



STOP



Leaders Telling a Different Story

**Preventing and Countering
Violent Extremism**

PROPOSAL
**For Countering Violent and Extremist
Narratives**





Proposal for Countering Violent and Extremism Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

During 2016-2017, the WLA-CdM implemented its project *Preventing Violent Extremism: Leaders Telling a Different Story*. The objective of this 12 month project, supported by **European Commission DEVCO**, aimed at strengthening counter-narratives and producing a multi-dimensional response to extremist messaging by channeling the collective expertise of policymakers, media representatives, experts, practitioners and experience of the Club de Madrid Members, all of them former Presidents and Prime Ministers democratically elected.

The CdM, in collaboration with the Samir Kassir Foundation, conducted a qualitative research study in Lebanon, Tunisia and Nigeria, focusing on how citizens understand, receive and perceive messages of radical groups and the most effective channels for such messages. The aim is to provide evidence-based findings and policy recommendations taking into account local realities, target group needs, and most used channels of communication and the analysis of actual messages of extremist groups. It also provided assessment of the language, meaning and cultural images contained in the body of these messages in order to explain their attraction and influence on the target group. In addition, the project's content/media expert, Javier Lesaca, analyzed social media and engagement communication strategies of violent extremist groups.

The feedback and conclusions of the qualitative research and content analysis provided the launching pad for the discussions during the regional forums, CdM high level missions. This document contains the main conclusions and recommendations of this initiative.

1. Recommendations for preventing and countering violent extremism suggested in the focus groups conducted in Tunisia, Nigeria and Lebanon

During the past 12 months, focus groups conducted by the WLA-CdM in the three countries have enabled more than 400 citizens to voice their opinions and put forward their suggestions on the most effective methods to combat violence and extremism. The key findings from the focus group discussions are presented below, followed by the groups' main proposals for a counter-strategy.

A. The importance of face-to-face communication

In all three countries, participants considered the presence of face-to-face recruiters, who targeted individuals, to be a more significant and effective part of the radicalization process than other types of messaging. Face-to-face recruiters who are able to operate within at-risk communities, can easily identify persons who may be "ripe" for radicalization due to personal circumstances.

B. Local segmentation of the messages

It was clear from the focus group discussions that extremist groups' overall recruitment approach, both in their face-to-face recruitment and in other forms of messaging, is highly tailored and contextualized to communities' and individuals' local concerns and experiences. By mapping out very local concerns, radical groups can easily exploit a situation by highlighting a community's grievances, then apportioning blame and positioning themselves as an empowering agent for "positive" social change.

C. The creation of a local social contract

According to the focus group discussions, messages relating to “Islamic” calling for violence have much less effect than messages relating to the lived realities of people in their communities. Islamic jurisprudence is highly contentious, with a range of interpretations depending on the school of thought, and significant differences between theory and practice¹. Rather than using particular Koranic verses to inspire radicalization, extremists have created a framework of identity that places Sunni Muslims into an “out-group”² that requires individuals to respond to the injustices the group faces. While the Islamic framing of messages resonated less with focus group participants, it did create a cohesive effect.

D. The impact of the failure of the state

The low presence of the state in providing public services has increased the spaces in which radical groups operate. The means for closing these spaces will depend on the particular political and socio-economic context of each country. However, wider P/CVE framework of response should take this into account, so that no more harm is done.

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2 Huddy, Leonie. «From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory.» *Political psychology* 22.1 (2001): 127-156.

E. Main proposals for an effective counter-narrative strategy, in accordance with the results of the focus groups in Tunisia, Nigeria and Lebanon

—**Counter-messaging should be considered to be only a small part of the puzzle** and will not solve the issue on its own. P/CVE policies will only have a positive effect when coupled with good governance policies, including fair access to the rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, the development of socio-economically underdeveloped areas, engagement with at-risk communities and improvements to public service delivery.

—Counter-radical messages should be designed to deconstruct extremist narratives and to **ensure that no group feels marginalized**.

—**The people delivering the messages must be non-partisan and respected** within local communities.

—Messages should **seek to adopt symbols of unity and equality** through positive campaigns.

—Messages should not be general; they should **focus on issues affecting at-risk communities** and should respond to their needs.

—Messages should use **impactful and hard-hitting visuals in the most appropriate language** and dialect.

2. Recommendations for preventing and countering violent extremism suggested in the technical and policy dialogue in Tunisia, Nigeria and Lebanon

The technical and policy dialogue conducted with experts and policy makers from Tunisia, Nigeria and Lebanon resulted in a list of comprehensive and multidisciplinary recommendations to effectively combat contemporary violent and extremism.

Each case study country has a different approach to tackling radical messaging. Tunisia and Nigeria have made significant policy commitments to producing and delivering counter-messaging, whereas Lebanon has not developed a full-fledged P/CVE strategy.

Despite these differences in approach, participants of the technical and policy dialogue in all three countries shared broadly similar reactions to and interpretations of the messages, which underlines a common understanding of radical and counter-radical messages, and processes of radicalization. Participants highlighted that the messages in and of themselves were not drivers to recruitment; much more relevant was the lack of social and economic development, along with the failure of the state to provide a basic standard of welfare support.

The following list of recommendations drawn from the technical and policy dialogue in the three countries includes actions in the field of public governance, economics and public communication.

A. Preventing radicalization and recruitment into violent groups

Take a strategic approach:

—Communication is a necessary tool, but it cannot counter violent extremism alone. Other policies must reinforce and confirm the content of counter-radical messages.

—Avoid disguising CVE programmes as development, cultural, reconciliation,

or poverty-alleviation projects, or as dialogue initiatives, which may be negatively perceived by participating communities.

—Develop proper **stakeholder mapping and research** to better understand people’s decision to join extremist groups. Mapping motivations is crucial to crafting an effective counter-strategy because it helps identify the particular grievances and deprivations that push people towards extremism.

—Design a P/CVE strategy with a focus on **interpersonal interactions**, which is the most effective recruitment channel used by extremist groups. **Face-to-face encounters** have proven to be the best way of engaging with people to connect on a personal level and building a relationship of trust.

—Recognize the important role of engaging religious leaders in promoting alternative narratives. Increased understanding of their motivations and concerns can help engage them in ways that are more constructive.

—Create accurate **profiles of religious leaders and places of worship**, which should identify those promoting radicalized messages, and where and how this promotion is taking place. To support this, it would be extremely useful to establish an official registration portal or database for religious leaders.

Empower women and youth:

—Ensure that women and young people are able to participate fully in democratic governance processes, as inclusive societies are more likely to be peaceful and stable. Finding **innovative ways to engage** with these groups is vital.

—The government and other relevant stakeholders should promote **women’s empowerment and protection**, ensuring they have access to livelihoods and leadership opportunities, which can help to elevate their position in society. Addressing gender inequality would help to prevent extremist groups from exploiting gender dynamics in their recruitment efforts.

—**Target the most vulnerable groups** of society, such as women and young people, who can become powerful actors in PVE efforts. **Inclusive messaging** needs to incorporate all relevant stakeholders in the discussion, particularly **young people** and **local actors** who are considered trustworthy.

—Build young people’s capacity to develop and implement **early warning and early response mechanisms** to enable a fast, effective response to concerns about radicalization in their social circle or community.

—Integrate **P/CVE initiatives into school activities** and establish **safe spaces for young people and women** who are looking for confidential groups and constructive conversations on how to fight and address violent extremism.

—Encourage **leisure activities** and the establishment of **cultural centres** to keep young people positively engaged with society and avoid the boredom, frustration or alienation that can make them vulnerable to radicalization.

Rebuild trust between citizens and state:

—Strengthen **relationships between different sectors of society**, namely the relevant ministries, police, community leaders, local NGOs, and other security and law enforcement agencies. The government should play a key role in **rebuilding trust and confidence** among different actors through programmes aimed at improving **civil-security relations**. Likewise, encourage the **eradication of corruption and impunity** in security agencies and among other law enforcement actors, to help restore trust between these forces and civil society actors.

—International actors should take into consideration the emergence of **new models of governance** across the regions most affected by violent extremism, as they may need to deal with hybrid structures of governance in places where the state authority is weak. There is an institutional void in which authorities go into

“survival mode” and condone certain approaches and strategies that do not fully align with Western human rights. To address this weakness or absence of national authorities, international entities should promote **local good governance programmes**.

—Reinforce **traditional justice systems** in areas where people do not have access to formal systems of justice. Bureaucracy usually makes it difficult for people to find swift resolutions to their problems, leading to frustration and resentment that can make them more receptive to the messages of extremists.

B. Building an alternative narrative

—Promote **attractive and persuasive messages that resonate with the audience**. Terrorist groups make use of imagery and audiovisual techniques that fascinate viewers and create confusion between fiction and reality. Counterradical messages need to be even more compelling.

—Integrate **innovative schemes** and make use of the film industry, videos, graphics, photos and advertisements. Both traditional offline platforms and new online platforms should be exploited.

—Taking into account that extremist narratives are often based on feelings of marginalization, exploitation and frustration, the goal of counter-narratives should appeal to an **individual's emotions and sense of self-worth** to encourage people to empathize with and relate to broader society rather than isolated extremists.

—**Reconnect evidence-based narratives** in original ways, through channels that do not look like conventional media. Counter-terror messages should be precise, rich in content and reflect the values of the alternative narrative.

—Positive role models can help to debunk stereotypes and constructively spread awareness of the alternative narrative, which should focus on **emotional healing and reconciliation efforts** across different sectors of society and help to rebuild social trust. Most importantly, the counter-narrative against violent extremism needs to have a principle of “**shared humanity**” that abandons the victim-perpetrator narrative of who-killed-whom to focus on the common experiences of people on all sides of the conflict.

—Ongoing **analysis of the content of radical messages** is required, as it provides important evidence about the drivers of extremism and the approach of radicalized groups towards recruitment. This in turn enables policy makers to identify the main grievances of the population and respond by designing – and promoting – livelihood support initiatives. In terms of developing a national communications strategy based on **local concerns** and tailored to a **specific target audience**, participants of the technical and policy dialogue highlighted the need to focus alternative messaging on the **positive aspects of government services**.

—Furthermore, an effective strategy should focus on the development of a **more effective communication system** that spreads and disseminates counter-narratives using both traditional and new media. Messages should address vulnerable groups using language that stresses their value and importance in their community, rather than their helplessness as targets or beneficiaries of programming. The use of **vernacular language**, when possible, is an advantage, as audiences need to identify with the message and trust the news source.

C.**Fostering sustainable and meaningful partnerships**

—Develop a **comprehensive mapping of P/CVE initiatives** in the country. It is important to document what is being done to counter violent extremism, who is carrying out these efforts, and where. A periodically updated and easily accessible **database of P/CVE interventions** and initiatives could be created, along with a central and accessible **P/CVE resource and knowledge management centre/platform**.

—Establish an **effective coordination mechanism** to foster synergy, amplify impact and enhance the scope and coverage of P/CVE initiatives. Government agencies, community institutions, civil society and international development partners need to work together and coordinate their respective interventions to achieve the common goal of P/CVE. There is a need to **harmonize the strategies** of partners, which should be guided by a common mandate, and to **build a feedback mechanism** into partnership frameworks.

—Strengthen **existing state conflict-management agencies** or establish new ones where needed, in order to foster networks among state and non-state actors that increase P/CVE initiatives across the country.

—Mainstream **conflict sensitivity and peace-building efforts** into overarching development strategies in community development plans, with a focus on P/CVE.

—Promote **the creation of a participatory and needs-based budgetary system** as part of an integrated national development planning framework. This would be facilitated by the creation of a **multi-stakeholder peace fund** for sustainably funding peace initiatives, with contributions from the government (at all levels), the private sector and international development partners.

—Establish funding mechanisms for **local actors to develop their own, locally owned P/CVE initiatives** that target specific local concerns. Often, funding bodies of PVE projects are international entities, which have more resources than local organizations but do not necessarily provide the most effective strategy for reconciliation, rehabilitation and de-radicalization within a particular community.

Conclusion

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, violent extremism is one of the most complex threats to democracy and the rule of law. There are several reasons for this.

First, the factors involved in the processes of radicalization are varied and their number increasing. In addition to religious, socio-economic or geo-strategic motivations, the fascination with contemporary extremism has many underlying factors that are hard to objectify, such as frustration, the trivialization of violence through popular culture, or the creation of alignments of identity in the digital sphere, among others.

Second, the generation of violent and extremist movements no longer depends on hierarchical, localizable power structures. Violent movements are increasingly ethereal, invisible and decentralized. Radical groups seek to generate messages that seduce, influence and inspire actions of violence among their audiences, without the need for highly visible leaders or a chain of command.

And third, fighting extremism and violence is no longer a task that depends exclusively on states and governments. Technology companies, civil society, the media and the entertainment industry may have a greater role to play in the fight against terrorism than states themselves. It should also be borne in mind that the role of states is not effective if it is exercised unilaterally, and that effective action against extremism relies on multilateral cooperation that engages all stakeholders in an inclusive and participatory manner.

The attraction of tens of thousands of young people around the world to violent extremist movements is a major threat to the sustainability and future of democracy and the rule of law. States and public institutions must once again win the respect of their citizens and be credible and effective in the eyes of the public. Achieving this will not be an easy task, but doing so will ensure that the freedom of people and respect for human rights will continue to mark the norms of coexistence in the twenty-first century.

The importance of building an alternative narrative

It is clear from the research that violent and extremist groups have succeeded in seducing their audiences by creating elaborate narratives that go beyond the construction of messages. It follows that efforts to counter these narratives of violence and hatred cannot be limited to the dissemination of isolated messages, but should employ these same tactics as those used so effectively by the communications strategists of Daesh and other terrorist groups.

Creating such narratives involves listening to and gaining insight into potential audiences; understanding their needs, concerns and cultural particularities. It means developing a script that reflects and responds to these social and cultural concerns, and choosing or creating characters and scenarios that are credible and interesting to the audience. An effective narrative must be aesthetically attractive and culturally familiar, and delivered by spokespeople the audience can both relate to and trust. Finally, it must be distributed in the diverse and multiplatform channels where its target audience is most active.

Such efforts should not be limited to generating counter-narratives, but should also try to create alternative narratives that are more compelling than those of extremist groups. While counter-messaging is intended to respond to a particular message, the alternative narrative is proactive, broader in its scope, and is consistently, persistently disseminated. Both types of narratives are essential components of an effective strategy to counter violent extremism. In the search for effective and thoughtful alternative narratives, P/CVE practitioners and policy makers should embrace innovative storytelling and marketing practices and collaborate with experts in the creative industries, IT companies, traditional and new media companies and others to jointly create a powerful “alternative story system”.

RECOMMENDATIONS: 14 POINTS FOR BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY TO PREVENT AND COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Drawing on the evidence obtained from the analysis of extremist groups' communications, the national and regional consultations and debates convened by WLA-CdM members and the focus group discussion in Tunisia, Liberia and Lebanon, 14 practical steps have been defined to enable countries and public institutions to counter the messages of violent groups.

1. Understand violence and extremism as a complex and multidisciplinary phenomenon requiring a multidisciplinary response

Efforts to counter contemporary violent and extremist movements require a systematic, scientific and multidisciplinary approach. There is not a simple, single answer to understand why thousands of citizens from all over the world have been attracted to violence and extremism. The complexity of the challenge demands an approach and a methodology that combines border control, exchange of information and intelligence, respect for legal order and human rights, dialogue with social movements and local religious communities, analysis of psychological profiles, sociological and political interpretation of nation-states in the context of post-modernity, socio-economic and labour integration of the new generations of citizens and, of course, the battle to win hearts and minds in the complex process of shaping global public opinion. Professionals and researchers from all the above-mentioned disciplines should be called on to explore and define the roots of the global extremism threat and to contribute to an effective counter-strategy.

The multidisciplinary approach should foster a policy dialogue between different public and private actors to develop innovative and effective measures and narratives to counter extremism and radicalization. The policy dialogue should include representatives of governments, public institutions, multilateral organizations, civil society, religious leaders, IT companies, media and the entertainment industry (music, films and videogames).

2. Take a scientific, evidence-based approach

The massive multimedia production of terrorist groups such as Daesh or Al Qaeda to win the hearts and minds of the youngest and most frustrated generations around the world has put the international community on alert. Ongoing, rigorous analysis of the messages of radicalism is fundamental to the development of effective counter-strategies.

The first practical step to build an effective narrative is to identify and measure indicators that could generate scientific evidence of the main motivations and arguments used by violent and extremist groups in their messages. Indicators could include the themes; cultural inspiration; the aesthetic; target audience; language; nationality of the spokespersons; occupation of the spokespersons; length of the message; the platform that is used to release it; the format (audiovisual, pdf, images, etc.); the most-used words and expressions; and the group responsible for releasing the message. This scientific baseline will provide a fuller understanding of violent and extremist messages, which can be drawn on in efforts to counter them.

3. Recognize the need for a multilateral approach

The current radical and violent extremism is not confined to the boundaries of the modern nation-state. For example, the UN estimates that 35,000 young people from 100 different countries have sworn their allegiance to Daesh. This case clearly illustrates the importance of addressing the threat from a multilateral perspective. The unilateral actions of national governments cannot effectively address a global and multinational challenge. Greater resources and legitimacy are required for existing mechanisms for combating violence and extremism established in multilateral institutions such as the UN or the EU, among others.

Anti-radicalization initiatives at the national level should be supported and supplemented by multilateral fora through the creation of specific working groups and

task-force projects. Such groups or task forces should have at their disposal the full range of expertise needed to counter the communication strategy of violent and radical groups: they should include researchers; public opinion analysts; journalists; audiovisual creators; marketing experts, and specialists in web analytics and big data. The task forces would be monitored by agencies such as the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), which has the backing and political legitimacy of the member countries.

4. Build a new social contract with the local population

The most credible messages are those that are backed up by coherent stories. As has been shown, both in the focus groups and in the analysis of the messages of radical groups, contemporary violent extremism is intrinsically related to the crisis of the nation-state. Frustration arising from the perception of nation-states' unfulfilled promises has created conditions favourable to the emergence of a wave of global rebellion, which manifests differently in diverse regions of the planet.

The best way to fight extremism and violence is to root out and respond to such frustrations. The redrawing of new social contracts between citizens and the state, and the moral rearmament of public institutions, will be key to avoiding violent extremism.

Institutions must be strengthened such that citizens regain confidence in their public administrations. This must be based on eradicating corruption in public life, implementing policies to create an economy that is capable of absorbing the talent of the new generations of citizens, and managing public services efficiently. Together these elements form the basis of a sustainable narrative to counteract violent extremism, and to build a more effective and inclusive democracy.

5. Communicate the new social contract effectively

Frustration arises from perceptions, which are subjective. As has been seen in some countries, the objective improvement of economic, social and development indicators does not necessarily lead to a decrease in levels of frustration and citizen unrest. It is not enough to improve the standards of good governance if citizens do not perceive them as such. Indeed, one of the successes of Daesh has been not its good governance, but its communication strategy to generate a perception that it exercises good governance. More than 25 percent of this terrorist group's videos show it providing public services to the Sunni population of Iraq and Syria.

As well as actually improving governance standards, countries must implement communication policies to enhance citizens' awareness and perceptions of positive government actions.

6. Build a transmedia narrative based on the storytelling technique

One of the most effective ways to respond to radical and violent messages is to create positive narratives that foster values of respect, tolerance and inclusion. These narratives should not just be counter-narrative to the messages of the terrorists, but positive alternative messages that fascinate and appeal to the same audiences.

The technique known as "transmedia storytelling"¹ is of particular interest in this regard. The target audience for this communication process are young people known as "millennials". As another example, this age group grew up watching Pokemon on television, continued to be involved with it through various formats such as magazines, toys and merchandising, and ended up involved with its protagonists by playing a virtual reality game on their smartphones.

¹ According to its creator, Henry Jenkins, narratives "represent a process where integral elements of a fictional story are systematically dispersed across multiple broadcast channels in order to create a unique and coordinated entertainment experience". The idea is that each medium makes its own contribution to the narrative of history. Jenkins gives as examples of this new narrative the sagas of fiction like Star Wars or the worlds of the superheroes created by Marvel using various audiovisual products that "enable the potential market of a product to be expanded by creating different entry points for different audience segments".

Transmedia narratives require the creation of an “exciting world” in which different characters interact on different platforms, generating human stories that socialize the message in a pleasant and suggestive way among audiences. To harness this strategy in the effort to counter violent extremism, institutions must create alliances with scriptwriters, artists, game designers and other agents of a country’s entertainment industry. Transmedia narratives must clearly define and articulate their messages, create the main characters of the story, construct an attractive universe and write compelling scripts that inspire and unite their audiences.

The most difficult decision is in choosing the principles upon which to base the narrative. What are the values, symbols, heroes and common histories of a society that deserve to be narrated and disseminated to help shape public opinion? The plurality and complexity of contemporary societies make it difficult to find these points of basic consensus. However, the search for a common denominator that satisfies the great social majority is fundamental to the construction of narratives that defend coexistence and the rule of law, and respect human rights.

Daesh has devoted 25 percent of its narrative to projecting values associated with good governance and management of public services; with another 25 percent of its content it presents itself as a global movement supporting youth empowerment. More than 800 young people from different parts of the world have appeared in its videos explaining why they joined. This data is useful for formulating alternative proposals to combat extremist groups. **Alternative narratives must be largely based on disseminating global and diverse values of good management of public resources and social justice, and targeted to a young audience.**

7. Use the same communications strategies as extremists to counter their messages

The scientific analysis of the 1,340 propaganda videos distributed by Daesh identified four major strategies in its narrative: messages about good governance; messages about its triumph in the field of combat; interviews with hundreds of young recruits from around the world explaining why they decided to join Daesh; and videos in which explicit violence, including murder, is transformed into multimedia shows.

These four key communications strategies can also be employed to build an alternative narrative:

—First, show the good governance of public institutions; at the same time, demonstrate the poor and corrupt management of public services exercised by terrorists.

—Second, highlight the military defeats of Daesh and the effectiveness of the armies who fight them. As former Prime Minister of Tunisia and current WLA-CdM member Mehdi Jomaa explained, “They (Daesh) show their victory; we have to show their defeat.”

—Third, an effective counter-strategy could share the testimonies of hundreds of young people from all over the world explaining why left the terrorist group and returned to their country of origin.

—Finally, it is crucial to give a face and voice to the victims of extremism. It is a vital to show that their murders have no place on a multimedia show, but are the horrific slaughter of human beings whose stories should be reported with dignity and humanity.

8. Create a network of “owned media” in alliance with civil society

The distribution of digital media content is based on a triple strategy that combines “owned media, paid media and gained media”. Owned media refers to the platforms and channels that a brand creates to communicate directly with its audiences; paid media refers to the advertisements and paid spaces that a brand inserts in traditional channels of communication; and gained media is the information, comments or communications that, free of charge, users and influential traditional media make about the brand. Owned media is of great importance in implementing a narrative that aims to counter violent and radical messages, as it allows for direct communication and interaction with the target audiences in a segmented and personalized way.

Violent and extremist groups such as Daesh have created solid structures of owned media to transmit a huge number of messages to their audiences without losing control over the framing of these messages. The network of owned media established by Daesh includes 39 audiovisual producers, magazines in several languages, news agencies and radio stations. It is therefore necessary to work with civil society to create and build support for a network of owned media which can compete with that of terrorist groups in terms of its size and reach, and effectively counter its radical message.

9. Form alliances with traditional media

To successfully disseminate messages, it is necessary to have the support of traditional media – television, radio and print channels. Alliances must be established with this sector to disseminate the narratives created to counter extremism and violence.

It would also be extremely useful to engage in a policy dialogue with traditional media companies to analyse best practice when reporting on events on which the only information is that disseminated by violent extremist groups through their own media channels. A case in point is the videos showing beheadings of hostages. The only images of such events are those provided by extremists, but by replicating these images traditional media channels are indirectly participating in the terrorist group's communication strategy. Traditional media channels should not contribute to disseminating the narratives created by extremist groups; nor should they remain silent about the atrocities committed by these violent organizations.

Furthermore, traditional media have not sufficiently highlighted the fact that the vast majority of victims of the "Islamic" terror group Daesh are Muslims. As this report shows, from January 2014 to August 2017, Daesh published 240 videos on social media of the murders of 850 citizens. Only 2 per cent of the victims in these videos are Westerners; 34 per cent are Syrian; 33 per cent are Iraqi; 8 per cent are Yemeni; 6 per cent are Egyptian; and 3 per cent are Afghan.

A policy dialogue with traditional media could include finding new ways to frame these horrific events, such as interviews with victims' families, including Muslim victims who are often not given enough attention.

10. Ensure constant coverage and interact with the audience

Repetition and pre-eminence of a message is one of the decisive elements in creating a successful and effective narrative about a public issue. According to Robert M. Entman, the more often the frame of a public matter is repeated (the “magnitude” of its coverage), the more likely it is that a significant portion of the audience will feel compelled by the message. Daesh has published 10,000 communication campaigns, including 1,340 videos, in less than three years. Never in history has a criminal organization communicated at such levels. It is estimated that more than 400 anonymous individuals participate in each Daesh Twitter campaign, spreading more than 1,000 messages in less than four hours.

Alternative narrative campaigns therefore have to be at least equal in terms of magnitude and repetition than those created and launched by violent extremist organizations in social media; this implies great production capacity.

As important as communicating with insistence is establishing contact and dialogue with the target audiences. Those responsible for the communications of violent and extremist organizations understand that much of the success of their communication campaign relies on their ability not only to inform, but also to listen to and engage in dialogue with their audiences, and attract new recruits. In the last two years, there have been abundant cases of active listening and dialogue between terrorists and their potential audiences.

11. Form alliances with IT companies

To effectively distribute messages among potential audiences online, it is critical to know exactly where those audiences are. The systematic use of monitoring software for social networks makes it possible to know exactly what channels are used and what conversations are frequented by the followers of violent and extremist groups.

It is very useful to implement active listening equipment in social networks to detect groups and influential individuals in these conversations. Once the networks where radicalization is occurring are objectively known, a “campaign of disruption” can be implemented by distributing the communication materials developed to create alternative narratives. Digital disruption campaigns can have a much greater impact if they are carried out in collaboration with large technology companies, which can help detect individuals who are actively seeking out violent and extremist groups. Governments should seek the support of such companies while ensuring a balance between legitimate security concerns and human rights guarantees. The Internet and social media search software itself may suggest alternative content that leads these vulnerable individuals away from extremism and violence.

Every day, terrorist and extremist groups spread hundreds of messages to influence global public opinion through open communication platforms. For example, Daesh maintains a production capacity of more than a dozen propaganda campaigns a day, and an average of ten videos per month. Public and governmental initiatives to thwart this activity are of little use without the support and cooperation of the large IT companies whose platforms are maliciously used by violent and extremist groups to propagate their messages. These companies have the ability to remove content that promotes violent behaviour from their platforms, but to date any efforts to do so have fallen well short of what is needed. Governments have to address the normative gap and develop regulatory frameworks for companies to abide by in order to establish limits on extremist content.

12. Segment the audiences

One of the greatest innovations that Daesh has brought to modern terrorism has been the treatment of its potential audiences as a potential market. According to Kotler, a market is the set of “all potential customers who share a specific need or desire and who might be willing to have the ability to make an exchange to satisfy that need or desire”. Daesh has detected the needs and desires shared by both its internal audiences (citizens of Iraq and Syria) and external audiences (young foreigners). It has also applied audience segmentation in its communication strategy since the beginning of 2014, using a network of 39 audiovisual producers that create and distribute personalized content for 39 audiences in different regions of the world. The message conveyed is common to all audiences, though different cultural products are created to be more effective in each of them.

Proposals for an alternative narrative to violent extremism must also use audience segmentation, developing personalized products for each potential audience that takes into account its cultural, linguistic and social specificities.

13. Work with the entertainment industry

One of Daesh's major victories over governments and institutions is in the battle of aesthetics. The investigation of the 1,340 videos released by Daesh in the last three years indicates that 50 percent of its videos of executions are directly inspired by and based on the most popular movies, video games and music videos of youth culture. For the first time in history, terrorism has been made to appear exciting, modern and familiar. Defeating it requires building a cultural and social alternative that is just as appealing to younger generations. Democracy, the rule of law, freedom and equality should not be concepts that young people associate with history and law books – they should be at the heart of attractive, inspiring cultural products. Making democracy and freedom fashionable is one of the most effective ways to combat terrorism, extremism and violence.

14. Find credible spokespeople

Choosing the right spokespeople is fundamental to effective communication. This is well understood by Daesh, which entrusted the transmission of its messages about the caliphate to a group of almost 1,000 young people from all over the world – spokespeople who were credible to their target audience. Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi only appeared in one of the 1,340 videos the group released.

The alternative narrative required to seduce generations of millennials towards social and cultural movements opposed to extremism and violence must also be communicated by credible actors. The young people of Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, Nigeria, Lebanon and others vulnerable to violent and extremist messages must be the main protagonists in this. Only they can offer a credible and attractive alternative to channel the disenchantment of a generation frustrated with governments and institutions that are perceived as distant and even hostile. Public institutions should seek out and build alliances with these youth groups, and entrust them with spreading effective and compelling narratives that can compete with violent extremist messages.

Processes of radicalization do not only occur in the digital environment; they are the sum of many variables, and, as this study has found, personal relationships play a vital part. It is imperative that the main messages of the **alternative narratives are internalized and spread by those in the close personal circles of young people vulnerable to radicalization: their mothers, fathers, siblings, friends, school-mates, local sports personalities, and community or religious leaders.**

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