



Hedayah

CVE RESEARCH BRIEF 3

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Narratives and Counter-Narratives

About Hedayah

Hedayah is the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi through the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Hedayah was established to serve as the premier international institution for training and capacity building, dialogue and collaboration, and research and analysis to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations, in support of long-term, global efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.

Introduction

The contents of this brief are based on the discussions that occurred from 3-4 November at an expert workshop on Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism hosted by Hedayah in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this 2-day expert roundtable was to bring together 20-25 researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a closed discussion of the current trends in CVE research. The goals at the meeting were to 1) address the current research outcomes in countering violent extremism; 2) determine the critical gaps in research on CVE; 3) identify the new and emerging threats of violent extremism; and 4) establish a recommended research agenda for Hedayah and CVE researchers in the coming 2 years.

This Research Brief is a quick-reference guide for researchers, practitioners and policymakers interested in learning more about the current research and future needs and gaps in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) on the topic of Narratives and Counter-narratives. This report reflects the discussions of the participants at the expert workshop, and does not represent the opinion of Hedayah.

In preparation for the meeting, Hedayah worked with Curtin University to map the existing CVE literature and assess the CVE research landscape across four themes: 1) social media and CVE, 2) education and CVE, 3) narratives of victims, survivors and formers for CVE, and 4) Disengagement and De-radicalization.¹ Meeting attendees utilized this literature review as a baseline for the discussions. Participants were also invited to prepare short research proposals prior to the meeting for review and discussion by other participants.

In addition to the discussions that occurred at the expert workshop on *Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism*, this brief also draws from findings of the literature review conducted by Hedayah and Curtin University, the research proposals that were submitted by the participants, and independent research conducted by the author.²

¹For an electronic version of the mapping activity, please visit www.hedayah.ae.

²Some of the reflections and analysis in this report also draws from an expert meeting titled "Developing Effective Counter-narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism" hosted in Abu Dhabi in June 2014. For a more detailed report, see: <http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/developing-effective-counter-narrative-frameworks-for-countering-violent-extremism.pdf>.

Current Status of Literature

The literature discussed and assessed with regards to narratives and counter-narratives focused on three distinct issues:

1. The roles of victims in narratives and counter-narratives.

Participants noted that victims of terrorism have a potential for effective counter-narratives because they are able to humanize the individuals violent extremists perceive as the 'enemy.' Victims' narratives could reinforce dissatisfaction with the dangerous methods violent extremists use to carry out their objectives. Moreover, it is often the case that communities vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment are also affected by violent extremism directly or indirectly, so victims can be a powerful emotional narrative. However, participants also acknowledged that much of this evidence is anecdotal, and there are few studies that capture the effectiveness of victims' narratives in preventing violent extremism.

2. The roles of formers and ex-prisoners in narratives and counter-narratives.

First and foremost, participants emphasized the powerful narrative role that former violent extremists can have, particularly with programs related to preventing, countering or reversing radicalization. Formers and ex-prisoners carry a certain weight in terms of the respect that potential recruits might have towards them. Because formers have experienced the reality of violent extremism first hand, they can speak to their disillusionment and the consequences of joining a violent extremist organization or committing an act of terrorism. Formers also have a unique role to play in understanding the cycle of radicalization and the narratives involved. There is some research capturing the narratives of formers and evaluating the radicalization process and documenting the points in which an individual could have made a different decision, had the narrative been different.

3. Social media as a main component of radicalization in the modern context.

One participant questioned if there was a fundamental difference between real time social media and other forms of media, or if the communication speed was just faster. Participants discussed the need to view internet radicalization in ways that differed from radicalization based on face-to-face interactions. Moreover, another participant remarked that social media, in terms of communications tools, is the rule, not the exception, especially when it comes to the youth cohort.

Some general observations were also made with regards to narratives and counter-narratives in the current literature with special reference to the narrative of the state. Participants recommended looking at history to assess what worked and what did not work in the past and apply it towards our current goals. One participant suggested that narrative and counter-narratives strategies should glean from the successes and failures of intelligence agencies, particularly during the Cold War, in terms of the narratives they created on both sides of the war. Participants also discussed the need to learn from the existing military literature related to strategic communications and campaigns, as it is not always applied in terms of messaging against violent extremism.

Gaps and Needs

In general, the literature assessing the effectiveness of narratives and counter-narratives is abundant, but generally has not produced much in terms of successful or effective strategies to counter the narrative of violent extremism. As such, participants made a number of recommendations in terms of the gaps in the current research.

1. There is lack of empirical evidence supporting the success of narratives of victims of terrorism and of former violent extremists.

Studies that attempt to measure the perceptions of individuals hearing the stories of victims of terrorism or former violent extremists may reinforce the anecdotal evidence suggesting victims and formers are powerful messengers.

2. There is a need to better explore the relationship of victimization to the process of radicalization.

This refers to the feelings of victimization of individuals by the state, or by outside forces.

3. There is a need to better assess how social media has an impact on everyday life before assessing how social media is related to radicalization.

Not much is known about social media as a baseline, specifically with relation to how social media impacts decision-making and behavior among the youth population. Moreover, participants also suggested collecting data on the number of online followers of a particular social media account, the nature of the messages on the account, and the relationship of these messages to the actions and behaviors of those followers. This data could have implications for effective counter-narratives. Participants suggested that involving marketing experts and social media experts in the research process related to radicalization might be one way to help overcome this challenge.

4. There is little research when it comes to assessing the audience of messages, particularly related to online and social media.

Participants pointed out that many people reading messages against violent extremism online already agree. In other words, participants suggested that counter-narratives require long-term, sustained engagement with an individual, and a relationship of trust built with that individual, before the narrative can be effective. Again, marketing and communications experts may be able to help with marketing the messages aimed at countering the narrative of violent extremists in such a way that reaches the target audience better, if more is known about that particular audience.

Challenges to Future Research on Narratives and Counter-Narratives

Participants discussed a number of challenges related to narratives and counter-narratives for CVE purposes.

1. Avoiding the perception that counter-narratives are counter-Islam.

Messages against violent extremism should be careful not to wrongly attack religion and ideology that many Muslims share, partially due to a lack of understanding of Islamic principles. Instead, producers of counter-narratives should take a nuanced approach advised by Islamic scholars when refuting Islamic principles in order to avoid alienating large swaths of the Muslim population.

2. Contextualizing counter-narratives in the greater geo-political context of the modern world.

Often narratives of violent extremists are embedded in a greater historical battle between good and evil, and they characterize local conflicts in a way that is bigger, grander or more international. The challenge to an effective counter-narrative, then, is to appeal to both the local realities and contexts as well as the broader narratives. Moreover, participants also suggested that there is a challenge in relating narratives and counter-narratives to the current events of the world. What may be effective one day may be received completely differently after a major disaster, crisis, or political disagreement.

Ongoing and Future Programs and Projects

Participants at the Expert Workshop debated a number of research programs and projects that were both ongoing and proposed. Two potential follow-up projects related to narratives and counter-narratives are listed below. Please respect the intellectual property rights of those conducting the research. If you would like more information, or if you have a partnership or funding opportunity available, please contact info@hedayah.ae.

1. Tweeting for God: A Study of Australian Violent Extremist Twitter Activity and Their Influence (Proposed)

Research Questions: How are messages that legitimize foreign fighters discursively constructed and disseminated on social media? How does authority and authenticity become established and individuals become canonized on social media? What are the external (exogenous) factors and internal characteristics (endogenous) of social media messages that impact on trends and the dissemination of messages on social media?

Description: This project uses tracking infrastructure for social media analysis (TriSMA) to explore the burgeoning phenomenon of foreign fighters' use of social media. The research will enhance understanding of social media trends and, importantly, will be the first of its kind to use 'big data' to gain insights into the radicalization process and the role of social media. The project outcomes will be of benefit to development of government policies and practice in the prevention of violent extremism. TriSMA will be used to capture Twitter messages and Facebook activities relating to the phenomenon of foreign fighters. The data sets will be analyzed using a typology of variables to establish volume, content, connectivity and demographics of messages.

2. A Study of the Audience of Violent Extremist Preachers: Mapping audience online and offline activity in response to online narratives (Proposed)

Research Question: What are the factors that constitute influence in the online environment in relation to violent jihadist narratives? How are audiences of on-line violent extremist narratives receiving, interpreting and acting on the messages they receive?

Description: This research project examines the process of online radicalization by applying media theories to a study of the terrorists' audience. A research framework for studying the terrorists' audience based on media theories would focus on the message, its producers and its consumers as well as the relationships between these three elements. Such a framework involves three levels of analysis—each yielding different insights that collectively inform an understanding of how and why terroristic online narratives are constructed and deconstructed in different ways by different people.