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Alter-Messaging:

The Credible, Sustainable Counterterrorism Strategy

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This policy brief is part of an occasional series to provide recent college and graduate school graduates with the opportunity to develop their research and writing on topics of interest in the field of counterterrorism and international security.

The views presented here do not necessarily represent the views of CGCC.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following individuals for their support and constructive feedback that helped shape the policy brief: Alistair Millar, Naureen Chowdhury-Fink, Rosemary Battles, and Caryn Pinto.

INTRODUCTION

Global counterterrorism efforts are at a crossroads. After more than a decade of emphasis on tactical efforts to counter terrorism, such as the military-led pursuit of groups and individuals who have already committed acts of terrorism, there has been a shift toward strategic counterterrorism, which instead seeks to prevent individuals from being recruited to the cause in the first place and before they can inflict any harm on innocent civilians. The tactically focused, kinetic approach has led to some major victories, including the deaths of Osama bin Laden and other high-ranking terrorist leaders, but has come at a significant military, economic, diplomatic, and human cost. Moreover, the recent increase in terrorist activity in the Sahel;[1] a five-fold increase over the last three years in the number of al-Qaida fighters in Yemen;[2] and the reemergence of al-Qaida in Iraq after years of U.S. and coalition operations[3] all point to the need for greater efforts to curtail the flow of new recruits.

Terrorist organizations routinely search for an equalizer that will allow them to challenge and prolong their survival against often financially and militarily superior adversaries, i.e., governments. By design, terrorists' narratives—stories constructed around cultural beliefs and ideals—represent a main strategic element of their operations and provide an effective vehicle for conveying their ideology. Terrorist organizations use these narratives to lure vulnerable individuals with real or perceived grievances to rally around the group's ideals; these narratives represent the main variable influencing an organization's recruitment power. Al-Qaida has become adept at manipulating narratives and succeeded in disguising often politically related grievances (e.g., oppression, poverty) under a distorted veil of Islam. Similarly using a narrative that exploits the language of religion, al-Qaida attempts to justify its use of violence. Without a conscious effort to prevent the radicalization and recruitment of future terrorists, the factors motivating terrorist organizations will endure within narratives until a new wave of recruits emerges to replace those killed or captured.

In the last decade, governments such as the Netherlands, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as international organizations including the United Nations, have begun implementing more-comprehensive counterterrorism strategies that add a number of preventive efforts to address the spread of the ideology of terrorism and subsequent radicalization. Although this is a critical first step, the success of these government-led efforts are hindered by two major obstacles: lack of credibility and compatibility, i.e., the ability to resonate and connect, including lack of firsthand cultural knowledge of target audiences outside a government's sovereign territory. The absence of these two elements could explain why, for the most part, current, preventive efforts have had a limited effect. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton echoed concerns that "[w]e are in an information war, and we are losing."[4]

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[1] Jill Dougherty, "European Official: Al Qaeda Threat in Northern Africa 'Spreading,'" CNN, 3 October 2012, http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/03/al-qaeda-threat-in-northern-africa-spreading.

[2] Gregory D. Johnsen, "A Profile of AQAP's Upper Echelon," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 72 (24 July 2012): 6, http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/CTCSentinel-Vol5Iss72.pdf.

[3] Joby Warrick, "In Foiled Jordanian Terror Plot, Officials See Hand of Resurgent al-Qaeda in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 2 December 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-jordanian-terror-plot-officials-see-hand-of-resurgent-al-qaeda-in-iraq/2012/12/02/43f1698c-3421-11e2-bb9b-288a310849ee_story.html.

[4] Nicole Gaouette, "Clinton, Senators Stress Mideast Energy, U.S. Strategic Stakes," Bloomberg, 2 March 2011, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-02/clinton-senators-stress-mideast-energy-u-s-strategic-stakes.html.

"Al-Qaida has become adept at manipulating narratives and succeeded in disguising often politically related grievances (e.g., oppression, poverty) under a distorted veil of Islam."

This brief proposes the concept of "alter-messaging," centered on credible and compatible messengers, specifically former terrorists and survivors of terrorist attacks, who can deliver alternative content to the ideology of terrorism. Ensuring the messengers' credibility remains intact is essential, and maintaining a strict level of independence from government influence or manipulation is key to success. Alter-messaging separates the act of communicating into four components: the message, the messenger, the medium of delivery, and the recipient. The first three components are tailored to specific audiences during alter-messaging efforts to maximize the probability that the content will prevent individuals from becoming radicalized. Terrorist organizations rely on the convincing nature of their ideology, conveyed through narratives, to help maintain a constant influx of new recruits who enable the execution of violent terrorist attacks. Alter-messaging, in essence, aims to disable a terrorist's most powerful weapon—ideology—and not only prevent future recruits from joining the ranks of terrorist organizations, but also implant an alternative message within a terrorist organization itself, causing an increase in defectors.[5]

TERRORIST USE OF NARRATIVES

Terrorist organizations rely heavily on a consistent flow of new recruits to execute terrorist attacks. An organization's ability to attract new recruits (recruitment power) stems from the persuasive nature of the narratives that convey its ideology. Ultimately, narratives become an essential component of terrorist operations, serving as a terrorist lifeline, luring vulnerable individuals with real or perceived grievances to rally around the group's ideals.[6] These messages exploit and contort firsthand cultural knowledge, including the grievances of an intended audience, to justify the use of violence and garner support in the form of recruits, financing, and supplies. Combined with today's globally linked environment, terrorist organizations possess an instant mode of connecting with a worldwide network of potential supporters.

A unique aspect of al-Qaida's spread of ideology is that they have constructed a master narrative that affiliate, local, or regional terrorist organizations can use as a template to tailor content, including shaping messages based on culture or grievances, to particular target audiences.[7] Additionally, al-Qaida and its affiliates regularly incorporate images of innocent Muslims, including women and children who are hurt or killed in U.S. strikes, in their own narratives to gain support. The same technique could be used in alter-messaging efforts to highlight the suffering of innocent people injured or killed by terrorist attacks, potentially dissuading individuals from joining the terrorist ranks.

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[5] Although the focus of this brief is al-Qaida and its affiliates, the proposed concepts apply to the broader threat of violent extremism as well.

[6] Tom Quiggin, "Understanding al-Qaeda's Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (August 2009): 20.

[7] See Open Source Center, Monitor 360, and Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, "Special Report: Al-Qaeda," September 2011, http://info.publicintelligence.net/OSC-AlQaedaMasterNarratives.pdf (two case studies on al-Qaida affiliates: Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb).

COMPATIBLE CREDIBILITY

Credibility and compatibility are the crux of alter-messaging, as they help determine its success. Credibility is one of the main defining factors in an information war, but credibility alone will not achieve victory.[8] Messengers also need the ability to connect to their target audience on another level, so those with local, firsthand cultural knowledge are likely to be the most effective by being better suited to challenge terrorist narratives using the same cultural and dialectal nuances that terrorist organizations often manipulate to gain an advantage. For its practitioners to maintain the needed level of trust and a strong connection with the target audience, alter-messaging will need to operate outside of government control and ensure strict separation and independence from government influence and manipulation. If separation does not remain, these messengers will likely lose their credibility and may even do more harm than good.[9]

Former terrorists and survivors are ideal candidates as they have powerful messages based on personal accounts with terrorism. This group is comprised of a broad demographic of people that can be used to reach a large number of different audiences. They also carry compelling, emotionally charged personal stories that can appeal to a broad audience. Although some former terrorists may face criticism for flip-flopping on their beliefs, they can help others question the wisdom of their ideology, similar to how former gang members routinely share their experiences to deter others from following the same destructive path they once went down.

Former terrorists have a unique understanding of the entire situation i.e., the process of radicalizing, operating as a terrorist and possibly carrying out an act of violence, ultimately defecting, and possibly deradicalizing altogether as they once turned to terrorism to express the original grievance that caused them to radicalize, making them "obvious candidates for the job."[10] Also, former terrorists can point out the reality of the terrorist lifestyle. They can tell of the miserable conditions and treatment they received while a member of the terrorist organization. Highlighting the reality of conditions, including poor treatment and a lack of respect, could provide an effective deterrent for potential terrorists. Studies suggest this has already proved effective in that "a number of prospective terrorists have been deterred by the harsh reality of life in terrorist training camps."[11] Another message involves the possibility of leaving a terrorist organization. Many members of terrorist organizations do not realize it is possible for them to leave unharmed.[12] Not knowing they can leave unharmed, terrorists, even when they no longer or never agreed with the organization's ideals or goals, may remain in the group out of fear.[13] EXIT-Germany, an organization designed to assist right-wing extremist dropouts, has acknowledged this problem and has

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[8] Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Benefits of Soft Power," *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, 2 August 2004, http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/4290.html.

[9] As noted later in this brief, the damage that was done to the reputation of the UK-based Quilliam Foundation is a case in point, when it was revealed that the foundation received its financing from the UK government. See Richard Kerbaj, "Government Gives £1m to Anti-Extremist Think-Tank Quilliam Foundation," *London Times*, 20 January 2009, http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/politics/article2026766.ece.

[10] Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Dropouts: Learning From Those Who Have Left," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policy Focus*, no. 101 (January 2010), p. 2, http://www.pvtr.org/pdf/ICPVTRinNews/TerroristDropouts.pdf.

[11] Ibid., p. 12.

[12] Ibid., p. 30.

[13] Ibid.

taken steps to educate members of right-wing extremist groups in the region.[14] By telling their stories, former terrorists have the credibility to inspire current terrorists or potential recruits to reverse their path of radicalization.

One of the major tactics al-Qaida uses in its narrative is to dehumanize its victims, removing their faces and voices. This tactic is likely used to make it easier to carry out acts of violence against them. Giving survivors a forum to tell their stories can provide a very detailed, emotionally charged description of the horrific events they experienced, i.e., humanizing the victims. It allows others to hear the real-life nightmare they experienced and will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Survivors can portray the harsh reality of terrorist violence, and their stories may spread seeds of doubt among potential recruits, current terrorists, and supporters, forcing them to question their motivations. Sharing the stories of al-Qaida's victims "from the World Trade Center to the weddings, funerals, schools, mosques, and hotels where suicide bombers have brought untold grief to thousands of families, tribes, and communities throughout the Muslim world" gives a face, name, and voice to anyone who has ever directly or indirectly experienced the pain caused by a terrorist attack.[15]

Former terrorists and survivors, as credible messengers, need a forum to disseminate their alternative messages. Alter-messaging will adopt a similar approach to the State Department's Viral Peace initiative, created to "annoy, frustrate and humiliate denizens of online extremist forums."[16] Viral Peace officials advocate letting "Muslims in various foreign countries figure out which message boards to troll and how to properly troll them."[17] Alter-messaging will allow the messengers to decide if a formal organization should be established to provide an infrastructure and forum for the messengers to convey their messages or if they can achieve their goal independently. Yet, independent organizations such as nonprofits focused on preventing future radicalization should create the infrastructure and provide a forum for credible and compatible messengers to reach a worldwide audience; messengers will determine if they are able to maintain their credibility through this model.

A small number of organizations have been created to amplify the voices of victims and former terrorists. For example, the Global Survivors Network (GSN) and Quilliam Foundation use the personal stories of former terrorists to stop the spread of violent extremism. From 2009 to 2012, the GSN worked with survivors to share poignant stories of their suffering, and they have trained local survivors to more effectively connect with their communities. The Quilliam Foundation, a counterextremism think tank established by two former terrorists, is a perfect example of how government influence or association can decimate credibility. When it was revealed that the UK government provided funding to the organization, the Quilliam Foundation suffered a devastating blow to its credibility, and many of its associates were deemed traitors by the Muslim community for corroborating

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[14] Ethan Sacks, "Neo-Nazis Punk'd! German Right-Wingers Get Free T-Shirts, That Turn Out to Bear Message of Inclusion," *New York Daily News*, 11 August 2011, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/neo-nazis-punk-german-right-wingers-free-t-shirts-turn-bear-message-inclusion-article-1.948464.

[15] Frank J. Cilluffo and Daniel Kimmage, "How to Beat al Qaeda at Its Own Game," *Foreign Policy*, 14 April 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/04/13/how_to_beat_al_qaeda_at_its_own_game.

[16] Spencer Ackerman, "Newest U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy: Trolling," *Wired*, 18 July 2012, http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/07/counterterrorism-trolls/all/.

[17] Ibid.

with the government.[18] This result further underscores the importance of credibility and compatibility of messengers within a particular audience and their need to remain separate from any government connection.

By tailoring the first three components of alter-messaging—the message, the messenger, and the medium of delivery—which are controllable, it is possible to increase the probability of success by maximizing compatibility and preventing any unintended consequences associated with wrongful interpretations of messages. This includes matching messengers to the audience based on age, race, gender, and religious affiliation, among others. For example, a former or survivor in his or her 20s with a college degree and specific religious denomination could use social media to connect to a target audience bearing the same characteristics. The same messenger and medium of delivery may not be as compatible with someone from a different demographic. The alter-messaging concept assumes this tailored approach will mitigate issues with existing counternarrative efforts, which are often criticized for being too direct and sometimes interpreted as attacks on the broader population. Recently, counternarrative efforts have attempted to alleviate this issue by delivering messages that are more positive. Alter-messaging, however, is not necessarily relying on positive messages but rather a realistic message that attempts to utilize compatibility to increase the acceptance of the content.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Governments generally lack the necessary credibility and compatibility to counter the terrorist's message, which is by nature an antiestablishment message. This lack of credibility can easily derail preventive counterterrorism efforts even before they start and may be an insurmountable obstacle. Widespread belief that ulterior motives drive U.S. actions has destroyed what little credibility the U.S. government had. Further damaging U.S credibility and, subsequently, U.S. preventive counterterrorism efforts are an inconsistency between its actions and policies. For example, the 2011 "National Strategy for Counterterrorism" promotes human rights and the rule of law, but the United States uses drones to kill terrorists.[19] This issue is hotly contested for multiple reasons, including the targeting and killing of U.S. citizens (e.g., Anwar al-Awlaki) and the collateral damage that injures or kills innocent civilians, some of whom are women and children. Al-Qaida and others exploit these events to extend the opinion that the United States is anti-Muslim, thereby increasing the void between the U.S. government and the Muslim community.

Governments may suffer from a lack of compatibility with target audiences and may actually offend the audience due to a limited firsthand cultural knowledge. For example, the United States could release messages aimed at criticizing al-Qaida, but inadvertently offend the general Muslim population in the process. Amy Zalman, a strategic communications expert, explains that "[n]egative attributes [credited] to an enemy easily bleed into similar attitudes toward the entire population," making it important to have a messenger who

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[18] Martin Bright, "Quilliam: A Think-Tank We Must Save," *Jewish Chronicle Online*, 10 March 2011, http://www.thejc.com/comment-and-debate/comment/46401/quilliam-a-think-tank-we-must-save.

[19] The White House, "National Strategy for Counterterrorism," June 2011, http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/counterterrorism_strategy.pdf.

understands the target audience, increasing the likelihood the message will resonate.[20] Governments should focus on tactical action against existing terrorists and adopt additional courses of action that complement alter-messaging efforts led by former terrorists and survivors.

Additional government efforts should focus on external elements that do not influence the message or messengers in any way, such as providing resources (e.g., financial, housing) to defecting terrorists. These individuals may face unforeseeable financial hardship and estrangement from their family after leaving a terrorist organization, and in some cases, assistance to defectors has been "highly effective" in terms of preventing recidivism.[21] Defectors would have to be closely monitored to ensure that they truly have cut ties with their terrorist brethren, but the benefit from their status as defectors is substantial. From an alter-messaging perspective, they add to the number of messengers spreading alternative content to help additional terrorists defect or prevent future recruits from becoming radicalized.

The United Nations has outlined a number of preventive counterterrorism efforts that could be undertaken by governments. The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy paved the way for preventive counterterrorism techniques and described many multilateral capacity-building efforts aimed at reducing radicalization. In a 2006 report accompanying the Strategy, Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for a global approach: "Because terrorism affects us all, we all must be involved in countering it."[22] The Strategy proposes that counterterrorism action follow a similar approach employed to address other global issues, such as "landmines, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, the recruitment of child soldiers and impunity for war crimes."[23] The Secretary-General recommended a combination of international, regional, and local campaigns that utilizes civil society to spread a message that focuses on the negative impacts of terrorism on victims, economies, and development efforts.[24] In general, the Strategy focuses on promoting democracy and increasing infrastructure or community resources, such as schools and hospitals. Elements of the Strategy are incorporated into some counterterrorism strategies and have become a complement to military-led pursuit of current terrorists. Although these efforts are not always included under the counterterrorism umbrella, they operate with the same goal of preventing individuals from becoming radicalized.

THE WAY FORWARD

A major obstacle facing alter-messaging is the absence of metrics to determine its effectiveness. Support will be contingent on success, and without metrics, it is nearly impossible to measure success. Due to the complexity of collecting data on the direct results of preventive efforts, i.e., measuring a nonevent in most cases, such as the nonradicalization

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[20] Amy Zalman, "Strategic Communications in Irregular Wars," in *Strategic Communications for Combating Terrorism*, ed. A. Aykut Öncü, Troy Bucher, and Osman Aytaç (2010), p. 86, http://www.coedat.nato.int/publications/StratComm/StratComm2010.pdf.

[21] Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Ellie B. Hearne, "Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement From Violent Extremism," International Peace Institute, October 2008, p. 10, http://www.ipinst.org/media/pdf/publications/beter.pdf.

[22] UN General Assembly, *Uniting Against Terrorism: Recommendations for a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy; Report of the Secretary-General*, A/60/825, 27 April 2006, para. 16.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., para. 17.

of an individual, it may take years to finalize applicable metrics. Waiting would be counterproductive, however, because the time to implement alter-messaging is now. Moreover, developing metrics for a relatively immature concept can sometimes be harmful, in that identifying the "wrong" metrics in the beginning may steer the process instead of natural adaptation based on lessons learned. If a reactionary approach is taken and alter-messaging efforts are not supported until after metrics are developed, the probability of terrorist violence remains high. If a progressive approach ensues, alter-messaging efforts can be shaped in real time, ensuring it remains ahead of the counterterrorism curve. Metrics will likely emerge naturally, as alter-messaging continues to grow and is employed. Further research should be conducted on developing metrics to measure prevention efforts, but support should not be contingent on its completion.

A few efforts are underway to review existing prevention efforts by identifying common elements and analyzing goals in order to gain a better understanding of maximizing the success of these types of programs. For example, a February 2012 colloquium hosted by the government of Canada in Ottawa brought together government representatives, experts, and counterterrorism practitioners to gain a stronger understanding of current counterterrorism efforts, especially those focused on prevention, and attempted to posit lessons learned from related fields (e.g., gang prevention, community engagement, immigration integration). Additional research built on the Ottawa colloquium findings, provided recommendations for "further developing evaluation tools," and improved on some of the recommendations and challenges identified at the colloquium.[25] This additional research identifies certain areas worth reviewing in greater detail, including a more robust analysis of existing prevention efforts, documentation of prevention efforts and corresponding outcomes in a database, greater training, and increased information sharing.[26]

CONCLUSION

Al-Qaida's ability to bring the current battlefield to online websites, chat rooms, and forums has forced a shift in counterterrorism strategy. Military power was once believed to be the solution but has now become only a piece of a much larger, comprehensive strategy aimed at not only eliminating current terrorists, but also preventing future radicalization. Terrorist organizations rely heavily on their persuasive narrative to attract new recruits and supporters to adopt their ideology. Al-Qaida and its affiliates tailor a master narrative to maximize their appeal within a target audience and often distribute images of women and children injured or killed in U.S. strikes, rendering U.S. preventive counterterrorism efforts essentially useless. Alter-messaging efforts independent of governments may be a sustainable solution to challenge terrorism on an informational level. Led by former terrorists and survivors of terrorist attacks, alter-messaging provides a credible way to deliver messages that revolve around powerful personal stories. It also has the ability to use firsthand cultural knowledge to connect with audiences. Credible messengers with the ability to resonate with an audience must lead the way forward against manipulative terrorist organizations. Governments should accept an indirect role in alter-messaging by providing supporting actions that do not jeopardize the credibility of the messengers.

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[25] Peter Romaniuk and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "From Input to Impact: Evaluating Terrorism Prevention Programs," Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2012, p. 18, http://www.globalct.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CGCC_EvaluatingTerrorismPrevention.pdf.

[26] Ibid., pp. 18–19.

According to Frank Cilluffo, Director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI), and Daniel Kimmage, a noted independent consultant and former Senior Analyst at (HSPI), "Terrorist radicalization and recruitment are a byproduct of the movies, songs, poetry, essays, and books that tell an emotionally charged story with distinctive vocabulary, clear-cut heroes and villains, and larger-than-life symbols." Having similar modes of conveyance providing an alternative message to that of terrorists can lead to the inverse.[27] Given their credibility and a global forum to share their stories, former terrorists and survivors can humanize the victims of terrorism. Their stories can connect and resonate through broad audiences, reducing the number of individuals who join or support terrorist organizations.

Alter-messaging should be given greater emphasis within a larger strategic effort on counterterrorism that puts more trust in credible nongovernment messengers who are better placed than governments to address the ideology of terrorism as part of a more concerted effort to prevent future recruitment and radicalization of violent extremists.

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[27] Cilluffo and Kimmage, "How to Beat al Qaeda at Its Own Game."

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