3 Redefining ‘Us’ and ‘Them’

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#### Introduction

‘Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.’ By uttering these words nine days after the infamous attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush declared a Global War on Terror (GWOT). It was a peculiar divide the President created, since ‘terrorism’ does not designate a specific type of enemy. Terrorism is merely a tactic which may be and has been utilised by very diverse groups, such as for instance the leftist movements in the 1970s in a host of western countries, including the United States; right-wing extremists like Timothy McVeigh, who attacked the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma in 1995, causing a death toll of 168, the most atrocious terrorist onslaught on U.S. soil until 9/11; loners like Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who tried to halt scientific progress until he was finally apprehended by the FBI after 18 years; or even by states.

Consequently, no matter how serious President Bush’s words were, they did not give a clear signal, nor provide a concrete strategy, the less so because if he was really declaring a full scale war on terror, his target list should have included the ETA in Spain, the Hindu/Marxist Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the Maoist rebels in eastern India, the Kurdish PKK and so on, which it obviously did not. The U.S.-led GWOT was aimed at a single special brand of terrorism, i.e. Islamist or jihadist terrorism: not only al-Qaeda, but also the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah and similar terrorist organisations. Consequently, although many western leaders, including President Bush, visited mosques and invited Muslim community leaders to indicate that the war on terror was neither a war against Islam, nor a crusade, as the President inaptly branded it a few days after 9/11, many got the impression that the crucial post-9/11 global divide was one between Muslims and non-Muslims. After all, had the attacks not been committed by 19 Muslims, who either came from the Middle East or studied in the ‘West’? And had not their leader, Mohammed Atta, left a testament in which he wrote that he wanted ‘to die as a good Muslim’? When many Americans asked themselves and their compatriots ‘Why do they hate us?’, the word ‘they’ generally referred to Muslims and people from the Middle East. Similar developments took place in Europe after the Madrid and London bombings and the murder of Dutch director and writer Theo van Gogh. Various European societies seemed to subsequently polarise around Muslim and non-Muslim identities. ‘How come I am a non-Muslim today whilst I was not one five years ago, as if I was baptised overnight?’, a Dutch author wrote in the year 2006.<sup>1</sup>

More than seven years after the events of 9/11, the new administration of President Barack Obama abandoned the use of the term ‘war on terror’; several European countries had already done so previously.<sup>2</sup> Policy now is to talk of a (counter)insurgency or a Global Counterinsurgency (GCOIN), or about an ‘overseas contingency operation’, but once again this is about tactics and not about adversaries and content. Clearly, something is changing in the way policymakers and strategists define their struggles today, but the question is: where are they moving away from and where are they heading for? This brings me to three sets of interconnected questions I would like to address in this chapter:

1. Who did we think until recently the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ constituted?;
2. How do ‘they’ see ‘us’ and how do ‘we’ see ‘them’?; and
3. Who should ‘we’ be and how would we like to be seen, compared to how ‘they’ would like to be seen and what opportunities they would like to get?

#### 1. Who did we think the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ constituted?

As mentioned above, although there have been many efforts between 2001 and 2009 to create different divides, for instance between peace- and life-loving people on the one hand and death-loving people on

the other, the main divide perceived by most was between Muslims and non-Muslims. And nothing creates divides between people as successfully as violence. In that respect, al-Qaeda-guided and -inspired terrorists succeeded in getting Muslims on their side, if only in the perception of many non-Muslims. Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda certainly succeeded in bringing Islam to the attention of people in the West. Never before were so many Qurans sold in the West, so many courses taught on the Islam to non-Muslims and so many books published to teach the essentials of this major religion. Nowadays, it is impossible to read a daily newspaper in the West without noticing several articles that concern Islam. It is therefore understandable that some view Bin Laden as 'the quintessential public diplomat'.<sup>3</sup> Or, as a foreign diplomat put it a couple of years ago: 'How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?'<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, there are various experts that maintain that al-Qaeda and their like have little to do with religion. Tom Quiggin, for instance, asserts that if one leaves out the Quranic quotes from jihadists' writings, they sound conspicuously as old-fashioned Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries.<sup>5</sup> Although I would not fully agree with these experts, deciding whether al-Qaeda and its goals are or are not highly religious is irrelevant for present purposes. Even if religion is used as a ruse, one will have to explain why so many people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, accept the 'ruse' and form their opinions and even their behaviour accordingly. 'If men define their situations as real, they are real in their consequences.'<sup>6</sup> One will also have to explain why so many people at least think that religion is on the return, and with a vengeance.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, to many, the divide was between either the 'West' and Islam or the U.S. and Islam. Turning our attention to the latter of both divides, the Islamic religion, one may expect the answer that there simply is no such thing as *the* Islam. Whilst some argue that Islam humiliates women, others may point out that the position of women in certain Islamic countries is much better than in various western countries, that women were elected as state leaders in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey, or that the position of Muslim women is not so much the result of the Islamic belief as it is the result of the cultures in which these women live or from which they originate. If one states that Islam and democracy seem very difficult to combine, other people may point to Indonesia or even to Turkey, where Islam and democracy co-habit. But that is a clincher. Similar conclusions may be reached when referring to other major concepts as Christianity, democracy, the West or for that matter terrorism. They all present different manifestations of the same phenomenon and nevertheless we feel we can constitute Weberian ideal types of them.<sup>8</sup>

When we turn to the first part of both divides, we find either the West or the U.S. There is certainly a difference between these two and often this difference is sought in the fact that the U.S. is a major power, for some time even the only hegemon left in the world after the Cold War. In comparison, although Europe, which together with the U.S. is generally perceived to form the core of the ambiguous term the 'West', may be a significant economic power, it certainly is not a military power (yet). This definitely constitutes a difference, which is for instance highlighted by the fact that an American public diplomacy officer's work is often much more difficult than that of his European counterpart: 'The fact that the United States remains so dominant a presence and influence in the world [...] means that in almost every nation on the globe, there are crucial issues between the U.S and others [...]'.<sup>9</sup>

However, I would think that there is another and more important difference between the U.S. and Europe in this respect, and that is that the U.S. is a nation that is still guided to a large extent by religious beliefs, whereas Europe is not. In Europe, only a quarter of the population still considers religion to be relevant to

their daily lives, compared to 55 percent in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> The very idea that the recently appointed European 'president' would end his speeches with the words 'God bless Europe' or 'And may God's peace be upon you', as President Barack Obama did in his June 2009 Cairo speech, and all of his predecessor have done before him, is unthinkable.

Hence, in Europe more than in the U.S., people not only turn against Islam as such, but also against the idea that religion should resume a prominent position in society. A number of decades ago, at the height of the Cold War and after several defections from the East, a Dutch entertainer told his audience: 'The Russians are coming ... one by one.' In fact, this is what many perceived has happened with Muslims in Western Europe. The Islam came to the West, but it did so on an individual basis. And in the minds of some islamophobes, if these Muslims are not stopped because governments lack the will or knowledge, Western Europe will soon become Islamised.<sup>11</sup> Especially in The Netherlands, a country that secularised very rapidly since the 1960s, many people, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, resist the idea of Muslims 'turning back the clock' for half a century by proclaiming 'backward' ideas about the position of women, homosexuals, and individual rights, and by believing in a grand narrative while people in the West thought they had reached the end of ideology and the end of History. Thus, by entering the European society, Muslims have rejuvenated the debate on the question whether Europeans want to live in a world with or without God. It is therefore impossible to take religion out of the debate that flared up after 9/11, be it for a different reason than the question whether al-Qaeda is highly religious or not.

## 2. How do 'they' see 'us' and how do 'we' see 'them'?

Most people do not see themselves as others perceive them. They tend to think of themselves as being superior to others. One only has to look at nations' history books to see how often children are taught that they are living in the best nation of the world. Believers and non-believers treat each other at best with blandness. But others may think differently. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, majorities in 22 out of a selection of 25 nations had favourable attitudes towards the U.S. in 1999/2000; eight years later, only 13 still did, with falls of 43 percent in Turkey and 46 percent in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> Much of this decline was caused by the war on terror. In 2002, according to data from the same project, majorities in 23 out of 31 countries supported the GWOT. Five years later, this was the case in only 11 countries.<sup>13</sup> So who are the good guys and who are the bad guys? This very much seems to be in the eye of the beholder. Some policy-makers concluded after this that more positive views can be created by spin techniques as part of public diplomacy or strategic communication efforts.

On 26 November 2007, U.S. Secretary of Defense and former CIA-chief Robert Gates held a speech in which he stated that the American armed forces are not sufficiently equipped to protect and promote American interests throughout the world. According to him, diplomacy would be a better weapon in this regard. Consequently he made, what he himself called, a 'blasphemous' plea for a raise not of the budget of his own department but of that of the State Department. Gates called it 'just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America'.<sup>14</sup> It is in 'the War of Ideas' that the United States government has indeed performed the poorest, according to Robert Grenier, former chief of the CIA's Counter Terrorism Center.<sup>15</sup> He noted little coherent, realistic or effective efforts at winning this war in Washington, D.C. In the cynical words of one American author, ideological warfare 'is today simply not a significant part of the "global war on terrorism". Or rather, it is a part of that war – but it is being employed effectively only by our adversaries.'<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, it is remarkable how little publications on U.S. public diplomacy or strategic communication discuss ideas, content and substance; more often they merely focus upon techniques, means of communication, competences and budgets.<sup>17</sup> And with little effect. In a 2007 poll by worldpublicopinion.org, nearly two-thirds of the respondents in Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan and Indonesia believed that the war on terror aimed to 'spread Christianity in the region' of the Middle East.<sup>18</sup> And that may even be considered to be a positive view, since quite often soldiers violate Muslim culture and habits by what one may be tempted to call their unsavoury and 'unchristian' behaviour.<sup>19</sup> Besides, they are perceived to kill indiscriminately when causing collateral damage.<sup>20</sup> This is grist to the jihadist propaganda mill.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the fact that the number of casualties on the side of the local population is hardly ever counted, as opposed to the well registered number of fallen soldiers on the side of western troops, serves as proof for some that the blood of Crusaders is more important to the West than that of Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, even though foreign attitudes toward the U.S. have improved in general after Barack Obama took office as President, people in the Middle East kept distrusting U.S. foreign policy. Take the example of Egypt: in the first four months of 2009, the percentage of Egyptians who were highly confident that the American President would do the right thing in international politics rose from 8 to 39. However, in April/May 2009, 67 percent of Egyptians continued to believe that the U.S. plays a negative role in the world, 76 percent still believed that the U.S. seeks to weaken the Muslim world, 80 percent believed that Americans try to control Middle Eastern oil and the same percentage was of the opinion that the U.S. wants to impose its culture upon Muslim countries.<sup>23</sup>

Views of people, whether positive or negative, are, in spite of temporary successes of spin doctors, at the end of the day based upon real experiences. As Anthony Trollope's 1881 novel *Dr. Wortle's School* has it: 'The utility of a sermon depends much on the idea that the audience has of the piety of the man who preaches it'.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, it is not sufficient just to change the wordings or even ideas without changing the policies. This is what the renowned poller Humphrey Taylor calls the 'say-do problem':

*'[T]he U.S. government often seems to say one thing and do another. For example, Washington professes to be a strong supporter of human rights, but the world hears about Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, "extraordinary renditions", our reluctance to prohibit water-boarding, or refusal to accept that the Geneva Conventions apply to "unlawful combatants". We say we believe in and want to promote democracy, but we support dictatorial governments if we need their support, and oppose democratically elected governments – from Venezuela to Gaza – if we do not like their policies.'*<sup>25</sup>

Taylor concludes therefore that U.S. public diplomacy 'should be focused mainly on what the president and administration do and not just how they present themselves and their policies to the world'.<sup>26</sup>

A similar conclusion was reached in August 2009 by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, admiral Michael G. Mullen:

*'We hurt ourselves more when our words don't align with our actions. Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces. When they find a "say-do" gap – such as Abu Ghraib – they drive a truck right through it. So should we, quite frankly. We must be vigilant about holding ourselves accountable to higher standards of conduct and closing any gaps, real or perceived, between what we say about ourselves and what we do to back it up. In fact, I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems. Each time we fail to live up to our values or don't follow up on a promise, we look more and more like the arrogant Americans the enemy claims we are.'*

...

*Because what we are after in the end – or should be after – are actions that speak for themselves, that speak for us. What we need more than anything else is credibility.'*<sup>27</sup>

However, it is not only Americans who should do some soul-searching in this respect. Europeans may just as well ask themselves how one can maintain to export democracy and the rule of law to far-away places, if one simultaneously limits civil rights at home. In the fight against terrorism, the executive power in many western countries has been strengthened vis-à-vis parliament and the judicial system. Almost everywhere, the time constraints for detention without charges have been stretched; possibilities for observation and registration have been broadened; facilities for administrative measures have been extended and so have the possibilities for tapping phones and electronic messages. For instance, the United Kingdom, the country where the idea and practice of *habeas corpus* originated, has, according to its highest freedom-of-information official, Richard Thomas, sleepwalked into the stage of a surveillance state.<sup>28</sup> According to the human rights organisation Privacy International, the U.K. has thus joined China and Russia as an 'endemic surveillance state'.<sup>29</sup> Whereas fifty years ago, President Eisenhower warned against the powers of a military-industrial-complex, one could utter the same words of caution today against a security-industrial-complex. It almost seems as if the more governmental leaders state that their nations are defending freedoms, these nations lose their liberties.

### 3. Who should 'we' like to be? And what opportunities should 'they' like and be given?

In his much applauded Cairo speech, which so neatly coincided with the Expert Meeting in The Hague, President Obama did avoid the word 'Muslim world', for the use of which in his inaugural address he had been criticised.<sup>30</sup> Instead he still used the words 'Muslim majority countries' and 'Muslim communities'. In fact, he did not take religion out of the rhetoric. He tried to bridge the gap 'between Islam and the West', whose relationship included 'centuries of co-existence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars'. His way out was seeking an end to 'the cycle of suspicion and discord' and looking for 'common ground'. The President said he came to Cairo 'to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles - principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.' He appealed to Muslims to confront 'violent extremists': 'The enduring faith of over a billion people is so much bigger than the narrow hatred of a few. Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism, it is an important part of promoting peace.'<sup>31</sup>

Albeit it being a heart-warming speech after so many lost years in which not the offer of dialogue but American monologue dominated, it did not take into account that religious truth and secular truth are two completely different things. Perhaps as an American and a Christian, he may not view this as the problem many Europeans perceive it to be. The question also remains whether President Obama will be able to move beyond the rhetoric and his own 'subtle instinct for public persuasion',<sup>32</sup> especially in the field of human rights. In other words: whether he will get rid of the 'do-say' problem. President Obama prohibited the use of torture and he ordered the closing down of Guantanamo Bay. But questions remain: Will he manage to stop all human rights abuses and did he in fact abolish the practice of secret prisons and renditions?<sup>33</sup> Will the administration carry through an inquiry into abuses by the CIA or will it stop short of the ugly truth?<sup>34</sup> His predecessor supposed that democracy could be established from above; this is just as erroneous as

thinking that emancipation can be dictated. Instead of forcing democracy upon a conquered/liberated nation, it would be much more fruitful if President Obama would address the so-called friendly regimes in the Middle East or the former Soviet Union with regard to their 'democracy deficit'.<sup>35</sup> Simultaneously, with professional and moral support for groups in the Arab and Islamic world that turn against jihadi movements, the West will have to pressurise the autocratic regimes to tolerate diversity within their own societies. Western governments should no longer hold themselves hostage by fear that democratisation processes in the Middle East that are not supported by western troops will necessarily lead to more extremism.<sup>36</sup> It is this fear that creates a credibility gap between the words from the West and their actual policies.<sup>37</sup> Time and again polls show that ordinary Arabs appreciate western values like liberty, equality and the rule of law highly, but that at the same time they object against western and particularly American policies concerning the Middle-East.<sup>38</sup> Early 2007, a poll showed for instance that over ninety per cent of Egyptians and Iranians longed for freedom of expression similar to the one U.S. citizens know.<sup>39</sup> At the same time two thirds of those polled in the Middle East maintained that the US was not really favouring democracy in their region.<sup>40</sup> Apparently, people in the West and in the Middle East share some common values, but their governments do not always act accordingly. And what will be the position of the U.S. and Europe on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which kindles so much of Arab and Muslim anger against the West? And, will President Obama and the European leaders be prepared to share the West's material wealth with lesser-to-do nations? In this respect, Osama bin Laden holds one of his strongest trump cards: after all, he was the multi-billionaire who chose to live in a cave.

But far more important than all these individual questions, which should be addressed by both American and European leaders, is the question: do Americans and Europeans really know what they stand for? As Moroccan authorities told an American mission preparing an advisory report on public diplomacy: 'If you do not define yourself [...], the extremists will define you.'<sup>41</sup> '[W]e are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals', said Robert Gates in his abovementioned speech.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, individual Americans have, immediately after 9/11, tried to answer, from completely different standpoints, the question of what their nation stands for.<sup>43</sup>

It seems people in Europe have much more trouble doing so. 'Our main problem is that already for several generations we no longer know what it means to be a European', a Dutch philosopher stated rightly.<sup>44</sup> In expressing their values, European nations and societies often do not progress much further beyond emphasising what they are not and what they dislike.<sup>45</sup> In that sense, there is no longer a Europeanness or Dutchness or Britishness, but a derived identity, an identity derived from the 'other', the one who one does not want to look like.<sup>46</sup> It is exactly this hollowness of the European values, this derivative character of their identity that makes so many Europeans to turn against the 'other', especially the spiritual other who still seems to have a sense of purpose in life and still seems to know what his or her values are. Then again, this may merely be an appearance, a facade. Similarly, many Muslims construct their own identity by resisting 'the West' or the culture of their host nations. As such, Muslims and non-Muslims are to a large extent keeping up appearances, keeping the idea alive that they have an identity of their own, whereas they only have one because of 'the other'. And whereas American proponents of public diplomacy unashamedly proclaim American values and at best that American values are universal values *de facto*,<sup>47</sup> Europeans find great difficulties in establishing whether they want to stress western, European or national values, and even what these values actually include.<sup>48</sup>

However, perhaps this drawback can be converted into an advantage. Why should we start with a value-laden debate, in which it is difficult to reconcile values, especially as Europeans themselves are divided about, amongst others, the value of religion. If we agree that a change in the 'us' and 'them' divide should include both religious people and secularists on both sides, extremism, peace and democracy being the issues at stake, then this should imply that governments should not use the prism of religion and religious middlemen to get their message across.<sup>49</sup> A western democratic government that wants to apply the rule of law, has to discern only between honourable citizens and enemies of the state. Citizenship should be the defining identity from the point of view of the state.

This is an approach that may also have an international appeal, as one of al-Qaeda's major problems is that Muslims reproach them for committing attacks in which fellow-Muslims die. On Islamic websites discussing jihad and martyrdom through suicide attacks, one does encounter a lot of understanding for armed resistance in the Palestinian areas and Iraq, but there is relatively little sympathy for the terrorist ideology of al-Qaeda, and especially its killings of innocent civilians are heavily criticised.<sup>50</sup> One can recognise a trend that support for terrorism subsides when people experience terrorist attacks in their own country, whether it is in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi-Arabia or Pakistan.<sup>51</sup>

This shows that in spite of everything, Al-Qaeda is vulnerable, precisely when it brings home its central message in the form of attacks to Muslim areas themselves. This was the very reason why Osama bin Laden felt himself urged to call upon the leaders of al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Zarqawi and his successor, to mitigate their methods.<sup>52</sup> The same occurred with regard to al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, whose leader Abdelmalik Droukhal was apparently replaced because he was held responsible for too many civilian victims.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, western information campaigns should stress that jihadists champion a culture of death and destruction - after all, terrorism kills - whereas the West offers life.<sup>54</sup>

Leaving debates about opposing values aside, European non-Muslims could create mutual tolerance and respect by addressing individuals instead of a single other in the shape of the Muslim community.<sup>55</sup> What they could say is: I agree that you think differently, but we face a number of common problems in this world. Independent from your basic beliefs, ideologies or outlook, what would you think would be a good suggestion? This would turn us away from the unanswerable questions about people's loyalties, but would instead appeal to their humaneness and involve them in finding solutions for common problems, from ecological problems to resource problems and to cohesion problems. And we should start with listening: collecting, monitoring and analysing the opinion of other publics.<sup>56</sup> Or in the words of Admiral Mullen: 'We've come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect. They are not. Good communication runs both ways. It's not about telling *our* story. We must also be better listeners.'<sup>57</sup>

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## 4 The Importance of Countering Al-Qaeda's 'Single Narrative'

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*'The real challenge is not just to understand why Global Islamism appeals to many Muslim young people, deconstructing it so that its pretensions are exposed for all to see, but eventually to defeat it and its capacity for immense violence and intolerance. It has to be defeated as much for the sake of Muslims and their ability to lead lives of their choice in the country of their choice as for the rest of us who also want to do the same'*  
(M. Desai, 2007)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Terrorism consists of a combination of violence and communication.<sup>2</sup> Counter-terrorism must likewise address the communication dimension. The 'war on terror' should therefore also be a 'war' on the ideological appeal of al-Qaeda, its ability to win and radicalise young people to join its ranks. The 'battle of ideas' with al-Qaeda has long been neglected. After more than eight years of mainly kinetic warfare against al-Qaeda, it is high time that its ideology is confronted.

Al-Qaeda's ideology is expressed in its 'single narrative', a unifying framework of explanation that provides vulnerable Muslims with an emotionally satisfying story to make sense of the world in which they live and their role in it.<sup>3</sup> This narrative embraces religious terrorism<sup>4</sup> and appears to empower those who come to believe in it – so much so that they are not only willing to kill but even to sacrifice their own lives. Apparently, it provides the fanatical 'true believers' with a strong sense of identity, enabling them to rationalise past personal failings and justify the use of violence against those who are either considered 'guilty' or simply stand in their way.

### The ideology of al-Qaeda

Ideology offers its believers, in the words of Andrew Heywood, a 'more or less coherent set of ideas that provide the basis for organized political action, whether it is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power'. Ideology provides (i) a 'worldview', (ii) a vision of a better society (utopian or a return to a golden age in the past) and (iii) a pathway from (i) to (ii).<sup>4</sup> Al-Qaeda's 'single narrative' fits this ideological blueprint:

- there is a *basic grievance* - a Zionist-Christian alliance is held responsible for most, if not all, that is wrong in Muslim countries and the way Muslims are allegedly discriminated and/or (mis-)treated in the world;
- there is a *vision of the good society*: a single political entity - the Caliphate - that replaces corrupt Muslim rulers under Western influence with the rule of *Sharia* (Islamic Law) wherever there are Muslims; and
- there is a *path from the grievance to the vision*: the eradication, in a violent jihad led by a heroic vanguard (al-Qaeda), of the alleged malign Western influence from the Muslim world.

The ultimate goal of al-Qaeda is the submission of the rest of the world to its version of Islam - al-Qaeda's Charter leaves little doubt about this.<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, the single narrative contains the following elements:

- The pursuit of *Jihad* is an individual obligation for all Muslims;
- A clash of civilisations between the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world (*Dar-al-Harp*) until *Sharia* rule is established everywhere;
- No distinction is made between civilian and military targets in the fight against enemies;
- Legitimisation of suicide/martyrdom (*shahid*) operations as an asymmetric tactic of warfare against enemies (despite the fact that Islam prohibits suicide);

- Killing of other Muslims is justified as ‘collateral damage’, or for their complicity with the West or with ‘apostate’ Muslim governments which stand in the way of introducing strict Sharia law and an Islamic state;
- *Takfir*: the excommunication of Muslims for failure to apply Sharia law or failure to accept the beliefs and practices deemed right by jihadists;
- Attacking the ‘far enemy’ as a means to mobilise Muslims and punish foreign powers which are said to back ‘apostate’ Muslim rulers; and
- Return of the Caliphate: establishment of a government ruled by Sharia as a stepping stone to a Sharia-based world government.<sup>7</sup>

While the single narrative with its archaic metaphors and self-serving selective historical analogies is a fantastic black-and-white cliché of a complex historical and contemporary situation, it cannot be dismissed as unrealistic. ‘If men define situations as real they are real in their consequences’, the Thomas theorem postulated long ago and it has, by and large, stood the test of time.<sup>8</sup> It is a fact that the single narrative plays an important role in preparing the path for vulnerable young Muslims towards terrorism, by:

1. Identifying a problem as not just a misfortune, but an injustice;
2. Constructing a moral justification for violence (religious, ideological, political);
3. Blaming the victims (‘it is their own fault’);
4. Dehumanising the victims through language and symbols (‘pigs and apes’);
5. Displacing responsibility (God or other authorities ordered the individual to commit the act of violence) or diffusing responsibility (the group, not the individual, is responsible); and
6. Misconstructing or minimising harmful effects (by using euphemisms or by contrasting to other acts which are worse).<sup>9</sup>

Against this background, ‘the battle of ideas’ with the myth-making single narrative of Jihadists needs to be taken seriously. Al-Qaeda’s militant ideology and discourse, the mindset of militant Islam and how it impacts on Muslim diasporas in Western democracies and on the interests of democratic countries elsewhere need to be fully understood – and countered since it will not go away by itself. A. Trethewey, S. Corman and B. Goodall have pointed out that ideology has four functions, namely (i) naturalising, (ii) obscuring, (iii) universalising and (iv) structuring:

*‘Naturalizing means turning socially constructed, politically-motivated, and fluid ideas into taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and meanings. Doing so makes them seem fixed, objective, and “naturally occurring”. Obscuring is denying or hiding contradictions in ongoing systems of meaning, making them seem to be seamless, coherent, and unified worldviews. Universalizing means presenting the interests or concerns of those in power as the interests of all group members. And structuring involves creating rules and resources in a social system that preserve the ideology.’<sup>10</sup>*

A major problem with countering al-Qaeda’s ideological narrative is that it is embedded in more general Arab and Muslim narratives of grievances against the West. These narratives have been articulated by Arab Muslim mainstream representatives in one form or another – grievances which have to some extent a factual basis in the 19th and 20th century history of colonialism.<sup>11</sup> Yet, while some of the grievances articulated by al-Qaeda are real, the solutions advocated by al-Qaeda are unreal since the Muslim masses are unlikely to accept the premises that can be found in its texts – premises such as:

- Jihadism – a permanent, individual obligation on all Muslims to attack non-believers and heretics as a way of life and individual key to paradise;
- The rejection of pluralism and democracy;
- The overthrow of virtually all regimes in the Middle East and their replacement with Taliban-style rule as practiced in Afghanistan from 1996-2001;
- The infliction of violence on their own people, government, and resources are i) necessary, ii) religiously sanctioned, and iii) really the fault of the West, Israel, and apostate regimes; and
- The people in Muslim countries cannot reform their societies without the help of outsiders who bring jihad as the only source of empowerment and reform.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Qaeda has defined itself from its beginning as a defender of Muslims who are said to be under attack from the West. Yet by now it has become widely apparent that al-Qaeda’s claim is a dubious one: while declaring war on the Jews and the Crusaders, fact is that most of al-Qaeda’s victims have been Muslims, far fewer have been Christian (Crusaders) and very few have been Jewish. When it came to a concrete emergency calling for a collective Muslim defence such as the one during the Israeli (counter-)attack on Hamas in Gaza in January 2009, al-Qaeda could not launch a single attack itself on behalf of the Palestinians. The reality on the ground and the rhetoric of al-Qaeda on the Internet often stand light-years apart. In an audio-tape issued on 14 January 2009, Bin Laden claimed that his jihad against the U.S. had been responsible for bringing about the economic collapse of the U.S. – after he had earlier claimed credit for the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup>

Such ludicrous claims, if not persuasively countered, will, however, find believers among the ignorant and semi-educated. Too often, al-Qaeda’s propaganda goes unchallenged. In reality, al-Qaeda has achieved little: it has not managed to mobilise the masses, and, in its more than twenty years of existence, has not managed to seize and hold a single state as a solid base for further expansion. However, where al-Qaeda has been successful is in propagating its vision among vulnerable young Muslims in search of a purpose in their lives. In fact, it has given them an ideology that grants them a licence, a justification, to kill in the name of God.

Violence, because it is norm-violating, requires legitimisation – a justifying narrative.<sup>14</sup> It is hard to kill innocent people, but it is easier to kill people that are considered guilty. It is hard to justify aggressive violence, but it is easier to justify self-defence or defence of those who call for assistance against aggression. When the use of violence can be reframed as the execution of justice or as an act of defence rather than aggression, it is much more easy to perform. Successfully reframed narratives can make the guilty look innocent and the innocent guilty. Where violence cannot be justified, feelings of guilt can at least be neutralised by language containing psychological mechanisms of denial and guilt-transfer. The hateful word precedes the violent deed.<sup>15</sup>

How should a persuasive counter-narrative be framed? We should not fall into the trap of al-Qaeda by discussing the present conflict as being one between Muslims and non-Muslims. The clash of civilisation is not between Islam (‘defended’ by al-Qaeda) and the West. The dividing line is between those who seek to provoke political and social change by means of revolutionary violence and callous murder of innocent civilians and, on the other side, those – whether in the West, East or South – who strive to address political differences through peaceful reforms and by legitimate means, using force only as a last resort and for

defensive purposes. The latter camp includes a vast majority of Muslims, including those in West-European diasporas. These immigrant Muslims and their offspring are key to a persuasive counter-narrative.

### Muslims in the diaspora

Muslims in our midst have to be seen and treated as an asset, not as a liability. After all, they, or their parents, often left Muslim countries to seek a better life in the West. If they can make clear to fellow Muslims that Muslims have better chances of development in the West and under Western-style democracies than they would have under an al-Qaeda type regime or, for that matter, under some of the present repressive Muslim regimes in Arab countries, the Muslim diasporas in the West can become a source of strength – rather than a source of concern – in the struggle against transnational jihadists. Counter-intuitive as it may sound, Western democracies offer Muslims the best opportunities to develop their civilisation. Gilles Kepel has elaborated on this:

*‘A promising generation of young Muslims [in Europe] now have opportunities to exercise democratic rights that are forbidden – or so restricted as to be emptied of significance – in countries where Islam represents the majority religion. Their political participation has its roots in local organizations, where many of these entrepreneurs, activists, professionals, and civil servant got their start. Such grassroots political activity requires a separation of mosque and state, as Islam settles into the European milieu. This separation of the secular and religious domain is the prerequisite for liberating the forces of reform in the Muslim world. [...] The prospect that European Muslims may transcend both jihad and fitna pleases neither radical activists nor salafists and Islamists – even if the Islamists themselves, once they are actors in the European political arena, find their own rigid principles giving way to the compromises of democracy. [I]t is imperative to work toward full democratic participation for young people of Muslim background, through institutions – especially those of education and culture – that encourage upward social mobility and the emergence of new elites. Moving beyond the ideological constraints of jihad and fitna and, indeed, beyond Europe’s geographical borders, these young men and women present a new face of Islam – reconciled with modernity – to the larger world.’<sup>16</sup>*

Modern Muslims in Western diasporas are arguably the best social carriers to counter al-Qaeda’s single narrative. They can incorporate the best elements of both worlds – Islam and the West – and create a new meaningful and credible narrative that expresses their vision of what it means to be a Muslim in the modern world and how to interact with the West and achieve their aspirations within their host societies and in their countries of origin. Western democracies offer them many more opportunities of upward social mobility than the rigid social hierarchies of many authoritarian Muslim states. Modern Muslims should be encouraged to take up that role as intermediaries and formulate an alternative vision to al-Qaeda’s view that ‘jihad is the only solution’ (as often proclaimed by al-Zawaheri).<sup>17</sup> This is in their own best interest as well as the one of democratic host countries. Western governments have to enter into dialogue and debate with them and through them with the wider Muslim community. Al-Qaeda itself is averse of any real dialogue.<sup>18</sup> It seeks to intimidate and ultimately destroy secular and pluralist societies and also targets moderate Muslims. It has made substantial inroads in successfully selling elements of its single narrative to mainstream Muslims. That is particularly true for its capacity to reframe Western resistance against jihadist terrorism as a war on Islam.

Even a majority of Muslims living in the U.S. who should know better have come to believe it, as Clark McCauley and Jennifer Stellar found on the basis of U.S. public opinion surveys: ‘Muslim Americans show a striking decrease in belief that the US war is against terrorism (from 67% in 2001 to 26% in 2007), and a

parallel increase in the belief that the war is actually about Islam (from 18% in 2001 to 55% in 2007)’ (see table 1).<sup>20</sup>

Table 1. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, do you feel the U.S. is fighting a war on terrorism or a war against Islam? (percentages)

	Zogby 2001 n=1781	Zogby 2002 <sup>a</sup> n=531	Zogby 2004 <sup>b</sup> n=1846	Pew 2007 <sup>c</sup> n=1050
Terrorism	67	41	33	26
Islam	18	31	38	55
Neither/Both	--	20	--	2
NS, DK, Refused	16	7	29	17

Source: C. McCauley & J. Stellar, ‘U.S. Muslims after 9/11: Poll Trends 2001-2007’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2009, Table 10.

Since the socio-economic situation of Muslims is markedly better in the U.S. than in most of Europe, and the degree of discrimination is rather lower than on this side of the Atlantic, there is reason to believe that in many parts of Europe (especially the United Kingdom) the perception of many Muslims is not markedly different – and probably worse – compared to that of Muslims in the U.S. While sympathy for al-Qaeda among mainstream Arab and Muslim public opinion is currently lower than it used to be, it is still sizeable.<sup>19</sup> The percentage of radicals among European Muslims is, according to what we know, around ten percent of the Muslim populations.<sup>21</sup>

The number of violent extremists who would actually engage in terrorism is however only a tiny fraction of the radicalised part of Muslim youth in Western diasporas. The large majority of Muslims immigrants to Europe have either assimilated to the way of life of democratic host societies or have at least integrated, with some reservations in the cultural sphere, into Western societies.<sup>22</sup> Among them are the ‘modern Muslims’ referred to above. Some of them might not necessarily be ‘moderate’ and some of them might also not necessarily be ‘Muslims’ in a strictly religious sense – but they are so in a cultural sense. These are the people we should dialogue and team up with. They, in turn, should be encouraged to dialogue with those young Muslims who lean towards extremism. As Muslims who ‘made it’ in the West, modern Muslims can show them that there are alternatives to jihad to bring about social change.

### The role of government

However, encouragement of these modern Muslims to take up the role as intermediaries needs to be structured, focused and funded. That requires resources which, in many cases, go beyond those of civil society. In practice, the means for the ‘battle of ideas’ will often have to be found from democratic governments. In principle, governments can try to reach out directly to vulnerable Muslim youth in the diaspora which it hosts. However, it often lacks the cultural sensitivity and *savoir faire* to do so. It is generally wiser to act through intermediaries representing that diaspora. However, in practice it has proven to be quite difficult for Western governments to find the right local Muslim partners.<sup>23</sup> The very fact that potential

partners are seen to be supported financially by government will be used against them by some extremists wishing to undermine their credibility.<sup>24</sup>

To some extent that is unavoidable and must be accepted. Yet it matters very much which part of the government reaches out to the modern Muslims in search for assistance against extremist elements. In general, a role for local government is preferable to clandestine support from secret services or the military.<sup>25</sup> In the U.S., it is the Pentagon that has the largest budget for strategic communication campaigns – almost one billion dollars for 2010.<sup>26</sup> However, that money is presumably spent abroad rather than in the Muslim diaspora in the U.S. In general, the focus should be on national and local diaspora’s potential radicals and extremists. However, modern Muslims in that diaspora should be encouraged to reach out not only to domestic radicals and extremists but also to those in the countries they originate from. They have a cultural affinity to them which they have less with other Muslims in the *Ummah* (the Muslim community as a whole).

The *Ummah* is not monolithic and probably almost as split as Christianity. Paradoxically, it is an Islamophobia strengthened by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath, that unwittingly gives some substance to the notion of the *Ummah* – lifting it beyond the mere idea of an ‘imagined community’. On the other hand, continuing – and in some cases growing – discrimination as a consequence of al-Qaeda activities in the West should make it clear to modern Muslims in the West that they cannot afford to stand aside as neutral observers when al-Qaeda attacks its ‘far enemy’. Western governments need to assure law-abiding members of the Muslim diasporas they host, in words and by deeds, that they are not living in a hostile environment, that they can participate in the progress of society and preserve their cultural identity within the democratic and legal parameters of their host society (such as, for instance, the equality of women).<sup>27</sup>

Modern Muslims in the West have their counter-parts in the Arab and Muslim world among entrepreneurs, technocrats, academics, students, professionals, reformists within state bureaucracies, journalists, popular artists and others. They can build bridges to them and help to strengthen them in their countries. The modern Muslims in the countries of origin need support because they are often squeezed between authoritarian regimes on the one hand and political Islamists on the other. Some of the modern Muslims in the West are radicals rather than moderates and many of their counterparts in the Arab and Muslim world are also radicals since the governments that control those countries are more often than not reactionary rather than reformist, labelling everyone who wants long overdue political change a radical.<sup>28</sup>

Most values people in the West cherish – democracy, merit-based upward social mobility, the welfare state, rule of law, respect for human dignity and individual rights (including women’s rights), material prosperity, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, freedom (including freedom of thought and expression), equality, education for all, the search for individual happiness in this world, human security, peace for all – are appealing to a broad spectrum of people in the Arab and Muslim world.

#### Al-Qaeda’s values and vulnerabilities

Many of these values stand in direct opposition to al-Qaeda’s values: instead of pluralism, salafist jihadists want unity of thought. Instead of democracy, they want a theocratic caliphate; instead of peace, they want a jihad until the whole world submits to them;<sup>29</sup> instead of seeking human happiness in this life, they seek death in the expectation of happiness in paradise.<sup>30</sup> The maximalist goals of al-Qaeda, involving the

overthrow of heretic Arab regimes, the elimination of Western influence in the Muslim world and ultimately a new world order under a caliphate,<sup>31</sup> are bound to provoke greater and greater resistance if and when al-Qaeda’s power should increase.

For if the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan (1996-2001) is anything to go by how an Islamist country would be ruled, the outlook is not one that can please the Arab and Muslim masses. The Taliban made, during its rule, no significant efforts to provide jobs, education or health care. There was no social program worth speaking of nor was there a plan of economic development. All the Taliban provided for the public was a greater degree of public security. That was brought about at a price – the threat of swift and draconian public punishments. However, even that was elusive; once out of power, the Taliban themselves undermined public security when fighting for a comeback.<sup>32</sup>

Outside Afghanistan, the record of the salafist jihadists has not been much better. The practical results of their activities have been that:

- They set up one group of Muslims against the other (especially in Iraq, where they tried to trigger a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites);
- Most of the people they killed were not Americans or Jews but Muslims, including women and children; and
- They attacked sources of national income in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, examples being the oil and tourist industry.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, the jihadists’ struggle so far has caused what is termed *fitna* (social and political chaos) – a concept that has no positive connotations in Arabic. It is important to attack the salafist jihadists at their weak points. As A. Trethewey, S. Corman and B. Goodall have pointed out, if ideology has four functions, these functions should be interfered with:

*‘To undermine naturalizing we can focus on challenging assumptions, beliefs, and meanings behind an ideology. To fight obscuring we can target contradictions, pushing them into the open. To target universalizing we can engage subgroups and their leaders, politicizing the differences in interests that ideology tries to smooth over. And to resist structuring we can place stress on the structures and/or promote alternatives that might replace, undermine, or circumvent them.’<sup>34</sup>*

Audrey K. Cronin, in turn, has pointed out that the secret to undermining this campaign is not ‘winning hearts and minds’, but enhancing al-Qaeda’s tendency to lose them.<sup>35</sup> Strangely enough, a recipe for this has been given by one of al-Qaeda’s top leaders and strategists, Abu Yahya al-Liby. In a one and a half hour long video titled ‘Dots of the Letter’, al-Liby teased the superpower by pointing out how the U.S. could defeat al-Qaeda. Incredible as it sounds, he actually sketched six weaknesses of the terrorist organisation, which its main enemy could exploit in the war for the hearts and minds of Muslims. These are:

1. Focus on amplifying cases of ex-jihadists who have renounced armed action;
2. Fabricate stories about Jihadist mistakes and exaggerate mistakes when possible;
3. Prompt mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* that incriminate the Jihadist movement and its actions;
4. Strengthen and back Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach;

5. Aggressively neutralise or discredit the guiding thinkers of the jihadist movement; and
6. Spin minor disagreements among leaders of jihadist organisations as being major doctrinal or methodological disputes.<sup>36</sup>

In a comment on al-Liby's self-destructive recommendations to the United States, Carl Ciovacco concluded that:

*'The extent of Abu Yahya's recommendations for unravelling Al Qaeda is massive because they are an internal survey of Al Qaeda's own weaknesses. It would be on par with Erwin Rommel providing the United States with Germany's gravest vulnerabilities in 1944. Furthermore, the advice contains culturally-sensitive insights difficult for American counter-terrorism strategists to have imagined. For example, the power of a few violent salafi clerics within Al Qaeda and the greater jihadist movement was unknown until recently. Research has shown that only a handful of radical clerics around the world radicalize a large majority of jihadists. Abu Yahya's suggestion to focus on clerics and fatwas corroborates the importance of fatwas in the war of ideas.'*<sup>37</sup>

#### Successfully countering al-Qaeda's single narrative

The 'war of ideas' is about having a more credible narrative. As a U.S. government study put it: 'Today, political struggles are about the creation and destruction of credibility'.<sup>38</sup> In this new type of struggle, where 'the information domain is a battlespace',<sup>39</sup> one can focus either on the propagation of one's own narrative or try to discredit the narrative of the adversary – or, ideally, both. Since al-Qaeda's single narrative is based on weak argumentation, half-truth and downright lies,<sup>40</sup> it is, in a way, easier to attack al-Qaeda on that front.<sup>41</sup> To do so, one has to challenge the assumptions underlying al-Qaeda's ideology, expose its fallacies and dismantle its conspiracy theories. This can be done by academic researchers or government analysts and scholars familiar with Islamic politics, history and theology. Yet the dissemination of such analyses should better be left to modern Muslims – moderates and radicals – who have greater credibility with the most relevant target audiences.

However, in facilitating modern Muslims to counter al-Qaeda's single narrative, it is important that Western governments do not provide al-Qaeda with extra arguments by saying one thing and doing the other. The gap between the declaratory policy of Western governments and their actual (real-)policies in the Middle East and beyond has to be narrowed – otherwise there will be no credibility. The grievances of al-Qaeda – imagined and real – need to be addressed and discussed, and put into context and perspective. While some of those grievances are, in whole or in part, justified, others are not. In particular, al-Qaeda's chief framing success – the widely believed allegation that the war on terror is a war on Islam – needs to be discredited by a careful exposition of the dynamics of international conflicts and their root causes. The selective and biased references to historical episodes where Western interventions took place in Muslim countries by al-Qaeda need to be countered by critical (including self-critical) evidence-based accounts, counter-examples and detailed analyses and a systematic evaluation of grievances and claims made by al-Qaeda.<sup>42</sup>

Frank Cilluffo, a former White House Homeland Security official said at the end of the Bush administration: 'We've been fighting the wrong battle. The real center of gravity of the enemy is their narrative. It is ideologically bankrupt.'<sup>43</sup> However, that bankruptcy has yet to be exposed in full detail by credible voices targeting different audiences, namely the members of al-Qaeda and its two dozen affiliate groups, their supporters, their sympathisers and Muslims in general. Al-Qaeda's main strength lies not in its arms but

in its single narrative, its ideology.<sup>44</sup> It is here that the main counteroffensive has to take place.

As has been argued in this chapter, the best *social* carriers for a counter-narrative are, from the point of view of Western governments, modern Muslims from diasporas in the West who 'made it'. By this we do not mean fully Westernised immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries, but those who credibly manage to integrate their religious-cultural heritage with the heritage of democratic and largely secular host societies. Out of that fusion, new positive role models for Muslims can arise that will in the end prove more attractive than bearded men preaching hate and destruction from a cave with guns on their side. To give prominence to successful Muslims who made their way and found their place in the West in the fields of politics, economics, religion and culture, is a task that governments should promote – but with discretion. The Muslim world needs credible social role models and if none of these can emerge in Muslim countries, alternative social counter-narratives need to come from Muslim diasporas in the West.

In the *religious* field, a Western counter-narrative against al-Qaeda's single narrative is more difficult to promote since our societies are largely secularised. Nevertheless, Western democratic governments should at the very minimum insist that Imams that preach in the mosques in the West are not agitating against the core values of Western societies. Imams should understand the local and the diaspora culture and should have received training for their tasks in Imam schools that are certified by the host government. Such Imams should be well-enough versed in Islam to be able to counter the jihadist single narrative with one that draws from the mainstream traditions of Islam.

In the *political* field, the counter-narrative of Western governments can only gain greater credibility when the gap between declaratory policy and *realpolitik* is closed with regard to Western policies towards the Arab and Muslim world and Israel. As a response to Western governments' long associations and dealings with undemocratic regimes in the region, steps towards democracy in the Middle East and North Africa have usually brought anti-Western parties closer to political power – with the dire prospect of 'one man, one vote, one time' elections replacing pro-Western, non-democratic regimes with anti-Western, anti-democratic regimes.

In the final analysis, the social, religious and political counter-narratives are all based on *moral* counter-narratives: who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, and why. Undeniably, Bin Laden has enjoyed some Robin Hood-type sympathy from the Arab street and beyond. Yet neither he nor Ayman al-Zawahiri can ultimately claim the moral high-ground. There is a widespread desire for moral leadership and at the same time there is a lack of leaders of the format of Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela in the Arab and Muslim world – and for that matter, in much of the rest of the world. This lack of secular moral leadership has favoured a search for religious moral leadership – a turn from which, among others, those who call for jihad have profited. While the jihadists are, in the end, likely to discredit themselves with their blind acts of terrorism, this process can be speeded up if one discredits their verbal justifications for violence against innocent civilians. The observation and the defence of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants and the immunity of the civilians in armed conflict is the moral divide in the struggle with Islamic extremism. This distinction also has roots in the Islamic tradition, and that part of the Muslim heritage needs to be strengthened by credible insiders of Islamic culture such as modern Muslims in Western diasporas. However, the propagation of their 'story' needs the support of both civil society and democratic governments in their host societies. We all have a common interest in delegitimising the jihadist ideology as expressed in the single narrative of al-Qaeda.

- 1 M. Desai, *Rethinking Islamism: The Ideology of the New Terror*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2007, p.165.
- 2 This thesis was first elaborated in A.P. Schmid & J. de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*, Sage, London, 1982. It can be found in terrorist writings since the 1870s. Ayman al-Zawahiri, for instance, wrote in *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*: '[...] be sure to inflict maximum casualties on the enemy, kill the greatest number of people, for this is the language understood by the West'. – A. al-Zawahiri, 'Knights under the Prophet's Banner' in G. Kepel & J-P. Milelli (eds.), *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 2008, pp. 203-4.
- 3 The 'Single Narrative' can be found in al-Qaeda writings such as in the introduction to *The Al-Qaeda Manual* which was located by the Manchester Metropolitan Police during a search of an al-Qaeda member's home. – CSTPV Primary Documents Archive, St. Andrews, CSTPV.
- 4 According to Charles Kimball, 'religious terrorism' functions on the basis of five essential principles: (i) means justify the end, (ii) holy war, (iii) blind obedience, (iv) absolute truth claims, and (v) the ideal times. See C. Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil: Five Warning Signs*, HarperCollins, New York, 2003.
- 5 A. Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 4th edn, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007, pp. 11-2.
- 6 'There will be continuing enmity until everyone believes in Allah. We will not meet [the enemy] halfway and there will be no room for dialogue with them', al-Qaeda's Charter says. – cit. J.L. Babbin, *In the Words of Our Enemies*, Regnery Press, Washington, D.C., 2007, p. 60.
- 7 Adapted from The Change Institute, *Studies into violent radicalisation: The beliefs, ideologies and narratives*, The Change Institute, London, 2008, p. 5.
- 8 W.I. Thomas & D.S. Thomas, *The Child in America: Behaviour Problems and Programs*, 2nd edn, Knopf, New York, 1928, pp. 571-2.
- 9 Adapted from A. Dalgaard-Nielson, 'Studying violent radicalization in Europe II: The potential contribution of socio-psychological and psychological approaches', Danish Institute for International Studies Working Paper, no 2008/03, 2008, p. 10.
- 10 A. Trethewey, S.R. Corman & B. Goodall, 'Out of their Heads and into their Conversation: Countering Extremist Ideology', Arizona State University Consortium for Strategic Communication, Report no. 902, 14 September 2009, p. 2.
- 11 J. Pressman noted that 'Quashing the idea, what analyst Daniel Byman calls bin Laden's worldview, is extremely difficult because it has been observed and articulated by others'. – J. Pressman, 'Rethinking Transnational Counterterrorism: Beyond a National Framework', *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2007, p. 72. See also I. Buruma & A. Margalit, *Occidentalism. A Short History of Anti-Westernism*, Atlantic Books, London, 2004.
- 12 Adapted from W. McCants (ed.), *Militant Ideology Atlas*, Combating Terrorism Center, Westpoint, 2006, pp. 9-10; and The Change Institute, 'Studies into violent radicalisation'.
- 13 'The growing, and mysterious, irrelevance of al-Qaeda', *The Economist*, 22 January 2009.
- 14 D.E. Apter, 'Political Violence in Analytical Perspective' in D.E. Apter (ed.), *The Legitimization of Violence*, Macmillan, London, 1947, p. 2.
- 15 Daniel J. Goldhagen, who studied genocides including the Holocaust, concluded: 'Language is the basis of mass murder. What we know about the world, about other ethnic groups, about foreigners, is conveyed by means of speech, words, that is language. Mass murder is performed by human beings who hold other human beings to be sub-human or [consider them] a great danger. They utilize language to de-humanize their victims or to demonize them.' *Der Spiegel*, no. 41, 5 October 2009, p. 135.
- 16 G. Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 2004, pp. 293-4.
- 17 A. al-Zawahiri, 'Knights under the Prophet's Banner', pp. 194-5.
- 18 This can be gathered from 'The Al Qaeda Manual' found by Scotland Yard in a house in Manchester belonging to an al-Qaeda member. It opens with a statement saying: 'The confrontation that we are calling for with the apostate regimes does not know Socratic debates..., Platonic ideals..., not Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-gun. [...] Islamic governments have never and will never be established through peaceful solutions and cooperative councils. They are established as they [always] have been by pen and gun, by word and bullet, by tongue and teeth.' – The Al Qaeda Manual. CSTPV Primary Documents archive, p. 4. – Such rejection of dialogue has a long history with al-Qaeda. One of its founders, Osama Bin Laden's teacher and mentor, the Palestinian Dr. Abdullah Azzam, already advocated implacable confrontation in the 1980s: 'Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogue'. – Cit. M. Burleigh, *Sacred Causes. Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda*, Harper Perennial, London, 2007, p. 460.
- 19 B. Hoffman, 'A Counterterrorism Strategy for the Obama Administration', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2009, p. 4. – According to one poll, 8% of the public in Muslim countries surveyed had positive feelings about al-Qaeda, 18 percent mixed feelings and 61 percent negative feelings. – 'US "War on Terror" Has Not Weakened al-Qaeda, Says Global Poll', *World Public Opinion.org*, 28 September 2008, retrieved 1 November 2009, <[http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international\\_security\\_bt/547.php?lb=brglm&pnt=547&nid=&id=>](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/international_security_bt/547.php?lb=brglm&pnt=547&nid=&id=>).
- 20 C. McCauley & J. Stellar, 'U.S. Muslims after 9/11: Poll Trends 2001-2007', p. 41, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2009, pp. 35-47.
- 21 P. Waldmann, *Radikalisierung in der Diaspora. Wie Islamisten im Westen zu Terroristen werden*, Murmann Verlag, Hamburg, 2009.
- 22 Cf. *ibid*.
- 23 Cf. S. Maher & M. Frampton, *Choosing our friends wisely. Criteria for engagement with Muslim groups*, Policy Exchange, London, 2009.
- 24 This happened to the founders of the counter-extremist Think Tank *Quilliam Foundation*, Maa'jid Nawaz and Ed Husain, in the United Kingdom, who receive support from the British government. See R. Kerai, 'Government gives £ 1m to anti-extremist think tank Quilliam Foundation', *Times Online*, 20 January 2009. See also Maher & Frampton.
- 25 Cf. Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law, *Radicalisation, Recruitment and the EU Counter-radicalisation Strategy*, 17 November 2008, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.transnationalterrorism.eu/tekst/publications/WP4%20Del%207.pdf>>, pp. 75-9 ('15.2 The Amsterdam approach').
- 26 'In July [2009], the House [of Representatives] Appropriations Committee, in approving the fiscal 2010 defense funding bill, said it had identified 10 strategic communications programs that boosted costs from \$9 million in fiscal 2005 to a "staggering \$988 million request for fiscal 2010." The committee said many of the costlier programs appear as "alarmingly non-military propaganda, public relations, and behavioral modification messaging.'" – Cit. W. Pincus, 'McChrystal Says Insurgents Are Winning Communications Battle', *Washington Post*, 27 September 2009.
- 27 The treatment of Muslims in the West, while certainly open to improvement, is markedly better than the one of non-Muslims under fundamentalist Islam. Take, for instance, the conditions which Sheikh Marzouq Salem Al-Ghami, based on historical Muslim practice, set in a sermon at the Al-Rahmah mosque in Mecca: 'If the infidels live among the Muslims, in accordance with the conditions set out by the Prophet, there is nothing wrong with it provided they pay Jizya to the Islamic treasury. Other conditions are [...] that they do not renovate a church or a monastery, do not rebuild ones that were destroyed, that they feed for three days any Muslim who passes by their homes [...] that they rise when a Muslim wishes to sit, that they do not imitate Muslims in dress and speech, nor ride horses, nor own swords, nor arm themselves with any kind of weapon; that they do not sell wine, do not show the cross, do not ring church bells, do not raise their voices during prayer, that they shave their hair in front so as to make them easily identifiable, do not incite anyone against the Muslims, and do not strike a Muslim [...] If they violate these conditions, they have no protection'. – Reproduced in Babbin, p.38.
- 28 U.S. Government, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., 2004, p. 42.
- 29 Al-Qaeda's Charter postulates: 'There will be continuing enmity until everyone believes in Allah. We will not meet [the enemy] halfway and there will be no room for dialogue with them'. – Cit. Babbin, p. 60.
- 30 S. Cottee, 'Mind Slaughter: The Neutralizations of Jihadi Salafism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, forthcoming vol. 33, no. 5, 2010; cf. also Buruma & Margalit. p. 68, where the authors cite Osama Bin Laden as saying: 'Death is truth and the ultimate destiny, and life will end anyway'.
- 31 A.K. Cronin, 'Commentary: Al-Qaeda's support is fading', *CNNPolitics.com*, 6 October 2009, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/10/06/cronin.al.qaeda/index.html>>.
- 32 Cottee, 'Mind Slaughter'.
- 33 McCants, pp. 9-10.
- 34 Trethewey, Corman & Goodall, p. 2.
- 35 Cronin, 'Commentary'.
- 36 Cit. C.J. Ciovacco, 'Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?', *Strategic Insights*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2009, pp. 2. See also J. Brachman, 'Abu Yahya's Six Easy Steps for Defeating al-Qaeda', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 1, no. 5, 2007.
- 37 C.J. Ciovacco, pp. 9-10.
- 38 U.S. Government, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, p. 20.
- 39 Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal in an assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, see Pincus, 'McChrystal'.
- 40 An example of a lie would be Bin Laden's statement, in an interview with a Pakistani newspaper where he said: 'I have already said that I am not involved in the 11 September attacks in the United States. [...] Neither I had any knowledge of these attacks nor [did] I consider the killing of innocent women, children and other human beings as an appreciable act. Islam strictly forbids causing harm to innocent women, children, and other people. Such a practice is forbidden even in the course of a battle.' – Exclusive Interview With Usama Bin Ladin on 11 Sept Attacks in US, *The Dawn*, 3 April 2002. Contrast this with another statement of his: 'As for the World Trade Towers, the ones who were attacked and who died in it were part of a financial power. It wasn't a children's school! Neither was it a residence. And the general consensus is that most of the people who were in the towers were men that backed the biggest financial force in the world, which spreads mischief throughout the world.' – Osama Bin Laden in interview with *Al Jazeera*, 20 October 2001, reproduced in: Kepel & Milelli, p. 119).
- 41 Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal in an assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, see Pincus, 'McChrystal'.
- 42 Many of al-Qaeda's claims are quite easy to dismantle and dismiss. For instance, the new American president Barack Obama (termed 'a house negro' by Ayman al-Zawahiri) was blamed by an al-Qaeda spokesman for the Israeli assault on Gaza in these words: 'He kills your brothers and sisters in Gaza mercilessly and without affection' - thereby holding him responsible for a war that was begun and ended before he even took office. Cit. J. Warrick, 'To Combat Obama, Al-Qaeda Hurls Insults', *Washington Post*, 25 January 2009.
- 43 Cit. A. Ripley, 'Reverse Radicalism', *TIME - What's Next* 2008, 13 March 2008.
- 44 Ayman al-Zawahiri in his book 'Knights under the Prophet's Banner', reviewing in late 2001 more than three decades of anti-regime struggle of the jihadist movement in Egypt, listed as one of his organisation's achievements: 'A clear thought and ideology: The Islamic movement has largely succeeded in clarifying the main elements of its ideology, relying on strong evidence from the Koran, the prophet's tradition, and the respected scholars. This provided it with a solid base on which it hoisted its banner, which everyday attracts new advocates, God willing.' - Cit. Foreign Broadcasting Information Service (FBIS-NES-2002-0108).

# 5 Narratives and Counter-Narratives for Global Jihad: Opinion versus Action<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In this chapter, we argue that different audiences accept different parts of the 'Global Jihad' narrative; that many agree with the narrative who will never engage in radical action or terrorism; and that security forces should not target the narrative as if targeting terrorists. One implication of our analysis is a need for caution against overreach with respect to counter-narratives, that is, against too expansive an understanding of what sort of narratives are to be countered. Our analysis endeavours to pinpoint what and what not to target and why, and reveals that different counter-narratives are required to combat each part of the 'Global Jihad' narrative and the subset of Muslims who believe it.

## Global Jihad narrative in the pyramid model

Good research starts with an interesting research problem. In the case of research on terrorism, the problem begins with the meta-narrative of 'Global Jihad', which may be divided into four levels:

1. Islam is under attack by Western crusaders led by the United States;
2. *Jihadis*, whom the West refers to as 'terrorists', are defending against this attack;
3. The actions they take in defence of Islam are proportional, just and religiously sanctified; and, therefore
4. It is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.<sup>2</sup>

Several authors in this volume posit this meta-narrative to be a compound of four separate narratives. The *political narrative* is concerned with the evils of the West, including a neo-Marxist take on global inequities and distributive effects arising from Western hegemony and exploitation whose roots can be traced to Islam's best known cultural historian, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). The *moral narrative* focuses on the internal contradictions of liberal democracies, which profess freedom as their core value and equality and justice as their subsidiary values, although these values are unrealisable ideals and indeed drivers of a society's moral decay. The *religious narrative* legitimises violent struggle to defend Islam against the crusader West. The *social-psychological narrative*, finally, employs a classic in-group – out-group strategy to brand as infidels those who do not buy into this syllogism, while promoting the brotherhood of arms as a means of countering social exclusion and fulfilling a yearning for adventure and sacrifice that compels the 'true believer'.

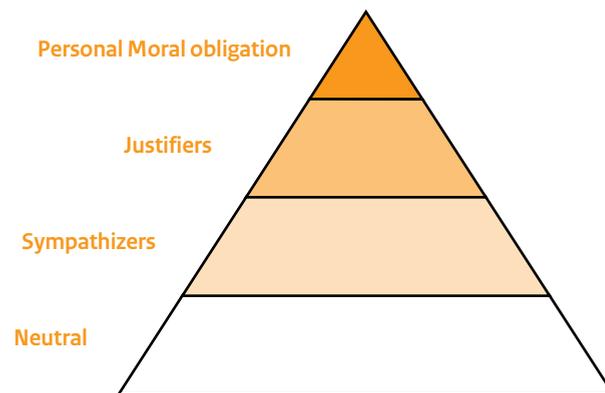
No wonder this sounds all too familiar to the astute historical observer. The parallels in the meta-narratives that accompany Global Jihad on the one hand, and Germany's Red Army Faction and Italy's Red Brigades and ETA on the other hand, are striking, notably where the political, moral and social-psychological narratives are concerned. A key difference is the religious component that sets Islamic jihad against Western crusaders.

We have here historical echoes of the religiously-motivated civil wars that ravaged Europe throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: however, much of this is just old wine in new bottles. The difference now is both the global scale of the struggle and the destructiveness of modern weaponry at the disposal of those intent on doing harm. We know how the story of Europe's religious strife ends, which makes it tempting to dismiss the meta-narrative of Global Jihad as an atavistic reaction that will be eviscerated by modernisation, analogous to what Karl Deutsch had famously postulated about nationalism. Modernisation, however, did not eradicate nationalism – it actually fostered its proliferation. Similarly, the diffusion of the Global Jihad narrative must be taken seriously. Understanding this narrative – who joins

in what parts of the narrative, and why – is necessary to begin constructing and targeting effective counter-narratives.

The Global Jihad narrative is conveniently analysed in terms of a pyramid of radicalisation in which the base includes all that currently do not accept any of the Global Jihad narrative (Figure 1). A layer above the base are those who sympathise with the first step of the jihadist frame: that the West is waging a war on Islam (Global Jihad level 1, pyramid second level). Next higher in the pyramid are Muslims who believe that jihadis are acting in defence of Islam and that their actions are morally and religiously justified (Global Jihad levels 2 and 3, pyramid third level). Higher yet in the pyramid are Muslims who believe there is an individual duty to support and participate in defence of Islam (Global Jihad level 4, pyramid fourth level). There is some complexity here: Islam distinguishes between defence that must be mandated by legitimate authority, a group responsibility, and defence that is an individual obligation of every good Muslim. Osama bin Laden has argued that the current threat to Islam justifies an individual obligation not dependent on having state or religious authority behind it, and we here identify belief in the individual obligation as the highest, most radicalised level of the narrative pyramid.

Figure 1. The narrative pyramid



The implication of a pyramid model of the Global Jihad narrative is that the lower levels represent more people, with lower levels of radicalisation. Polling data offer some support for this implication.

ICM telephone polls of U.K. Muslims have asked the following question: ‘President Bush and Tony Blair have said the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam. Do you agree or disagree?’ In November 2004, 80% of a national sample of 500 Muslims disagreed, that is, endorsed the idea that the war on terrorism is a war against Islam. In other words, about 80% of U.K. Muslims agreed with level (1) of the Global Jihad narrative.

A July 2005 ICM poll of U.K. Muslims asked a more extreme question: ‘Do you think any further attacks by British suicide bombers in the UK are justified or unjustified?’ This poll was conducted after the July 7, 2005 bombings in the London underground, and 5% of a national sample of 500 Muslims said that further attacks were justified. In other words, about 5% of U.K. Muslims agreed with levels (2) and (3) of the Global Jihad narrative.

Unfortunately, we have not found any polling data asking about the individual obligation for jihad, level (4), but we speculate that the number agreeing would be less than 5%.

It is worth noting that in the case of U.K. Muslims in 2004-2005, the pyramid model is misshapen insofar as the neutral base of the pyramid, those who do not accept even the first level of the Global Jihad, that the West is engaged in war against Islam, is smaller than the next level. Only 20% of U.K. Muslims do not see a war on Islam, whereas 80% do see a war on Islam. Descriptively, then, the base of the pyramid is smaller than the first level of opinion radicalisation.

An important implication of the pyramid model of radicalisation is that different parts or combinations of the Global Jihad narrative are held by Muslims in different layers of the pyramid. Here we do not suggest that all who justify suicide bombing also see a war on Islam, but we expect that most do. Similarly, not all who feel a personal moral obligation for jihad also defend suicide bombing, but we expect that many do. In short, those who accept more radical elements of the Global Jihad narrative are more likely – but not 100% likely – to accept less radical elements. Given that different subsets of Muslims accept different elements of the Global Jihad narrative, it seems likely that the origins, or sources or predictors of acceptance differ for different elements.

Again, polling data offer some support for this implication. The 2007 Pew poll of U.S. Muslims included two items similar to the items already cited from two different ICM polls of U.K. Muslims. Doubts about the war on terrorism are represented by this item: ‘Do you think that the U.S.-led war on terrorism is a sincere effort to reduce international terrorism or don’t you believe that?’ Justification of suicide bombing is represented by the following item: ‘Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?’

Seeing the war on terrorism as insincere and seeing suicide attacks in defence of Islam as justified are only weakly correlated ( $r = .05$ ; 74% of respondents who say suicide attacks are often or sometimes justified also say the war on terrorism is insincere, whereas 63% of respondents who say suicide attacks are rarely or never justified also say the war on terrorism is insincere). In other words, there is little association between these two aspects of the Global Jihad narrative: knowing who believes one aspect seems to say little about who believes the other aspect.

Given this weak correlation, it is not surprising that the predictors of the two beliefs are different. By our calculation from Pew data, the best predictor of seeing the war on terrorism as ‘insincere’ is belief that the U.S. made the wrong decision in using military force against Iraq ( $r = .38$ ). But believing the U.S. made the wrong decision in Iraq does not predict justifying suicide attacks in defence of Islam ( $r = .00$ ). In fact, the Pew poll does not include any strong predictor of justifying suicide attacks; the best of the weak predictors is age, with younger respondents justifying suicide attacks more than older ( $r = .16$ ).

In short, polling data for U.K. and U.S. Muslims suggest that different aspects of the Global Jihad narrative are held by different subsets of U.S. and U.K. Muslims, and that the predictors of different aspects of the narrative also differ. But although we have sufficient data to parse this phenomenon, we do not have enough

empirical evidence to gauge its micro-causal mechanisms: We know very little about the distal and proximate conditions that explain why any given individual happens to be more receptive to any one element of the narrative than another. In short, we have some idea who is likely to be more (or less) prone to the narrative: but not knowing why the narrative has traction with any given individual makes it difficult to devise an effective counter-narrative strategy. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence cited here is sufficient to conclude that when it comes to counter-narratives, one size does not fit all.

### Global Jihad action in the pyramid model

For decades psychologists have studied the relation between beliefs and feelings (cognition and attitude) and action (behaviour). There is no simple generalisation to be made about this relation. Under some circumstances, beliefs and feelings are good predictors of action (in a voting booth, for instance) and in other circumstances beliefs and feelings are weak predictors of action (when strong social norms run counter to an individual's attitude, for instance). When action consistent with beliefs and feelings is costly (such as committing oneself to a suicide bombing), the gap between belief and behaviour is likely to be large.

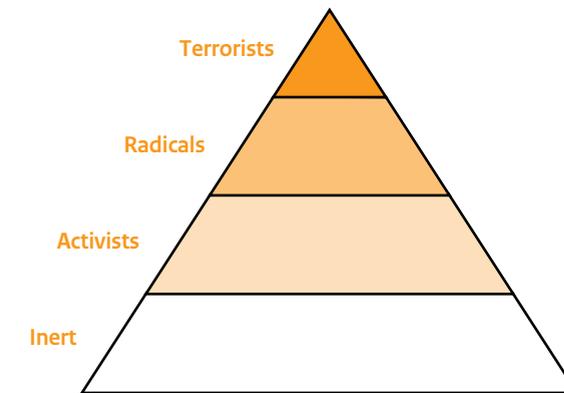
This also seems to be the situation for the Global Jihad narrative: the opportunity cost of believing in a war on Islam and feeling that suicide attacks are justified in defence of Islam is relatively low; action in defence of Islam is disproportionately costly in time, energy, and, at least in Western countries, risk of incarceration or death.

The gap between belief and action is evident in the contrast between polling data and security reports in the U.K., where 5% of adult Muslims saw reported suicide attacks as justified but only several hundred terrorism-related arrests have been made since 9/11. The 5% of Muslims projects to about 50,000 of the roughly one million adult Muslims in the U.K., indicating that only about 200 of 50,000 U.K. Muslims have acted on their beliefs in the Global Jihad narrative. The difficulty for security forces is finding the needle in the haystack: the one among hundreds who will act on belief in even the most extreme aspects of the Global Jihad narrative.

A similar situation exists in the U.S. According to the 2007 Pew poll of an estimated 2.3 million U.S. Muslims, 8% find suicide attacks justified *often* or *sometimes*, but fewer than a hundred terrorism-related arrests have been made since 9/11.

The gap between the Global Jihad narrative and Global Jihad violence, at least in Western countries, indicates the need for another pyramid model, the pyramid of action (Figure 2). Here the base includes all Muslims who are politically inert, whatever their beliefs or feelings. The next higher level are activists, engaged in legal and nonviolent political action, although some may join in one or another part of the Global Jihad narrative. Hizb ut-Tahrir members, for instance, are legal activists in both the U.K. and in the U.S. (Hizb had its first national meeting in the U.S. in Chicago in July 2009), even though Hizb, like Osama, is striving to re-establish a supra-national caliphate. Higher yet are radicals, engaged in illegal political action that may include violence. Finally, at the apex of the action pyramid are the terrorists, radicals who target lethal violence against civilians.

Figure 2. The action pyramid



It is important to distinguish between non-violent and violent political behaviour, because, ultimately, it is the latter that is of primary concern for the purposes of public security. The former is of interest only if there is evidence that it presages the latter. For example, the movement for voting rights for women, and the civil-rights movement militating for racial equality, were both considered radical and engaged in some illegal political action. With the benefit of hindsight, however, would we judge them as a liability or as an asset to the body politic?

We believe that the borders between the levels of the action pyramid represent the most important transition points of radicalisation in action: from doing nothing to doing something; from legal political action to illegal political action; and from illegal political action to killing civilians. It is important to be clear, however, that the action pyramid is neither a conveyor belt nor a stage theory in which an individual must progress through each succeeding level in a linear fashion to become a terrorist. It is not necessary to be an activist to become a radical, nor is it necessary to be involved in nonviolent radical action to move to violent radical action.

### Mechanisms of radicalisation

Any attempt at formulating a stage theory of radicalisation in action is contradicted by the multiple mechanisms of radicalisation identified at individual, group, and mass levels. The following mechanisms of radicalisation have been identified, mostly from case materials about terrorist groups and terrorist individuals. No claim is made that this is an exhaustive list: indeed, additional mechanisms have been identified since the first publication of this approach by McCauley and Moskaleiko in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

#### Individual level

1. Personal grievance. An individual is angry and seeks revenge for government action that harms self or loved ones. Personal grievance usually does not lead to action unless interpreted as part of some larger group grievance. Chechen Black Widows revenging brothers and husbands killed by Russians are a commonly cited example.
2. Group grievance. Identification with a group perceived as victims can radicalise an individual who has not personally experienced any grievance. This includes 'lone-wolf terrorism' and 'sudden jihad

syndrome', with such examples as the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, as well as Mohammed Rea Taheri-azar, and Momin Khawaja.

3. Self persuasion in action – the slippery slope. This mechanism is rooted in the famous Milgram experiment and is consistent with the image of a 'conveyor belt', where people are gradually radicalised in a step-by-step process.
4. Love. Individuals can join an existing radical group because someone they love – friend, romantic partner, family member – asks them, or because they want to aid and protect a loved one. Sometimes a member of a radical group may cultivate a personal connection with a potential recruit.
5. Fear. In a failed state, individuals can join a militant group because they feel safer with friends with guns than on the street alone. Examples are found among militants of the FARQ in Colombia and sectarian groups in Iraq.
6. Thrill, Status, Money. This mechanism depends on individual preferences, usually those of young males. Examples include joining the U.S. Marine Corps, setting Improvised Explosive Devices in Iraq or Afghanistan, or joining a street gang.

#### Small group level

7. Group polarisation. Discussion among members of a like-minded group moves members further in the initially agreed-upon direction. Two tendencies contribute: individuals not wanting to fall behind in representing group-favoured values, and hearing a preponderance of arguments in the group-favoured direction.
8. Group competition. Radicalisation can occur when non-state actors compete with a state, compete against non-state groups (often in the form of 'outbidding' other groups), and when factions of the same group compete with one another (such as multiple fissions within the IRA).
9. Extreme cohesion under isolation/threat. This multiplier of group dynamics (mechanisms 7 and 8) occurs for underground groups, cults, and small groups in combat.

#### Mass level

10. External threat. This mechanism is at work at both the group level (mechanism 8) and the mass level. External threats lead to increased group identification, magnified ethnic entrepreneurship and the power of leaders, sanctions for in-group deviates, and idealised in-group values. An example is the U.S. reaction to 9/11 and the Somali diaspora's reaction to Ethiopian (Christian) troops entering Somalia in 2006.
11. Hate. An essentialised and dehumanised view of the enemy facilitates killing by ethnic or religious category, including civilians as well as militants and military.
12. Martyrdom. Martyrs can radicalise a mass audience by their example of sacrifice. A classic example is the 1981 hunger strike in which 10 IRA/INLA prisoners perished but the Republican cause was resuscitated.

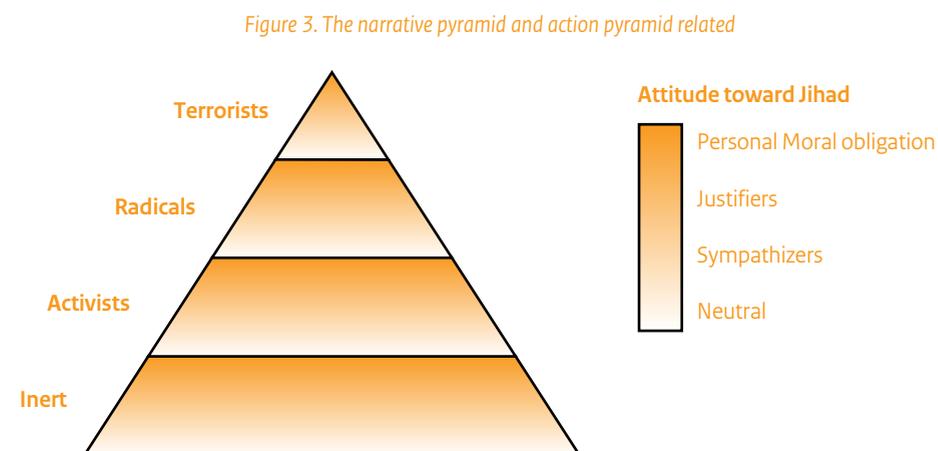
For the purpose of understanding the radicalisation pyramid, it is important to notice that five of the six individual-level mechanisms do not depend on accepting new ideas from a radical ideology or narrative. Personal grievance, slippery slope, love, fear, and thrill-seeking can move individuals to radical action, including joining an existing radical group. In particular, these five mechanisms do not depend on the existence or acceptance of the narrative of Global Jihad.

In many cases, a radical narrative or ideology is learned after an individual joins a radical group. In these

cases the narrative is less a cause than a rationalisation of commitment to radical action. In rational-choice terms, we might say that the purpose of the narrative is to reduce transaction costs of group interaction by building and reinforcing group cohesion and group consensus about action. Narratives may thus be better conceived of as enablers rather than as drivers of radicalisation. Here it is important to notice that, to the extent that narratives are developed out of action and small group commitments, the potential for blocking radicalisation by counter-narratives is limited.

#### Relating the two pyramids

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that relating the two pyramids, the narrative pyramid and the action pyramid, is anything but straightforward. Figure 3 represents, for each action level, a possible distribution of acceptance of the four aspects of the Global Jihad narrative.



In this representation, acceptance of narrative elements is correlated with levels of action, such that accepting a personal moral obligation for jihad – relative thickness of the black band within each action level – is most likely among the terrorists and least likely among the inert. Similarly, belief in none of the aspects of the Global Jihad narrative – relative thickness of the white band within each action level – is most likely among the inert and least likely among the terrorists.

But the correlation is only probabilistic, not deterministic. A few individual jihadist terrorists may accept no part of the Global Jihad narrative – for instance an individual who joined a terrorist group for the thrill of guns and fighting. And there may be a few politically inert individuals who feel a personal moral obligation for jihad – for instance an individual who does not want to hurt his parents by leaving for jihad.

As already described, it is neither obvious nor known what parts of the Global Jihad narrative appear with what frequency in different levels of the action pyramid. Mechanisms of radicalisation that do not depend on ideology or narrative imply that the Global Jihad narrative is not necessary for radicalisation in action. It seems likely that participation in a radical jihadist group soon teaches most or all of the Global Jihad narrative, but the narrative is not necessary to initiate radical action.

Particularly needed is a better understanding of how individuals and groups shift between sympathy, justification, and support for illegal political activity<sup>4</sup> and the way this shift relates to the ‘multiple economic, social, political, and organizational relations that span borders’.<sup>5</sup> Are there tipping points that put individuals ‘over the edge’ into action? Does a critical mass of drivers need to be accumulated for individuals to cross thresholds? Are there quantum leaps from illegal political action such as banned marches and property damage to lethal violence against human targets? What precipitates such leaps?

We turn now to consider briefly issues of efficacy and human-rights that are raised by recognising the weak relation between narrative and action.

#### *Efficacy and efficiency issues*

Security and intelligence agencies’ mandate is not to control radicalisation but to protect against violent threats. A common presumption is that radical ideas translate into a violent threat. And not just any type of violence but politically-motivated violence that is directed at general populations, less for the purpose of inflicting physical harm as for maximizing psychological impact in order to disrupt legitimate authority and the capacity to govern.

As research by, amongst others, Counterpoint and Demos documents<sup>6</sup>, whereas bravado about violence proliferates among radicals, not only are they unlikely to act on it, but those most likely to act also do not come from the circle of radicals engaged in bravado. To the contrary, those prone to violence are fully aware of the costs associated with their activity and, as rational actors, will thus be intent not to draw attention to themselves. In other words, zeroing in on ‘narrative radicals’ is likely to generate an ineffective diversion of resources from ‘action radicals’, as false positives proliferate.

Taken together, the three pyramids indicate that the relationship between radical ideas and radical violence is problematic. Making a related point, the chapter by Max Taylor and Gilbert Ramsay in this volume details the problematic logic that plagues the field. As an analogy, only a fraction of people who look at child pornography actually act out as paedophiles and paedophiles are not necessarily into child pornography.

Another issue parallel to the problem of focusing on ‘narrative radicals’ is the search for suspicious financial transactions. In accordance with the United Nation’s Counter-Terrorism Initiative, many countries have now enacted legislation that requires banks to flag suspicious transactions, usually defined by an arbitrarily low threshold (usually about \$10,000). As a result, the number of suspect transactions has grown exponentially. Yet, the resources devoted to acting on those flagged transactions have grown arithmetically (at best). As a result, the number of false positives has escalated while detection of genuinely illicit transactions has actually declined.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of conceiving the process of radicalisation as a pathway,<sup>8</sup> a conveyor belt of sorts with a mechanistic understanding of individuals set on a quasi-determinist trajectory, the evidence points, instead, to plural pathways with no profile trajectory.<sup>9</sup> Models that treat radicalisation as a single pathway that starts at political sympathy and ends in political violence, run the risk of oversimplifying what is actually quite a heterogeneous process by making many of the variables that matter exogenous to the model.<sup>10</sup> Examples exist of individuals who ‘self-radicalise’,<sup>11</sup> individuals who are specifically targeted by recruiters,<sup>12</sup> individuals

recruited by family or friendship groups,<sup>13</sup> and more recently individuals who are radicalised through media, largely the Internet.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Human rights issues*

Arguments of efficacy aside, there is the human rights perspective to be considered. Democracies have an unfortunate history of labelling any serious challenge to the status quo as radicalism. While the history of the rise of the modern security and police state throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries need not detain us here,<sup>15</sup> states cannot be careful enough when endeavouring to control or censor thought and beliefs. Indeed, the rise of democratic pluralism can be read as the struggle against state control and censorship of views from the margins. Some secularists today would like to attribute many of the world’s ills to religion.<sup>16</sup> Their inference is that any type of ‘extremist’ religion ought to be marginalised or banned. The problem with this approach is that it misses the crux of the problem: only actual violence is the responsibility of security forces.

Democracies are premised on the assumption that freedom of speech and thought should prevail, which is why free speech is protected from arbitrary government interference. Only under very specific circumstances is an utterance in and of itself a crime. Rather, the criminal justice system in a democracy is generally structured to deal with acts of crime *ex post facto*. Intent and motivation are not normally punishable; they only factor into the degree of punishment. In short, gauging threat by means of profiling characteristics such as religion, political opinion, or country of origin is not particularly effective, unnecessarily aggravates the security problem by alienating entire communities, and is usually difficult to reconcile with democratic constitutions.

Since courts have been reticent to convict based on terrorist motivation and intent, and since political opinion does not necessarily translate into actual illegal action, focus on the Global Jihad narrative is not a fruitful avenue for intelligence and law enforcement to pursue. Rather the war of ideas that can be tracked in polls, focus groups, web sites and video releases must be separated from the war on terrorists. The pyramid of narrative and the pyramid of action can together contribute to this kind of understanding and this kind of action.

Another way to tackle the aim of counter-narratives is to invert the problem. The evidence in this chapter suggests that one way to think about Global Jihad is as a massive free-rider problem: While the grievances are widely shared, the call to arms is not. Moreover, those who share the call to arms may have motives other than grievances to join the fight. For a counter-narrative strategy to be strategic, then, it should (1) frustrate the violent extremists by exacerbating their free-rider problem and (2) capture those individuals who join in the meta-narrative without the meta-narrative having much purchase on their behaviour.

The evidence in this chapter suggests that the way to aggravate the free-rider problem is to widen the gap between narrative and behaviour. That is best done by (1) raising the costs associated with acting on violent beliefs (which liberal democracies’ legislators and security forces appear to have done quite successfully in recent years), and (2) mitigating the mechanisms of radicalisation that can push some individuals to bear such costs nonetheless. On both points, the research on counter-narratives overlaps closely with work on opposing terrorist organisations.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the war of ideas against the Global Jihadist narrative must be distinguished from the war against active terrorists. Violent political action must be the focus of security forces, whereas the war of ideas is in the political realm of choosing and promoting political policies.

Within the war of ideas, we suggest that different parts of the Global Jihad narrative are held by different audiences, and that each part and its audience must be separately targeted if counter-narratives are to be effective.<sup>17</sup> One approach to the war of ideas would give priority to ‘top-down’ counter-narratives that target (1) individuals who are higher up in the pyramid and (2) individuals who are particularly prone to an upward trajectory in the pyramidal model.

The more radicalised individuals higher up are in one sense an easier target, because there are fewer of them. This makes the counter-narrative easier to tailor but also makes it more difficult to communicate the message to the target audience. In addition, those individuals who are already more radicalised are likely to be more resistant to even the best counter-narrative.

The second set of individuals is even more complicated to address because, in each pyramid level - whether of the narrative pyramid or the action pyramid - only few will move toward greater radicalisation in any given period of time. And, as we have reviewed in the section on Mechanisms of Radicalisation, there are many mechanisms of radicalisation and thus many different paths to radicalisation. The number of paths is calculated by adding up all possible combinations of the twelve mechanisms identified. A ‘profile’ of individuals likely to show increased radicalisation is thus unlikely to be helpful.

Tentatively, then, we conclude that the ‘top-down’ approach is not promising. Radicals and terrorists are difficult to reach and difficult to move, and no profile exists for predicting those most susceptible to radicalisation. A lesser but still significant problem is that focusing on the more radicalised presents a real predicament for research. The higher up in the radicalisation pyramid people are – whether narrative or action pyramid – the less likely they are to collaborate with researchers for fear of risking the attention of security forces.

Thus, we lean toward the view that the war of ideas should give priority to a ‘bottom-up’ focus on the lower levels of the two pyramids. The public-opinion evidence cited in this chapter has already suggested how we can make some inroads into understanding what are sometimes referred to as ‘vulnerable populations’. Polling data can assess the percentages of Muslims who accept: none of the Global Jihad narratives; level one of the narrative, the ‘war on Islam’; and levels two and three of the narrative, the justification of suicide bombing in defence of Islam. Polling data could track changes in these percentages as evidence of counter-narratives, and, in the long run, provide an evidence-based science of counter-narratives against the Global Jihad narrative.

A poll of Ottawa Muslims conducted by the authors provides another kind of evidence relating to counter-narratives.<sup>17</sup> Results of the poll indicated, not surprisingly, that respondents approving one militant group (e.g. Hamas) were likely to approve others (e.g. Hezbollah, al-Qaeda). Similarly, results indicated that respondents approving one Western country (e.g. Canada) were likely to approve others (e.g. U.S., Israel).

More surprising was the fact that approval of militant groups was unrelated to approval of Western countries. Approval of Hamas was not related to disapproval of Israel, for instance.

If replicated for other populations of Muslims, these results would have significant implications for countering the Global Jihad narrative. It seems that we cannot count on turning Muslims against Islamic militants via counter-narratives that help Muslims feel more positive toward the West. Similarly, perhaps we cannot count on making Muslims more positive toward the West by turning them against Islamic militants. Although it is easy to assume that Muslims must choose between Islamic militants and the West, our results suggest that the war of ideas against the Global Jihad narrative must have two separate and independent targets: moving Muslims against militants and moving Muslims toward the West.

Finally, it is important to raise another kind of difficulty with counter-narratives, no matter whether the target is top-down or bottom-up. The danger is that a message may be effective with the target audience but have unintended consequences for those not immediately targeted. In this, counter-narratives are similar to more kinetic forms of counterinsurgency: both can have collateral damage that undermines political goals. For instance, a message arguing that Islam does not approve killing enemy civilians might combat acceptance of suicide bombing in defence of Islam, but might at the same time reinforce, at least implicitly, that Western countries are enemies engaged in war against Islam.

In the end, the danger with counter-narratives is what the military refers to as a ‘ready-fire-aim’ problem: We think we know the source of the problem when, in fact, the issue is much more complex and differentiated than it appears. Although a well-intentioned solution, it may either risk diffusing scarce resources without a measurable effect or spawning unintended consequences. The good news is that, in the marketplace of ideas, democracy’s mantra of non-violence to settle political disputes appears to have the upper hand. The bad news is that democracies have not cornered the market yet.

- 1 This research was supported by the United States Department of Homeland Security through the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), grant number N00140510629. However, any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect views of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.
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- 12 See Hegghammer, pp. 39-60. This may also include charismatic leaders. See for example: S. O'Neill & D. McGrory, *The Suicide Factory, Abu Hamza and the Finsbury Park Mosque*, Harper Perennial, London, 2006.
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- 14 See for example Kohlmann, pp. 95-109; A. Stenersen, 'The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2008, pp. 215-33; B. Lia, 'Al Qaeda Online: Understanding Jihadist Internet Infrastructure', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2006.
- 15 See for example D.E. Emerson, *Metternich and the Political Police: Security and Subversion in the Hapsburg Monarchy (1815-1830)*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1968.
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# 6 Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons from Cases of Terrorist Dropouts<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

As the United States continues to fight militarily to disrupt the efforts of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the U.S. government has slowly come to the realisation that military force alone cannot defeat violent extremism. There has been increased recognition that capturing and killing all terrorists is not a realistic strategy, and that we must spend more time understanding how and why individuals are becoming terrorists. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld posed this fundamental question in an infamous 2003 memorandum, asking 'Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?'<sup>2</sup> At the time, however, there was little genuine focus in the U.S. government on determining the answer to this difficult question.

Today, more than seven years after 9/11, the focus of U.S. and international counterterrorism efforts has shifted, and there is far more attention being paid to the 'softer' side of the fight against terrorism alluded to by Secretary Rumsfeld. There is a growing consensus now that countering the ideology that drives this extremism has become critical in the effort to prevent and defeat the violence that emerges from it. Al-Qaeda's ideas, and those of like-minded groups, must be challenged with a counter-narrative of stronger appeal. There is also a growing recognition that as the U.S. and other parties begin crafting their own narrative to counter that of radical groups in this so-called battle of ideas, it is necessary to better understand the radicalisation process that leads to terrorism. Otherwise, it will be impossible to understand what messages will resonate among terrorist recruits and be effective to counter this radicalisation process. Illustrating this increasing focus on studying and understanding the radicalisation process in the U.S., in 2007, the New York Police Department released a valuable assessment analysing how and where radicalisation occurred in eleven terrorist cells in the West. The federal government also addressed this issue in the July 2009 National Intelligence Estimate titled 'The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland'.<sup>3</sup>

However, there has been little focus on the flip side of the radicalisation equation – understanding those who have decided to *leave* terrorist organisations. In order to determine what kind of counter-narrative might be effective among those seemingly hardened individuals already in terrorist organisations or those well along the path to radicalisation, it is useful to look at examples of people who have voluntarily walked away from these organisations. Therefore, this chapter seeks to address the question: What lessons for developing successful counter-narratives can be learned by analysing individual cases of terrorist dropouts? Determining the reasons for a change in perspective could help governments craft messages designed to peel people away from terrorist organisations; this is one vital element of an effective counter-narrative. Figuring out who might be best positioned to deliver this message is another key angle from which to view the efficacy of a counter-narrative strategy. Having a better grasp of this 'drop-out' phenomenon may also enable governments to better predict whether an individual – or even a cell – is likely to follow through with an attack. Second, it may make it easier for governments to determine which cell members are particularly vulnerable to targeted deradicalisation efforts.

Developing an effective counter-narrative strategy will not be an easy task. An effective counter-narrative will need to address not only those vulnerable to the extremist message, but also those on the path toward radicalisation and those already radicalised. It is clear, therefore, that the U.S. government and others cannot develop a single, overarching counter-narrative expected to work across the board.

### The spread of the extremist narrative

Before examining the stories of those who have voluntarily walked away from terrorist organisations, it is useful to survey the state and strength of al-Qaeda's current appeal. Understanding why individuals are still attracted to Bin Laden's message is key to fighting against it. Despite signs of weakening, the underlying extremist narrative offered by al-Qaeda and its affiliates remains strong and compelling for some. Al-Qaeda charges that the U.S. and the West, more broadly, are at war with Islam and that the Muslim world must unify to defeat this threat and reestablish the caliphate. As evidence for their narrative, extremist groups point to the war in Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and U.S. support for Israel.

Al-Qaeda's recruitment extends to distant witnesses of these radical policies, far beyond, for example, detainees at Abu Ghraib. Instrumental to this wider success is the group's ability to connect individuals' local grievances to a global narrative. In fact, there is strong evidence that al-Qaeda's efforts to spread its destructive ideology have encouraged terrorist groups previously focused on more local targets, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (formerly known as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), to shift their ideological focus to the global struggle. By appropriating the al-Qaeda brand, other so-called homegrown terrorists have become far more dangerous than they otherwise would have been. And terrorists inspired by, but with no direct ties to, al-Qaeda continue to perpetuate violence globally, justified by al-Qaeda's global narrative.

The reasons the extremist narrative finds fertile soil in so many societies around the world are as various as the societies themselves. Some young Muslims may respond to a radicaliser's message because they feel excluded from their societies, trapped as they are in poverty or hopelessness within authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and beyond. Others, well-off and well-educated, live in Western democratic nations, but struggle with issues of belonging and identity and find that the radical message resonates with their experience and circumstances.

After looking at the reasons why, and processes by which, individuals are radicalised, it is clear that, as a senior British intelligence official stated, 'there is no single path that leads people to violent extremism.' Rather, as the official continued, 'social, foreign policy, economic, and personal factors all lead people to throw their lot in with extremists.'<sup>4</sup>

That being said, there has been a spate of seemingly good news in the counterterrorism arena over the past year, as former terrorist leaders and clerics have renounced their previous beliefs. Former Egyptian Islamic Jihad head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr Fadl), whose treatises al-Qaeda often cited to justify its actions, has written a new book rejecting al-Qaeda's message and tactics. Shaykh Salman bin Fahd al-Awda, an extremist cleric whose incarceration in the 1990s by the Saudis reportedly helped inspire Osama bin Laden to action, went on television to decry al-Qaeda's operations, asking bin Laden, 'How much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed [...] in the name of al-Qaeda?'<sup>5</sup> In the United Kingdom, former members of the radical group Hizb ut-Tahrir established the Quilliam Foundation, which describes itself as 'Britain's first Muslim counter-extremism think tank'. Quilliam aims to undermine the ideological foundation of radical extremism by refuting its premises. It is still too early to gauge the impact of these various recantations, but nonetheless they are certainly promising signs, at the very least.

### Four lessons learned for crafting a successful counter-narrative

#### 1. Undermine terrorist leadership

As with the radicalisation process, which seems to differ from person to person, there is not one clear overarching reason why individuals have walked away from terrorist organisations. The reasons for a change of heart can be strikingly prosaic: family, money, petty grievances. But they can also revolve around shaken ideology or lost faith in a group's leadership. Among such varied reasons, however, several common themes emerge when examining why different dropouts have left terrorist organisations. Governments may be able to take advantage of the knowledge of these trends to better formulate appropriate counter-narratives.

In studying the various terrorist dropout cases, it seems clear that 'Naming and Shaming', or undermining terrorist and extremist leadership, should constitute one part of the approach. Crafting messages that significantly detract from leaders' authority and credibility is vital. A general lack of respect for a group's leadership has often been a factor in dropping out of terrorist organisations. Essam al-Ridi, an Egyptian veteran of the 1980s jihad against the Soviets, testified during the 1998 East African embassy bombings trial that he resented taking battlefield orders from bin Laden and others who lacked military experience during the Afghan jihad. The decisive factor for al-Ridi's change of perspective was in a battle in which many jihadis died – in his view needlessly – as a result of inept leadership. In this battle, al-Qaeda declared a victory nonetheless. Al-Ridi has stated, '[m]y judgment as a person living here, not in the hereafter, is that this is pure killing. If you don't know what you're doing, you are killing your people [...] I became more angry and more opposing what's happening in Afghanistan and what's happening to Osama and how he became a leader of his own.'<sup>6</sup>

Ziad Jarrah, one of the 9/11 hijackers, was unhappy with Mohammed Atta's leadership while the 19 plotters were in the U.S., and the two often clashed. Jarrah had been on his own for most of his time in the U.S. before 9/11 and strongly resisted Atta's attempts to exert more direct control. At least in part due to his problems with Atta, Jarrah, who eventually became the hijacker pilot on the United 93 flight, was contemplating dropping out of the plot during the summer of 2001. In an emotional conversation, Ramzi Binalshibh – the Hamburg-based liaison between the cell plotting the 9/11 attacks and al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Afghanistan – persuaded Jarrah to stay.

Noman Benotman, the former leader of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), also turned his back on the terrorist cause, abandoning not only LIFG but al-Qaeda as well.<sup>7</sup> Benotman had real differences with bin Laden over the direction of the global jihadist movement, and Benotman claims to have asked the al-Qaeda Emir to leave behind the terrorism business in 2000, contending that they were fighting a losing battle. After 9/11, Benotman resigned from his position in LIFG, concerned that the U.S. would likely respond to the attack by targeting both al-Qaeda and his own organisation.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps then, the U.S. efforts to undermine AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by showing a video which made clear that he did not know how to handle a gun was potentially effective. Taking steps to avoid building up the reputations of terrorist leaders also likely has merit as a counter-narrative. For example, before 9/11, President Clinton said that he tried to avoid mentioning bin Laden's name too often in order to avoid making him a bigger hero in some parts of the world than he already was.

## 2. Highlight civilian/muslim suffering, hypocrisy of the Islamist narrative

An effective counter-narrative should also demonstrate civilian and Muslim suffering at the hands of the terrorists. Showing the resultant deaths of Muslims and focusing on the hypocrisy of the ideology is a worthwhile endeavour. A review of terrorist dropouts does indicate that this tactic has potential. Disillusionment with the terrorists' strategy and ideology has been, historically, a major reason people have left such groups. Some have felt that their fellow members or leaders have pushed their ideology too far.

One example is Omar bin Laden, Osama's fourth son. He had spent nearly five years living in Afghan training camps but, following 9/11, Omar quit al-Qaeda and called its attacks 'craziness', according to journalist Peter Bergen. He continued, '[t]hose guys are dummies. They have destroyed everything, and for nothing. What did we get from September 11?'<sup>9</sup>

Nazir Abbas, one of the top commanders in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), left his organisation for similar reasons. He trained hundreds to become terrorists in the JI camps that he helped to establish. He later questioned a bin Laden *fatwa* in 2000, which said that killing Americans and Jews everywhere is the highest act of worship and good deeds. It was following this *fatwa* that Abbas began to turn on JI and cooperate with Indonesian counterterrorism authorities. He held that jihad was to be fought only on the battlefield in defence of Islam and believed, in accordance with what he had always been taught, that fighting a holy war did not include the killing of civilians. In fact, Abbas later admitted feeling 'sinful' after the 2002 Bali bombings, since he had helped train the bombers.<sup>10</sup> Abbas felt that his fellow members in JI had an incorrect understanding of the JI mission. True jihad, according to Abbas, was taking place in Afghanistan and the Philippines, against an enemy attacking a Muslim community. Since leaving JI, Abbas has not only turned against the organisation by providing the Indonesian government invaluable information, he has also testified against the group's leadership. Interestingly, Abbas did not think that attacking a repressive government was wrong; his qualms with JI and other terrorist organisations' actions extended only to their violence against civilians. Abbas stated, 'I couldn't understand that exploding bombs against innocent civilians was jihad. That was the difference that made me escape from the group.'<sup>11</sup>

Al-Ridi began helping the U.S. government for similar reasons, explaining that he wanted to cooperate because 'I have an interest in helping you because I think Osama has ruined the reputation of Muslims'.<sup>12</sup> Another useful example is Abu Hadhifa, a long-time member of the Algerian jihad who rose to become the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) forces in eastern Algeria. Hadhifa dropped out of AQIM and turned himself in to Algerian authorities in June 2008,<sup>13</sup> according to his family, after reasoning that the jihad in Algeria was illegitimate.<sup>14</sup>

A counter-narrative that emphasises the terrorist groups' hypocrisy of targeting Muslims and civilians might resonate with those having similar doubts in such organisations. In this way, the U.S. could show that, as National Counter-Terrorism Center Director Michael Leiter has explained, 'it is al-Qaeda, and not the West, that is truly at war with Islam.'<sup>15</sup>

## 3. Portray terrorists as criminals, highlighting hypocrisy of terrorist narrative

In a related manner, painting terrorists as common criminals may help demonstrate the impurity of their ideology and supposed religious conviction. Terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, are increasingly involved in a variety of criminal activities. For example, the al-Qaeda cell that executed the devastating 2004 Madrid

train bombing plot, which killed almost 200 people, partially financed the attack by selling hashish. The terrorists who carried out the July 7, 2005, attacks on the transportation system in London were also self-financed, in part through credit card fraud. In Southeast Asia, the al-Qaeda-affiliated JI financed the 2002 Bali bombings, in part, through jewellery store robberies.

While terrorist groups are involved in a wide array of criminal activity, ranging from cigarette smuggling to selling counterfeit products, the nexus between drugs and terror is particularly strong. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, 19 of the 43 U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations are definitively linked to the global drug trade, and up to 60 percent of terrorist organisations are suspected of having some ties with the illegal narcotics trade.<sup>16</sup> Terrorist groups are particularly attracted to the drug trade because of the potential profits. Beyond selling the product, drugs provide many different avenues of revenue such as taxes on farmers and local cartels, and fees for providing 'security' for all aspects of the supply chain including production, trade, and distribution. Groups like the Afghan Taliban, the Colombian FARC, and the Lebanese Hezbollah generate significant resources from the extortion fees they collect from drug cartels and poppy or coca farmers operating in their 'territory'.

While it may seem to be a contradiction for religiously oriented terrorist groups to rely on criminal activity, these groups seek to justify these seemingly hypocritical actions. In 2006, Khan Mohammed, an Afghan Taliban member convicted last May of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism, explained his involvement in the Afghan drug trade as part of his desire that 'God turn all the infidels into corpses', adding, 'whether it is by opium or by shooting, this is our common goal'.<sup>17</sup> A leader of Fatah al-Islam, an al-Qaeda-linked group based in Lebanon, rationalised his group's bank-robbing activities by noting that 'stealing money from the infidels, from the usurious banks and the institutions which belong to the infidel regimes and states, is a legal thing which Allah has permitted us to do. This money is being seized from them and instead directed towards jihad'.<sup>18</sup> Such a spike in terrorists' criminal activity can be used to the West's advantage in trying to apprehend these groups, namely, by portraying such groups as ideologically hypocritical.

## 4. Focus on life as a terrorist

The fourth theme in a counter-narrative should be a focus on the reality of life as a terrorist. If people are joining because the terrorist lifestyle seems glamorous or because they believe they are fulfilling some larger purpose, demonstrating the reality will help to dispel these myths. Terrorist recruits are often treated badly by these organisations and the reality of life for a terrorist has often driven people out of them. If this message can be promulgated, the counter-narrative would certainly be strengthened. To best exploit this theme, there should be a platform for former members to speak about their unsatisfying lives as members of a terrorist organisation, hopefully emphasising that it simply does not live up to the hype. It is surprising that such seemingly trivial, petty factors can drive seemingly committed terrorists to drop out.

Through studying the personal stories of terrorist dropouts, it can be discerned that the individual operatives' perceived lack of respect from leaders was influential in their decision to break from the radical group. L'Houssaine Kherchtou, a Moroccan who trained to serve as bin Laden's personal pilot, grew bitter after a bin Laden aide turned down his request for \$500 to cover the costs of his wife's Caesarean section. He grew livid when al-Qaeda subsequently paid the expenses for a group of Egyptians to renew their passports in order to travel to Yemen. 'If I had a gun,' Kherchtou later testified, 'I would shoot [bin Laden] at that time'.<sup>19</sup> When the organisation moved to Afghanistan, Kherchtou said that he refused to accompany them,

thus violating his oath to a stingy bin Laden. From then on, he no longer considered himself to be a member of al-Qaeda.

Others have also bailed for financial reasons – often regarding low wages as a sign that they were not being treated with adequate respect. Jamal al-Fadl, a Sudanese radical who was one of al-Qaeda’s first members, fumed over his salary while al-Qaeda was based in Sudan. He began embezzling funds and stole approximately \$100,000 from bin Laden, according to his testimony in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings trial. When bin Laden got wind of al-Fadl’s theft, he ordered him to repay the money. Al-Fadl, after handing back about \$30,000, fled from al-Qaeda, fearing retribution.

A counter-narrative should also focus on fear – to bring home the reality of why an individual should be afraid to be a suicide bomber, for example. Given the fact that some have abandoned a planned attack even at the last minute, a fear-awareness approach could have an impact. This factor appears to have been significant in the case of Sajid Badat, a British citizen who was trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to serve as one of the shoebombers. On December 10, 2001, after completing his al-Qaeda training in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Badat returned home to the U.K. His mission was to blow up an airplane travelling from Europe to the U.S. while his associate, Richard Reid, would do the same on another plane. On December 22, Reid’s attempt was thwarted by his fellow passengers when he tried to light his device on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami. Badat, however, abandoned the plot, leaving his dismantled bomb in his parents’ house in the U.K. He had written to his parents earlier of a ‘sincere desire to sell my soul to Allah in return for Paradise’. Yet, Badat ultimately dropped out because, as he told prosecutors, he wanted to ‘introduce some calm to his life’.<sup>20</sup>

Mohammed al-Owali fled the scene of the 1998 embassy bombing in Nairobi before he could carry out what was supposed to be another component of the suicide attack. While he did not drop out of al-Qaeda, his fleeing the scene may prove useful in considering why terrorists do not follow through on their assignments to commit suicide attacks. In the failed July 21 attacks in London, one of the bombers, Manfo Kwaku Asiedu, a 32-year old British Ghanaian, abandoned his bomb in a West London park. While not much is known about him at this point, it can be presumed that fear was a factor in this last-minute decision.

### Presenting the message

Another critical element of devising a successful counter-narrative strategy is recognising that governments are not always the most effective messengers for presenting the counter-narrative. There is certainly a role for the U.S. government and other governments to play. There are many cases, however, where other actors may make more effective and credible messengers.

#### 1. The role of former terrorists

Former terrorists and extremists are one obvious party that could be employed to transmit the counter-narrative. Their presenting the narrative would resonate particularly strongly compared to that of unknown government officials. As demonstrated by al-Zawahiri’s defensiveness in his lengthy question-and-answer session over the internet in the summer of 2008 in the face of Dr Fadl’s public recantations, the voices of former jihadists appear to be the ones al-Qaeda fears most. These experienced al-Qaeda critics could deliver particularly strong messages about the reality of life as a terrorist and effectively leverage their disillusionment with the cause to lure both potential and active terrorists away from extremist groups.

The U.S. government in particular must also better understand who can wield influence in the Muslim communities throughout the world. These potential messengers can include activists, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, media personalities, and students, among others. U.S. embassies should play a leading role in trying to identify exactly who these people are and then determine how to incorporate them most effectively into the meta-narrative.

#### 2. The role of families

Additionally, the families of terrorists can also play an important role in trying to persuade individuals to leave terrorist organisations. Ties and contact with family have been major factors in causing individuals to reconsider their membership in these organisations. It is possibly for this reason that Atta forbade the 9/11 hijackers to contact their families to say goodbye. The wobbliest of the hijackers, Jarrah, resisted calls to cut ties with his fiancée in Germany and his family in Lebanon, thus souring his relationship with Atta, according to the 9/11 commission.<sup>21</sup> A number of recruits who left their families to join terrorist groups often returned home before carrying out their mission as part of their pre-determined plot. After renewed contact with their families, many trained terrorists subsequently decided to abandon the plots in which they had been selected to participate.<sup>22</sup>

This is exactly what happened to Saud al-Rashid and Mushabib al-Hamlan, two would-be 9/11 plotters. Both men bailed after leaving the fanatical, insular atmosphere of the Afghan training camps and returned home to Saudi Arabia. After getting a visa to enter the U.S., Hamlan contacted his family, despite clear al-Qaeda instructions to the contrary. He found out that his mother was ill and decided not to return to Afghanistan, despite intense pressure from his handlers. Hamlan later moved back in with his parents and returned to college. Similarly, Badat, the would-be shoe bomber, appears to have decided to abandon the plot once he returned to the U.K. and resumed contact with his family.

#### Strengthening the counternarrative in the future

The bottom line is that countering the terrorist narrative is a complicated task with no easy solution. There are a variety of steps beyond the four themes illustrated above that should be taken in the pursuit of successful counter-radicalisation and counter-narrative programs. For instance, the counter-radicalisation programs that are now springing up in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia should be better coordinated. The establishment of a ‘Counter-radicalisation Forum’, where the policymakers and practitioners from the countries engaged in these efforts can compare notes and best practices would be an important step forward. This organisation could also perform independent assessments of each country’s success and press for needed improvements, while recognising, however, that not all countries view the counter-radicalisation problem the same way. The Counter-radicalisation Forum should conduct comprehensive assessments on all aspects of the radicalisation cycle, including why people join terrorist organisations and why some choose to leave; how the radicalisation and deradicalisation process may be different in other parts of the world; how radicalisation is changing as the terrorist threat evolves; and what the realistic limits are in the deradicalisation process.

A comprehensive study exploring the drop-out phenomenon could also have great practical benefits for the U.S. and its partners. Governments could use the knowledge gleaned to shape their counter-radicalisation programs, which are growing in popularity throughout the world. Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia and Singapore, as well as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, are among the

countries that have put these types of programs into place in recent years. Yet it is clear from a preliminary review of individuals who have quit or defected that there are many different factors at play – ranging from strategic disagreements to financial disputes – that drive seemingly committed terrorists to change course. This seems to suggest that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is likely to produce only marginal results and that more flexible and tailored programs are necessary.

This type of study could also have a number of benefits for law enforcement and intelligence agencies’ counterterrorism efforts. Figuring out why individuals have walked away from terrorist groups may enable governments to better predict whether an individual, or even a cell, is likely to follow through with an attack. Understanding dropouts should also make it easier for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to determine which terrorists might be induced to switch sides, and how the government should proceed to encourage this.<sup>23</sup>

There is a great deal that governments could learn from one another as they develop their programs. For example, several of the European countries’ innovations appear to have particular domestic applicability for the U.S.:

- The United States should take a page from the British and ensure that all relevant government agencies fully understand the U.S. strategy and adhere to coordinated counter-radicalisation and counter-narrative strategies. At the very least, the U.S. government should focus on minimising inter-agency tensions that will possibly *contribute* to radicalisation. The U.S. government’s outreach to Arab-Americans and Muslim communities has been driven almost exclusively by its law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Attorneys’ offices, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security. While this contact is important, Muslim communities must see the government as consisting of more than its law enforcement arms. It is therefore critical that engagement is broadened to include service-providing entities, such as the Health and Human Services Department, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
- In the U.S. system, the only place for a local citizen to turn to with concerns about potential radicalisation is the FBI. The government should work with communities to develop alternative non-law enforcement mechanisms at the local level, both governmental and nongovernmental alike, to address radicalisation concerns. The city of Amsterdam’s ‘Information House’ is a model worth emulating.<sup>24</sup>

European governments, on the other hand, could learn a great deal from the robust system the U.S. government has in place to protect and defend civil rights. Some of the many, albeit little known, examples include:

- Justice Department lawsuits against schools and employers for prohibiting students and employees from wearing hijabs.
- Justice Department prosecutions of hate crimes against Muslims.
- The Department of Homeland Security’s Office for Civil Liberties and Civil Rights, the focus of which has been on addressing and resolving complaints (including those of Muslims) associated with the no-fly lists, profiling and naturalisation backlogs.

Though U.S. efforts are little-known and unique in the arena of counter-radicalisation, they have, thus far, succeeded in countering the al-Qaeda narrative and, as such, should be better publicised domestically and abroad. These actions will help to reassure Muslim-American communities, alert them to outlets for

resolving their grievances, encourage greater cooperation with law enforcement and other government agencies, and reduce the resonance of the radical extremist global narrative.

### Conclusion

There is no obvious silver bullet to countering the terrorists’ message, and as this review of various dropout cases reveals, there is certainly not one, simple overarching solution in this complicated arena. As such, the U.S. and other governments worldwide should focus on developing a multi-layered counter-narrative strategy, incorporating many different elements, designed to appeal to a wide variety of people. Looking back at cases where individuals have voluntarily left terrorist organisations, four themes seem to emerge that should be included in any counter-narrative campaign. They are:

1. Undermining the authority and legitimacy of terrorist leaders;
2. Highlighting the targeting of Muslims and civilians in terrorist attacks (which violates core beliefs of Islam);
3. Portraying terrorists as criminals who fail to live according to just Muslim principles; and
4. Focusing on the difficult, financially unstable, fear-filled life of a terrorist.

Beyond carefully *crafting* the counter-narrative, governments must also be mindful of how they *deliver* the counter-narrative. Utilising former terrorists may prove quite advantageous given their ability to directly connect with – and counter – the terrorist narrative. In addition, terrorists’ family members have successfully persuaded recruits, as well as active radicals, to leave behind extremist organisations. Working with terrorists’ families, therefore, may enable the U.S. government and its partners to effectively transmit their counter-narrative. Finally, counter-radicalisation efforts should be increasingly coordinated across national boundaries, thereby enabling individual programs to be strengthened through international cooperation.

Better understanding not only why people join but why they leave terrorist organisations is key to developing a message that resonates with those considering joining these groups, and perhaps even those already on the inside. While the recent statements of clerics and leaders who have rejected al-Qaeda and its ideology are certainly promising developments, the reality is that counterterrorism authorities currently lack a comprehensive understanding of how best to assemble and disseminate a counter-narrative. Until all aspects of the radicalisation cycle are better understood, including the reasons for abandoning the extremist cause, it will be difficult to develop an effective strategy to defeat the terrorist narrative and win the softer side of the fight against terrorism.

1 This paper is largely based on a lecture delivered at the Expert Meeting in the Hague in June 2009. Furthermore, it includes material from the Washington Institute’s Presidential Task Force Report, entitled ‘Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization.’ This report was released by the Institute in March 2009, and can be found at <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PTF2-Counterradicalization.pdf>>. The author served as one of the three co-conveners and primary drafters of that report.

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- 22 See for example D. McGroarty & Z. Hussain, 'New Wave of British terrorists are taught at schools, not in the mountains', *Times Online*, 14 July 2005, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article543782.ece>>.
- 23 The 9/11 plot offers some interesting examples in this regard. While Ziad Jarrah is the most obvious example of someone who might have been willing to turn on his co-conspirators, Said Bahaji – another member of the group in Germany now commonly referred to as the 'Hamburg cell' – may have been even more vulnerable. Bahaji, the only German citizen in the group, was described by associates after 9/11 as insecure, a follower, and not knowledgeable about Islam, which was not surprising given his own acknowledgement that he became a 'strong Muslim in a very short period of time.' One observer said that he did not fit in with the rest of the group because he was 'too German, too pedantic, too Western.' He was also quite weak, both physically and mentally. He left the German Army after a brief stint, and in Afghanistan after 9/11 he complained about the physical conditions and questioned the purpose of the 9/11 attacks. See C. Simpson, S. Swanson & J. Crewdson, '9/11 Suspect Cut Unlikely Figure in Terror Plot', *Chicago Tribune*, 23 February 2003.
- 24 See the Washington Institute's Task Force Report, 'Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization'.

# 7 Contemporary Jihadist Narratives: The Case of Momin Khawaja

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## Introduction

Momin Khawaja was arrested in 2004 in Ottawa, Canada, for his supporting role in a United Kingdom based plot. The plan of the self-formed 'jihadist' cell was to explode a 600 kilogram bomb in London. Momin and his fellow cell members were subsequently convicted of terrorism offences in Canadian and British courts.

His case may be unique in that Momin Khawaja was both literate *and* enjoyed writing extensive emails that explained his radicalisation process and violent beliefs. He also maintained an online blog, which, on occasion, would address radical themes (<http://www.klashinaat.blogspot.com>). During the investigation process all of his computer hard drives were seized from his home and place of employment. The result is an unprecedented multiyear record in which Khawaja describes how he came to be radicalised and why he thought violence was both necessary and justified.

Momin Khawaja was born in Canada on April 14th 1979 as the son of Pakistani immigrants who arrived in Canada in 1967. His family lived in the well-off Ottawa suburb of Orleans in a large single family house. At the time of his 2004 arrest, Momin Khawaja was earning CDN \$500.00 a day (approximately €300) as a private computer consultant to the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs. By his own description he led a relatively normal life until the fall of 2000. His views began to change when he began to have a series of political thoughts during the start of the Second Palestinian Intifada. These thoughts became the basis of his radicalisation process that would eventually lead to violent extremism and his participation in a terrorist plot. This chapter will, after several introductory remarks on the mind and make up of Islamist terrorist, utilise the detailed information available in the case of Momin Khawaja to analyse his radicalisation process, and the various extremist narratives that have influenced him along the way.

## In the mind of a terrorist

Can you get into the mind of a terrorist who tries to plant a bomb with the intent of killing large numbers of innocent people? Is it possible to understand what motivates an individual to go from being a seemingly 'normal' person to one who is willing to use terrorist violence as a means of gaining political influence? In order to understand the mind of a terrorist and the reason why terrorist attacks occur, we must look at how our societies perceive such individuals, as well as the overall political backdrop against which their radicalisation takes place. Simplistic or jingoistic explanations may be suitable for politicians trying to score political points. The public are fed lines such as 'the terrorists hate us because they hate our freedom'. However, these explanations are not sufficient for a society that actually wishes to defend itself while turning back the narratives and ideologies of terrorist groups.

One method of gaining insights into the minds of terrorists is to examine the narratives that they use, stories that will influence them to the extent that they trigger a radical change in thought, and in certain cases also in behaviour. It is important to understand how they perceive world events themselves, and how they then interpret those events and translate them to other like minded individuals. It is furthermore essential to analyse the specific kinds of narratives that influence them as they develop an extremist outlook.

## The make up of an Islamist terrorist

A number of questions are frequently asked in public, most often by politicians and others who seek to amplify an already alarming situation with regards to public safety.<sup>1</sup> However, some of these questions are

based on the simplified perceptions that ‘insane, poverty stricken terrorists’ hate us because they hate our freedom. The reasoning behind these questions is at best facile, or at worst deliberately misleading. Most terrorists who fall into the category of Islamic extremists are not insane, they do not hate freedom, and they do not come from poor or oppressed families. In fact, quite the opposite is true.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is safe to argue that the reasons for becoming a terrorist are much broader.

It is easy and perhaps even comforting to dismiss terrorists as insane individuals, drug addicted extremists or victims of poverty or child abuse. This sophistry avoids the facts such as terrorists are not crazy nor are they clinically insane. Research has shown that the occurrence of mental disease or defects among terrorists studied is less than it is in the population as a whole.<sup>3</sup> It would seem that the majority of terrorist groups avoid potential members who are mentally unstable.

Terrorists also do not commit acts of terrorism because of drug or alcohol problems, nor are they ‘brain-washed’ in the clinical sense of the term.<sup>4</sup> Similar to the claims of insanity, no greater drug or alcohol use is seen among terrorist as compared to the population as a whole. Another popular view is that most terrorists have been subjected to extreme poverty. As seen previously, studies have shown that the claims of poverty as basis of terrorism do not hold up to close examination.

Lastly, claims that emphasise religious fundamentalism, inherited from family members, as basis for extreme views do not withstand closer examination either. Most terrorists do not come from high practising or fundamentalist families. On the contrary, most of them in fact stem from low practising or non-practising families whose children have been sent to secular schools. Therefore, contrary to popular belief, Muslim youth who become terrorists are vulnerable to extremist conversion precisely because of their *lack* of religious knowledge.

If this is what Islamic extremist terrorists are not, then what are they? The make up of Islamist terrorists is important to know when trying to analyse the extremist narratives that might influence them, and when formulating suitable counter-narratives that aim to counteract that influence. Terrorists, in general, tend to be well educated, and their education mostly comes from secular schools. No significant correlation exists between attendance at the madrassas and their recruitment into terrorists groups. It also seems that many terrorists have Bachelor, Master and even PhD level degrees.

Another interesting trend is that that most terrorists are educated in the hard sciences and medicine, rather than social sciences or law.<sup>5</sup> For example, al-Qaeda’s number two man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is a medical doctor, as was one of its founders and ideologues, Dr Fadl. For those who do not have university education, their post-secondary studies are usually computer- or technical-related subjects.

In addition, most of the terrorist are members of families that are either middle class or somewhat privileged. Therefore, children of these families most likely have not been exposed to grinding poverty or violent abuse from dysfunctional families.

#### Islamic extremism: religion or politics?

It is a commonly held belief that the current wave of terrorist violence associated to Islamic extremism is driven by religion. Given the usual names and adjectives associated with it, this is not an unreasonable

mistake to make. However, terrorism is a political act by its very nature, and the terrorism driven or inspired by al-Qaeda and its followers is no different. Islamist terrorism is not about contested issues of religion or theology. It is about politics, especially the politics of the extreme left. A reading of al-Qaeda documents reveals that most of the proposed solutions to the perceived grievances are more political in nature than religious. Various al-Qaeda documents discuss the group’s role as vanguard for a new revolution, as well as the negative effects of previous colonialism, economic oppression and deprivation. At the same time, much of the analysis of the power of the ‘Crusader states’<sup>6</sup> is conducted in Marxian terms. Thus, it seems that most of the ideology and rhetoric of al-Qaeda is more ‘Marx’ than it is ‘Mohammed’. This certainly applies to the case of Momin Khawaja, as will become evident below. His limited religious beliefs are only evident *after* his radicalisation process has initiated. Furthermore, it will become clear that his so-called religious beliefs are only those cherry picked lines that he has been fed by various radical sources. As of the time of his arrest, he demonstrates no ability to explain or understand any theological concepts beyond a few Quranic lines which have been taken out of context.

#### The beginning of the radicalisation process of Momin Khawaja

It seems that for Momin Khawaja, there was no defining crisis or shock moment that was the catalyst that triggered his sudden radicalisation. As with most other terrorists, radicalisation in Momin’s case was a ‘process’ rather than an ‘event’. Nevertheless, with the available evidence, it is possible to determine with some certainty when the process started and what seemed to have triggered it.

The fall of 2000 was a critical time period in Momin Khawaja’s life. Like many others around the world, he watched the unfolding of the Second Intifada in the Palestinian Territories after Israeli Opposition Leader Ariel Sharon made a controversial visit to the Temple Mount. The incident was considered highly controversial, since the Temple Mount is considered holy by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Second Intifada, which ran from late September 2000 to approximately 2004,<sup>7</sup> was a major event for its day, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 3,000 to 5,000 Palestinians and around 1,000 Israelis.<sup>8</sup>

#### The political narrative

The majority of Momin Khawaja’s writings and explanations for his role in the Jihad are dedicated to political views. At no point does he write about differences in theology that divide Muslim from Christian or Jewish beliefs, nor does he demonstrate any particular insights into theology or religious practice. Most of his views are political and economic, with only passing references to religion as it relates to his identity. As he describes his life prior to his arrest, he had a fairly normal upbringing. In an extensive email to his fiancé, he states:

*‘[I] was once a normal kid too. I played basketball, went swimming, bike-riding, and did all the things that naughty kids do. But once I grew up, I felt that something was wrong, terribly wrong. Right around the age of 21, I realized that all the fun pastime activities that everyone was into were a waste of time and did not benefit Islam and the Muslims in any way. So I left everything. When the Palestinian Intifada happened, I started looking into my own life and questioning myself as to why our situation was so bad. I realized that “I” must change myself first, I must be willing to make a difference.’<sup>9</sup>*

To Momin Khawaja, the Intifada highlighted the contradictions between his own life and that of other Muslims in the world. He was living a life of relative luxury and safety, whilst others were living lives of

oppression and fear. He was healthy and well fed, while others were dying or leading lives of deprivation. Perhaps most glaring was the fact that he was a Muslim leading a good and safe life while living in a country that was – in his mind – collectively responsible for the suffering of Muslims overseas.

Moreover, in his eyes, there was no just political process that could lead to peaceful resolutions with regard to the Muslim *Ummah*. He stated that real change – as he perceived it – would not be easy nor would it be carried out by peaceful means. He also believed that in order for the real change to occur, a small cadre of informed and strong willed individuals should form the ‘vanguard’ of the ‘just’ movement. He writes about this process and states:

*‘Everyone assumes SOMEONE else is probably doing something to help, so why should “I” bother. It’s not true, no one does anything. If I want change, I have to do something about it. Change requires hardship, trials, sacrifice, pain, suffering, loss of life, loss of wealth. Do the Muslims think that Jannah is so cheap? Everyone is content with going to a few rallies, shouting slogans, “down with Israel” “down with the USA” and that’s it, we’ve done our part. What on earth does that do? Is this the response to mobilized armies, tanks, and missiles? Are the kuffar<sup>10</sup> going to stop murdering our brothers and sisters because we raise banners and shout slogans?’<sup>11</sup>*

*‘But then again, Two years ago, no one really thought Afghanistan was gonna happen, then a year ago no one really thought Iraq would happen... and look where we are today. Next thing you know, they roll into Syria and Saudi Arabia. So each day in the west adds to their economic dominance, blood-thirsty imperialism, and the Ummah’s oppression. It’s just like Bush said... you’re either on their side or our side.’<sup>12</sup>*

*‘I hate Hypocrisy, and examples of its worst kind can be found in Pakistan and its bowing before its Amreeki<sup>13</sup> masters. They’ve literally sold their Iman in exchange for dollars. Allahu’Alam, maybe they never had Iman to begin with. They opened their doors for Amreeki agents, complied with their wishes like slaves, and sold-out the Muslim Ummah as they fought hard against their own Muslim brothers and handed them over to the Kuffaar.’<sup>14</sup>*

In the preceding paragraphs, Momin Khawaja also demonstrates his knowledge of the ‘near enemy’ and ‘far enemy’ concept, which justifies attacking American and other Western soft economic targets. The concept of ‘near enemy’ and ‘far enemy’ means that many al-Qaeda followers or sympathisers believe that they need to attack America, which is the ‘far enemy’, in order to stop America from supporting the ‘near enemy’. The ‘near enemy’ denotes the corrupt governments in Muslim majority countries which, as Momin Khawaja and others believe, are held in place only by selling out their values and populations to the American and Western interests. Momin Khawaja follows this assessment by stating:

*‘A war-like mentality is needed against the Kuffar (governments, armies, supporters) because they are at war with us. America is at war with Islam, Israel is at war with Islam, so we do not treat Ariel Sharon and George Bush with compassion, do we?’<sup>14</sup>*

#### The religious narrative

Momin Khawaja did not have a strict religious upbringing, nor did religion play a major role in his life during his teenage years. The role of religion is not seen in his self-assessment either. Religion only becomes a factor in his life after he had already entered into the downward spiral of radicalisation and violence. This path is consistent with life patterns of other terrorists. Note in the following statement how

he sees attendance at a terrorist training camp as having filled developmental roles. In addition to weapons and explosives training for the Jihad, he also began to exercise radical religious views as well:

*‘It was then, by the will of Allah that I met a brother from England who was in the effort of Jihad, and part of a group of brothers who were leaving to go to Pakistan and join the Mujahideen already in Afghanistan. Although, untrained brothers are not sent to the front lines of Jihad, with the immense favour of Allah I was able to join a few brothers and spend time at a Mujahideen training camp. It was there that we built our spiritual link with Allah, trained in the ways of Jihad, and devoted our lives to the uplifting of the Deen and the defence of the Ummah.’<sup>16</sup>*

#### The economic narrative

Momin Khawaja’s view of Jihad was not a one-dimensional exercise of mindless violence against soft targets. His writings show that he has a rather sophisticated view of the ‘far enemy’ concept. He has listened to and accepted the view that military power needs an effective economy to support it. Therefore, he concludes that by attacking the softer target of the economy, the goals of Jihad can be reached. He explains this by saying:

*‘It’s not possible for Muslims to be war-mongers with the kill-em-all mentality, since the real war-mongers and killers are the ones with Nuclear weapons, missiles, bombs, F-16s, apache helicopters, all backed by billions of dollars. The Kuffar support their aggression by the use of their economic power, and this is why Jihad against their economy is necessary, as it is obligatory to destroy that economy which fuels the American war-machine.’<sup>17</sup>*

#### The social, heroic narrative of the Russian hell videos

In addition to the personal political, religious and economic narrative, a series of five ‘motivational’ videos produced by Ibn Khattab in Chechnya played an important role in the life and the subsequent criminal conviction of Momin Khawaja. Ibn Khattab was from a mixed Bedouin-Circassian family and has never been a member of or a follower of al-Qaeda, despite al-Qaeda’s attempts to co-opt him. Notwithstanding his lack of allegiance to al-Qaeda, his videos, depicting attacks against the Russian military in Chechnya, were popular among extremist Muslims and had great influence.

The videos are commonly referred to as the ‘Russian Hell’ series and together they present a clear narrative. The videos suggest that with just a few of the ‘brothers’ and some hand carried weapons, the oppressors can be defeated. In a typical scene from the videos, the group’s leader, Ibn Khattab, gives a military style pre-mission brief to his ‘soldiers’. Following the briefing, the soldiers are seen moving to the ambush site from which they will attack a convoy of Russian soldiers. The scenes are almost cheery and ooze with camaraderie and optimism. The videos also have a rich symbolism found in the overlaid graphics as well as inspirational music (*nasheeds*) playing in the background.

For Momin Khawaja, the videos must have formed part of his ‘education’ of the ways in which the *Mujahideen* could defeat the oppressors and their forces. Not only did he have copies of the videos on his hard drives, he is also known to have given copies to a woman that he was recruiting. Her role was to assist him in financial transfers relating to the planned attacks. One video extract was played in court to demonstrate the nature of the material he was using in his recruiting efforts.

The impacts of these videos can be seen in his writings, as he discusses various forms of warfare. Among the most interesting, with a clear outspoken narrative, is:

*'Muslims are simple people, of simple means. Rifles, machine guns, rockets, these are our steeds of war. If anything, we are pre-historic in our armament compared to the Kuffar. Wherever the Muslims took up arms and united in Jihad against the enemies of Allah, the help of Allah followed, and the victory followed.'*<sup>18</sup>

### The influential narratives of Abdullah Azzam

Lastly, assessing the detailed documentation of Khawaja's case reveals one more influential narrative, in the form of Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian-Jordanian who was a key figure in the anti-Soviet Jihad of 1979-1989. Among his many roles, he is perceived to be an early mentor to Osama bin Laden and one of the leading early ideologues of the jihadist movement. Ultimately, he ran afoul of others competing for bin Laden's attention in 1989 as al-Qaeda was being formed. He was assassinated in November 1989 in Peshawar, Pakistan. Although his killers have never been directly identified, it is highly probable that al-Qaeda's current number two man, al-Zawahiri, was responsible.<sup>19</sup>

Despite his death, Azzam remained a major figure among jihadists and his works are still circulated widely in print and on the Internet. His influence<sup>20</sup> as an ideologue was almost unparalleled in the 1990s and early 2000s and his impact on jihadism is exemplified by his book 'Join the Caravan of Martyrs.'<sup>21</sup> Although famous for a number of 'inspirational' statements and ideas, the one line that immortalises the totality of his beliefs is: '*Jihad and the Rifle Alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogue*'.<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted that Azzam is often referred to in jihadist circles as being a religious figure or religious mentor.<sup>23</sup> However, as with almost all other leading figures of jihadism, Azzam's main message was political. With this in mind, it is important to note the language used by Momin Khawaja when he discusses the plight of Muslims around the world:

*'Perhaps I'm wrong, but it's hard to excel in something, be the best you can be, unless you're 'in to' it. But, the Muslim is 'in to' all this with the intention of Jihad, uplifting of Islam, and removal of injustice. Countless examples are there before us, to remind us of the severity of abandoning Jihad, putting down arms. From Bosnia, to Somalia, to Mazar-e-Sharif, to Algeria, each and every time we find the treachery of the Americans, the U.N., and their allies in convincing the Muslims, the Mujahideen in putting down their arms in exchange for "peace". Every instance the Muslims gave up arms, they were slaughtered. Each time, efforts were made to disarm Muslims, place arms embargoes on Muslims, and yet at the same time weaponry and arms were supplied through back doors to the Kuffar party opposing the Muslims. This is the precise reason why there can be no peace, no negotiations, no deals whatsoever with the Kuffar because they are treacherous and only understand the language of death and destruction.'<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added)*

This paragraph from Momin Khawaja's writings demonstrates his understanding and usage of Abdullah Azzam's work.<sup>25</sup> In the underlined section of the above extract, we clearly hear the voice of Azzam. This extract, as many other examples in the case, shows that the narrative advanced by Azzam had a direct influence on the radicalisation and beliefs of Momin Khawaja.

### Conclusions on radicalising narratives and possible counter-narratives

Momin Khawaja is a second generation Canadian. He is an intelligent and well read individual and comes from an immigrant family which values education. He was not affected by drugs, poverty, mental instability, or sectarian violence. He had no criminal record and was not prone to acts of violence as a teenager. His teenage years are largely unremarkable.

Nevertheless, despite his unremarkable upbringing, he becomes radicalised at the age of 21, to the point at which he believed in the acceptability of the use of violence against innocent civilians. As a result of his activities produced by these beliefs, he was convicted on terrorism charges.

Momin Khawaja was radicalised through exposure to a series of narratives. The narratives were primarily political and played heavily on the perceived injustices that negatively affect Muslims around the world. The contradiction between his own relatively easy life in Canada and the lives of his fellow Muslims in the Palestinian Territories, Chechnya, Pakistan and Afghanistan laid heavily on his conscience.

In addition to the primary role of the political narratives, a series of economic, military and religious narratives also played a significant role on his radicalisation. Consistent with most of these narratives, it is worth noting that Momin Khawaja has accepted the ideology of al-Qaeda as expressed in the following key points:

1. All Muslims are under constant attack everywhere, and it is the Crusader states that are responsible. Only al-Qaeda and its followers are fighting the oppressors of Muslims and if you are not supporting al-Qaeda, then you are supporting the oppressors; and
2. Al-Qaeda has a vanguard mission to inspire and support the uprising of the oppressed Ummah. Al-Qaeda recognises that it cannot achieve these goals by itself, so it needs to inspire the masses through uplifting messages intended to encourage revolutionary activity.

The subtext of these narratives appeals primarily to young males regardless of their place of origin. It suggests that if one joins the Jihad, he will have an adventurous and exciting life shared with like minded comrades. The decision to join will also impact on one's life by giving a greater meaning to one's aimless existence.

While discussing the issue of terrorism, many researchers focus primarily on abnormalities that may explain the creation of the terrorist phenomenon. All too often, researchers adopt the faulty assumption that terrorists possess some type of fatal flaw or pre-existing condition which causes their radicalisation. However, this case and other studies have demonstrated that most terrorists are frighteningly normal individuals who have arrived at their stage in life by embracing a series of radical narratives. These narratives address potential terrorists' perceived notions of injustice and allow them to construct a life path as the vanguards in a pursuit of 'justice' for the Muslim Ummah.

Given the content and appeal of these radicalising extremist narratives, what conclusions can we draw as to an effective counter-narrative strategy? For one, it should not try to convince the target audience that 'their view' is wrong, while 'our view' is right. In rehabilitation programs that have been successful, the approach has generally been to demonstrate to the individuals concerned that there are more ways of looking at a certain issue.<sup>26</sup> An individual who is on the path of radicalisation often believes what they are

told simply because they have no other information available. All too often, young impressionable minds are given only one side of the story or terrorist narrative while they are being drawn into the process that leads to political violence. By showing them that there exist several sides in any issue, that the world cannot be explained in terms of black and white, they are given the choice and the ability to think for themselves while questioning the integrity of those producing the radical narratives.

An effective counter-narrative campaign must also address the issues that serve to radicalise young minds. On the surface, this sounds logical and sensible. However, closer attention must be paid to what initially radicalised individuals and what seemed to resonate with them. It is not possible to base a counter-narrative campaign on beliefs such as 'the terrorists hate us because they hate our freedom'. A campaign that attempts to work on the idea that 'democracy is better' is unlikely to generate much interest or attention amongst the necessary target audience, especially given that many of them live or were educated in democratic states.

Additionally, a counter-narrative campaign has to have a simple and clear message, and this must be a 'smart' message. It is necessary to accept the fact that most of those young people who become radicalised are otherwise intelligent and rational people who have developed extreme points of view.

Finally, it should be noted that the individuals who are recruited to commit violent acts of terrorism were vulnerable to recruitment precisely because of their lack of knowledge, not because of their informed views on religious and political issues. The key issues need to be addressed, such as for instance the faith that awaits suicide bombers according to the Quran and the illegality of killing innocent fellow-Muslims.

1 For more on the misuse of the fear generated by terrorism, see A. Acharya, *Age of Fear: Power Versus Principle in the War on Terror*, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, 2004.  
 2 For more on this, see M. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Network*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004.  
 3 Sageman's research on a large number (400) of jihadist terrorists makes it rather clear that mental disorders are not part of the overall problem. To the contrary, his work suggests that only four of the 400 may have had some sort of thought disorder and only one had a mild form of mental retardation.  
 4 Despite common claims of brainwashing, no cases have been noted. As Sageman puts it: "First, from a scientific perspective, five decades of research have failed to provide any empirical support for this thesis. Secondly, the biographical accounts of those explaining their embrace of the ideology fail to describe any coercive techniques leading to their final acceptance of the ideology. Third, like its ideological appeal counterpart, it is vulnerable to the fundamental problem of specificity. If so many people are exposed to the global Salafi jihad ideology, why do only a few succumb to it? Fourth, some incarcerated members now see the errors of their ways in pursuing violence in the name of God." (Sageman, p. 125).

5 For instance: 1. Noor Din Mohd Top was a JI member. He graduated from Malaysia Technological University. 2. Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, formerly head of al-Qaeda's military committee attended Chowan College in North Carolina in the early 1980s and obtained an engineering degree from another university. 3. Yazid Sufaat is a U.S. trained biochemist. 4. Marwan Al-Shehhi, 23, is believed to have been the pilot of Flight 175 in the 9/11 incident. He was a student at the Technical University in Hamburg, Germany. 5. Dr. Azahari Husin was Jemaat Islamiya's bomb expert. He was a lecturer at Malaysia Technological University and holds a doctorate.  
 6 The definition of what constitutes the Crusader states varies among various groups and individuals and evolves over time. At a minimum, it means the U.S. and the U.K. In other circumstances, the definition includes France, Spain, Italy and Canada. At its broadest, it can mean all of the 'West' or all of the NATO member states.  
 7 Like many issues in the Palestinian conflict, there is no general agreement on the dates of the Second Intifada. Most observers agree that late September 2008 marks the start, but opinions vary on the end date. Some suggest 2004, others look at 2007 as being the end date. For the case of Momin Khawaja, it is primarily the start date which is of concern.

8 Exact numbers are difficult to obtain due to the political nature of the event. These numbers are according to the B'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for the Occupied Territories. See their website at: <<http://www.btselem.org/English/>>.  
 9 This extract is taken from an email of 18 September 2003 from Momin Khawaja to his fiancé Zeba Khan, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/features/khawajatrial/khawaja.pdf>>, p. 84.  
 10 Kuffar - a non-believer in Islam, generally used in this context as a pejorative term.  
 11 Email from Momin Khawaja to Zeba Khan, 8 August 2003, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', p. 84.  
 12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.  
 13 A pejorative term which refers to the U.S. or Americans.  
 14 Email from Momin Khawaja to Zeba Khan, 29 August 2003, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', pp. 16-7.  
 15 In his 'Reasons for Judgement' Mr. Justice Rutherford included a section on the mindset of Momin Khawaja. This extract was one among many others. For more information on Khawaja's mindset, as viewed by the convicting court, see the sub-section of the judgement entitled 'Momin Khawaja's Mindset' (paragraph 32) of 'Court File Number 04-G30282, 2008/10/29', retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://multimedia.thestar.com/acrobat/c1/ab/bf9c99dc4b87b854428bc30574d8.pdf>>, p.16.  
 16 This extract is taken from an email from Momin Khawaja to Zeba Khan, dated 18 September 2003, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', p. 85.  
 17 This extract is taken from an email from Momin Khawaja to Zeba Khan, dated 18 September 2003, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', pp. 83-4.  
 18 This extract is taken from an email from Momin Khawaja to Zeba Khan, dated 18 September 2003, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', p. 84.  
 19 For information concerning the split among the al-Qaeda leaders and the assassination, see G.C.S. Steven & R. Gunaratna (eds.), *Counterterrorism: A Reference Handbook*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2004, pp. 155-6.

20 For more information on Abdullah Azzam, see J. Stern, *Terror in the Name of God. Why Religious Militants Kill*, HarperCollins, New York, 2003, pp. 199-200 & p. 258; J. Corbin, *Al Qaeda: In Search of the Terror Network that Threatens the World*, Nation Books, New York, 2003, pp. 16-7; P.L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden*, Free Press/ 1st Touchstone edn., 2002, p. 30, p. 50, pp. 54-7, p. 59, pp. 64-5, p. 87, p. 136, p. 138, p. 140, p. 182, and p. 206; A. Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001, pp. 130-1. See also the preface/introductions to *Join the Caravan*, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.islamistwatch.org/texts/azzam/caravan/preface.html>>.  
 21 This book is available online at <<http://www.islamistwatch.org/texts/azzam/caravan/caravan.html>>.  
 22 Sheikh A. Azzam, *Join the Caravan*, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.islamistwatch.org/texts/azzam/caravan/caravan.html>>, p.9  
 23 Ironically, Sheikh Azzam would probably disapprove of the use of his works to support al-Qaeda as it existed from approximately 1996 to the present. While Azzam was not shy about the use of violence in defending the interests of the Muslim Ummah, he was not in favor of offensive jihad and he expressed great concern about the killing of innocents. Nothing exists to show that he would support the virulent takfirist views of Dr Fadl or Zawahiri.  
 24 This extract is taken from an email from Momin Khawaja to Zeba Khan, dated 18 September 2003, available in 'Email Communications between Momin Khawaja and Zeba Khan', p. 83.  
 25 The book *Caravan of Martyrs* was found in Khawaja's bedroom during the police search of his home, along with a number of other Islamist works and weapons.  
 26 The Singapore Religious Rehabilitation Program (RRG) started informally in 2002 and was formalised in 2003. The project now includes more than 1000 interviews and a series of individuals who have been released due to the success of the program. Their website can be viewed at: <<http://www.rrg.sg/>>. I am greatly indebted to Ustaz Hannif Hassan from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Nanyang Technological University) for his continuous assistance and explanations about the program over a period of several years as well as to Ustaz Mohammed Bin Ali from the RRG for his explanations and understanding.

## 8 Violent Radical Content and the Relationship between Ideology and Behaviour: Do Counter-Narratives Matter?

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### Introduction

We generally assume that there is some relationship between ideology and behaviour; that relationship might variously be in terms of ideology motivating the individual along certain directions, providing a rationale for some course of action, or in a direct sense influencing not just intention, but action. Furthermore, within the area of political violence, we frequently take for granted that political ideology 'causes' – albeit in an unspecified way – problematic violent behaviour such as terrorism. We have even invented a term – radicalisation – that appears to describe the process whereby that influence occurs. This paper will explore some of these concepts, and analyse how they relate to extremist narratives and possible counter-narratives.

A common and broadly reliable observation can begin our discussion. Terrorists and those who are politically violent tend to have in their possession upon arrest material (in the form of print, images or digital material) that relates to expressions of ideology that are linked to their violent behaviour. In the case of the Islamist radical, for example, it is not unusual to find books, sermons and perhaps pamphlets and images that describe and illustrate the particular kind of religious ideology the offender is associated with, and which frequently make reference to violence as a 'desirable' or necessary quality. The same materials are used to proselytise and attract the faithful to the particular point of view. In contemporary terms, the most likely source for this material is the Internet, especially amongst the young, although older people, or people in areas not well served by the Internet, might acquire such material on audiotapes, videotapes or books.

In this paper we will primarily focus on the Internet, although the discussion is more generally applicable. Our concerns arise, on the Internet or with other forms of media, not about content *per se*, but when it is in some sense thought to be problematic. As we noted above, our particular problematic issue (amongst many) concerns terrorism and political violence and relates to the process we assume is causally related to this. However, an important initial point to make is that this is just one case of a more general concern about problematic content and its relationship with Internet use and content. Pornography, gambling and hate activities are other examples of problematic content that are also assumed to relate to behaviour. It is furthermore important to note that our concerns are also not particularly to do with the medium *per se* (books, the Internet), but the use to which we put that medium, which in the case of the Internet is also a communications system, and also as the platform on which user activity of the enormous range of applications can function and gain value and utility. Whilst it might be said for other media, Internet use is overwhelmingly instrumental, and is closely connected to the concerns of the everyday life of users; family, friends, work and leisure.<sup>1</sup> This instrumentality above all shapes what we do on the Internet and how we use it. But this flexibility also means that the Internet can facilitate, or make more likely or privilege, some kinds of behaviour, problematic or otherwise.

To develop our thoughts on this, in what follows we will first of all examine how we will recognise radicalisation, problematic content related to it, and the potential relationship between that content and problematic behaviour. We will only then, having established a framework to work from, examine what counter-narratives might mean.

### What is radicalisation and how might we recognise content?

Hoskin and O’Loughlin in a jargon ridden and largely impenetrable article identify the following as areas of conceptual disjunction around the concept of radicalisation:

1. the actuality of radicalisation as a process that can and does result in violent acts;
2. the mediatisation of radicalisation, including the intersecting, overlapping, and colliding discourses of politicians, intelligence agencies, journalists, and interest groups; and
3. empirical social science ‘evidence base’ that supports the existence of (1).<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, Hoskin and O’Loughlin are pointing out that the media and politics have shaped our concept of radicalisation, rather than the concept being derived from any form of objective or evidence based analysis; the inelegant term mediatisation seems to imply this. In developing this argument, they suggest that the media ‘blurs the normal with the deviant by presenting each as part of a continuum, a spectrum of activities’.<sup>3</sup>

It does this in part, they argue, by the “clustering” of terms, phrases, and associated discourses (for example, terms from paedophilia reports such as “grooming”) by journalists, policy-makers and security services, so that the term radicalisation has become part of the rhetorical structure of the waging of the “War on Terror” without any reflexive interrogation of its distinctiveness, genealogy or function, in describing a “root cause” of terrorist activities which thus requires a policy and/or tactical response (i.e. ‘de-radicalisation’).<sup>4</sup>

Amongst other things, this suggests a concern that use of the concept of radicalisation has, as it were, gone in advance of any evidence based systematic analysis, and has become a convenient media and political term essentially lacking substance and meaning. Some of the uncertainties around the concept that might be identified include:

- How do we recognise radicalisation?;
- What are its attributes?;
- Is it a state or a process?;
- How do we understand the sense of personal agency in radicalisation?; and
- How in psychological terms is ‘intent’, and in evidential terms *mens rea*, identified?

Given this, how strange it is that our concerns focus around content related to radicalisation, for instance in the form of extremist narratives, when we are so unclear what it is! We can, however, approach this analysis raised by Hoskin and O’Loughlin from a different perspective, that does not necessarily ground the discussion in problems of the media or politics. From a psychological perspective, terms such as ‘violent radical’ or ‘radical’ appear to have a precision that can be argued to be illusory; the same might be said of ‘radicalisation’. Such terms fall into the category described by Skinner as ‘explanatory fictions’, words that merely describe in different terms the original word it is supposed to explain.<sup>5</sup> That in itself amounts to merely replacing one word with another, but the particular problem of explanatory fictions is that they also purport to explain, often by reference to complex essentially unobservable processes, a term that at least in origin could be grounded in some form of observable behaviour. The way we use ‘radicalisation’ seems to fit into this category.

Whatever other baggage is associated with the term, radicalisation presumably relates to kinds and degrees of engagement with ideas and ideologies that in some way relate to dissent and/or violence. Both engagement and dissent, however, are imprecise and unclear terms; they might mean a range of different things, and we need to further refine the concepts to progress. Perhaps a focus on association

with behaviour such as violence, or some identifiable propagation of violence, is a way to progress this further; otherwise what we are left with refers to ‘a state of mind’ and ‘propensities’ that lacks the capacity for any kind of verification.

But herein lies the challenge. When we see an item of terrorist related content on the Internet or in a book (even though we may be uncertain precisely what its attributes might be), it is very unlikely that we can know with any certainty that the person responsible for its distribution is a terrorist, an agent of the State, or a madman. We certainly cannot assume there is any sense of their being, by either reader or the distributor, a direct involvement in terrorist violence. Even if there is, we are not automatically warranted in making any immediate assumptions about the role of the material in question in leading to or aggravating *further* instances of terrorist violence, or protecting against violence.

In fact, the notion of publicly accessible content being problematic simply because ‘terrorists’ are behind it is somewhat absurd. If content is problematic in some sense, then it is presumably problematic *as content*, regardless of what we know about its author; but this presents a paradox. Without arriving at some kind of idea of ‘terrorist content’ as a self-contained category of problematic – which is not to say necessarily illegal – material, we cannot satisfactorily talk about ‘terrorist’ phenomena being caused by content; or at least, we cannot do so based on the study of that content alone. On the other hand, if we talk about ‘terrorist’ material we are presenting what is in a sense an oxymoron. By itself, no material is inherently ‘terrorist’ at any rate, in a problematic sense when understood as being related to expression of violence.

One way around this problem is to simply ignore all instances of material that are not demonstrably related to a particular case of politically violent activity (which of course begs the question of how we might know). But before we arrive at that point, there is reason for thinking that it may nonetheless be worth trying to rescue some kind of idea of content as ‘terroristic’ in its own right. Firstly, whether we like it or not, the idea of the importance of ‘terrorist’ or, more generally, ‘violent radical’ material has cast a long shadow. Items such as websites of terrorist groups, videos of terrorist operations, ideological and polemic books, etc. seen as justifying terrorism and disseminated principally by the Internet are much talked about. To simply ignore all such items in a spirit of radical scepticism risks accusations of side-stepping a core issue.

There is, however, a more serious reason for wanting to find a way of incorporating ideological content into discussions of terrorism. This is the fact that, unlike most other types of law-enforcement activity, counterterrorism has the unusual property of being necessarily and primarily pre-emptive. Unlike burglaries or even homicides, instances of terrorism are rare in most places, but have a very high public impact. This means that simply looking at the (relatively few) people who have been responsible for acts of terrorism and about whose activities adequate information exists, could be seen as rather limited. Surely, it might be argued, there is a need to look at items such as the vast wealth of potentially ‘terrorist’ material on the Internet with a view to determining where and from whom the terrorism is likely to come next?

In other words, there is a need to be able to ask the question ‘is there a relationship between the propagation of content “x” primarily but not necessarily exclusively on the Internet, and terrorism?’ And yet, remarkably, because of the so far almost complete failure to engage seriously with questions of what makes ‘terrorist’ content ‘terrorist’, *we are not only not in a position to answer such a question: We are actually*

unable to even pose it meaningfully. Quite simply, we do not know what ‘content x’ is. We have no consistent framework for describing it; and if we cannot describe or identify it, how can we mount campaigns to counter it?

Part of the problem here perhaps relates to how we use the concept of radicalisation as an ill-defined conceptual process rather than grounding it in something tangible. However, if we ground the concept of radicalisation in terms of behaviour, then as with all behaviours it should be possible to describe their nature, and to categorise them in some way (i.e. in terms of quantity of material accessed or collected, in terms of degree of violent rhetoric, or in terms of known associations with violent actors). Thus, if we follow this line of reasoning, any given individual could in principle have assigned to him an index of ‘radicalisation’, which would translate out into some kinds of activities. Such an index would therefore be a descriptive label, grounded in what the individual has done by seeking out and accessing ideological material (text or images), or through attendance at events, sermons, demonstrations, etc. In both these cases (accessing/collecting material, or attendance at events), there is a behavioural substrate that can be identified, and in one case a permanent product;<sup>6</sup> as such, the classification can therefore be repeated or independently verified.

#### Categorisation of the ‘terroristicness’ of content

We can clarify this point, perhaps, with a comparison from another kind of problematic behaviour: that related to the collection and distribution of child pornography. Here, there exists a tool in the form of the COPINE scale for categorising any example of child pornographic material in order of severity.<sup>7</sup> The U.K. Sentencing Advisory Panel Guidance on Offences involving Child Pornography recommends a degree of judicial sentence to the nature of the indecent material possessed and the extent of the offender’s involvement with it. It describes five levels of offence (derived from the seven point COPINE scale and relating content with engagement), each being related to sentencing tariffs. Level one on the scale implies essentially appropriate images of children in contexts that suggest they are being used as part of an erotic fantasy. Level five indicates images of very serious sexual offences being carried out against children. The COPINE scale happens to be used by prosecutors, but in origin it was not intended to have a legal significance. Nor – and this is important – is it supposed to be in any way predictive, by itself, of wider ‘risks’ of a particular offender going on to carry out a ‘contact’ offence. In fact, there is no conclusive evidence at all that such a relationship exists. The existence of the scale, however, means that we can meaningfully examine that possibility; we can pose questions within a framework that can be identified, verified, and that has some measure of consistency. Analysis of seized computer hard drives in terrorist cases, for example (a direct parallel with most of the Internet Child Pornography offenders), would similarly yield such evidence.

Could there ever be something like a COPINE scale for ‘terrorist’ content? The obstacles are undoubtedly formidable. Firstly, it is plainly the case that to judge any given example of content as ‘terrorist’, we are likely to need a good deal more of it than would be the case with child pornography. An image of the twin towers collapsing, for example, while very prominent on jihadi websites and forums, is hardly a reliable indicator of some kind of problem content on its own. And yet, child pornography content is not entirely devoid of contextual factors as well. A photograph of a naked two year old playing in a paddling pool might be perfectly appropriate in a family album; less so in a forum known to be frequented by paedophiles.

Secondly, content can be ‘terrorist’ in many different ways. A CNN news article on a bombing in a Baghdad

market place is arguably ‘terrorist’ in the sense that it rewards those responsible with publicity. The US army weapons manual is potentially ‘terrorist’ if it is used to assist in the training of terrorists.<sup>8</sup> The photograph of a given location in Washington, D.C. may be terrorist if it is provided in order to assist in the reconnaissance and pre-operation research of an aspiring terrorist cell.<sup>9</sup> The ostensibly legitimate charity asking for online donations may be a terrorist front operation. On the other hand, the article protesting certain aspects of the relationship between Colombia and the U.S. which could have appeared on any leftist Spanish language site may happen to appear on what is quite openly the website of the Popular Army of the United Revolutionary Forces of Colombia<sup>10</sup> – widely listed as a terrorist group.

These problems are not necessarily insuperable obstacles, provided that we accept that, if we are to order material as *terrorist material*, we will need to take the ‘terroristic’ part of the material as our dimension, thus leaving aside other characteristics of the material as intervening variables as it were within this analysis. That is to say, if for example we come across a website which looks, say, Palestinian nationalist, but which says nothing about being affiliated with any group we would call ‘terrorist’,<sup>11</sup> and we compare it to a site which is clearly Iraqi insurgent, and both sites are asking for donations,<sup>12</sup> it might in fact turn out to be the case that money given to either will end up financing terrorist operations. But we should be able to say something along the lines of: ‘based on rhetoric, this site looks not ‘terrorist’ at all, whereas this one looks somewhat ‘terrorist’ (and perhaps this other one looks very ‘terrorist’ indeed). We might, given the right sort of information, be able to go on to say something along the lines of: ‘as it happens, the first site, which did not look ‘terrorist’ at all, is more of a concern, since it attracted more donations by not revealing their true destination’, or even vice versa. Indeed, to continue with our child pornography analogy, there might even be some reasons to say that individuals interacting with material quite low on the COPINE scale are paradoxically perhaps at greater risk of offending against children in the ‘real world’ than are those with material very high on the scale. This is not the issue however, because what is important is that since the question can be framed in an objective way, then the resolution to this issue will lie in empirical data rather than opinion. In other words, even if the ‘terroristicness’ of problematic content does not tell us how relevant material actually is to an act of terrorist violence being carried out, it would be useful to have such a scale, simply so as to provide a way of ordering our assertions in this regard, enabling us to systematically explore questions, and if appropriate construct suitable counter-narrative interventions.

#### Terrorist content

What, then, could ‘terroristic’ mean with regard to content? A possible starting point could be provided by recent U.K. attempts in legislation to criminalise actions such as ‘glorification,’ ‘encouragement,’ ‘apology’ or ‘public provocation’ of terrorism. Such provision in law presumes that it is possible, in the form of a public expression of some kind, to carry out an act that is problematically ‘terrorist’. Indeed, in U.K. law, the 2006 Terrorism Act creates the category of a ‘terrorist publication’. The notion of categorising certain kinds of speech as a terrorist offence has been highly controversial, but as a conceptual starting point (not as a statement about the appropriateness or otherwise of such legislative initiatives), such provisions are potentially interesting.

In the 2006 Terrorism Act, a ‘terrorist publication’ is defined either as a publication which is understood as ‘a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement to them to the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism’, or which is likely ‘to be useful in the commission or preparation of such acts and [...] understood [...] for the purpose of being so useful to them’.<sup>13</sup> Indirect encouragement is, in

turn, understood as material which ‘glorifies,’ or which ‘is matter from which that person could reasonably be expected to infer that what is being glorified is being glorified as conduct that should be emulated by him in existing circumstances’.<sup>14</sup>

The aim here, it is worth stressing, is not to attempt to apply current U.K. law to content, or even to adhere particularly closely to the concepts it lays out. Nonetheless, the language used by the act is useful as a starting point for the way in which references to approval of terrorist violence internal to a discourse may be used as a way of identifying it as, in some sense relevant to terrorism. Indeed, from the language of the act, we can perhaps already draw out a tentative sense of a scale of severity that might be set out something like the following:

1. Indirect encouragement of indirect involvement in acts of terrorism (instigation);
2. Indirect encouragement of direct involvement in acts of terrorism (preparation, commission);
3. Direct encouragement of indirect involvement in acts of terrorism;
4. Direct encouragement of direct involvement in acts of terrorism; and
5. Direct encouragement and provision of material useful in the commission of acts of terrorism.

From this, the question immediately follows as to what is meant by an ‘act of terrorism’. The definition being assumed in the U.K.’s 2006 Terrorism Act is that provided in an earlier piece of British legislation, the Terrorism Act of 2000. However, this definition is probably broader than most academic scholars of terrorism would be comfortable with, since it essentially considers any use of firearms or explosives in the service of a political, religious or ideological cause to be terrorism. This throws us back on the old question of terrorism definitions. However, this point need not cause undue difficulty to our analysis. Firstly, since the purpose of the present chapter is exploratory, and not in any way prescriptive, there is no need to make very dogmatic assertion about what an ‘act of terrorism’ is. Secondly, in practice there is probably more consensus over the basic characteristics of what makes an act of terrorism than is generally recognised. Indeed, even the United Nations – legendary for its failure to reach a universally agreed upon definition of terrorism – actually provides a tacit definition in the body of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism;

*‘Any other [i.e. not already proscribed in the existing international treaties on terrorism] act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.’<sup>15</sup>*

This definition, in its core characteristics, can be seen to match current academic attempts to define terrorism. For example, the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland offers its users a customisable definition of terrorism based on the presumption that an act of terrorism is ‘an intentional act of violence or threat of violence by a non-state actor’ (the database is explicitly restricted to non-state terrorism, without implying that this is the only type of terrorism there is), where at least two out of the following three criteria are also met:

1. The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious or social goal;
2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
3. The violent act was outside the precepts of international law.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, we might argue that we are warranted to consider ideological material as ‘terrorist’ to the extent that it appears to condone or encourage acts of violence against civilians (or other non-combatants), especially where the stated intent is to terrify.

If we attempt to bring this yardstick to content accessible via the most commonly used medium for distribution of material, the Internet, one immediate realisation is that much material that might be regarded in media commentary, for example, as ‘terrorist’ falls short of the criterion of ‘condoning or encouraging acts of violence’. Tsifti and Weimann examined circumstances in which, while there is no very apparent glorification of violent activity by a group, the group which is being promoted is nonetheless one which can be said with some confidence to be institutionally responsible for acts of violence against civilians.<sup>17</sup> Websites of groups such as Hamas, FARC, the PKK and (until recently) the LTTE promote organisations that are widely categorised (at least among Western countries) as terrorist, but did so mainly through promoting political agendas and condemning acts of violence by their state opponents.

It might, however, be argued, that there is another level of support for violence short of obvious support for terrorist violence which can frequently be observed in material of apparent ‘terrorist’ relevance. This is what we might call support for ‘militaristic’ violence. A point perhaps rarely made with regard to much of the jihadi video material that circulates on the Internet, is that a substantial proportion of it would perhaps be more accurately understood as ‘pro-insurgency’ than pro-terrorism *per se*, in so far as it takes care to portray violence against military, rather than civilian targets. This is, it ought to be stressed, often in marked contrast to the actual victims of the groups that are thereby celebrated.

This is illustrated by a study by Abbasi, Chen and Salem, who found that, of a sample of sixty videos culled by the automatic web-crawling technology of the University of Arizona’s Dark Web Portal, 56% of targets presented were military vehicles, 20% military bases and 7% aircrafts (which may be presumed to be military aircrafts).<sup>18</sup> This means that a total of 83% of the targets portrayed were military targets. Given that 13% of targets could not be identified, this means that only a total of 4% of targets (2% diplomatic and 2% transport infrastructure) could be confidently described as civilian. An examination of a less scientifically obtained sample of similar videos (conducted by CSTPV) appears to replicate this result. On the fifty videos returned in a Google video search for ‘jihadi operations’ on 19 August 2009, we find that of 38 of all identifiable (or explicitly described) targets, 28 are attacks on American soldiers, and other attacks are purported to be against Russian soldiers, Israeli soldiers and Iraqi militias (the Peshmerga and the Al-Mahdi Army). Only one video appears to show what may be an attack on a civilian target – possibly the Iraqi police.

This does not mean that the groups in question (in this case, primarily the Islamic State of Iraq) do not openly condone attacks on other targets, or even that they do not produce videos of such attacks. Beheading videos of civilian hostages are, of course, notorious counterexamples. And the very series from which many of the web search results came, ‘Knights of the Martyrdom’ – a recent set of video releases documenting a series of truck bombings by the Islamic State of Iraq – describes itself as depicting ‘operations against the Americans and the apostates’, a category which could be interpreted very widely indeed. Moreover, in the videos themselves, in the pre-operations statements given by the bombers, the Iraqi state and police are identified as opponents as well as the American occupiers. Indeed, the ‘harvests’, regular condensed reports by insurgent groups of the operations they claim to have carried out, are quite prepared

to mention operations against police and, generally *Safavid* (Shiite) targets alongside attacks on occupying military forces. Nonetheless, outside of specific contexts (notably hostage beheading videos), the amount of straightforward ‘terrorism’ in these terms portrayed by jihadi groups is arguably a good deal less than might be imagined.

Indeed, it may be noted that, just as Iraqi insurgent groups (and insurgent groups elsewhere) present their violence as violence, predominantly, against soldiers in uniform, there also exist websites which display with equal gusto videos of the exertion of lethal force by American troops against targets presumed to be insurgents. The website <http://www.gotwarporn.com>, motivated by a patriotic doctrine apparently informed by Philip Bobbitt’s (2002) historical theories in *The Shield of Achilles*, describes its basic position in the following terms:

*‘There is no war in Iraq, there is no war in Afghanistan, they are but two battlefields in a greater war, the long war, and despite what others would have you believe, when the enemy meets us on the field of battle, we kick their a\*\*!’<sup>19</sup>*

The essential purpose of the site is ostensibly to provide some entertainment and, perhaps, morale boosting sustenance along the course of this ‘long war’ by showing videos (organised, conveniently, by weapon type) of American forces tracking and killing their hapless opponents. In so far as it is presumably an assumption of the website that those being killed are legitimate targets, this can be categorised as an attempt to portray military, rather than terrorist violence. However, there are moments where the site arguably strays over the edge into sympathy for what would be, were they carried out, war crimes. For example, a prominently displayed link declares that ‘I’m a fan of disproportionate response’. This links to a blog named <http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com>, which makes the – we hope flippant – claim that:

*‘Based on what’s been done to them, they’d [the Israelis] be justified in clearing Lebanon and Gaza of people and paving both places over. They haven’t, but that’s their prerogative.’<sup>20</sup>*

The theme of emphasis on violence against military targets can also be seen, perhaps more predictably, in the Islamist organisation the *Izz ad-Din al-Qassam* Brigades. As previously noted by Tsfati and Weimann, Hamas (and Hezbollah) were somewhat exceptional among organisations surveyed on the web for their emphasis on descriptions of violent operations and its hagiographies of the ‘martyrs’ of such operations.<sup>21</sup> In practice – and as might be expected –, this is particularly the focus of the website of the Hamas movement’s self-professed military wing. Indeed, analysis of the official homepages of the group in Arabic (<http://www.alqassam.ps>) and English (<http://www.qassam.ps>) suggests that commemoration of martyrs of the group is, alongside with commemoration of prisoners of the group, the pre-eminent theme of the group’s web material. In spite of this, the number of martyrs killed in overtly terroristic operations is apparently relatively small at present – though this may well be a function of the fact that, in contrast to the present day, at the time of Tsfati and Weimann’s study, the Second Intifada was in full swing, meaning that there were plentiful incidents of ‘martyrdom operations’ against civilian targets to report on. Today, most cases of al-Qassam martyrs are described as coming from armed exchanges with military forces or with the somewhat enigmatic formula of ‘martyred while doing his duty’.

In spite of this, approval of violence against civilians is not entirely absent from the al-Qassam site. For instance, as of August 8th, 2009, the Arabic version of the site (though, interestingly, not the English

version) contained a report on the suicide bombing of Café Moment – an event that took place in 2002 and resulted, according to the Qassam brigades’ own account, in the death of fifteen and the wounding of a further ninety ‘Zionist frequenters of the café’. The justification offered in this report was, interestingly, rather contradictory. The claim was repeatedly made that Café Moment is located close to then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s private residence in Jerusalem, thus suggesting that the attack be seen as a ‘strong blow for the Zionist security apparatus’. Secondly, the location of Café Moment was alluded to as a place from which Palestinians had been expelled in 1948, implicitly substituting the victimisation of displaced Palestinian civilians for that of dead Israeli civilians. Finally, however, the death count was not shied away from, and indeed it seemed to be a matter of some pride that of the wounded, seven were ‘in a very dangerous condition’, such that they would not be in a position to serve in the occupation forces again.

If the Qassam brigades’ description of an attack that left numerous civilians dead seems to have a slightly schizophrenic quality in its attempt to justify this activity, there are other examples of narrative content that leave far less room for doubt. Among these we might number the American anti-abortion group the Army of God. This organisation’s website is at <http://www.armyofgod.com>. If we might perhaps be forgiven for considering attacks which kill ‘occupation’ forces on patrol as examples of insurgent rather than, strictly, terrorist violence, then the same can hardly be said for the attacks on abortion providing doctors and their clinics upon which the Army of God lavishes fulsome praise. While the organisation makes plain that it views such medical professionals as frontline soldiers in a demonic war on America’s unborn babies, the non-combatant status of these individuals is otherwise hardly in question to anyone else. Thematically speaking, however, the site has some striking commonalities with that of the al-Qassam brigades – particularly the focus on martyrology and prisoners. While most of the gallery of ‘American heroes’ celebrated by the group, such as most recently Scott Roeder, assassin of late term abortion provider George Tiller, are alive and in prison, the online hagiographies provided for them are very similar to those of dead Qassamis; it seems all are individuals of exemplary moral character, and to quote the biblical allusion with which the anti-abortion killer Paul Hill is lauded ‘of whom the world was not worth’ (Hebrews 11:38). All are ‘defenders’ of the slaughtered unborn.

And yet, notwithstanding the Army of God’s jubilant exultation in the deeds of convicted murderers (and, it might perhaps be suggested, somewhat ghoulish fascination with a small and endlessly repeated selection of horrendous images of aborted and dismembered fetuses), the Army of God website does not present direct calls for violence from its viewers. And in this sense, it is perhaps, paradoxically, a milder case of the promotion of violence than that of a group whose ‘terrorist’ status is much more contentious.

Another example is the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a network of environmentally motivated saboteurs who perform activities such as tree spiking, bomb hoaxes and, particularly arson. While they are often referred to as ‘ecoterrorists’ it is worth pointing out that the group has never yet killed anyone, and has disavowed the use of violence against living targets in no uncertain terms. Indeed, it claims:

*‘The guidelines for the ELF specifically require members to take all necessary precautions to ensure no one is physically injured. In the history of the ELF internationally no one has been injured from the group’s actions and that is not a coincidence. Yes, the use of fire as a tool is dangerous but when used properly it can tremendously aid in the destruction of property associated with the killing of life.’<sup>22</sup>*

By definitions of terrorism such as the one in the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism quoted above, the group is not terrorist at all. If, however, it is accepted that the violence against property the network practices can, after all, be construed as terrorist, then the words of the network's online 'press office' – an entity which claims to act simply as a passive recipient of communiqués from anonymous activists worldwide – can be interpreted as even more direct incitement than those of the Army of God, and indeed many more explicitly terrorist organisations. As the website <http://www.elfpressoffice.org> puts it:

*'The earth is not dying. It is being killed – and those that are killing it have names and addresses. What are you doing tonight?'*<sup>23</sup>

While we may consider the Earth Liberation Front, if they are a terrorist group at all, to lie at the fringes of terrorism, they are not unique in making explicit calls for action from those reading their materials. Indeed, among the most direct of terrorist groups in making such calls is one which few would have difficulty in describing as 'terrorist': al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Under Yusuf al-Ayyiri, this organisation became particularly notable for the production of electronic magazines such as *Voice of Jihad* and *Al Battar Military Camp*, the latter of which, in particular, specialised in encouraging individuals to participate in violent activities. Indeed, advice for those residents of Arabic countries who wished to join in the war against American expatriates was, apparently, a familiar theme for a time, as the following forum post seems to indicate.

*'Go to the supermarket where he shops (the American pig) observe him well and keep close to his trolley in the supermarket. Let the poison be in a syringe. And if this pig puts in his trolley some fruits and vegetables which are not covered with a bag, spread it on the food without him knowing. It is preferable to put it on things like rocket, lettuce and the like. If not, you can stick the injection into any of the fruits - oranges, apples, whatever he has - even a fizzy drink like cola, and so on. With the permission of the only God, 'who begat not, nor was begotten, nor ever had unto him his like' he will die a horrible death. Imagine him dying and his soul leaving his body as he chokes.'*<sup>24</sup>

While prescriptions for carrying out a lethal campaign by means of poisons injected into fruits and vegetables may hardly seem on a par with the mass casualty terrorist attacks which have earned al-Qaeda its notoriety, the important point here is the implicit sentiment. Americans, in the extract above, are assumed to be fair game simply by virtue of being American. This, of course, is scarcely a shocking revelation with regard to al-Qaeda. Such ideas have been current in the Islamist militant milieu at least since Osama bin Laden's 1996 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Two Holy Places'. But what is chilling about the extract above is the way in which it appears to ground the abstract idea of American nationals as a legitimate target in what is ostensibly (though perhaps not in reality) a realistic set of individual actions.

#### Terrorist narratives on the Internet

It might be argued that the Internet has a number of unique characteristics that both increase the necessity of arriving at a way of identifying content independently as 'terrorist' but which, at the same time, frustrate it. Once information is digitised, it can be infinitely copied without loss of fidelity and transported endlessly. If a computer is connected to the Internet, it can access digital information on (in principle) any other computer on the network. This means that Internet users have formidable powers to manipulate and

disseminate content over other forms of media. The Internet has therefore led to new genres of 'mash up', 'user generated content' and the like.

Consequently, on the Internet, the act of producing original material, and the act of producing montages of others' material tend to blur together. Like composers of *musique concrete* in the mid twentieth century, or of hip hop in the late twentieth century, Internet users do not just consume. They also 'prosume', to use the term coined by Toffler; expressing themselves by the very act of collecting material.<sup>25</sup>

This means that isolating particular 'terrorist' discourses on the Internet is a complex and ambiguous task. A beheading video of al-Qaeda in Iraq is the propaganda of a terrorist group. But such videos are paradoxically most readily obtained in the present day from fervently patriotic and militaristic American websites, eager to perpetuate ideas of the terrorist threat. On the other hand, 'radical' forums sympathetic to al-Qaeda contain surprising amounts of material from the mainstream media, posted for the apparent purpose of illustrating some particular ideological point. This is even more true for English language forums not affiliated to al-Qaeda, but popular with 'violent radicals' such as <http://www.islamicawakening.com> and <http://www.revolutionmuslim.com>.<sup>26</sup> An analysis of a hundred threads culled from the 'politics, jihad and current affairs' section of the former of these forums at three periods over the past year reveals that, far from being a major conduit of the propaganda of terrorist groups, the majority of leading posts in this forum come from mainstream, Western media sources such as the BBC, CNN, Reuters and the Associated Press.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, this does not mean that the overall message of the forum is in any way tempered by the editorial stance of such news sources. Rather, the cumulative, selective and essentially narrative effect of the articles – as well as that of the somewhat sparse discussions that sometimes accompany them – is to present a discourse in which Muslims are perceived as relentlessly persecuted both by non-Muslim powers and by hypocritical pseudo-Muslim rulers, who act in collusion with the outside forces. Against this are positioned the mujahideen, in the form of al-Qaeda, the Taliban and groups such as the Shabab movement in Somalia, who are unerringly honourable and righteous defenders of Muslims, in contrast to the brutal and unconscionable tactics which are attributed to their opponents. In order to present this discourse, all that is required is to selectively post any article detailing oppression of Muslims (for example, alleged use of white phosphorous as a weapon by the IDF in Gaza, or the perceived discriminative and arbitrary treatment meted out to Muslim residents of Western countries), while either holding back or challenging any article mentioning similar abuses by fighting Muslim groups; in other words, a discourse not dissimilar from that promoted by al-Qaeda itself.

#### Counter-narratives

Where does this leave counter-narrative initiatives? An implicit assumption in the above discussion is that an initiative to address the problematic content that concerns us needs to be evidence driven. Given this, it seems we are not yet really in a position to seriously engage with such an undertaking. Surely, before we can directly address problematic content, we need to be able to identify its qualities; and the discussion above suggests we have not adequately done this.

There are, nevertheless, some general assertions that can be made. For example, the earlier discussion suggests there needs to be clarity of objectives recognising that the primary focus is the prevention of

ultimate engagement of individuals with terrorism or other forms of violence. Prevention of radicalisation, or of the expression of a radical critique of contemporary government policy, is not necessarily the same as this. Perhaps part of the issue here is recognition in any counter-narrative of the need for boundaries around fundamental principles (i.e. non-use of violence) that need to be expressed.

It can also be argued that the Internet represents a different case from other media. For example, it seems to be a feature of the Internet that people at the margins often exercise a disproportionate influence.

In the context of concern here, this may be because of all or some of the following:

- Their particular ideology is especially attractive/ welcoming/ relevant;
- Their enthusiasm may leak into their interaction with people; and/or
- They are so strongly committed they spend disproportionately long periods of time online.

Evidence suggests that time, presence and the nature of engagement are probably the most important qualities that determine individual status online, and thereby the propensity an individual might have to influence other's experience of radicalisation processes. Time online in an appropriate forum gives access and exposure to lots of people, and it gives a sense of belonging. Similarly, presence is often associated with authority (note the use of terms like *newbie*) especially when associated with authoritative postings or engagement (note the use of the term *lurker* as abusive to describe someone who does not engage). There is also some evidence that young people adopting leadership styles in Internet forums differ in their online behaviour from adults.<sup>28</sup> One characteristic is that contrary to adult leadership styles of contributing ideas, sticking to tasks and using powerful language, young people tend to keep the goals and needs of the group as central, synthesising the posts of others, for example, rather than contributing their own ideas.

In terms of the narrative content, the particular material accessed (text, video, audio) may or may not be relevant (as opposed to interaction around the process of accessing material, participation in discussions, etc); if it is influential, this will presumably relate to the point on the trajectory towards radicalisation and/or involvement with terrorism any given individual might be. However, within the context of notions related to 'scales of radicalisation content', we clearly need to explore further what qualities influential material has (as opposed to non-influential material), we need to better understand how we might assess any influence such material might have, and we need to look at material usage in relation to individual's patterns of internet engagement. An issue here might be to distinguish between text and visual material, and in the latter case to explore the role of emotions and fantasy. The role of visual imagery – both still and moving – clearly is important, in that large quantities are found on seized hard drives from offenders, and there are anecdotal accounts of the significance of particular forms of imagery, such as the beheading videos or the martyrs' video wills. It is less clear, however, what functions this material might play in terms of supporting terrorist activity, in terms of motivation, and in terms of facilitating the radicalisation process.

We probably also need to develop a more discriminating sense of the role of ideological and emotional content of material accessed, and of the role of that content as an identity marker as opposed to the objectively assessed persuasive qualities of the material *per se*. Despite the enormous amount of ideologically radical material that circulates and is widely available (text, video, audio) how much of this is actually influential, and if it is why is this (persuasive ideology, emotional content, a sense of identity) and how much is collected for other reasons? At the very least, this surely needs to be determined before the creation of counter-narrative campaigns.

A further question to pose is, if we think of this in terms of behavioural products, what do people do with the material they access, either on- or offline – is it catalogued (if so how and using what parameters), is it simply stored, is it read, is it used as a token in exchanges etc.? The answers to this for any individual are likely to be multiple, and vary over time – a sense of process therefore also needs to be developed. We know for instance from other areas like child pornography that collecting and assembling material is not always motivated by the obvious reasons and indeed problematic material can be collected for a number of what at times might appear to be contradictory reasons. The role of fantasy as a motivating element needs to be explored in this context. However, a fundamental dilemma we face is knowing who will ultimately participate in violence as a result of involvement with such material, who will become radically sophisticated but not express this in violence, and who is just playing with challenging thoughts and ideas. Age and developmental status may also be factors here.

In the particular case of the role of the Internet, we know that in general the Internet may:

- Alter moods;
- Lessen social risk and remove inhibitions;
- Increase a sense of anonymity and invulnerability;
- Enable multiple self representations;
- Show evidence of group dynamics;
- Validate, justify and offer an exchange medium;
- Challenge old concepts of regulation;
- Disrupt and challenge conventional hierarchies; and
- Offer opportunities for emotional avoidance.

All of these are relevant factors in helping us understand the processes at work in the way interaction with content on the Internet can influence radicalisation, and these should be taken into account in the development of counter-narrative initiatives. The absence of empirical data, although a long-term goal, should not limit the recognition of the significance of these factors.

Evidence suggests that people may often be aware of their problematic behaviour, and may recognise the need to address it, but at the same time may feel powerless or lacking in the necessary knowledge to develop strategies to reduce it. This may particularly be the case for people who have moved along a trajectory towards violence, and can recognise – in however limited a fashion – the need to address their problematic behaviour before crossing some legal, social or personal boundary. A further issue relates to people understanding the legal issues engagement with radical material might present for them, and who may not recognise the problematic qualities to what they are doing. An element of any counter-narrative therefore should be the provision of assistance to reach out to people in these situations.

In a general sense, we should seek to place any counter-narrative initiative into our broader understanding of what we mean by preventing problematic and at times probably illegal behaviour. Brantingham and Faust identify three kinds of crime prevention initiatives that may be relevant to our understanding of the development of counter-narrative strategies:

1. Primary prevention, focussed on stopping a crime before it occurs,
2. Secondary prevention, directed at individuals thought to be at high risk of committing an offence; and
3. Tertiary prevention, focussed on known offenders.<sup>29</sup>

The development of counter-narratives seems to primarily fall within notions of primary prevention (i.e. stopping crime before it occurs), although they may also be relevant to other groups that may be farther along a trajectory towards violence. Typically, primary prevention initiatives are divided into social preventative measures, and situational preventative measures. Social preventative measures in the main address the 'inclination' to offend, and are generally conceptualised in terms of educational initiatives or in broad social engineering terms where initiatives tend to be undifferentiated as to target group, and available to all, regardless of risk. Such initiatives may have a place, but are essentially long term and necessarily lack a focus on the specific potential criminal incident or context. It should be noted that initiatives of this kind are often regarded as inefficient and of limited value in other crime prevention terms; in the context of the international availability of the Internet, such initiatives can only have even more limited achievements. Their popularity however perhaps relates to a political imperative to be seen to be doing something, rather than an evidenced based analysis of the problems.

Cornish and Clarke offer a typology of situational crime reduction techniques identifying five broad categories, each containing strategic sub categories; increase effort, increase risk, reduce rewards, reduce provocation, and remove excuses.<sup>30</sup> These five broad categories individually and together may offer a way of conceptualising and structuring counter-narrative initiatives; indeed, they may offer a template for the development of a range of targeted initiatives, and the practical implications of this need to be further explored. Some strategies are likely to be more effective than others, and all are likely to be grounded in the specific context the individual finds him- or herself; quite clearly, one size will not fit all. This argues therefore for a range of initiatives premised on a systematic analysis of the nature and form of radicalisation targeted, the kinds of individuals potentially involved, and the characteristics of the medium (i.e. internet protocol, type of involvement) to be used.

In the particular case of the Internet, however derived, expression of violence that has its origins in Internet activity requires transition from online to offline activity to be effective and for the potential for violence to be expressed. As in other areas, where this transition point involves contact with others, it offers probably the most effective principal focus for practical law enforcement attention and intervention, with general educational programmes and other counter-narrative efforts to offer alternative perspectives and opportunities being developed in parallel by other agencies (actual or quasi-civil society agencies). We need more empirical information about transition points to identify qualities of vulnerability, but the development of strategies based on the five broad situational crime reduction techniques identified above (i.e. increase effort, increase risk, reduce rewards, reduce provocation, and remove excuses) seem to offer the most conceptually coherent strategies around which to structure intervention. Coordination and liaison between agencies will be necessary to ensure maximum impact and effectiveness. The special case of self-radicalisation, and individual action outside of a group, needs closer examination to establish its reality and parameters. Experience in policing e-commerce crimes suggests that partnership arrangements with private agencies are necessary to achieve success.<sup>31</sup>

It can be argued that civil society agencies (as opposed to law enforcement or intelligence agencies) may be best placed to deliver counter-narratives and to develop anti-radicalisation strategies,<sup>32</sup> but it is equally the case that in the contemporary world they may also be the main agents of civil discord. This inevitable tension may however be a source of strength rather than weakness for counter-radicalisation initiatives. Civil society agencies tend to:

- Have high degrees of public trust;
- Mobilise in a cost effective way high levels of involvement;
- Be responsive; and
- Function with distributed organisational structures (which help to ensure continuity).

Within the context of the Internet and its rather particular sense of a civil society structure, these roles for civil society agencies may be particularly relevant. However, it goes without saying that the nature of any counter-narrative strategy, and its qualities from such organisations will need particular attention. An art, religious and cultural focus – assuming a particularly popular and ethnically/socially appropriate cultural focus – may be the kind of vehicle that would potentially be most effective; recognising, for example, the role of music in the shaping and development of popular political as well as social culture, and similarly recognising the significance of religious discourse for some of the communities targeted.<sup>33</sup> However, a sense of autonomy, legitimacy and credibility will lie at the core of any initiative for it to be effective, and this must be a central factor in the identification of agencies to express and develop these ideas. It may be that direct and indirect strategies need to be developed to accommodate the range of processes involved.

In conclusion, the title of this paper asks if counter-narratives matter. Intuition and commonsense suggests they do; evidence is either lacking or at best equivocal. Until we can be sure what the counter-narratives should be addressing, and how we can identify the content and actors they should target, we will not be able to judge whether what we do either works, or even influences behavioural outcomes. This must raise serious policy questions, which, given the extent of public attention to this area, is a source of concern.

1 See for example M. Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.

2 A. Hoskin & B. O'Loughlin, 'Pre-meditating guilt: radicalisation and mediality in British News', p. 84, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 81-93.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

5 See B.F. Skinner, *Science and Human Behavior*, Free Press, New York, 1953.

6 Images or text constitute permanent products, and these are in other areas important elements in behavioural assessment and intervention strategies, and are used in data based decision-making and assessment.

7 See M. Taylor & E. Quayle, *Child Pornography: An Internet Crime*, Brunner-Routledge, Hove, 2003.

8 Such manuals are readily accessible on far right and jihadist forums.

9 In 2006, two men were picked up filming locations in Washington, D.C. – footage which they later emailed to the 'cyberjihadis' Younis Tsouli and Aabid Khan according to the BBC. Photographs of locations in Washington were a standard part of the materials to be found on self-styled 'jihadi' websites at least up to 2008.

10 The URL of the official site of FARC was until recently <www.farc-ejercitodelpueblo.org>.

11 The most well-known example of this would be that of the group 'The Holy Land Foundation', the exposure of which's links to violent activity in Palestine are described in the book *Terrorist Hunter* by Rita Katz (then writing anonymously); *Terrorist Hunter: The Extraordinary Story of a Woman Who Went Undercover to Infiltrate the Radical Islamic Groups Operating in America*, HarperCollins, New York, 2003.

12 As, for example, the Islamic Army of Iraq's site at <http://iaisite.org/>.

13 Terrorism Act 2006, article 1.1 and 2.3(b).

14 *Ibid.*, 2.4.

15 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in resolution 54/109 of 9 December 1999, article 2.1(b)

16 These criteria can be viewed at <www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>.

17 Y. Tsafati & G. Weimann, 'www.terrorism.com: Terror on the Internet', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2002, pp. 317-32.

- 18 A. Abbasi, H. Chen & A. Salem, 'Sentiment Analysis in Multiple Languages: Feature Selection for Opinion Classification in Web Forums', *ACM Transactions on Information Systems*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2008, pp. 12:1-12:34.
- 19 <<http://gotwarporn.com>>.
- 20 Baron Bodissey, 'A Matter of Proportion', *Gates of Vienna*, 17 July 2006, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.com/2006/07/matter-of-proportion.html>>.
- 21 See Tsfati & Weimann.
- 22 'Frequently asked questions about the Earth Liberation Front (ELF)', North American ELF Press Office, 2001, retrieved 1 November 2009, <[http://www.animalliberationfront.com/ALFront/ELF/elf\\_faqs.pdf](http://www.animalliberationfront.com/ALFront/ELF/elf_faqs.pdf)>, p. 27.
- 23 <<http://www.elfpressoffice.org>>.
- 24 <<http://www.al-sayf.com>> (now extinct).
- 25 See A. Toffler, *The Third Wave*, Collins, London, 1980.
- 26 These forums were identified to the authors as problematic in terms of expressions of violent radical ideology by Abdul-Haqq Baker of Brixton Mosque, London.
- 27 This conforms to findings already encountered by Paterson, who observes that increasing availability and demand for news on the Internet between 2001 and 2005 was accompanied not by a growth and diversification in Internet journalism, but by a growing reliance on a handful of news agencies such as AP, AFP and Reuters. See C. Paterson, 'News Agency Dominance in International News on the Internet', *Papers in International and Global Communication*, No. 01/06, May 2006, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/cicr/exhibits/42/cicrpateron.pdf>>.
- 28 See for example J. Cassell, D. Huffaker, D. Tversky & K. Ferriman, 'The language of online leadership: Gender and Youth Engagement on the Internet', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2006, pp. 436-49.
- 29 P.J. Brantingham & F.L. Faust, 'A Conceptual Model of Crime Prevention', *Crime & Delinquency*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1976, pp. 284-96.
- 30 D.B. Cornish & R.V. Clarke, 'Opportunities, Precipitators and Criminal Decisions: A Reply to Wortley's Critique of Situational Crime Prevention' in M. Smith & D.B. Cornish (eds.), *Theory for Situational Crime Prevention. (Crime Prevention Studies, vol. 16)*, Criminal Justice Press, Monsey, NY., 2003, pp. 41-96.
- 31 See for example G.R. Newman & R.V. Clarke, *Superhighway Robbery: Preventing E-Commerce Crime*, Willan Publishing, Cullompton, U.K., 2003.
- 32 See The Change Institute, *Best practices in cooperation initiatives between authorities and civil society with a view to the prevention of and response to violent radicalisation*, The Change Institute, London, 2008.
- 33 See, for an interesting example of what appears to be a very effective counter-narrative that might be emulated, for instance C. Maag, 'Young Muslims Build a Subculture on an Underground Book', *New York Times*, 22 December 2008, retrieved 1 November 2009, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/us/23muslim.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/us/23muslim.html?_r=3)>.

# 9 New Media and Counter-Narrative Strategies

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## Introduction

This chapter examines the potential for the use of new media technologies in countering violent extremist narratives. The debate over extremist narratives and counter-strategies is set against a complex background of information and communication technologies (ICT) that both help and hinder the ability of governments and agencies to combat the use of these same technologies by extremists for propaganda, radicalisation, recruitment, and operational purposes. Whilst states are undeniably lagging in their use of new media, they do possess the resources to engage in these dynamic spaces, if a few important considerations are taken into account. The following chapter discusses both the new media environment and how states might begin to engage more effectively with new media in order to counteract the propagation of extremist narratives.

## The new media environment

The term 'new media' has arisen almost organically in recent years, and has developed in opposition to 'old' or traditional forms of media, such as newspapers, television and radio. These familiar technologies are often characterised as 'one-to-many' systems of information delivery, centrally produced, and distributed through linear supply chains to multiple consumers.

By contrast, new media forms – principally reliant on networked digital computing devices – are typified as interactive, 'many-to-many' exchange systems, which have also augmented the possibilities of rapid one-to-one communication across global networks. The boundaries between production and consumption have been substantially blurred by new media, such that consumers of digitally-mediated information are also usually producers too. In the current discussion, this is perhaps best exemplified by the phenomenon commonly known since 2004 as Web 2.0.<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of differences between Web 2.0 and the web's first iteration, Web 1.0. Static websites still exist but have been overtaken in ubiquity and importance by user-generated content on blogs, social networking sites, web forums, file-sharing sites, etc, where the emphasis is on creating content rather than just reading it. In information management-speak, this illustrates the shift from 'old' client-server relationships to 'new' peer-to-peer relationships. Web 2.0 derives its value not from content provided by site owners only but by site users too, who are themselves creators of content.

This surge in 'user-generated content' spurred a massive increase in types of web platform with which we are now all familiar. These include free blogging platforms (Wordpress, Blogger, LiveJournal), social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Ning, LinkedIn), content aggregators (Bloglines, Google Reader, Netvibes, Topix), online media sharing (YouTube, Hulu, Last.fm, Flickr), mashup tools (Google Maps, Yahoo! Pipes), real-time microblogging services (Twitter, FriendFeed, Tumblr), web forums, distributed online gaming, etc., where the emphasis is on creating content and social meaning, rather than media consumption alone.

Theorists generally agree that these factors have helped in some way to 'flatten' traditional hierarchies of information exchange, with the potential to 'democratise' the postmodern public sphere.<sup>2</sup> How this is playing out is much disputed, with some, like Herman and McChesney, arguing that far from doing so, access to global information flows is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few multinational corporations.<sup>3</sup> As internet censorship becomes the live issue for governments worldwide into the next

decade, we may also witness the ‘Balkanisation’ of the internet – a far cry from the original promise of the web, let alone the assertions of early cyber-utopians like Peter Ludlow, for whom cyberspace was a new world beyond the reach of government.<sup>4</sup>

Although the web is the best known example of an internet-based technology,<sup>5</sup> there are others that also qualify as new media. Virtual worlds, networked computer games, instant messaging, various internet communications channels, and many more digital platforms form the varied ‘ecosystem’ of new media. ‘Old’ media have also come on board, with newspapers and television channels increasingly offering interactive platforms through which people can access content at their convenience, and often for free, as well as engage in feedback with programme broadcasters and makers. In an important sense, the distinction between ‘new’ and ‘old’ media is becoming slightly redundant and it may, as public diplomacy expert Matt Armstrong consistently avers, be more useful to think in terms of ‘now media’ instead.<sup>6</sup>

The ecology of new media presents opportunities for multiple actors to exploit the relative anonymity, velocity and ubiquity of the global internet for their own ends, for good or ill. The existence of both socially constructive and detrimental outcomes has led to what a recent Chatham House report termed, ‘the dilemma of the technological commons’.<sup>7</sup>

Political extremists have long been users of networked communications technologies<sup>8</sup> but it is only since 9/11 that the relationship between terrorism and the internet has been a significant focus of policy concerns. Islamists are not at present the only violent extremist groups using new media, but the framing context of most of this discussion is undeniably the ‘War on Terror’, with its emphasis on global jihadism. Although the technical proficiency of groups like al-Qaeda is often exaggerated,<sup>9</sup> it is clear that Islamists are tapping into new media technologies as a very effective vehicle for their anti-Western narratives.

Video is particularly important: of insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, IED explosions in Iraq and statements by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri – all of which are channelled onto the internet by organisations like al-Fajr Media Center and the Global Islamic Media Front as files tailor-made for a range of platforms and bandwidth capacities.<sup>10</sup> These are circulated and widely-distributed by further tiers of activists and sympathisers through forums, chatrooms and email, and onto high-profile sites like YouTube, amongst many others. Not only can these serve as inspiration to a wide range of interested parties, but the same platforms are used by radical preachers, ideologues, self-appointed commentators, and what al-Qaeda expert Jarret Brachman terms ‘jihobbyists’. The emphasis is not only on the viral circulation of ‘core’ video and other material, but on the production of one’s own material that promotes the narrative of jihad.<sup>11</sup> The ‘e-jihad’ has been given legitimacy by *fatwa*, such that pro-jihad individuals can become ‘involved’ without committing acts of violence or counteracting their Islamic faith.<sup>12</sup> Nowhere else is this given as much expression as in the many web forums dedicated to Islamist issues that serve to assist in the radicalisation and recruitment of individuals to the cause, principally through the furtherance of community discourses that support the broader narratives.<sup>13</sup>

The characteristics of new media that facilitate the propagation of narratives associated with extremism and terrorism can also, in theory, be used by those who wish to counter those discourses. However, whilst new media are undoubtedly complicit in, for example, the radicalisation of young Muslims into extremism, the social context of these individuals is as important as the media with which they choose to

engage.<sup>14</sup> Media are part of a matrix of radicalising factors, and it follows that responses aimed at countering radicalisation should take full account of all facets of people’s social environments, not just those mediated through communications technologies. In the same fashion, just as extremist narratives would exist without contemporary information technologies, the deployment of computer-mediated counter-narratives should only be as part of a suite of interlinked operations beneath a coherent strategic umbrella. Due to the global environment of new media, global engagement is necessary: the best tools for this are new media themselves.

However, not all of the target audiences towards whom counter-narratives might be directed are necessarily engaged with new media. In the West, this mainly applies to older members of the public – who are not very likely to constitute a target demographic in this case – but young people are increasingly ‘wired’ via domestic broadband, or, more often, ‘wireless’, by virtue of near-saturation internet-ready mobile telephony. The same applies to the rich countries of east and southeast Asia. In southern Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, domestic internet connections are less widespread but network functions are often fulfilled by educational establishments and public internet facilities.

Often forgotten in the context of this discussion is the importance of cellphones to citizens of less-developed countries.<sup>15</sup> Whilst the global internet-using population is somewhere around 1.5 billion,<sup>16</sup> mobile phone users easily exceed three billion.<sup>17</sup> In addition to this vast network of voice users, SMS (text message) channels are also significant communications vectors globally. As more cellphones incorporate internet functionality as standard, with the added attractions of iPhone applications, augmented reality and other new developments, we can expect to see them becoming more important generally, but particularly in countries with less developed static internet infrastructures. Therefore, we should not think that ‘new media’ equates just to those that are accessed via fixed and mobile personal computers.

The following sections will deal primarily with the internet as the example *par excellence* of a new media technology. This is principally due to its increasing ubiquity, and the relative familiarity with which we regard it. However, other forms of social media exist, and will develop rapidly in the coming years, and the following comments should be born in mind when we consider all types of digital communications platforms.

#### **New media: opportunities and obstacles**

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan is probably best remembered for his oft-quoted maxim, ‘the medium is the message’.<sup>18</sup> By this, he did not imply, as is commonly thought, that technology is more important than content, or that information is somehow unimportant. Rather, McLuhan meant that the nature of the medium is embedded in the message it carries, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship in which the medium influences how the message is perceived by an audience. The medium has social consequences in effecting often unanticipated changes in human behaviour and thought, and therefore has within itself potential often hidden from those who invent or use it.

The new media environment constantly surprises and excites those who monitor its growth and development. Seemingly at every turn, users/creators devise new tools and methods to turn the availability of information to their advantage, causing it to act as they wish it to, and to fulfil their required functionalities – a far cry from older ‘one-to-many’ forms of information dissemination. The technologies of the internet

mean that content can be recontextualised, reinterpreted and remixed by anyone. It can be repurposed to suit one's needs and desires. It can be aimed at local, national or international audiences by any one person, group, or even society.

This has led to what Johnny Ryan terms the 'plasticity' of information,<sup>19</sup> and which fulfils McLuhan's suggestions that the technology itself can cause unpredictable effects to occur in both the social and technological domains. This is particularly true when we consider how powerful the image has become in the perpetuation of both terrorist and counter-terrorist strategies, for example.<sup>20</sup> YouTube has become a crucial vehicle for almost any type of political actor imaginable, particularly as imagery does not respect linguistic barriers – it has become part of the message.

In this environment of 'recombinant social media' and evolving relationships between people and technology, it should be clear that traditional models of information dissemination and control simply do not apply. However, the challenges and opportunities are afforded to both extremists and those trying to combat them.

The internet, in particular, has reduced the cost of international communication, enabled access to almost unlimited volumes of information, and has made it easier to reach audiences and communities of like-minded individuals. For the extremist, the relative anonymity of online activity has also lowered the thresholds for acting in risky behaviours that might be proscribed in the physical world.

The velocity of the internet, however, is, whilst a boon for interpersonal messaging and commercial transactions, also somewhat of a challenge. No sooner has something been released onto the net than it should be considered to have 'gone global'. Control of the message has been relinquished, and will never be regained. This may play into the hands of extremists, for whom propaganda can be inaccurate and misleading but are mainly catering for an audience of the already-converted, but can be difficult for states, for whom 'media management' has become a watchword for modern media engagement. Errors in judgement can become amplified across the net, and even honest messages can be skewed and wilfully misinterpreted. In a sense, this is little different from more traditional media, of which Mark Twain is alleged to have remarked, 'a lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes', but the increased velocity of new media means that there is even less time or opportunity to correct mistakes, meaning that governments need robust yet flexible media strategies to deal with them.

The following three sections will address a series of key questions that need to be considered when attempting to use new media as means of countering extremist messages in a globalised communications environment.

#### Should governments engage with new media?

The simple answer is 'yes', not least because these forms of communication are cheap and available. The opportunities afforded government across a wide range of sectors means that most governments are very aware that new media offer multiple platforms for service provision, problem resolution, inter-agency communication, policy promotion and a host of other functions besides. 'E-Government' has become a buzzword in recent years, and all capable governments are investing heavily in the means and methods of delivering online content and services that meet the needs of government and their citizens.<sup>21</sup>

The field of countering violent extremism is qualitatively and quantitatively different, of course, for reasons of culture, ethnicity, ethics, and other politically charged considerations. If we ask the question again, 'should governments engage with new media to counter extremist narratives?', the answer becomes, 'yes, but be realistic'. We cannot expect total success in countering extremist narratives using new media. Due to the 'perpetual beta' nature of online environments,<sup>22</sup> and the recombinant social media concept, total message control is both impossible and unwise. It follows that attempts to totally control the message are also wasteful of resources.

Corman *et al.* suggest that states adopt a perspective of 'pragmatic complexity', which acknowledges that control is 'impossible and dysfunctional', and that 'failure is the norm' – in terms of strategic objectives, at least. This perspective also suggests that participants in the system are mutually interdependent, and that none are in control of the total communication process.<sup>23</sup> This presumes that the success of A's message depends not only on the message but also on what B thinks and does. Conversely, what B thinks and does is influenced by A's behaviour and B's expectations, interpretations and attributions with respect to A.<sup>24</sup> This appreciation of cultural context implies that there is no one, unitary audience waiting to receive government's chosen message; that relationship simply does not exist.

Whilst failure is not a word that politicians like to hear, it may be one that policymakers can accept, and Corman and his colleagues are making the point that success is a relative concept. It may be far better to try many methods, and gain success that way, than to repeat old and tired counter-narratives through the same old channels, hoping eventually to hit ideational pay-dirt. The sheer variation and proliferation of new media might be daunting,<sup>25</sup> but their resources and expertise mean that governments are actually very well placed to exploit and experiment with these platforms, although their return on investment may well be lower than they might expect for traditional channels.

This is a challenge for governments, but no reason not to proceed. In the United Kingdom, the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) was founded in June 2007 as a cross-departmental team charged with exposing the weaknesses of extremist ideologies and brands, promoting and supporting credible alternatives, and strengthening and protecting national security through communications. Although public information on RICU's activities is scant, they are actively exploring the potential of new media platforms like blogs and social networking sites to propagate counter-narratives as part of the broader countering violence extremism project as set out in recent iterations of the UK counterterrorism strategies.<sup>26</sup>

We might add that governments have to engage in new media – after all, as the old game show catchphrase goes, 'You have to be in it to win it.' Organisations like RICU occupy a grey area in the public consciousness that is usually regarded as 'propaganda', for right or wrong, and the necessities of public diplomacy and strategic communication should not be left just to organisations with limited public transparency. We therefore make one further observation on the general involvement of government with new media. Overt government attempts to use new media – or traditional, mainstream media (MSM), for that matter – should be clearly 'branded'. They should be open, not only to the source and intent of the Twitter feed, the Facebook group, or the YouTube channel, but also to the resulting comments and criticisms that such initiatives will inevitably attract. The well-respected Edelman Trust Barometer survey, in 2009 reaffirmed that trusted organisations are ones that communicate openly, honestly, and regularly. They are also

responsive, and deal with complaints head-on, swiftly, and respectfully.<sup>27</sup> It is worth remembering that in the high-speed global media environment, lies and dissimulation are apt to be discovered, and fast.

#### How should appropriate new media platforms be identified?

The simplest approach is to say that it is sensible to use similar platforms to those used by the audiences whom you wish to reach. This might seem self-evident but is as important as identifying those audiences, and the counter-narratives governments wish to propagate. It is also better to integrate with existing networks than to attempt to set up new ones, or to expect people to flock to a new and shiny initiative just because it's there. With new media, the Barnumesque dictum of 'build it and they will come' falls flat almost entirely. Whilst there is definitely a place for openly-branded large websites like the U.K.'s *Radical Middle Way* (RMW), which has had some success in furthering its counter-extremism agenda, the RMW website is but one of many activities and platforms that the broader project employs.<sup>28</sup>

If, for example, we look at the World Map of Social Networks, created by Vincenzo Cosenza, a marketing specialist at Microsoft Italy, we find that some of our expectations regarding what social networks are most popular where, are somewhat confounded.<sup>29</sup> Talk of the 'MySpace Generation' – a term frequently used to describe a generation of 'digital natives', more technologically *au fait* than their older fellow citizens – has, in the personal experience of the author been replicated by U.K. House of Commons Select Committees and 4-star generals, and taken to mean that all young people use MySpace; indeed, one would think that they only use MySpace. It might be surprising for some of these older commentators to find that in the U.K., for example, MySpace lags behind Facebook and Bebo in terms of user activity; it does not register in the top three sites in Italy, Russia or Spain. Even Facebook, dominant in Europe, is hardly used in China or Russia; Orkut leads the way in India, Hi5 in Portugal, and Maktoob in Arabic-speaking countries. These findings have obvious implications when deciding what social network platform might be appropriate within a given country for a particular demographic.

With respect to the Arabic-speaking world, which hosts many of the websites and online resources that are hubs for information dissemination to Europe and the world, there is little value in assuming that all users, or even all countries, have similar linguistic and interest profiles. A recent report from Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, 'Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere', illustrated strikingly how varied was this form of new media across the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> Some of the key findings were that the U.S. is not a major topic of discussion across the region; that Arabic bloggers are overwhelmingly critical of violent extremists; and that domestic news is more important than international news in most of the countries analysed. Furthermore, YouTube and Wikipedia were linked to far more often as sources of internet-available information than any other sites. The results of the survey dispelled ideas that the 'Arabic blogosphere' is a hotbed of extremist discourse, online radicalisation, and anti-Western sentiment.

These international examples demonstrate that sound research is a prerequisite to effective engagement and resource allocation, and similar approaches are needed at national level also. This is exactly the sort of task with which RICU has been charged, for example. They have commissioned specific research on audience segmentation, online behaviours of young British Muslims youth, media consumption patterns amongst British Muslims, and the role of blogs in radicalisation.<sup>31</sup> Audiences and platforms should be identified and properly understood before communications operations are brought online. Of course, there needs to be an ongoing audit of new media platforms, as the internet-using public can be extremely

fickle and flighty when new platforms emerge – as in the case of Twitter – or they simply get bored with older services like MySpace.

Some platforms are remarkably resilient to the vagaries and velocity of global service choice. A number of the jihadi web forums have substantial longevity, for example, and are of concern to security agencies everywhere.<sup>32</sup> However, these are beyond the scope of the current enquiry, and are substantially monitored by intelligence agencies and non-governmental organisations alike.<sup>33</sup> Governments should not attempt direct overt intervention in such fora because these actions would result in significant pushback from users, as well as jeopardising the covert intelligence-gathering potential provided by these communities.

#### What is the role of civil society?

There has been great improvement in many countries in enabling civil society involvement in national counter extremism strategies. Some, like the U.K.'s 2009 CONTEST II strategy, devote great care to outlining how non-governmental organisations, community groups, schools, etc., should be approached, encouraged and utilised to assist in countering extremist narratives. This is a very problematic area, as eloquently and forcefully described in the Policy Exchange's report 'Choosing Our Friends Wisely' (2009).<sup>34</sup> Identifying the correct groups for partnership and possible funding has been a constant problem for governments, and many attempts have resulted in negative public relations and damaging implications for social cohesion.

Nevertheless, civil society in its various forms remains a potent, relevant, and important source of help in countering extremist narratives. As regards new media, their role might be somewhat different, but they still have a potential role to play. Local communities are still the best placed people to determine what is required in their communities, and thought should be given to supporting online initiatives relevant to these communities, if they believe that it would assist them in countering extremism, and if they are up to the task of managing these programs effectively. It is likely, as with the aforementioned RMW, that such projects would only be in part new media-orientated, and would form only one strand of a group's activities. Government partnerships should take into account the utility of such initiatives, as well as the warnings regarding choice of partners, particularly where funding is involved.

Such civil society groups are likely to be most effective 'on the street', at a local level, with new media outlets supporting and promoting those activities. The issue of community remains relevant when we talk about the broader new media environment. The concept of the 'virtual community' has been much discussed by academics and, although no definition is acceptable to all, a consensus accepts that virtual communities do exist. These do not always map well onto 'real-world' communities, extending across national and ethnic borders, and tend to represent communities of interest and emotion, rather than communities linked by physical co-location. Many of the online communities that are central to the propagation of extremist media can be understood in these terms. These are more problematic for civil society to address, as the same resources that can be mobilised in a local community in space cannot always be so used in cyberspace.

This has led to the emergence of individuals and groups who have taken it upon themselves, either unfunded, or as small non-profit organisations, to tackle extremist narratives online. Sometimes this manifests as direct confrontation, by persons anonymous to these researchers on forums and blogs, or in rather more publicly accessible form by named individuals who expose extremist narratives and

'name-and-shame' those responsible for them. These groups are of varying political hue, and have differential 'success' in achieving their stated aims. Many are of very high quality (NEFA Foundation, Internet Haganah, Jihadica) whereas others are jingoistic adolescents (YouTube 'smackdown posses'), or virulent Islamophobes (Robert Spencer, Atlas Shrugs). These people are taking their own fight to extremists in ways of which some governments might be envious, but this range of civil society activity is probably beyond the scope of most governments to intervene constructively, partly due to their transnational characteristics.<sup>35</sup>

There are many roles for civil society/government partnerships in using new media to counter extremist narratives, but they are likely to be relatively limited in scope, and will probably mainly exist as valuable, tactical support for physical world activities. However, there is scope for governments to explore, in tandem with civil society, innovative ideas for a broader engagement of local communities with the global information media environment, which includes critical capacity-building in information communications technologies.

#### A framework for new media engagement

This section identifies areas that should be taken into consideration when designing new media strategies to counter extremist narratives.

#### Focus

Although this chapter principally concerns the technologies, rather than the content, of counter-narratives, it is important not to focus too much on those technologies. The *purposes of engagement have not changed*, but the speed and complexity of the environment has. The broader strategic aims of communications should not be obscured by the excitement and potential of new media platforms. It is important to remain focused on *positive social outcomes*, rather than just short-term security gains.

#### Research

It is imperative to understand one's potential audience(s) as well and as completely as possible. This must be based upon sound *research and analysis*, rather than received wisdom. Knowledge will enable the types of message to be better tailored, as well as the new media platforms identified to deliver them.<sup>36</sup>

#### Attitude

It is important that those responsible for project design, community liaison and communication (direct or indirect) should remain *honest, transparent and patient*. At the same time, information provision should be *agile and rapid*, as well as both *reactive and anticipatory*, reflecting the new media environment in general.

#### Content

Content that thrives in the new media ecology is *simple, relevant, 'sticky', free* and, frequently, *humorous*. The product needs to resonate with the target audience(s), and will fail otherwise. The aim should be to provide *alternative information streams of high quality* with which people engage and identify. In an 'always on' environment, the content needs to be both *up-to-date and up-to-the-minute*. In some circumstances, it may be desirable to have others act as proxies or vehicles for the content, with content *'going viral'* as a result.

## Conclusions

An important consideration with which to conclude this discussion is that, although the focus of this chapter is on the use of technological platforms, this should not be construed as an assertion that technology alone can 'solve' the issue of countering extremist narratives. This observation arises from an understanding that, in analyses of society and technology, it pays neither to adopt a hard technological determinism, nor to rely overly on forms of social constructivism.<sup>37</sup> In the words of Peláez and Kyriakou:

*'Neither is technology divorced from the social context from which it springs, nor is technology a social product that is independent of the viability conditions that science/technology establishes.'*<sup>38</sup>

In other words, humans create technology through science and innovation, which in turn helps shape the socio-cultural experience of mankind.

In a 'soft' form of technological determinism, Manuel Castells has written, 'technology is society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools.'<sup>39</sup> Nowhere is this more obvious than in the context of 'new media', principally as part of 'cyberspace'. Although it is a tricky environment to define satisfactorily, cyberspace is a complex assemblage of technology, information, and people. *Technology* enables the exchange of *information* at the behest of *human* wills. Although this situation may change with the emergence of artificial intelligences, at present new media technologies are predicated upon the thoughts and actions of human beings alone, despite the often strange things that happen to information in the networks.

This is a general observation on the potential of technology to assist in the struggle against terrorism, particularly in the form of violent extremist narratives. New media are an essential part of counter-narrative programmes, but must be developed as part of overarching political strategies that address the real issues at stake. If political strategy is clear it will be that much easier to communicate this via new media to audiences both friendly and hostile.

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- 4 J.P. Barlow, 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' in P. Ludlow (ed.), *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA & London, 2001, pp. 27-30.
- 5 Although often considered so in public discourse, the web and the internet are not synonymous. The internet is the global network of interconnected computer networks, whereas the web is a system of interlinked hypertext documents (mostly webpages) accessed via the internet.

- 6 M. Armstrong, 'Social Media as Public Diplomacy', *Perspectives*, vol. 1, no. 2 2009.
- 7 P. Cornish, R. Hughes and David Livingstone, *Cyberspace and the National Security of the United Kingdom: Threats and Responses*, Chatham House, London, 2009, p.21.
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- 10 See E. Kohlmann, 'Al-Qaida's Online Couriers', *NEFA Foundation*, May 2009, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://nefafoundation.org/fajrchart.html>>.

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# 10 Heterogeneous Counter-Narratives and the Role of Social Diplomacy

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## Introduction

The fight against terrorism is conducted in various ways: via war and the deployment of military resources, by means of a state's intelligence apparatus and through the application of judicial instruments. Fighting the underlying ideology that terrorists use to legitimise their violence has also been given a central place in counterterrorism policies. Combating extremist views is viewed as the 'soft' side of such a policy, and it plays a pivotal role in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the violent extremists and those in their nearby environment that – both actively and passively – support their actions. In this so-called battle of ideas, governments attempt to undermine the particular narrative of jihadi extremists. Their usually simplistic message is: the 'West' is the enemy of Islam, the only way to counter the West is via violence and therefore jihad is the only option. Western governments have developed various strategies (de-radicalisation programs, rehabilitation programs, empowerment of liberal Muslims, etc.), but recently much emphasis has been put on the development of 'counter-narratives'. This is not an easy task, especially when the messenger is a state. Besides, in the current media age, one must take into account the symbiotic relationship that exists between extremists and the media. The effectiveness of a counter-narrative strategy therefore largely depends on the manner in which the (new) media report, distribute and interpret the narrative.

There are, however, more (strategic) questions that need to be dealt with. What, for instance, is the correct scale of the counter-narrative? Is this a global narrative concentrated on stories about the West and Islam? Or should it be a national or a local narrative? Additionally, the recipient of the counter-narrative needs to be defined. Is it the Muslim population as a whole, or certain Muslim groups with particular religious beliefs? Or solely radicals and extremists, and if so, who among them precisely? Or should the counter-narratives be aimed at more general questions of identity and uncertainties of individuals? Finally, there is the problem of content. Is the counter-narrative aimed at dealing with the extremists' violent ideology, the religious misinterpretations, the psychological implications, the actual violent practices, or the concept of martyrdom? All in all, developing effective strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative is not a simple task.

In any case, each narrative begins with an understanding of developments in the Islamic world, the Islamic religious movements and their manifestations in the country in which the target audience resides. A good relationship with the Islamic world in the broad sense of the word is vital. In this chapter, the author will refrain from dealing into depth with the factors relevant for the effectiveness of counter-narrative strategies, since most of these have already been discussed in other chapters in this volume. Instead, emphasis will be put on a tool that will constitute a necessary complement to public diplomacy and strategic messaging in this context, a vehicle to tell stories: social diplomacy.

Social diplomacy may be a useful instrument to this end: it emphasises the societal dimension of public diplomacy and the involvement of independent actors beyond the government. As a result of this involvement of different actors, the narrative that counters jihadist extremism will be a heterogeneous one. In this way, both the form and the content of the counterstrategy represent the discourse of democracy. However, before elaborating upon the role of civic organisations, we should investigate and clarify the tensions that may exist between NGOs and the government when dealing with this issue.

## Social diplomacy<sup>1</sup>

The concepts of public and social diplomacy are closely linked to the notion of soft power, defined by

Joseph Nye as ‘the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.’ This, according to Nye, ‘arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies’.<sup>2</sup> Whereas public diplomacy refers to the engagement of state actors with foreign audiences abroad by making use of soft power, social diplomacy can generally be understood as the broadest range of activities by civil society actors, such as NGOs, who are successful in using their structural relationship with the Islamic and Arab world to increase mutual understanding. Civil society has challenged the limits of public diplomacy by creating its own social diplomacy realm. In this realm, social diplomacy actors from one society engage, exchange and cooperate with social diplomacy actors and foreign publics within other societies. Social diplomacy efforts take place in any imaginable form, such as exchanges and exchange programs in the broadest sense, expert meetings, exhibitions, lectures, special delegation visits, etc. The unique and more credible role of civil society actors holds promising opportunities for structurally improving relations in the long run and playing a de-escalating role in contingency plans in the short run. Wider civil society as a whole, and NGOs in particular, have developed into actors who make use of their local and regional long-term networks to increase mutual understanding and cooperation. In fact, they can even on occasion perform damage control when necessary. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the mutual advice mechanisms of development cooperation organisations and international human rights groups, and the international cooperation between trade unions.

The active involvement of non-state actors in social diplomacy efforts that aim to counter jihadist extremism may assist the government in its aspiration for stability and security. In their complementary relation, public and social diplomacy intrinsically provide heterogeneous counter-narratives.

Looking closer at previous attempts at social diplomacy, it becomes clear that a very important factor for its success is the way governments and NGOs succeed in their cooperation. In order to fulfil the three key dimensions of public diplomacy – i.e. daily communication to explain foreign policy decisions, strategic communication involving symbolic events and various activities to advance specific government policies, and relationship building with key individuals over many years – governments need to work closely together with NGOs. Consequently, NGOs are increasingly recognised as diplomatic actors. In addition, popular artists and sportsmen are acting as ambassadors for their country or for a specific issue that is of importance to their country, and even ordinary citizens can make a valuable contribution via informal relationships and contact with other people, which is instrumental to the building of bridges between cultures.

Having NGOs and ordinary citizens as diplomatic messengers has two major strengths. First and foremost, they can bring a level of credibility to public diplomacy efforts that a government will never attain. They are less prone to political manipulation than governmental organisations, and because of their non-hierarchical and independent character, they are more easily trusted as dialogue partners. Secondly, they are well equipped to engage in dialogue with foreign audiences because of their expertise and the common interests they share with organisations and citizens abroad. This enables them to tackle cultural barriers and penetrate various layers of a foreign society, including subcultures. Moreover, their expertise – in addition to that of the government – and common interests enable NGOs and other non-official actors not only to listen but also to understand.

The question is not whether public diplomacy should either be ‘done’ by government or be outsourced to

extra-governmental actors. In the current globalised environment in which nations are confronted with a broad variety of both national and international issues, the right mix must be found between those two entities – to be created, regularly revised and sustained.

An example in which such a successful mix has been found are the civil society initiatives that were organised to respond to the release of the controversial movie ‘Fitna’, created by the Dutch MP Geert Wilders. FORUM was one of several institutes that deployed such initiatives. Letters were written to governments of Islamic countries and to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, Dutch embassies were contacted and visited, talks were held with influential Islamic leaders, a fact book concerning the democratic rights of Muslims and Muslim organisations in the Netherlands was distributed in Islamic countries, and interviews and informal press meetings were held with various media in Islamic countries. The central message was clear and present across the board: Muslims in the Netherlands are not oppressed, they are not interested in foreign interferences, and they are very much in favour of the freedom of expression.

Whilst the public diplomacy efforts undertaken by the Dutch government mainly focused on the official position of the Dutch government and the legal aspects concerning the release of the movie, the social diplomacy narratives and actions presented a wider perspective of the Dutch context and the impact and perception of the movie in the Netherlands. This addition of social diplomacy efforts to the public diplomacy strategy resulted in a relatively calm reaction to the release of the movie. All these actions combined form an example of both the potential impact of successful social diplomacy and the importance of the right mix between public and social diplomacy.

### Tensions

Nevertheless, governments and civil actors such as NGOs are faced with various challenges when cooperating with each other. One of the principal tensions relates to the question of how to deal with the autonomy of such non-governmental actors. How can the factors that ensure civil society’s credibility be preserved, whilst at the same time making its role more structural in the national public and social diplomacy approach? Many critics have called for institutionalised cooperation between government, civil society and business. According to this multi-stakeholder diplomacy approach, governments would be able to draw on the expertise, access and legitimacy of civil society and businesses to further public diplomacy goals, whilst civil society actors may in turn for instance gain financial and logistical support from the government.<sup>3</sup> The problem with this scenario is summarised by Shaun Riordan: ‘Many potential agents are reluctant to be associated with government. In as far as they are perceived to operate under government direction, or with government funding, their credibility and effectiveness can be undermined. Their involvement in a social diplomacy strategy can therefore be highly problematic.’<sup>4</sup> If NGOs and other civil society actors are to remain credible, they should be able to freely voice both their agreement with and their criticism of governmental actions.<sup>5</sup> Any possible association with a government must therefore be shaped according to careful considerations, which serve both the national public diplomacy strategy and the necessary abilities of civil society to perform social diplomacy independently and effectively.

When turning to the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism, the tension between the actors of public and social diplomacy described above certainly becomes apparent. For example, when cases of radicalisation and extremism are on the increase, and the government and certain sections of the public perceive this as a real threat, will there be enough space for civil society actors to question this perception?

Or question perhaps not this perception of extremist danger *per se*, but the causes behind it and the best way to counter them? This is often not the case, since a feeling of urgency often dominates, which leaves little space for seemingly endless discussions on causes and counterstrategies. Consequently, NGOs unintentionally fall into a policy trap and become part of an in-group that only produces one limited set of counterstrategies. If a government has already determined that there ought to be one unambiguous counterstrategy or one counter-narrative, NGOs will lag behind if they point out that this does not necessarily have to be the case. The effectiveness of the alleged counterstrategy or counter-narrative is then ordered *a priori*.

Two arguments may be presented against this construction of a policy trap, which – whether or not intently – leaves little space for alternative counter-narratives from civil society actors such as NGOs. Beatrice de Graaf rightfully argues that a counter-narrative is sometimes not the best strategy: ‘[a]n effort of separating fact from fiction probably produces more results than constructing counter-narratives that will have little effect at best or are considered state propaganda at worst – thereby further antagonizing radical elements in society’. According to De Graaf, it is questionable whether a government should engage in producing a counter-narrative at all; the ground principles of democracy, such as freedom of speech, should be sufficient in encouraging a move away from violent extremism. What is important, however, is to neutralise ‘existing myths and legends’, since this can ‘serve to dry up the pool of new terrorist recruits, take away justifications for new attacks and, in doing so, undermine the potential legitimacy of terrorist calls to arms’.<sup>6</sup>

The second argument against a too hasty tendency of the government to organise NGOs and other civil society actors in its fight against extremism was pointed out by the author in an earlier commentary on an article by Frank Buijs, Froukje Demant and Atef Hamdy.<sup>7</sup> The commentary referred to the democratic deficit that is often found or hidden – be it as a subtext – in the reasoning of extremists or radicals. Whilst the authors of the article in question argued that radicalisation is a purely political matter, the process as such takes place on all levels of life; political, socio-cultural, and religious. Radicalisation is a process of alienation or estrangement from the established society that is substantially influenced by the socio-economic and ethnic-cultural position of the individuals involved. The most difficult task for a democratic constitutional state is to draw conclusions from the fact that radicalism is a reaction to doubts about the democratic, political or personnel legitimacy of the system. Consequently, the government cannot be blinded by the reprehensibility of radical thoughts, but it should instead seriously explore to what extent its policies fail, and may in fact lead to broader public support for extremists. For many authorities, this is an unacceptable issue, as it may be perceived that they give in to the unreasonable criticism and demands of the extremists. However, they fail to see that it is not so much about the radicals or extremists, as it is about the diffuse support that parts of the population could give them. These people should be ‘regained’ and therefore it is necessary that the government focuses on the feelings of social discontent, even though they might seem exaggerated.

Whereas De Graaf suggests that democratic principles could be effective to encourage individuals to move away from extremism without constructing a counter-narrative, it becomes clear from the experiences with countering right-wing extremism in the Netherlands – which have been documented extensively – that an approach of inclusion can be successful. This perspective proves to be particularly successful with opportunistic followers, the rank and file of the violent extremists who do not use ideological motives as such to justify their position and deeds, but instead have more practical and ordinary motivations.

### Heterogeneous counter-narratives

The effective inclusion perspective demonstrates that a counter-narrative in itself is not objectionable. However, the manifestation of this counter-narrative is of utmost importance. In order to effectively oppose threats such as jihadist extremism, the government should not try to incorporate civil actors into one single counter-narrative, but instead stimulate the production of plural oppositions, or heterogeneous counter-narratives. Social diplomacy, conducted by a variety of independent civil actors, may facilitate such a strategy.

A similar plea for heterogeneity is made by Paul Frissen in a recent publication.<sup>8</sup> He claims that the political exists by the grace of difference since politics’ primary function is to channel conflicting positions. Consequently, narratives that aim to annul all other narratives – as is for instance the case with populist narratives – are in essence a-political. Such single narratives contradict the fundamental principles of democracy. Therefore, dissimilarity needs to be regarded as the basis of politics and not as something that should be opposed. Thus, the counter-narrative that is formulated as a response to violent (jihadist) extremism should be a heterogeneous one. In this way, counter-narratives will express the democratic discourse.

This is an essential point when dealing with extremists that oppose democracy and its very core values. In order to convey the indispensability of democratic practice and values, counter-narratives need to represent this message in both content and form. Producing a single counter-narrative, something that governments may be inclined to do when having to oppose extremist violence, in fact goes against the democratic values that they attempt to guard with their counter-narrative in the first place. Thus, in order to effectively oppose extremism within a democratic discourse, heterogeneous counter-narratives that represent the fundamental nature of politics, namely dissimilarity, should be produced. Social diplomacy conducted by various civil society actors, combined with public diplomacy, enables and stimulates such heterogeneous counter-narratives.

### Conclusion

In the fight against jihadist extremism – and perhaps every other form of ideologically, religiously or ethnically motivated extremism – cooperation between national and local governments on the one hand and citizens and civil society organisations on the other, will prove of great use. This cooperation will have the most impact when the right mix of public and social diplomacy is applied. The coordination of these efforts will be the responsibility of the government, but in the cooperation there needs to be enough space for an autonomous role of citizens and organisations, since a heterogeneous approach to fighting extremism will be most successful. This implies that various forms of this approach need to be developed: repressive (government), preventive (in cooperation) and restorative (mostly NGOs with the assistance of the government). The necessary counter-narratives – be it the citizens of Amsterdam against extremism, democrats against anti-democrats, or non-violent citizens and organisations against violent extremists and their organisations – have to be heterogeneous as well, in order for them to express the democratic discourse. They should therefore not be subordinate to the ruling paradigm that the government imposes.

Hence, the fight against violent extremism is a democratic and civil task in which all parties involved – the government, NGOs and individual citizens – have to be fully aware of their own responsibilities and autonomy. In the fight against extremism, freedom and democracy cannot become the ultimate victims.

- 1 This paragraph is partly based on an unpublished research proposal for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Clingendael Diplomatic Studies Programme/FORUM, *Engaging the Arab and Islamic World through Social Diplomacy*, Research Proposal, June 2009.
- 2 J.S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Perseus, Cambridge, MA., 2004, preface.
- 3 See for instance J. Kurbalija & V. Katrandjiev, *Multistakeholder Diplomacy, Challenges and Opportunities*, DiploFoundation, Geneva, 2006.
- 4 S. Riordan, 'Dialogue-based Public Diplomacy: A new Foreign Policy Paradigm?', *Clingendael Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, Netherlands Institute of Foreign Relations Clingendael, The Hague, 2004, p. 4
- 5 B. Hocking, 'Privatizing Diplomacy?', p. 147, *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2004, pp. 147-52.
- 6 B. de Graaf, 'Counter-Narratives and the Unrehearsed Stories Counter-Terrorists Unwittingly Produce', p. 9, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 3, no. 2., pp. 5-11.
- 7 See S. Harchaoui, 'Radicalisme als insluitingsprobleem', in S. Harchaoui (ed.), *Hedendaags radicalisme; verklaringen en aanpak*, Het Spinhuis, Apeldoorn/Antwerp, 2006, pp. 1-16. The commentary concerned the chapter by F.J. Buijs, F. Demant & A. Hamdy, 'Islamitisch radicalisme in Nederland', in *ibid.*, pp. 17-60.
- 8 P.H.A. Frissen, *Gevaar Verplicht. Over de noodzaak van aristocratische politiek*, Van Gennep Uitgeverij, Amsterdam, 2009.

# 11 Furthering the Counter-Narrative via Educational and Social Grassroots Projects

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## Introduction

The issue of 'radicalisation' and the terrorist violence with which it is becoming synonymous has developed a considerable profile in recent years at both the global and local level.<sup>1</sup> To the detriment of a more focused discussion of the issue, debate has often confounded acceptable, non-violent, 'radical' attitudes, with the behaviour of a minority who carry out illegal acts of violence. The aim here will be to offer an insight into how those working with people at risk of violent extremism and individuals convicted of terrorist offences could attempt attitudinal and behavioural change from a grassroots' perspective. This is based on the first author's experience as Chief Executive Officer of Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) in London, and the second author's understanding based on her work with SGCS over the last three years.<sup>2</sup>

SGCS is a Muslim-led community organisation established in the late 1990s, which is positioned in the midst of the community it serves. This has seen it witness the rise of the post-9/11 discussion on radicalisation, and the effects, both of the debate and of the terrorism with which it is associated. During this period, SGCS has instigated a variety of initiatives aimed at reducing social exclusion and extremism; both significant problems in the local area. It is hoped by offering an overview based on our understanding of the organisation and its work, a clearer picture might emerge as to routes of engaging with those involved in extremist violence. This will consider the comprehensive and pervasive nature of the counter-narrative which needs to be promoted, and its relationship to a variety of direct and indirect delivery methods.

This chapter will start with a review of the nature of the partnerships that can help in this work, and consideration of those who should be involved; including organisers, beneficiaries and the relationship to the community at large. Subsequently, counter-radicalisation project goals and outcomes will be outlined, taking into account the varied and holistic nature of the methods that should be considered. Focus will then move to the counter-narratives that are integral to this type of work. Next, the impact of the various local programmes will be examined, along with the long-term nature of the commitment that is needed in order to achieve success and be able to assess its effects. Finally, challenges and obstacles will be discussed, followed by the implications for future efforts, and conclusions will be drawn in relation to the prospects of this type of grassroots project.

## A partnership approach

The community can and should be considered the starting point of work in this field.<sup>3</sup> However, one should not make the mistake of oversimplifying the complex and multi-layered nature of Muslim communities. These communities often encompass multiple ethnicities, languages and cultures. Thus, the more flexible and inclusive the approach taken, the greater the chance of reaching those at risk. This can be attempted by engaging with local people and community leaders as well as statutory bodies. This comprehensive model of engagement fosters a more collaborative approach to issues of extremism, anti-social behaviour and economic disadvantage. It also operates to build trust between grassroots organisations, the community and the authorities, which is vital for the success of intervention work.<sup>4</sup>

In order for the impact of community-centric efforts to be maximised, there needs to be a level of trust between the community and the authorities. The presence of a formal organisation, consisting of people perceived to be representatives of the local community, provides a platform where the community and various statutory and non-statutory organisations can engage with one another. The inclusion of the local

community acts to empower those involved, and enhances the effectiveness, and reach, of voluntary organisations.<sup>5</sup> It also provides a broad base of influence: more individuals successfully encouraged to engage with the problems the community faces means a greater support network exists to help those that may become involved in extremist ideology, or show signs of other deviant behaviour. This approach aims to build trust, ownership and a shared sense of responsibility. It also facilitates a more positive model for interaction between historically antagonistic parties (for example the police and young Muslims), encouraging a more cooperative relationship.

Crucial to this multi-dimensional approach is the role of community and religious leaders, as they lend vital credibility to such initiatives. The support of the local Mosques is particularly important in the positive engagement of the community, and the success of delivering an authentic religious message which responds to the concerns of its constituency. The Mosque can act as a place where people meet, and provides guidance to its congregants. Thus, the positive engagement of religious leaders is important to any efforts that concern violent ideology. This commitment to trust-building, alongside the credibility conferred by the support of the Mosque, enables a more concrete foundation from which to deliver an alternative message to counter those promoting violent extremism.

All members of the community have a role to play in this; the broader the network of support for the grassroots project, the greater is its likely impact. Where families and friends are aware of the issue of radicalisation, they may be more inclined to refer people to the project about whom they are concerned. When women are given the skills to recognise maladaptive internet use, they are better equipped to engage with their children. And where communities and their constituents feel there is somewhere to go that does not immediately and necessarily involve the authorities, they are more likely to raise issues of concern and become involved in providing a response. Therefore, depending on whether the aim is engaging with someone who has been convicted of terrorist offences, or whether the hope is to counter the extremist narrative that seeks to influence the community at large, an inclusive approach to engagement is necessary for a comprehensive response to the issue.<sup>6</sup> In this context, if the attempt to engage with extremism is considered a state-led, top-down initiative, it has much less chance of success. Empowered, community-led work is needed; this requires the support of statutory agencies, but should have its origins in the context with which it is trying to engage.

#### Project goals and outcomes

The ultimate goal of any grassroots organisation working in the context of violent extremism is to divert those involved, or at risk, away from maladaptive attitudes and towards positive social integration. Using educational, recreational and social programmes is an ideal way of working towards this end. The exact requirements of the project are most likely to succeed if they are developed in collaboration with the community they aim to serve. This facilitates the development of a more personal interaction and relationship between project organisers and beneficiaries, which enables the organisers to better identify their attitudes and needs.

Project outcomes involve a number of explicit and implicit aims. On an overt level, programmes should aim to enhance the attractiveness of the organisation and encourage participation. They should also deliver education and training to enhance skills and the chance of employment, and/or provide enjoyable diversionary activities. However, less explicit outcomes are developed alongside these concrete skills, such

as building personal capacity and self-efficacy. It is within this context of personal development that there should be a concerted effort to engage with the attitudes of those considered at risk of becoming involved in violent extremism. It is important to note, however, that the aim should not necessarily be the complete deconstruction of the 'radical' attitudes that some consider underpins violent extremism. Rather, efforts should be directed towards counteracting the belief that violence is a legitimate response and natural corollary of such attitudes.

The variety of programmes through which beneficiaries are engaged should be multi-faceted and responsive to the needs of the community. They can include formal training through accredited courses, mentoring and religious teaching. Other routes are language training in Urdu, Arabic and English; open days focusing on particular themes such as self-employment, training opportunities and citizenship; as well as matters such as childcare and parenting skills. Work on issues of personal development is another important strand of work, which can be delivered through seminars. These can focus on a particular area of concern, for instance anger management, drug and alcohol awareness, or guns and gangs. Offering a presentation, with subsequent scope for discussion, engages beneficiaries. Through discussion, the views of the participants will become apparent, and issues of concern may be raised and discussed in an open manner. For example, the grievances of the participants could be encouraged in relation to questions on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The consequence of this discussion is twofold: firstly, it enables the leaders of the project to identify those who hold extremist views; and secondly, it allows for an open dialogue in which appropriate, authentic, Islamic views may be introduced. This can involve inviting respected Islamic Scholars to speak and discuss appropriate and non-violent responses to issues of concern based on the Quran.

#### **Project example: PROSEED – Providing Real Opportunity and Support for Employability Enhancement and Development**

*PROSEED was instigated by SGCS in recognition of the growing levels of social exclusion and extremism in the local Muslim communities. A diverse range of beneficiaries were recruited, either through referral from concerned friends and family, through personal contact with project leaders in the community, or at the Mosque. Engagement took place via personal development seminars, for example on drug and alcohol awareness; training and education courses, such as web design; and personal mentoring from project leaders. Through these activities, beneficiaries' ideas and beliefs became known. Those attracted by extremist ideology were then targeted by mentors and religious scholars, and their attitudes explored and challenged. This was operationalised through discussion, debate and Islamic teachings. The project also acted as a community-appropriate centre for training classes, acting to build personal capacity and esteem in the community at large. For example, SGCS offered a women-only ICT course, enabling traditionally 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as Somali women, to learn about computers and the internet. This better equipped them to deal with problems such as online extremist fora their children may come into contact with.*

*The initiative successfully engaged a considerable number of the local community, including some of those most likely to progress towards violent extremism. This suggests the project was able to attract beneficiaries and deliver practical tools for academic, personal and social development, enabling SGCS to act as a continued site for engagement with those at risk of radicalisation. Importantly, contact with many beneficiaries was maintained after the delivery of courses and seminars was completed, with a number of people becoming actively engaged with SGCS as employees or volunteers. Whilst a full evaluation of the impact of the programme demands a long-term approach, there are parallels with successful programmes dealing with similar issues of social exclusion and maladaptive attitudes. This gives considerable cause for optimism that attitudinal change and diversion away from radical ideology has been affected in the beneficiaries.*

Goals may therefore be considered to consist of 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes. Hard outcomes are those related to skills development, training and education, as well as help with issues like housing or social welfare which project leaders should also be equipped to assist with. These are targeted to help beneficiaries move towards employment and integration into the mainstream economic environment. Soft outcomes involve such aspects as self-confidence, motivation, promoting social-inclusion and pro-social attitudes, as well as trying to develop a sense of belonging in the local and wider community. This is allied to the aim of fostering a more accurate and non-violent understanding of Islam, with the hope that this will promote a less extreme and antagonistic attitude towards the wider society. When combined, this approach provides a platform where individuals can increase their personal capacity, and interact with others who are able to introduce alternative perspectives on issues of social, political and religious concern. Grassroots organisations may offer a culturally-appropriate, non-judgemental forum for exploring those issues where non-violent religious, social and political perspectives on subjects such as Islamophobia, foreign policy and social deprivation may be presented and discussed. The overall aim should be to encourage movement towards community integration through economic, spiritual and personal development.

A key aspect of engagement with beneficiaries is personal communication and mentoring. When those at risk of radicalisation are identified, targeted mentoring by project leaders can challenge their maladaptive beliefs through dialogue and religious scholarship, and through using training and seminars to divert them. Project leaders, mentors and workshop facilitators drawn from the local community generate a space of acceptance and understanding of the personal circumstances of the beneficiaries through shared experiences.<sup>7</sup> This is important as it gives them greater credibility with beneficiaries, who may identify with them, hence facilitating a more positive relationship in which those mentors may act as role models.<sup>8</sup> The aim is to foster increased integration into society<sup>9</sup> through a regular platform for interaction, providing support and a stable interpersonal relationship with the beneficiaries. This mentor-mentee relationship is part of a socialisation process aimed at influencing the individual positively<sup>10</sup> and encouraging the move away from maladaptive behaviour and attitudes.<sup>11</sup> To maximise the likelihood of success, mentors should have a background similar to that of the beneficiaries. Being from the same – or at least a comparable – community provides a level of understanding that is effective in building trust and encouraging the individual to engage with alternative ways of perceiving and interacting with society.

Hopefully, this brief exploration of the multi-dimensional nature of the goals implied in this type of work illustrates that the counter-narrative beneficiaries are introduced to is a pervasive one that should be represented in the organisation's aims and methods. This may be better characterised as the foundation of the organisation's ethos, rather than an explicit 'message' that is directly promoted as such. The values of social responsibility, economic self-sufficiency, personal empowerment and achievement and, most importantly, an authentic understanding of Islam based on a non-violent approach, are crucial in engaging those at risk. Hence, individuals are not always explicitly 'told' or 'taught' the details of the counter-narrative; rather, they are encouraged to engage with problems and concerns within the framework of the values outlined above. This is operationalised through change agents drawn from the local community, who act as mentors to the beneficiaries. These individuals generate and promote this wider ethos and deliver the more direct elements of the counter-narrative through ongoing dialogue. Multiple avenues for engagement allow for issues to be addressed at several levels, including the personal skills of the individual as well as their attitudes and beliefs. They also enable the promotion of an alternative set of responses via a set of attitudes founded in authentic Islamic scholarship, social integration and personal responsibility.

### The nature of counter-narratives

The concept of a 'counter-narrative' at the grassroots level may thus be better characterised as a philosophy or ethos, within which those from the community are encouraged to explore issues of concern. However, this does not deny the need to challenge maladaptive or inaccurate attitudes and beliefs which are used to support violent extremism, concerning both society and Islam. It is these utterances that may be more explicitly targeted by a counter-narrative, or an alternative set of interpretive tools which can be promoted and openly discussed with the beneficiaries to encourage positive attitudinal and behavioural change. However, it is important that these are delivered in a culturally-appropriate and inclusive context, and as part of the ethos already described. In considering such counter-narrative programmes, it is important to identify the difference in political, religious and social themes.

### Religious

Central to any response to violent, extremist ideology is an accurate, authentic interpretation of Islamic doctrine. This centres on the tenets of the Islamic faith, and asserts that killing is wrong, and that suicide is forbidden. Furthermore, alternative interpretations of the Quran and Hadith that espouse a violent response should be argued to be inaccurate, and often espoused by those uneducated in the true way of Islam. This type of counter-narrative is best delivered by Islamic scholars, whose position as respected members of the religious community and as experts on Islamic scripture gives them immense credibility.<sup>12</sup> It can also be helpful to bring in Islamic scholars from outside the area, as this increases their standing as impartial judges on matters raised in a specific context.

It is vital that any discussion takes place in an open and inclusive environment. This allows a dialogue to begin with those at risk, or those already engaged in violent extremism. This should be part of an ongoing process to present an authentic reading of the Islamic scriptures, and openly discuss issues of concern. Such open discussions enable the Imams to respond to the often legitimate concerns of the Muslim communities, and provide authentic answers to issues such as foreign policy, disenfranchisement and discrimination.

### Political

The disadvantages that many in the Muslim communities experience are a powerful driver of discontent.<sup>13</sup> Their foundation in discrimination, recently coined Islamophobia or the clash of civilisations,<sup>14</sup> where the 'West' is implacably antagonistic towards Islam, offers a cogent explanation for the personal experience of disenfranchisement that many have gone through.<sup>15</sup> Responses to this notion should include the recognition of the often disenfranchised position of Muslim communities, and acknowledge the discrimination and social inequality which contribute to it. Crucially however, emphasis should be placed on the individual to respond to this situation positively. This entails clarifying the roles and responsibilities of citizenship, as well as acknowledging the position and associated rights and responsibilities of the authorities and the state in relation to social issues and security.<sup>16</sup>

Underpinning this is the personal responsibility of the individual; this reframes the question of 'who is to blame for my position?' to 'what am I going to do about the position I am in?' Focussing on active citizenship and personal responsibility negates the extremists' view that they should not be part of the (political) solution for the socio-political status of the Muslim communities in both the local and global context. Rather, it encourages them to stop fighting the system, and become part of it by increasing their engagement

through the prism of personal growth and achievement. This does not imply an acceptance of the way in which the authorities behave, but encourages a response aimed at constructive, non-violent engagement. This is a proactive approach, which has the Islamic community at its centre.<sup>17</sup> The goal is to see individuals and communities ultimately take ownership of the problem of terrorism and violent extremism, and it is in grassroots organisations that this participative and empowering approach is particularly effective.<sup>18</sup>

### Social

Closely related to the political counter-narrative is a message of social inclusion. This narrative concerns the positive framing of social engagement, integration and citizenship. Again, this is founded in personal responsibility in relation to empowerment that is aimed at identifying and realising the individual's goals.<sup>19</sup> Central to this social counter-narrative is the aspiration and promotion of a positive future, in which hope, social inclusion and achievements are motivators for personal change. Through successful and identifiable role models, who have often come from a similar background, hope may be promoted, as well as the movement towards an individual's goals through enhanced self-efficacy.<sup>20</sup> A good connection with project leaders is also important; their investment in the individual and the community at large encourages a positive, reciprocal relationship.<sup>21</sup> This counter-narrative is tailored and directed at the individual, and it is this person-centric engagement in the community context that can ultimately lead to increased social quality.<sup>22</sup> In turn, this relates to social inclusion. If an individual feels part of society, he or she may have a greater willingness to engage in social and economic life and develop a more positive relationship with the community at large.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, a counter-narrative strategy should be a multi-faceted process of holistic engagement with the individual. Its exact nature will be dictated by those at the receiving end, as they will have specific concerns which will need to be addressed through exploration of particular issues. However, primary, reoccurring themes are, firstly, the non-violent nature of Islam and a rejection of violence as a route to addressing grievances. These can be successfully delivered by authentic Islamic scholars and explored and reinforced by mentors. Secondly, there should be a recognition of the often disadvantaged position of members of Muslim communities, both at home and abroad. This political message should be allied to a narrative of self-empowerment, in which the individual is encouraged to take responsibility for his or her situation and attempt to better it through training, education and self-improvement. Thirdly, there should be a narrative incorporating the benefits of social inclusion and pro-social citizenship. This aspirational message, together with the political counter-narrative, recognises the issues affecting Muslim communities, whilst at the same time encouraging individuals to improve their own circumstances through self-development. Only such a holistic and inclusive counter-narrative approach is likely to be successful.

### Successful counter-narratives at the local level

Despite its importance, there are considerable challenges in assessing the impact of intervention work, challenges that may be particularly acute at the grassroots level.<sup>24</sup> First and foremost, the causal relationship between a programme and attitudinal and behavioural change is difficult to isolate.<sup>25</sup> There are also issues relating to the most useful measure of impact;<sup>26</sup> to identifying and collating data; to identifying the most appropriate tools; to the dynamic and evolving nature of grassroots organisations; and to allocating scarce resources for evaluation work.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it is necessary to appreciate the long-term nature of this effort, since effects may not be seen for quite some time. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw on best

practices from experience to identify those approaches that may be considered most likely to have a positive impact.

With these issues in mind, it is perhaps useful to look at what successful engagement with violent ideology should look like. It must be noted, however, that each community context is different, and all efforts require a flexible approach to maximise their potential effectiveness. What follows are therefore only guidelines as to what might constitute effective engagement in the area of violent extremism, looking at organisational-, community- and individual-level measures.

In terms of the organisation that delivers the counter-narratives, issues of infrastructure and governance are quintessential. In the grassroots context, a central position in the community and positive relationship with the local Mosques are vital to ensure the actor has sufficient reach and credibility in order to engage with those at risk of radicalisation. Links between the organisation and broader statutory bodies should also be developed. However, a careful approach should be taken here, as the credibility of the organisation can be eroded if it is perceived to be an extension of the state. Successfully marshalling these resources and relationships requires a degree of trust to be present between the various parties, which can take some time to develop. Inclusivity is an important factor in building this trust, and is assisted by creating a physical site for interaction and knowledge sharing. This involves including all aspects of the community with the aim of empowering and building the capacity of the local constituency, trying to construct a more resilient infrastructure through which issues of disenfranchisement and radical ideology may be addressed.

Project leaders are key to this. They should be drawn from the local area, and be able to advocate on behalf of the community and interact with statutory bodies, community groups, religious figures and individuals effectively. Projects should be tailored to the specific community, sensitive to the needs of its users, and ideally be positioned in the centre of that community, as this enables a swift response to emerging problems. Positioning programmes in this way helps to foster a vital sense of ownership; the problems the community faces are perceived to be the responsibility of the entire constituency, and all will benefit if the issues are successfully resolved. Goals of such programmes include the enhancement of social capital,<sup>28</sup> which is of vital importance for informal social control, social cohesion and trust.<sup>29</sup>

With respect to the individual beneficiaries, trust building and credibility are fundamental to successful engagement. A mentoring relationship between project leaders and beneficiaries may achieve this, as illustrated by its various successes in respect to the movement away from more 'traditional' forms of crime.<sup>30</sup> Assessment and appreciation of individual needs are likely to enhance the success of any intervention, and have seen positive benefits in encouraging the social integration of disenfranchised young people.<sup>31</sup> A further element at the individual level is the interaction between the beneficiary and a religious scholar, and the support of the religious community at large.<sup>32</sup> This is a particularly important part of the engagement process in Muslim communities, and it is vital that the beneficiary should consider the scholar to be a credible and impartial source of information on Islam.

Formulating the aims of the engagement process, based on the needs of an individual, is a complex effort. Each individual will have his or her own requirements that need to be addressed, so evidence of behavioural and attitudinal change will be specific to that person. In general however, ideal outcomes include a rejection of violence as a route to addressing perceptions of disenfranchisement, and a positive

and aspirational engagement with society. Work towards this final goal is not a swift, or unidirectional process. Attitude change takes time and commitment, and it may result in both back-sliding and progress. Assessment of such change can also be complicated, as some beneficiaries may 'say the right thing' in line with perceived expectations. However, a close relationship often enables the mentor to pick up on this, which allows him to continue to work towards real, internal change. This is most obviously manifested in engagement with the project itself. There have been a number of occasions in the existence of SGCS where beneficiaries have become volunteers or staff-members. This facilitates their personal development, helps the organisation and enables an ongoing relationship with the individual encouraging permanent change.

Quantitative measures of impact can be combined with qualitative measures to provide a more holistic overview of the effects of a programme. This can involve identifying the number of beneficiaries, demographic information and number of courses attended. It can also include matters such as the number of people directed towards employment and the provision of infrastructure (e.g. word-processing programmes and internet access), and community-appropriate facilities. 'Soft' outcomes such as increased self-confidence, feelings of social inclusion and integration can also be taken as proxies for the aim of moving people away from violent ideology.<sup>33</sup> A further aspect, which can be drawn from work on engaging with criminogenic attitudes, is the development of goals which are linked to personal growth.<sup>34</sup> These are thought to encourage social development and lead people away from crime and economic marginalisation.<sup>35</sup> Finally, promoting hope, self-respect and empowerment is also important, alongside enabling beneficiaries to come into contact with new ideas and experiences.<sup>36</sup> This has been effective in various successful youth programmes,<sup>37</sup> and may be of assistance when trying to introduce alternative ways of adapting to the community to those attracted by violent ideologies.

All of these measures however, do not belie the complexity of engagement with those who are engaged in, or are at risk of getting involved in, violent extremism. Each individual will require a tailor-made approach, which takes into account their personal, emotional, spiritual and practical needs. As part of this, constant evaluation and assessment at the individual, organisational and community-levels are important to ensure that lessons are learned, and the processes hypothesised to be at work are more concretely understood and verified.

#### Challenges in delivery

When engaging with violent ideology in a grassroots context, there are obvious challenges operating at the individual level that relate to the beneficiaries with whom one is working, as well as issues dealing with the community and statutory bodies. The predominant challenges are the importance of gaining trust and credibility, and the degree of capacity existing in the community.

Grassroots organisations are generally heavily dependent on the local community for practical support, requiring skills which may not yet be in place in the local context. The recognition of these gaps and efforts to build the capacity of members of the local community is therefore important in itself.<sup>38</sup> However, such capacity building is also relevant for dealing with wider social and political issues such as extremist ideology. By enhancing community capacity, society becomes more robust to both internal and external challenges.<sup>39</sup> In turn, this can lead to enhanced social cohesion and improved informal social control,<sup>40</sup> both of which may be considered important in creating a more resilient community that is better equipped to deal with the issue of violent ideology.

As discussed, when engaging with individuals who advocate or have sympathy for violent extremism, there is a huge hurdle of gaining trust to overcome, and a consequent need for a long-term commitment to relationship building. The grassroots, Muslim-led approach has a number of advantages in this regard, as there is usually already a degree of shared cultural and religious understanding between the organisation and the beneficiaries.<sup>41</sup> If a grassroots organisation employs effective advocates, its central position in the community will facilitate a multi-level engagement strategy, in which all parties are encouraged to take ownership of the problem. This interaction between groups and the related knowledge-sharing should aim to improve relations and increase understanding. This acts to build trust, and can also act as a site of advocacy for marginal groups.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, there remains the issue of those who are resistant to an alternative approach and who resist any form of counter-narrative. These are among the most challenging beneficiaries, and require ongoing, long-term work to try and address their maladaptive attitudes. As discussed, an individual-level, dynamic process of assessment and intervention is needed to identify which elements of a multi-dimensional approach, such as the one proposed here, should be emphasised. It is this person-centric approach that has the greatest chance of success.

#### Conclusions and implications for future work

Through this discussion, we hope to have illustrated the value and necessity of grassroots, Muslim-led community organisations as a site for engaging with issues of social exclusion and violent Islamist extremism. Their understanding of the community in which they are situated offers vital insight into the appropriate and effective delivery of counter-narratives and execution of programmes. Partnership work is central to this, and needs to include the local community, religious leaders and statutory bodies that together aim to promote a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. Leadership from within the civil and religious communities is a vital part of such a strategy, conferring credibility, trust and a true, non-violent interpretation of Islam.

A key feature to the success of delivering narratives to counter extremism is the holistic and pervasive nature of the message. The counter-narrative needs to be delivered both explicitly, where maladaptive beliefs are robustly challenged, and implicitly, through the ethos of the organisation and its approach towards social, political and religious issues. Education and social programmes are ideal vehicles through which these can be communicated. The combination of 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes that result from successful engagement through these routes is important in maintaining an attractive offer to potential beneficiaries. It also provides an open forum for discussion and interaction on issues such as socio-economic disadvantage, foreign policy and social exclusion, allowing a personal relationship to be built between organisers, mentors and beneficiaries. This should be underpinned with an authentic interpretation of Islamic doctrine, and is key to influencing those at risk of participating or currently involved in violent extremism.

1 S. Bux, 'Muslim Youths, Islam and Violent Radicalisation: Addressing Some Myths', *The Police Journal*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2007, pp. 267-278.

2 This includes evaluation work funded by London Probation and the AGIS 2006 Reducing Hate Crime in Europe 2 Project.

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## The NCTb helps to make the Netherlands a safer place to live

The task of the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism is to minimise the risk and fear of terrorist attacks in the Netherlands and to take prior measures to limit the potential of terrorist acts. The NCTb is responsible for the central coordination of counterterrorism efforts and ensures that cooperation between all the parties involved is and remains of a high standard.