Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy

by Omar Ashour

Abstract

Is "online de-radicalization" possible? Given the two growing phenomena of "online radicalization" and "behavioral/ideological/organizational de-radicalization," this article outlines a broad strategy for countering the narratives of violent extremists. It argues that an effective counter-narrative should be built on three pillars. The first is an effective comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every dimension of the extremist narrative, namely the theological, political, historical, instrumental and socio-psychological dimensions. The second pillar is the messengers. The article argues that for the first time in the history of Jihadism a "critical mass" of former militants, who rebelled not only against the current behaviour of their former colleagues but also against the ideology supporting it, has come into existence. This "critical mass" can constitute the core of credible messengers, especially the few de-radicalized individuals and groups that still maintain influence and respect among vulnerable communities. The third pillar is the dissemination and attraction strategy of the counter-narratives(s) which focuses on the role of the media. The author of the article outlines a broad framework, which is a part of a UN-sponsored, comprehensive research project on countering the extremists narrative.

Introduction

The impact of violent extremist narratives on the processes of radicalization, recruitment, and "identity-building" has been established by multiple research findings.[1] In the words of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, one the famous strategists and ideologues of Jihadism: "the best way to organize is without an organization...an ideological front survives any security arrangements."[2] In addition, there has been a debate on the role of the Internet, whether primary or secondary, in promoting and publicising extremist narratives, in facilitating radicalisation and recruitment processes, as well as in reaching new audiences.[3] Given the scope and the intensity of the problem, using the Internet and other media outlets to revert that role, and to counter-violent extremist narratives becomes a global imperative. As opposed to its effects on radicalisation, the Internet can play a vital role in promoting a counter-narrative and in facilitating counter-radicalization and de-radicalization efforts.[4]

Building, conveying, and publicising a comprehensive counter-narrative to violent extremism is a crucial, yet challenging task. It requires international cooperation between the United Nations, governmental bodies, and serious experts on the subject matter. It also requires

comprehensiveness, credibility, and wide accessibility. A comprehensive counter-narrative should be able to cover the major dimensions of the violent extremist ontology in question, namely the political, historical, socio-psychological, theological, and instrumental dimensions. It also has to be conveyed, promoted, and supported by credible messengers. Since the 1960s, empirical data have consistently shown that sophisticated counterarguments to the ideologies of violent extremists without conveyance by credible messengers can have only limited success.[5]

The current moment is unique; for the first time in the history of Jihadism we are provided with a "critical mass" of former militants who rebelled, not only against the current jihadists' behaviour but also against the ideology that motivates them. Their message to the younger generations of potential sympathizers and recruits is quite powerful: "we were the pioneers of Jihadism and the authors of a large part of its literature. Here are our experiences and here is what went wrong."[6] In addition, due to the behavior of violent extremists, multiple other independent, credible messengers have emerged to speak out against the violent behavior and the ideologies promoting it. Those messengers include respectable and independent religious clerics, academic scholars, former officials, and civil society organizations.

The challenge for the United National and for governments worldwide will be how to capitalize on that unique moment and how to employ the messages, the messengers, and the proper media outlets to create and promote a comprehensive, credible counter-narrative to violent extremism. This article sketches a broad framework for a counter-narrative strategy. The framework is a part of a UN-sponsored, comprehensive research project on countering online extremist narrative. The framework will be presented in the forthcoming conference on *Use of the Internet to Counter the Appeal of Extremist Violence* which will be held in Riyadh in January 2011. The conference is sponsored by the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UN-CTITF) and the Nayyif University for Security Studies.

Online De-Radicalization and the Strategy for a Counter-Narrative

A strategy for counter-narrative can be built on three pillars. The first is the comprehensiveness, the depth and multi-layers of the message. The second is the background and the credibly of the messengers. The third is the promotion and the propagation (for the conference purposes, the focus will be on the usage of online media to counter-radicalization and the promotion of a counter-narrative). Finally, any global strategy will need international cooperation for its implementation. The sections below outline the proposed pillars of the strategy.

a. *The Message*

Regardless of ideology, narratives of violent extremists, including those of groups like Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF), Italy's Red Brigades (BR) , Spain's ETA, the United Kingdom's Provisional IRA, and Israel's Irgun, can be subsumed under four categories: political, historical, socio-psychological, and instrumental. Groups that employ religion to legitimate their

violent actions add a 'theological' dimension, with various types of religious symbolism. Stern, Aum Shinrikyo, and Al-Qaeda fall under this category. Brief details of those dimensions are described below:

1. The **political** narrative emphasizes various types of grievances that a particular group claims to suffer from, while clearly identifying the culprit(s) held responsible for the situation. In case of Al-Qaeda, for example, the culprits are primarily the West, led by the United States and Israel, most Arab and Muslim governments, and several other states with Muslim-minorities (including Russia, India, China, Philippines, and others).

2. To root the narrative further, violent extremists select specific **historical** episodes to give the political dimension historical legitimacy.

3. The **socio-psychological** narrative usually empowers the non-mainstream against the mainstream. It tends to focus on the glorification of violent acts, including terrorism, as well as their perpetrators. It also links them directly to grievances.

4. The **instrumental** narrative addresses/promotes the alleged effectiveness of violent methods in achieving social-political goals.

5. Finally, a **theologica**l narrative emphasises the religiously legitimate reactions/actions to the political grievances and social oppression. In case of Al-Qaeda, those actions/ reactions are elevated to become individual religious duties. Ethical and moral issues are addressed within this narrative.

By mixing these dimensions, or some of them, armed groups outline a broad worldview that provides ready-made, swift and easy answers to many complex, real, and valid questions. The mix, match, and interactions between the aforementioned dimensions provide an attractive, subjective narrative, full of cultural and historical symbolism.

To counter that narrative, an attractive and comprehensive message should be outlined. It is crucial to address every dimension as well as to tailor the message to different audiences, especially to young people and their concerns. It is also crucial to understand the specifics of the group(s) in question, the peculiarities of their ideology and ontology, and the nuances of the context(s) in which it operates. A counter-narrative built for the American Ku Klux Klan should look quite different from one built to counter Al-Qaeda's ideology, despite a few superficial parallels between them. Oversimplification, shallowness, and generic counter-narratives should be avoided, as these invite successful "strike-backs." The content of the message should also be attractive, admitting the validity of some or all of the grievances (depending on the case), offering alternative ways to address those grievances, in addition to highlighting the legitimacy and effectiveness of non-violent strategies.

b. *The Messengers*

Contrary to widespread misconceptions about counter-narratives, we are not reinventing the wheel. There should be an appreciation and a realization that some of the dimensions briefly described above were previously addressed. However, the identity of the message-bearers makes a big difference. As one of the former commanders of the Egyptian Islamic Group's (IG) armed wing puts it: "Hearing the [theological/moral/instrumental] arguments directly from the Sheikhs [IG leaders] was different….do you think I did not hear this before?!...we heard those arguments from the Salafis and from al-Azhar…we did not accept them…we accepted them from the Sheikhs because we knew them and we knew their history."[7] In addition to former militant leaders and figures, the "external interaction" between radicals and independent religious figures, civil society actors, and credible academic experts proved to be crucial for the modification of the extremists' worldview, thus cracking the duality of "good" versus "evil."[8] This interaction can be understood as a process of social, political, and religious education and an updating of the worldview.

c. *The Media*

After building the message and coordinating with the messengers, publicising and propagating both of them becomes crucial. After all, many of the battles won by violent extremists were on media fronts. The media dimension of the counter-narrative strategy will require multiple tasks:

1. The first task is to analyse the counter-narratives available and highlight their sources of strength, appropriateness for the audience in question, and evaluate the potential impact.

2. The second task is to translate (if required), summarize, and sometimes simplify the existing and, hopefully, the forthcoming counter-narrative(s). In addition to texts, multi-media forms (for example online videos and audios) should be utilized as propagating tools.

3. The third task is introducing the messengers, their background, and their experiences.

Conclusion

With the rise of violent incidents related to online radicalization, outlining a global action plan for producing counter-narratives and promoting online de-radicalization becomes an essential task. In-depth research on counter-narratives, covering its multiple dimensions, constitutes an excellent foundation for guiding an action plan. The research on counter-narratives should build on previous findings, specifically in the area of ideological de-radicalization. Lessons learned from online and other interaction models (e.g. in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Yemen, United Kingdom and Netherlands) should be analyzed to guide and inform the process of constructing persuasive counter-narratives. Finally, enhancing international cooperation and exchange of experiences will be crucial for the success of any action plan or building process.

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Notes:

[1]Omar Ashour. "Lions Tamed? An Inquiry into the Causes of De -Radicalization of the Egyptian Islamic Group." *Middle East Journal* Vol. 61, No. 4 (Autumn 2007), pp. 596 – 627; Salman al-Auda. "*Ma'an dida Irhab al-Qa'ida* (Together Against the Terrorism of Al-Qaeda)."*Al-'Asr* , 9 October 2009; Eric Davis. "Ideology, Social Class and Islamic Radicalism" in Said A. Arjoman (ed.), *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam.* Albany: State University of New York, 1984; Jean-Pierre Filiu. Les neuf vies d'Al-Qaeda,.Paris: Fayard, 2009.

[2]Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, *Da'wat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya* (Call for Global Islamic Resistance). (No Place of Publication: No Publisher), 3rd ed., 2004, p. 1323.

[3]Marc Lynch. "al-Qaeda's Media Strategies," *The National Interest*, 1 March, 2006; *Hannah* Rogan. "Jihadism Online." Kjeller: FFI Rapport, 2006; Tim Stevens and Peter Neumann. "Countering Online Radicalization." London: ICSR Publication, 2009.

[4]For definitions of these terms see O.Ashour. *The Deradicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 4-7.

[5]O. Ashour, *The Deradicalization of Jihadists,* op. cit., pp. 138-142.

[6]For detailed analyses of these transformations see O. Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadist*; O. Ashour. "The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on Al-Qaeda." *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 2, No. 5 (Spring 2008); O. Ashour. "Islamist De-Radicalization in Algeria: Successes and Failures", *The Middle East Institute, Policy Brief,* no. 21 (November 2008); O. Ashour. "Hamas and the Prospects of De-Radicalization." In: Klejda Mulaj (ed.) *Violent Non-State Actors in Contemporary World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; O. Ashour. "Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Phenomenon of Jihadist Transformation." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (forthcoming). Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan. (eds.) *Leaving Terrorism Behind.* London: Routledge, 2009; Chris Boucek. "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy;"; John Horgan. *Waking Away from Terrorism.* London: Routledge, 2008; Sidney Jones. "Deradicalization and Indonesian Prisons." *International Crisis Group Report,* 19 November 2007; Jessica Stern. "Mind over Martyr." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 89, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2010),pp. 95-106.

[7]Mamduh Yusuf. Commander of the Armed Wing of the Egyptian Islamic Group (1988-1990). See parts of the interview in O. Ashour, *The Deradicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*. London: Routledge, 2009.

[8]For more on that processes of "external interaction" and their impacts on decisions to abandon and de-legitimate political violence see O. Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists*; O. Ashour, "The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on Al-Qaeda;" O. Ashour, "Islamist De-Radicalization in Algeria: Successes and Failures;" Chris Bouceks. "Extremist Re-education and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia," in: T. Bjørgo & J. Horgan (eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Disengagement from Political Violence*. New York: Routledge, 2009; Mohamed bin Mohamed. "The Roles of the Religious Rehabilitation Group in Singapore," in: A. H. Kader, *Fighting Terrorism: The Singapore Perspective*. Singapore: Taman Bacaan, 2009.