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COUNTERING ISLAMIC STATE RECRUITMENT: YOU'RE DOING IT TOTALLY WRONG

Christina Nemr

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In the past year, sensationalized media coverage of the Islamic State has reinvigorated discussions about how best to counter violent extremism (CVE). Though governments and organizations have been discussing and lightly implementing CVE efforts for years, it remains a concept whose parameters are notoriously ill-defined.

CVE's largest challenge resides in its definition Å there is no consensus (international or [domestic](#)) on what CVE is and what efforts it encompasses. Ongoing efforts to counter violent extremism are beset by little or no [research](#) underlying their premises, [misconceptions](#) about drivers of radicalization persist, and ultimately there seems no easy way to measure the effectiveness of any given CVE program.

Despite its limitations, conducting CVE programs has merit Å assuming those undertaking it know what is feasible and what is not. For example, though CVE is touted as a longer-term tool for countering terrorism, one that focuses on the drivers of radicalization, it is too often wielded as a quick fix designed to counter the latest terrorist recruitment technique. This quick fix attitude uses CVE as a short-term solution to the detriment of understanding how recruitment and radicalization to violence actually happens. Nowhere is this issue more pronounced than when it comes to countering the terrorist narrative Å a much-heralded and oft-used CVE approach that is nearly boundless in scope.

Counter-narrative campaigns focus on the terrorist message and try to discredit it in the hopes of dissuading individuals from being drawn to violence. A common argument for this intervention method is that terrorists are increasingly proficient at spreading their messages Å primarily online Å so governments and civil society must be equally proficient and prolific in their counter-messaging to reach the same "at-risk" individuals. These counter-[messages often take the form of](#) arguments against violence, exposés of terrorist groups' hypocrisy, or ridicule of terrorist narratives.

In a CVE context, pushing back on terrorist narratives makes intuitive sense Å it's a way of exposing falsehoods in a very public forum. But does it work?

Research has shown that when you're trying to convince people, [facts don't matter](#). We seem to understand this in domestic politics, but not in CVE. Appealing to an individual's value system is the most effective way to change opinions and spur people to action. This is because humans have evolved to [push "threatening information" away](#) in favor of information that confirms their own beliefs. In this way, humans apply the same concept of "fight or flight" to the intake of information. And there are [neuroscientific explanations](#) as to how this happens: When humans feel stress or feel threatened, the blood flow in the brain moves away from the

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neocortex, the site of higher-order thinking, and toward the limbic system, the more automatic and primitive site of our thinking. The movement of blood flow in this situation renders humans physically less capable of thinking in more nuanced and complex terms, and this has further consequences. [Conflict is more likely to ensue](#) when individuals process ideas only in black and white.

So what does all this mean? Efforts to undertake mass counter-narrative initiatives don't achieve their intended effect – and might even work against us. Ad campaigns, online or otherwise, that attempt to dissuade individuals from traveling to join groups like the Islamic State by [pointing out the realities on the ground](#) are missing the mark by failing to appeal to each potential recruit's value system and his or her own personal motivations. And any counter-narrative campaign attempting to dissuade potential recruits by ridiculing terrorist narratives is most certainly missing the mark because of the human tendency to internalize ridicule as a threat to their beliefs – leading them to double down on or harden their beliefs.

Proponents of mass counter-narrative campaigns might reiterate that these efforts aren't meant for hardened violent extremists or those well on their way to taking up the cause, but are instead targeted at the undecided fence-sitters. But one might argue that a fence-sitter, by virtue of tuning into the conversation, is already somewhat sympathetic to the cause and has internalized at least some of the violent extremist narrative – thereby rendering them susceptible to the same psychological reactions to counter-narrative campaigns.

To illustrate just how much counter-narrative campaigns can fail, let me give you an example from a related problem set of recruitment to violence. A few years ago, National Geographic aired an hour-long [documentary on Mara Salvatrucha](#), the transnational criminal gang more commonly known as MS-13. The documentary touched on their criminal activities, chilling violence, and indiscriminate mass murders. It was a grim portrayal of one of the most dangerous gangs in the world. In the immediate days and weeks after it aired, gang specialist law enforcement officers told me that recruitment rates for MS-13 soared. Though they could not prove the causal link between the documentary and the increased recruitment other than their anecdotal observations, they were convinced that the exposure played a significant factor in piquing interest.

Granted, this example isn't fully comparable to the issue of countering terrorist narratives at hand – violent extremism and gang activity are related but separate issues, and the documentary was not marketed as a counter-gang recruitment campaign. A third party simply undertook an awareness campaign aimed at educating its viewers. But that's exactly the point. If a chilling documentary on the horrors of MS-13 produced by a neutral third party didn't dissuade individuals from wanting to join MS-13, what hope are we realistically putting in mass counter-terrorist narrative efforts produced by governments?

The somewhat good news is that governments [are starting to realize](#) that counter-narrative messages might be more effective coming from other sources, though it doesn't stop them from continuing to expand their communications efforts. The problem is that even mass counter-narrative campaigns from non-government sources aren't likely to be any more successful. The reason why lies in the qualifier: "mass."

One of the reasons the Islamic State has successfully recruited individuals through social media is because they've applied modern [psychological and marketing 101 techniques](#). They seek out seemingly vulnerable people and shower them with constant attention – [giving them the sense of belonging and identity affirmation they seek](#). The process requires a personalized interaction, constant grooming, and patience with an emphasis on the long game – all hallmarks of a successful persuasion campaign. Counter-narrative campaigns are rarely personalized, consistent, or sustained. There are many reasons that explain the discrepancy, chief among them a lack of resources and appetite for long-term engagement, as well as the afore-mentioned over-emphasis on immediate and short-term solutions.

So here we have a two-fold problem: Mass counter-narrative campaigns don't work the way CVE practitioners intend them to, and governments and other organizations either don't have or aren't willing to expend the time and resources needed to effectively mount personalized counter-recruitment campaigns.

Before we consider some options, it's worth discerning the scope of the problem. As others have rightly pointed out, [recruitment and radicalization to violence are not happening on a mass scale](#). So why expend the effort and resources to undertake mass counter-narrative campaigns?

One solution would be to focus solely on those who have already expressed support for violent extremism. Focusing on the self-identified or easily identifiable violent extremist supporters is preferable to mass catch-all efforts for obvious reasons. Once those supporters have been identified (an easy task given the gleeful willingness with which people share everything on social media these days), one approach could employ former violent extremists to engage them over the long term. [Such an approach is currently being used](#) on a smaller scale and could easily be replicated with modest resources. [Another related approach](#) would turn the stories of former violent extremists into compelling dramas that are then targeted specifically at supporters and followed up with face-to-face engagements, an important element in successful [intervention campaigns](#).

These proposals would use the same successful principles of engagement that the Islamic State employs. If they'd be targeted, personalized, and sustained over the long term. And they're modest proposals, for good reason. Recalling again that terrorist recruitment is a relatively [small problem set](#), countering that recruitment in the same mediums terrorists use will not require huge sums of money. Our response can and should be both measured and commensurate.

If governments and organizations are serious about countering violent extremism, they mustn't forget the biggest [reason](#) why youth join violent extremist groups: the search for a sense of belonging, self-worth, and meaning. Terrorist groups are adept at tapping into that [desire](#). Counter-recruitment efforts are not, nor will they be if they ignore the [empathy](#) required to understand what lures individuals to violence.

Recruitment and radicalization to violence doesn't happen overnight. If CVE approaches are to have any chance of succeeding, they must address underlying grievances in a meaningful and sustained way. The research that can help us figure out how to do so exists, we just need the flexibility to apply it. Because, as is hopefully now obvious, a [meme](#) blasted out on Twitter won't cut it.

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