THE IMPORTANCE OF
IDEOLOGY

Counterterrorism strategies require more soft power to disrupt terror recruitment

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It is well-established that people become involved in terrorism to fulfill a variety of needs, including personal, social, spiritual, practical and even financial. It is also well-known that, for many terrorists, satisfying these motivations may be more important than commitment to ideology. And yet, it is the ideology of terrorist organizations that gives them their unique identity, distinguishes them from their enemies and clearly defines both "good" and "evil." Moreover, ideology forms the basis of terrorists' strategy, dictating their ends, ways and means and providing group members with a set of instructions on how to speak, dress and act. Ideology justifies and even necessitates violence, while simultaneously dehumanizing the enemy, giving the perpetrators a twisted sense of morality that sanctions all manner of atrocities.

Individual terrorists do not need to be experts in the ideology, nor do they need to believe every word that comes out of their leaders' mouths, as long as they adhere to basic ideological principles — what is the problem, who is to blame and what needs to be done about it. In fact, the simplest arguments are often the most compelling, and part of the power of terrorist ideology is that it paints a black and white picture of the world that deliberately dispenses with complexity. This helps explain the broad appeal and seemingly infinite pathways into terrorism, along with the diverse array of profiles and motivations involved.

One thing that terrorists have in common is at least basic exposure to terrorist ideology and propaganda. Along with some form of social contact, whether on- or offline, and practical opportunity, this is one of three necessary conditions for joining a terrorist organization. Indeed, ideology is arguably the "center of gravity" of terrorism. According to Clausewitz, this is "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act." Ideology is thus crucial to the survival, growth and longevity of terrorist organizations and must be countered as a matter of priority.

Delegates attend an anti-terror conference at the German Foreign Office in Berlin in May 2016. The conference, sponsored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, dealt with returning extremists. EPA

A Palestinian boy wears a Hamas militant headband during a military parade. Radicalization often begins at an early age. REUTERS

Counterideology tools and techniques

The need to counter terrorist ideology is hardly a revelation. More than a decade ago, U.S. Army Gen. John Abizaid — then head of U.S. Central Command — observed that "it's a battle of ideas as much as it is a military battle." Others had already come to the same realization, and by 2003 fledgling deradicalization programs were underway in places such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore and Yemen. Since then, efforts to counter terrorist ideology have gradually expanded to include government and nongovernment actors using a variety of tools and techniques aimed at different audiences, ranging from society as a whole to at-risk youth and convicted terrorists. Collectively, these efforts are now referred to as countering violent extremism (CVE).

Under the CVE umbrella, information operations, capacity-building projects and education initiatives, along with specialized counterradicalization and deradicalization programs, have multiplied worldwide. Some approach the problem on an intellectual level, for example, highlighting rational or theological inconsistencies in terrorists' lines of argument. Others take more of an emotional approach, drawing attention to the hypocrisy and lies of terrorist leaders or the impact of terrorism on victims and their families.

There are also growing efforts to showcase the reality of life inside a terrorist organization, which contrasts with the glossy propaganda and naïve expectations of recruits. Yet another technique that is becoming increasingly popular is to ridicule and make fun of terrorists — exemplified by the online campaign to Photoshop ISIS fighters as rubber ducks. Others still have focused on positive messages, such as interethnic or multifaith statements of solidarity that undermine the terrorists' "us versus them" narrative. Finally, practical approaches such as providing education and employment also play an important role in some programs. In reality, of course, different tools and techniques are often combined and adapted to the particular language, culture and circumstances of the target audience.

Emerging best practices

Although much is to be learned in this field, several principles of best practice can be identified. To begin with, it is fundamentally important to select an appropriate target audience (such as young people with a demonstrable interest in terrorist ideas/organizations) and develop an understanding of that audience. This will have implications for those likely to be seen as credible messengers and thus be able to exert a degree of influence. Former extremists are an obvious choice in this respect, but can also be problematic and are by no means the only people capable of countering terrorist ideas.

The choice of target audience will also inform decisions about the delivery and format of messages — where and how to engage using what particular method or type of media. Intuitively, imagery and video — featured heavily in terrorist propaganda — are likely to be more effective than long written articles. The tone of interaction with target audiences is also important, as is the timing — few people are likely to be swayed

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by a blunt or abrasive approach, nor one that fails to respond and adapt to contemporary events. Finally, it is necessary to tailor approaches to the particular local or individual circumstances in question. What works in one location or with one person may not work elsewhere with others.

Key challenges

The challenges in countering terrorist ideology are many. On a practical level, money, resources and expertise are often lacking, making it difficult to compete with the sheer volume of terrorist activity. Risk assessment of individuals, groups or communities is also far from straightforward, making it difficult to identify the most promising targets for engagement and allocate scarce resources efficiently. Building partnerships can also be tricky. From the government perspective, partners must be reliable, trustworthy and effective; on the nongovernmental side, the need to obtain funding and other forms of support must be balanced against the need to maintain independence. If a particular group or individual is perceived to be working for the government, it can undermine credibility.

There is no guarantee that efforts to counter terrorist ideology and recruitment will be universally well-received. Naturally, terrorists and their extremist supporters often attempt to undermine such efforts. At the same time, some sections of society may feel unfairly targeted, especially when police are involved, and such fears are frequently amplified by an unsympathetic media. This has very much been

the case in the United Kingdom, where the government's "Prevent" strategy has been erroneously branded as an attempt to spy on the Muslim population.

Perhaps most important, however, are challenges associated with evaluation. Although many CVE initiatives draw upon previous knowledge and experience in related areas as diverse as marketing campaigns, social work, criminal rehabilitation, and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs, the field in general appears to have developed through trial and error. In addition, indicators of success are often superficial; detailed, systematic evaluations are still few and far between. Establishing the impact of counterideology efforts is a daunting task, yet it will be essential to advancing the field.

Signs of progress

Despite many challenges, efforts to counter terrorist ideology are increasing and there is growing recognition that this is an important and underresourced area of counterterrorism with much potential. Furthermore, although the volume of terrorist messaging has markedly increased in recent years — thanks largely to ISIS — so, too, has the volume of countermessaging. For instance, anti-ISIS online content is now believed to outnumber pro-ISIS content 6 to 1. This is a product of increasing censorship on the part of companies such as Twitter (which has closed down hundreds of thousands of terrorist accounts), as well as a growth in grass-roots anti-terrorist activism.

There are also encouraging efforts to professionalize the CVE sphere by providing platforms for publishing research, such as the *Journal for Deradicalization*, and establishing dedicated institutions designed to facilitate information-sharing and further refine best practices — notably Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in 2012 and the Counter Extremism Project, which recently developed an algorithm to assist in identifying and removing extremist content online. The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund is another example of the increasing momentum in this area. Established in 2014, it aims to generate about $200 million over 10 years to be used to "support local, community-level initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against violent extremist agendas."

For too long, terrorists have been given free rein to spread propaganda and ideas more or less uncontested. That is no longer the case, and the chorus of voices against violent extremism and terrorism is gradually rising. The road ahead will not be easy, but it is one that we must commit to nonetheless. As we seek to undermine the appeal of terrorist ideology, it is vital that we share information, ideas and experience to learn from one another and progress. The diverse examples presented in this issue of *per Concordiam* are a modest contribution to this line of effort. □