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**OUT, OUT—THE ROLE OF MESSAGING
IN COUNTERING DOMESTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

by

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March 2020

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**OUT, OUT—THE ROLE OF MESSAGING IN COUNTERING DOMESTIC
VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

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ABSTRACT

Countering the radical Islamist narrative remains a high-profile priority of the United States in its ongoing efforts to counter domestic violent extremism. Since mid-2014, government officials have condemned the United States as unable to muster a satisfactory “counter-narrative,” and emphasize the potentially devastating consequences of failure. Experts inside and outside the government describe the Islamic State as masters of the internet capable of reaching into the United States and turning its people into hate-filled, violently inspired terrorists at will. The idea that the United States must aggressively work to counter these messages domestically remains a given; but should it? The focus of this thesis is to examine current U.S. efforts in counter-messaging to determine why the United States believes it is failing, and what, if any, evidence supports the idea that a counter-narrative or counter-messaging should be part of domestic countering violent extremism (CVE) programs. Review of official documents found little basis to assess U.S. programs, as no meaningful published strategy, objectives, or performance data exist for current efforts. Moreover, the foundational assumptions underlying current programs suggest malalignment between what U.S. officials desire a counter-messaging effort to accomplish and what is realistically achievable. Based on these findings, it is recommended that domestic CVE programs eliminate counter-messaging from their portfolio.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CAB	Community Awareness Briefing
COIN	counterinsurgency
CSCC	Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GEC	Global Engagement Center
IS	Islamic State
ISIL/ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Syria
MISO	Military Information Support Operations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCTC	National Counter Terrorism Center
PSYOPS	psychological operations
PSYWAR	psychological warfare
SIP	Strategic Implementation Plan

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Countering the radical Islamist narrative remains a high priority of the United States in its ongoing efforts to counter domestic violent extremism. In 2014, the rapid emergence of the Islamic State (IS) brought the idea of narratives to the forefront of public discussion. As the first terrorist organization to leverage social network platforms to their full potential for its strategic communications, IS and its graphic, taunting messages captured the attention and imagination of the world. Experts inside and outside government described IS as a uniquely gifted adversary capable of reaching into the United States and turning its people into violent terrorists from afar. These same officials also condemned the U.S. as unable to effectively challenge these messages, emphasizing the potentially devastating consequences of this failure.

The idea that strategic communications is essential to terrorism is certainly not new. In a prescient 2005 letter sent by Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Zawahiri wrote, “I say to you: that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.”¹ However, in 2014, the *tactics* of communication felt new and the U.S. government seemed ill prepared to respond. An assessment by Boyle and Kallmyer from the Broadcasting Board of Governors captures the general sentiment in Washington at the time well, “The information front against terrorist organizations is now of vital strategic significance, and the U.S. government was initially caught unprepared.”²

Given the extensive historical experience of the United States in strategic communications and wartime strategic influence campaigns, this perception of failure is

¹ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2007), 28.

² Robert Boyle and Kevin Kallmyer, “Combatting the Islamic State’s Digital Dominance: Revitalizing U.S. Communication Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 29–48, DOI: 10.1080/0163660x.2016.1170478.

somewhat surprising.³ Countering IS was a top national security and defense priority throughout the Obama administration. The *National Security Strategy 2015* specifies that the U.S. will “support alternatives to extremist messaging” and “undertake a comprehensive effort to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL.”⁴ A summit on countering violent extremism (CVE) held at the White House also explicitly addressed counter-narratives, and in conjunction with that summit, the White House announced dedicated staffing and additional funding for the overall CVE program.⁵ Yet, throughout 2015 and 2016, the belief of failure in Washington held firm. It begs the question, as a top White House priority, with resources and experience committed to the cause, why would government efforts fail?

This thesis began with an attempt to answer this deceptively simple question: is the U.S. *really* failing at efforts to counter-message radical Islamism? From the onset, significant challenges arose in finding an answer; first and foremost, there seems to be no meaningful strategy for counter-messaging. In 2011, the White House published a strategy entitled *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* with an accompanying Strategic Improvement Plan (SIP) that tasked multiple federal agencies with a variety of “strategic” deliverables, some of which include counter-messaging. However, no specific goals, performance measures, or evaluation plans were

³ The United States ran extensive strategic communications campaigns during WWI, WWII, Vietnam, and the Gulf War. For more information on historical U.S. strategic communications efforts, see James Farwell and John J. Hamre, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Bryan Freeman, “The Role of Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, and Psychological Operations in Strategic Information” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2005), 15–36.

⁴ White House, *National Security Strategy 2015* (Washington, DC: White House, 2015), 9–10, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf. Similar language is also present to show continuity into the Trump administration. White House, *National Security Strategy 2017* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 15, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁵ White House Press Secretary, “Fact Sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism,” February 18, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>.

provided, nor did the SIP direct coordination efforts across these agencies.⁶ The result is unsurprising. In 2016, Congress commissioned a comprehensive review of CVE efforts by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which found no “cohesive strategy” or “measurable outcomes” across the government, despite the 2011 plan.⁷ The report says:

The federal government does not have a cohesive strategy or process for assessing the overall CVE effort. Although GAO was able to determine the status of the 44 CVE tasks, it was not able to determine if the United States is better off today than it was in 2011 as a result of these tasks.⁸

Without a strategy to review or any supporting data, there is no basis upon which to authoritatively evaluate the existing programs. Put alternatively, it is inappropriate to call these efforts a failure because it is not possible to answer the question: failing at what. A natural outgrowth of this initial finding is why then does the U.S. *believe* it is failing? What was it hoping to accomplish that seems, as of yet, unattained?

Exploration of this second question requires a deep look into the ideas and assumptions underlying current and desired efforts in counter-messaging. The purpose of this thesis is to answer this second question, why does the U.S. believe it is failing, along with another, under what conditions could it succeed? Or simply put, what is the U.S. trying to accomplish and how accomplishable are these goals? To address these two points, research for this study is conducted in two phases.

First, a review of official documents, including testimony, public statements by relevant departments or their senior leaders, websites, and reports is performed to construct

⁶ The SIP says “we will coordinate activities, where appropriate, to support the CVE effort” but it does not say who the “we” is; no one is explicitly overseeing plan implementation writ large, although the National Security Staff and an Interagency Policy Committee are referenced in some places as architects of the plan and could ostensibly be those responsible for its execution. Later, the plan outlines how each task has a lead agency, in many cases several of them, responsible for coordinating the task, which appears to leave no one at the head of the project with visibility across all tasks and may account for the GAO findings presented in the 2017 report.

⁷ Government Accountability Office, *Countering Violent Extremism, Actions Needed to Define Strategy and Assess Progress of Federal Efforts*, GAO-17-300 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2017), 16.

⁸ Government Accountability Office, 2.

a “most-likely” set of objectives for counter-messaging.⁹ Working with these objectives, root cause analysis is used to identify assumptions and ideas that underlie them and they are organized into a framework for analysis.

Second, in phase two, this framework of ideas is critically examined against a comprehensive literature review to identify potential areas where expectations are unrealistic or underlying assumptions do not align with the collective knowledge of relevant academic disciplines. Many disciplines can contribute to an understanding of communications as it relates to terrorism; however, this study focuses on five where clear, direct association is evident: political communications, strategic communications, political science, sociology, and terrorism studies. In the case of each objective and its associated assumptions and ideas, these five disciplines are consulted for their respective wisdom on two questions: is it an achievable or appropriate goal for homeland security or law enforcement officials, and if so, is counter-messaging the most fitting tool to achieve this goal? In the end, very little evidence suggests yes for any of the objectives reviewed.¹⁰

Ultimately, it appears that rather than a failure of execution, the critical problem with U.S. counter-messaging is a failure of understanding and a misalignment of tactics to desired outcomes. While on its face it seems simple enough to accept that if an adversary is putting out messages that may have negative consequences, it is a good idea to counter them; as it turns out, this is not necessarily the case, and in fact, introducing counter-messages may result in the exact opposite of what the messenger wants.¹¹ It takes a deeper understanding of how messages are sent and received by individuals and groups, how narratives are intertwined with individual and group identity, how radicalization occurs, and the difference between radicalization and mobilizing to violence to recognize the flaws

⁹ Two points can be made. First, these objectives are used to encompass both what it supposed to be done and also what it wants to accomplish (so it includes the assumed desirable outcome). Second, it is necessary to depart from the published “strategic objectives” outlined in the 2011 document because they are not strategic.

¹⁰ The objectives are presented for the first time in Chapter IV.

¹¹ Kate Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies* (Bath, England: Partnership for Conflict, Crime, and Security Research, 2016), 9, <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>; Kris Christmann, *Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence* (London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012), 30.

in the current thinking about counter-messaging. This paper provides this needed context and concludes by offering suggestions on the potential scope and limitations of domestic counter-messaging campaigns moving forward.¹²

¹² Although this study focuses specifically on radical Islamism, it is worth noting that its findings can also apply more broadly to any identity-based political movement. Narratives are an essential component of identity politics, and so, how the U.S. government chooses to address the issue of narrative is critical when considering those groups. Radical Islam is one example of many.

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And finally, to my brothers, who have quietly changed the way the entire nation responds to these threats and provides emergency medical care. Because of your selfless commitment and tireless work, many lives have been saved. We are all indebted to your exemplary leadership.

In remembrance of the many lives we have lost in the pursuit of a safer nation here and abroad: may our flag never fall.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Words are, in my not so humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic, capable of both inflicting injury and remedying it.

—Albus Dumbledore, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

This is a story about stories: how they were built, who told them, what they said, why they might have said it, and so on. For some time, the U.S. government has been telling a story about the threat from a terrorist organization in Iraq called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL/Daesh), hereafter IS, that goes something like this: a group of terrorists is cleverly using propaganda in the digital space to infect people with radical ideas that will cause them to travel overseas and join this new state, or if that fails, murder people in their hometowns in the name of faith. In some sense or another, this underlying worry that IS propaganda could or would create a surge of terrorist attacks in the homeland persisted for several years.¹ In 2016, then Director of the FBI James Comey, testified before Congress:

Unlike other groups, ISIL has constructed a narrative that touches on all facets of life from career opportunities to family life to a sense of community. ***The message isn't tailored solely to those who are overtly expressing symptoms of radicalization. It is seen by many who click through the Internet every day, receive social media push notifications, and participate in social networks.*** Ultimately, many of these individuals are seeking a sense of belonging. Echoing other terrorist groups, ISIL has advocated for lone offender attacks in Western countries. Recent ISIL videos and propaganda specifically advocate for attacks against soldiers, law enforcement, and intelligence community personnel. ***Several incidents have occurred in the United States, Canada, and Europe that indicate this "call to arms" has resonated among ISIL supporters and sympathizers (emphasis mine).***²

¹ Depending on your perspective, it can be argued that this worry still exists, although somewhat lessened by the territorial losses the group experienced in 2017.

² James Comey, "Fifteen Years after 9/11: Threats to the Homeland, Statement before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, Washington, D.C.," FBI News, September 27, 2016, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/fifteen-years-after-911-threats-to-the-homeland>.

In this single statement, Director Comey reveals much about the thinking that drove government policy related to IS, especially concerning counter-messaging and the need for a counter-narrative.³ Notably, this testimony seems to suggest that “regular” people doing their online shopping might somehow be convinced to pull off terrorist attacks in the homeland, as demonstrated by the vague examples referenced. In his defense, the Director would probably say drawing such conclusions from his testimony is oversimplifying a complex problem; and if it were a unique or one-off comment, one might be inclined to agree. Except, this kind of oversimplification is not present in just one statement; it is found in numerous reports, fact sheets, official documents, and testimony and speeches from multiple leaders across multiple administrations. The ideas it captures are woven into all current Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs and policy, and the question that ought to have been asked but apparently never was is: *is any of this true?*

A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Today, the United States remains engaged in the longest war in its history. Over the course of engagement, the enemy has evolved in name but not in ideology. IS is the latest disenfranchised insurgent group with anti-U.S. global ambitions in the unstable region around the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. Sweeping decisively across Iraq and Syria in 2014, at its prime, IS commanded over 55,000 square miles of territory and some nine to 10 million people.⁴ However, what shocked America and its allies was not the group’s rapid military victories, as much as the proficiency with which IS spread its violent apocalyptic ideology. Leveraging social media and networked distribution, IS challenged the cherished tenets of liberal democracy and offered followers what many believed was a barbaric, medieval alternative where public executions, slavery, and the sexual subjugation of women and

³ Discussions about narratives and counter-narratives as a matter of government policy first appear in 2005 with the UK CONTEST strategy. This idea took root fully in the United States with the previously referenced 2011 White House strategy but the fervor of concern was greatly heightened by IS beginning in 2014.

⁴ As of November 2017, the group has lost almost all of its territory due to aggressive kinetic campaigns by the Iraq Army, Kurdish militias, and U.S. forces. Henry Johnson, “Mapped: The Islamic State Is Losing Its Territory—and Fast,” *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/16/mapped-the-islamic-state-is-losing-its-territory-and-fast/>; Luis Martinez, “ISIS Has Lost 25 Percent of Territory It Once Held in Iraq, US Says,” March 13, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/isis-lost-25-percent-territory-held-iraq-us/story?id=29625568>.

children were normal. It seemed impossible that in 2015, such ideas would be the stated goals of a group trying to form a legitimate nation; and yet, IS was recruiting by the tens of thousands.

At the time, it was a commonly accepted anecdote throughout senior leadership in the U.S. government that IS was “beating” the United States and other western governments on the communications front. In 2014, when IS began using social media to distribute its extremist messages and graphic videos, there was an immediate call for the United States to respond. The purported sophistication of IS’ content combined with its decentralized distribution networks stunned government officials; and, rather quickly, assessments of U.S. counter efforts found them wanting. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Alberto M. Fernandez, then Coordinator of the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC),⁵ said in reference to IS, “The sense of being heavily outgunned and outnumbered was palpable, both in terms of our own resources and in what everyone else was doing against this adversary worldwide.”⁶ A 2016 report from the House Homeland Security Committee reflects similar thoughts, “Indeed, recent administrations have failed to develop a basic domestic ‘counter-messaging’ effort to blunt the propaganda of extremist groups.”⁷ Yet, despite all the hand wringing, none of the official reports or testimony offered any clarity about what the United States was *specifically* failing to do or achieve.

The logical place to start when considering failure is to understand what was supposed to be accomplished in the first place, but unfortunately, the U.S. government never truly defined what the counter-messaging mission should accomplish, and perhaps,

⁵ CSCC was the lead for all significant efforts in counter-narrative at the time, which made Fernandez the most senior U.S. official on the matter.

⁶ Honorable Alberto Fernandez, *Hearing before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization & Recruitment on the Internet & Social Media*, Senate, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., July 6, 2016, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/investigations/hearings/isis-online-countering-terrorist-radicalization-and-recruitment-on-the-internet_social-media.

⁷ House Homeland Security Committee, *A National Strategy to Win the War against Islamic Terror* (Washington, DC: Congress, 2016), 15.

this is why no one could articulate the nature of the “failure.” The White House CVE strategy published in 2011 was not, despite the name, a truly strategic document. It provided a vision for engagement but not much in the way of substantive guidance to the involved agencies. It was also not updated to reflect the change of landscape when IS emerged. The federal agencies working on counter-narrative projects under the White House plan did not have individual strategic plans, assessment plans, or inter-agency coordination plans. None of the programs collected data about their efforts and no analysis of performance appears to have been formally conducted until the 2017 GAO review referenced earlier. In short, the answer to this question of was and still is the United States really failing is unknowable.

A natural curiosity then is why does the U.S. believe it is failing? cursory review of official sources suggests a few notable assumptions are at work under the surface. First, an *ip so facto* assumption seems to be present: the United States is failing *because* IS is succeeding. This assumption leads immediately to the second: IS is succeeding, which in and of itself assumes that the U.S. knows what its objectives are and can draw conclusions about overall performance. Also striking, is the persistence of statements regarding how uniquely good IS is at communications. Generally, this belief manifests as a sense that IS is doing something disruptive and fundamentally different by leveraging social networks and digital technology in a way that was unforeseeable, almost as if it were magic. Each of these ideas can be deconstructed enough to demonstrate the need for a full critical examination. Take for example the idea that IS messages are successfully achieving their goals, which for the sake of argument, is to recruit U.S. persons to the new caliphate. Is there evidence to suggest that they are doing so with great success? No, there really is not. While they may have recruited tens of thousands globally, the number of U.S. persons who traveled or attempted to travel is quite modest. In 2015, at the peak of such attempts, the FBI estimates about 250 made it to the battlefield in Syria; a handful were arrested while trying.⁸

⁸ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq*, Program on Extremism (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2018), 5, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf>.

Taken a step further, suppose it could be confirmed that all of these 250 U.S. persons received and consumed IS messages online prior to traveling, is it possible to know the degree to which the messages themselves were responsible for radicalization or mobilization to travel? Again, the answer is no. It is tempting to assume that the presence of IS content (i.e., Tweets, videos, chats) has some causal relationship to the outcome of “traveling to Syria” but that is unknowable. In fact, to the contrary, the very limited efficacy data that does exist suggests that while messages consumed through social media were perhaps part of the constellation of recruitment and radicalization, in most cases, more traditional person-to-person interactions were the critical factor in mobilization to travel.⁹ Field research to validate this more broadly cannot be realistically conducted. Given the percentage of those who traveled and are deceased or missing, the sample would be too small to make useful generalizations. Finally, it is important to note that *all* the available data about media consumption and habits comes from law enforcement. In other words, it excludes any persons who viewed the message and did not radicalize or mobilize to travel, which is a significant bias.¹⁰

This example demonstrates one of the fundamental gaps in data and misalignment of facts to ideas about counter-messaging that suggests the need to explore the whole concept of a counter-narrative in full. Surely, no one set out to be illogical or misinformed; lacking strong direction and under severe time pressure, the efforts undertaken by the agencies charged with building the current U.S. counter-messaging programs were perhaps well-meaning but have proven ill-fated. With millions of dollars invested in CVE and counter-messaging, it is worth determining the strength of the ideological and strategic foundation the current programs are resting on before further resources are expended.

⁹ Erroll Southers and Justin Hienz, *Foreign Fighters: Terrorist Recruitment and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Programs in Minneapolis-St. Paul* (Los Angeles: National Center of Excellence for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE), University of Southern California, 2015), 20; Sean C. Reynolds and Mohammed M. Hafez, “Social Network Analysis of German Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, February 2017, 1–26.

¹⁰ Christmann, “Preventing Religious Radicalisation,” 8. Although this literature review is somewhat dated, the author would argue that little has changed concerning the quality or availability of data.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION

Is counter-messaging a viable tool for countering domestic Islamist extremism? If so, to what end, for what objective(s)? If not, why not?

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to determine if counter-messaging is a practical tool for countering domestic Islamist extremism. The research follows a phased approach. It begins with an investigation into the current state of U.S. counter-messaging programs against radical Islamism, represented by IS, and includes a review of speeches, testimony, official documents, reports, and websites to determine what efforts are underway and what is known about their utility. From this baseline, it constructs a set of five “most-likely” objectives that reflects what the author believes to be the intended actions and desired outcomes of a domestic counter-messaging program or campaign.

In the next phase, this set of objectives is critically examined and deconstructed using root cause analysis to identify underlying assumptions, ideas, and beliefs to expose the ideological framework the current efforts are set upon. Next, the author examines literature across five fields with direct relevance to the framework: political communications, strategic communications, political science, sociology, and terrorism studies. The likely efficacy of each of the five objectives is determined by consulting the literature to answer two questions. is this an achievable or appropriate goal for law enforcement and homeland security, and if so, is counter-messaging the most fitting tool to achieve this goal?

Beyond determining the usefulness of a counter-narrative, it is also relevant to discuss how a counter-narrative should be shaped. To that end, the current narrative and alternative narrative from IS and the United States are presented and discussed. Since messages are a component of narratives, and therefore, counter-messages are a component of counter-narratives, understanding the broader context of the message exchange between IS and the U.S. is important to any informed opinion on the potential success or failure of counter-messaging.

The scope for this thesis is domestic. It only addresses counter-messaging aimed at influencing U.S. persons (residents and inhabitants) as opposed to externally facing efforts directed at non-U.S. persons abroad. There is a risk of external validity in trying to extend the findings outside the domestic audience; the rules of engagement for the U.S. government are different when considering non-U.S. persons and the frame and identity of external audiences is very different.

D. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Subsequent chapters take the reader on a progressive journey that explores current efforts and potential efficacy. Chapter II reviews important definitions that set boundaries and establish what counter-messaging is and is not. Chapter III discusses IS and U.S. narratives including how they are crafted and how they interact with one another. Chapter IV assesses the objectives of counter-messaging against the literature, and provides an evidence grade for the appropriateness and achievability of each objective. Chapter V concludes the report with a review of key findings and recommendations. Appendix A presents a review of current U.S. CVE and counter-messaging programs. Appendix B contains the complete methodology. Appendix C lists the full set of documents reviewed on current U.S. programs, policy, and narrative.

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II. DEFINITIONS: WHAT IS A NARRATIVE AND THE LANDSCAPE OF INFORMATION MISSIONS

Different components of information missions are frequently conflated and confused for one another. Part of the confusion stems from the fact that two *operational spaces* exist within information missions, military and civilian. They necessarily overlap but the tools and rules of engagement differ greatly between the two environments. Terms frequently used to discuss information missions are outlined in Table 1 along with their primary application and the source of the definition.

Table 1. Definitions.

Term	Definition	Application	Source
Counter-messaging	Messaging is the act of communicating something; counter-messaging is the act of discrediting an adversary’s narrative to current and potential sympathizers (tactic).	Military Civilian	Department of State ¹¹
Counter-narrative	Narratives are the device a group uses to tell its current and prospective members how to act by articulating what it means to be part of the group, establishing what the group stands for, and presenting how the group believes it is positioned in the world; a counter-narrative is a specifically crafted alternative to a group’s narrative.	Military Civilian	Quiggin ¹²
Strategic Communications	“By “strategic communication(s)” we refer to: (a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals.”	Civilian	White House ¹³

¹¹ “Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs,” U.S. State Department, accessed July 7, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/>.

¹² Tom Quiggin, “Understanding al-Queda’s Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009).

¹³ Joseph R. Biden, *National Framework for Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: White House, 2009), 2, <https://fas.org/man/eprint/pubdip.pdf>.

Term	Definition	Application	Source
Public Relations (Public Affairs)	“Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”	Civilian Military	Public Relations Society of America ¹⁴
Public Diplomacy	“To support the achievement of US foreign policy goals and objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security...”	Civilian	Department of State ¹⁵
Psychological Operations (PSYOPS)	“planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of psychological operations is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behaviors favorable to the originator’s objectives.”	Military	Department of Defense ¹⁶
Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR)	“planned use of propaganda and other psychological operations to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior of opposition groups.”	Military	RAND ¹⁷
Military Information Support Operations (MISO)	“The ultimate objective of U.S. MISO is to convince enemy, neutral, and friendly nations and forces to take action favorable to the United States and its allies.”	Military	U.S. Army Special Operations Command ¹⁸
Propaganda	“Propaganda, in the most neutral sense, means to disseminate or promote particular ideas... the term is associated with control and is regarded as a deliberate attempt to alter or maintain a balance of power that is advantageous to the propagandist...The	Military Civilian	Jowett ¹⁹

¹⁴ “About Public Relations,” Public Relations Society of America, accessed July 7, 2017, <http://apps.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Publicrelationsdefined/>.

¹⁵ U.S. State Department, “Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy.”

¹⁶ James Farwell and John J. Hamre, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 3–4.

¹⁷ “Psychological Warfare,” RAND, accessed July 7, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/topics/psychological-warfare.html>.

¹⁸ Public Affairs Office, *Military Information Support Operations Command (Airborne) (Provisional) Fact Sheet* (Ft. Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, n.d.), 1, accessed July 7, 2017, <https://www.soc.mil/MISOC/MISO%20fact%20sheet.pdf>.

¹⁹ Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 2012), 2–3.

Term	Definition	Application	Source
	purpose of propaganda is to convey an ideology to an audience with a related objective.”		
Counterinsurgency (COIN)	“comprehensive civilian and military efforts made to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances.”	Military	North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ²⁰

In the context of this thesis, the two most important terms to understand are narrative (counter-narrative) and messaging (counter-messaging). An individual or group’s identity is reflected by its narrative. Simply put, a narrative is a group or individual’s own story about how they came to be who they are. Narratives are the device a group uses to tell its current and prospective members how to act by articulating what it means to be part of the group, establishing what the group stands for, and presenting how the group believes it is positioned in the world.²¹ Narratives are somewhat like advertising; just like different consumers find different commercials appealing, different individuals will find different groups’ narratives appealing and subsequently choose to join one group instead of another.²² An individual is likely to find a narrative appealing when (a) the story makes clear how the group aligns with or contributes to how the person thinks of themselves (their individual identity) and (b) the story explains how group membership will add value to the individual’s life.²³

Where the narrative is the story, messaging is the action of telling the story; and so counter-messaging is the act of responding to the adversary’s story with articulated counterpoints. Counter-messaging targets a very specific audience with a message

²⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Counter-insurgency (COIN) (AJP-3.4.4(A))* (Brussels: NATO Standardization Office, 2017), 1–1, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allied-joint-doctrine-for-counter-insurgency-coin-ajp-344a>.

²¹ Quiggin, “Understanding al-Qaeda’s Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work.”

²² Cristina Archetti, “Terrorism Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 1, no. 9 (February 2015): 49–59, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/401/html>.

²³ Henri Tajfel, *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 16–79.

designed to get the persons receiving the message to think differently about a particular issue. It does not necessarily ask them to do anything with that thought—i.e., report something to authorities—it seeks simply to change their thinking. Since counter-messaging is usually targeting a specific point in an adversary’s message, it is inherently tactical. This distinction is significant when considering what counter-messaging can and cannot accomplish.

The remainder of the definitions are provided to highlight the boundaries of counter-messaging and counter-narratives. Often, activities described to be part of a “counter-narrative” or “counter-messaging” campaign are in fact a different type of information mission with a different purpose. In fact, this thesis identifies that two of the five current objectives for the United States in counter-messaging fall into this category, and therefore, are out of bounds. While it may seem trivial, making the clear distinction between these different efforts and using the appropriate terms to describe them is more than academic rigor. Successful counter-messaging relies on precise and targeted objectives tailored to specific, segmented audiences; imprecision leads to ineffectiveness.²⁴

²⁴ Andrew Glazzard, *Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2017), 3–7, <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ICCT-Glazzard-Losing-the-Plot-May-2017.pdf>.

III. A TALE OF TWO NARRATIVES: STORIES OF US AND IS

Its funny. All you have to do is say something nobody understands and they'll do practically anything you want them to.

—*The Catcher in the Rye*

Like all good stories, this one begins with once upon a time and it should sound familiar: once upon a time, a small band of men believed they ought to have their own country and so they took land from their neighbors with brute force. In retaliation, a powerful alliance of countries came to the aid of their neighbors and thus began the war to restore the land to its rightful leaders. Such a common tale could feature any cast of characters from nearly any time in history. Uninspiring and inconsequential, to motivate action, this narrative needs to rarify itself; it needs a better frame. That is exactly what IS did; they reframed an unoriginal story into a narrative compelling enough to capture international attention, and in so doing, drew the United States and its allies into a “battle of ideas.”²⁵

In this section, the frames comprising the IS and the U.S. narratives are presented and discussed. This serves as a character study of sorts, introducing the two main characters in the story and offering insights into how they view themselves and how they view each other. This understanding is necessary to the critical examination of how these stories are presented through messages and counter-messages, which unfolds in subsequent chapters. This chapter also gives context to future discussions about the goals of counter-messaging and their achievability.

Before presenting the narratives though, a word on how they are constructed and the importance of frames. Narratives, the stories themselves, are composed of frames and

²⁵ The author uses this term with some hesitation. Although it is fairly commonplace, in her opinion it gives undo credence to the idea that there *is* a conflict of ideas between the West and Islam. The author does not believe such a conflict exists or should exist. Furthermore, using language like “battle for hearts and minds” just further amplifies the perception of conflict. However, it is useful here to make this very point. Farwell and Hamre, *Persuasion and Power*, 143; Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2007), 217.

constructed using framing techniques. In the simplest terms, a frame is an outline for interpreting experiences and the surrounding world.²⁶ Like a filter on a camera, frames shape the way a person or group sees the world; altering the filter of the story changes its appeal to audiences. Returning to the earlier discussion about narratives, and the role of narratives in groups, according to Goffman, “Taken altogether the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture.”²⁷ From the perspective of a group with political objectives, like IS, framing can also be understood as the “process by which political actors define the issue for their audience.”²⁸ Frames (filters) interpret the current reality for the party’s followers and define how followers should respond to this reality; in other words, frames tell the party’s members what the current issues mean to them and how they should think about these issues.²⁹ Groups have core frames, or those frames that are central to and serve as a foundation for group identity, and supporting frames, which serve to bolster the core frames, and as the name implies, support the refinement of a group identity.

Framing techniques are the method by which a frame is applied. For example, storytelling is a common framing technique where the message takes on an air of drama through epic, mythological, or exaggerated circumstances. Framing techniques are the physical way in which the frames are put together into a narrative. They enhance frames by adding to or amplifying the existing tone, style, or emotional connotation of the message.

²⁶ Erving Goffman and Bennett M. Berger, *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northern University Press, 1986), 27; Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, “Framing Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 104–106, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054.

²⁷ Goffman and Berger, *Frame Analysis*.

²⁸ Regula Hanggli and Hanspeter Kriesi, “Frame Construction and Frame Promotion (Strategic Framing Choices),” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56, no. 3 (2012): 260–278, DOI: 10.1177/0002764211426325.

²⁹ Chong and Druckman, “Framing Theory,” 260–278.

Think of the narrative as a house where the frames are the studs and the framing techniques are the hardware used to secure them.³⁰ Once it is completely built, the set of frames collectively becomes the house or the narrative. A detailed understanding of how the house is built, or how the story is assembled, is essential to finding exploitable weakness in it. It is also essential to seeing malalignment and recognizing the limitations of such efforts.³¹

A. THE IS NARRATIVE IN THE WEST

Research into the IS narrative presented in this thesis was conducted as part of a separate study into frames and framing techniques using IS open source English-language recruitment materials in 2016. The author reviewed video and social media content from Instagram and Twitter and applied the framework approach to identify the core frames and framing techniques in the sample.³² The full methodology for this research is presented in the methodology section. It is worth noting that there are many such studies of IS messaging which have reached similar conclusions and others that have not; interested readers are encouraged to review the breadth of the literature on this topic and form their own opinions.

In 2014, IS revealed itself to the world with a call for all pious Muslims to come to its self-proclaimed caliphate.³³ Days later, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stood on a balcony at the

³⁰ The author is demonstrating a framing technique in presenting framing, using an analogy or “like this.” In this case, the goal is to make an intangible idea real by anchoring it to something already known to the reader. This is a common technique in IS materials; their goal is to anchor new ideas to existing ones that people have about themselves.

³¹ Glazzard, *Losing the Plot*, 7–16.

³² The framework approach is a method for progressive analysis that builds the analytic framework through successive refinement. A benefit of this approach is its organic nature; rather than starting with a pre-determined set of things to find in the data, it allows for simply looking to see what is present in the data and then determining what it may mean.

³³ “Sunni Rebels Declare New ‘Islamic Caliphate’,” Al Jazeera, June 30, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html>.

al-Nuri mosque in Mosul and called “true believers” with a story that would remain the dominant narrative until the loss of the physical caliphate in 2017:³⁴

There is a State (the Islamic State) founded in ancient piety, providing a globally oppressed people the opportunity for a better life alongside others who share their complete commitment to Islam. Before it is even fully built, the survival of this State is at great risk from an enemy determined for centuries to not only prevent the success of our people but to humiliate and subjugate us and ultimately eliminate our faith from the planet. If you come to this State, you will join a movement to secure the future of your faith. You will become a champion defender of Islam and receive in return prosperity for yourself and your future family, guaranteed by a just and effective government that is grounded in the tradition and teaching of your beloved faith.³⁵

Compare this narrative to the one presented at the opening of this chapter. Although they tell the same story—a fight for land and the right to exist independently—this version is far more inspiring and compelling. The following segments identify the frames and techniques that account for the difference.

1. Message Craft

When deconstructed, IS materials have three overarching core frames: contest for survival, effective state, and just or pious state.³⁶ In framing the story to all audiences, IS chooses to heavily emphasize its contest with the West. Many of its propaganda videos and

³⁴ Baghdadi proclaimed himself Caliph Ibrahim, the “leader of all Muslims everywhere.” Hannah Strange, “Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Addresses Muslims in Mosul,” July 5, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10948480/Islamic-State-leader-Abu-Bakr-al-Baghdadi-addresses-Muslims-in-Mosul.html>. In 2017, the narrative shifted in its core messages to eliminate focus on the physical state and its governance (presumably for obvious reasons). The new messages shifted to serving the faith wherever and however a believer could. The new messages were not part of the data collected or reviewed in this thesis but the reader may find the following pre- and post-comparison informative: Haroro J. Ingram and Alastair Reed, “Reverse-Engineering the ISIS Playbook, Part I and II: CT-CVE Messaging Lessons from ISIS’s English-Language Magazines,” VoxPol, April 13, 2018, <https://www.voxpol.eu/reverse-engineering-the-isis-playbook-part-i-ct-cve-messaging-lessons-from-isis-english-language-magazines/>.

³⁵ Other researchers have come to similar conclusions. See Alastair Reed and Jennifer Dowling, “The Role of Historical Narratives in Extremist Propaganda,” *Defense Strategic Communications* 4 (Spring 2018): 80–83; Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), 6–7, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/08/Pulling-Back-the-Curtain.pdf>.

³⁶ The full methodology for this work is outlined in Appendix B. Also, for other researchers with similar findings, see references in footnote 35.

print materials physically show conflict—i.e., battles—or reference its struggle for survival against an enemy that is portrayed as determined to eliminate not only IS itself but all of Islam. Second to contest, IS focuses on the construct of its state. Much of its English language content visually displays and references explicitly the functionality and fairness of IS as a government or state. There are images of children in schools, roads, markets full of goods, housing, etc.; all of which are the hallmarks of a thriving society. Tied to the concept of statehood is the presentation of piety, the third frame, as the foundation for justice. “Just” for IS means “piously just”; the caliphate follows Sharia, and so faith and state are deeply intertwined.

In crafting their story, IS uses several framing techniques: tradition, storytelling, and artifacts (symbols or symbolism). With this construction style, the contest for survival takes on a mythological nature and the pious, effective state is grounded in the richness of the ancient Islamic traditions and the glory of the Ottoman Empire. Symbols (artifacts) are frequently used to emphasize these points. Figure 1 presents an example from Instagram that shows a soldier on a battlefield carrying the IS flag. Note that the figure is dressed in ancient clothes evoking the glory of the past and presented in a desert landscape, a common motif that according to scholars from the West Point Combating Terrorism Center, implies a shared regional identity. Also, distant mountains represent the divine and martyrdom.³⁷

³⁷ Combating Terrorism Center, *Islamic Imagery Project: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda* (WestPoint, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006), 25–26.



Figure 1. Example of IS Use of Symbols, Instagram.³⁸

Returning to the narrative as a whole, consider the influence of choosing these types of message frames. First, anchoring to the past calls up language and imagery associated with the Crusades and western imperialism. This technique ties modern day political grievances to ancient ones, linking the present generation to its ancestors in an unbroken chain of wrongs.³⁹ For societies with strong patronage lines (tribal and family alliances), this technique is particularly effective at binding the current generation to this never-ending conflict as a matter of honor. The second thing this narrative does effectively is enshrine conflict as the only method of achieving the group's desired result. Since conflict is central to group identity through group narrative, less consequential or dramatic options are essentially removed from the table. Put alternatively, as a political entity with the stated objective of achieving statehood, IS is telling its followers that this goal cannot be achieved without war or violence. This concept is relevant to future discussions about efficacy with regards to counter-messages.

³⁸ Source: "Daesh," Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BJJJJsLhHWe/?tagged=daesh>, accessed August 20, 2016. Page is no longer available.

³⁹ Reed and Dowling, "The Role of Historical Narratives," 80.

2. Understanding the Audience

Much has been made of the professionalism and expertise demonstrated by IS with regard to messaging; indeed, its media organization is highly centralized and robustly structured and provides strict guidance on message construct and release.⁴⁰ While this structure in and of itself is impressive, what IS does that truly distinguishes it from other similar organizations is manage messaging across multiple audience segments.⁴¹ Much like a professional PR firm, IS cultivates, crafts, and delivers messages differently for different target audiences; they are expert at *delivering* the resonant narrative to the *right* audience. To do so, they must have a thorough understanding of two things, first, who specifically the target audience is, and second, what platforms the target audience is using to receive and send information.

On the first point of audience, primary source documents seized during raids provide some insights into who this group is but as validation is impossible, it is perhaps more useful to reframe the question as *who responded to the materials IS put out in the United States*, regardless of whether or not they were truly the intended audience. From what is known about those who traveled or attempted to travel from the U.S. (and also other Western countries), they were predominantly young men averaging 25 years old.⁴² Beyond that similarity, multiple comprehensive studies conclude that the travelers had very little in common. They had widely diverse backgrounds representing a variety of socioeconomic, educational, and employment trajectories. Counter to the common stereotypes, they were not generally poor, maladjusted, lacking in opportunities, or otherwise disenfranchised.⁴³ What they appeared to share most was a need for greater

⁴⁰ Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*, 6–7.

⁴¹ Robert Boyle and Kevin Kallmyer, “Combatting the Islamic State’s Digital Dominance: Revitalizing U.S. Communication Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 30–31, DOI: 10.1080/0163660x.2016.1170478; Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain*, 8–10.

⁴² Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*, 16; Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Origins of America’s Jihadists* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2017), 20, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE251.html>; Christmann, “Preventing Religious Radicalisation,” 23.

⁴³ Although it continues to be disproved, a fair amount of “authoritative” sources claim that IS recruits a higher than usual number of socio-/psychopaths, persons with mental illness, or “lost” youth, among other things. This is simply not true.

purpose in life, accompanied by a desire to deepen their faith.⁴⁴ If young Muslim males seeking a greater purpose are the target audience, or at least the responsive one, then the core frames in the IS narrative offer several key points of intersection with their new emerging identities: epic battles, heroic leadership, righteous and divine purpose, a future of godliness for themselves and a pathway to a family and children. Follow this narrative with “IS wants YOU,” and it is not hard to imagine how individuals have been swayed to the group.⁴⁵

As previously mentioned, IS tailors its message to the audience. Outside the United States, IS promotes somewhat different frames in narrative.⁴⁶ There are campaigns targeting its residents (internal), other locals (non-residents), women, and European Muslims. Generally, the core frames remain present but the materials and delivery mechanism are slightly adjusted to the preferences of each audience segment. As this thesis is domestically focused, it does not explore these other narratives or compare them to western focused narratives, but it is important to recognize that the group has distinct narratives for various audience types.⁴⁷

On the second point of understanding how to reach its target audience, IS is widely credited as sophisticated in their use of social networking platforms. Indeed, the use of certain technology like TweetBots, albeit coupled with a decentralized content distribution strategy, shows savvy. However, rather than simply credit the technology platforms, the valuable point is that IS recognized where its audience *was already talking* and used those platforms to distribute their message. That is to say, the message consumers drove the distribution strategy, not the message creator. Young Muslims are already using Twitter,

⁴⁴ Southers and Hienz, *Foreign Fighters*, 17–18.

⁴⁵ The idea that a fluid or partially constructed self-identity is a risk factor for recruitment and radicalization is supported by case studies and literature; it is also a possible explanation for the uniquely young profile of IS recruits. See Southers and Hienz, *Foreign Fighters*, 12; Scott Helfstein, *Edges of Radicalization: Individuals, Networks, and Ideas in Violent Extremism* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2012), 14.

⁴⁶ Ingram and Reed, “Reverse-Engineering the ISIS Playbook.”

⁴⁷ For more on gendered messaging, see Nelly Lahoud, “Empowerment or Subjugation: A Gendered Analysis of ISIL Messaging,” UN Women, 2018, <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/6/em-powerment-or-subjugation>.

YouTube, Telegram, and other social platforms and perhaps recognizing this, IS took its message where its desired audience was already engaged. The issue of IS and the internet is discussed further in Chapter IV, but the key point in this section is to recognize how delivery platforms are related to audience segmentation and overall message resonance.

B. THE U.S. NARRATIVE

Before examining the U.S. narrative, it is important to address two issues, first, author bias and second, terminology. As a U.S. citizen and resident since birth, it is impossible for the author to objectively analyze the U.S. narrative as it is her own. To limit bias as much as possible, this analysis includes only testimony and speeches of Presidents and Cabinet officials; no policy documents or other written materials are included.⁴⁸ This point leads to the second issue, terminology. Since the content of the U.S. narrative comes from state leaders and is presented in speeches and formal remarks, it is by definition more appropriately thought of as public diplomacy or strategic communications. That is to say by definition, *the United States does not have a counter-narrative* to IS; hence this thesis. However, not having a counter-narrative is not the same thing as not having an alternative narrative. What this section explores is most appropriately thought of as the U.S.’ alternative narrative to IS, or radical Islamism in general, as the roots of the current alternative narrative pre-date IS.

Beginning with President Bush following 9/11, the U.S. narrative in relation to Islamist extremism has remained fairly constant. It goes something like this: The United States is the world’s premiere champion of civil and human rights, justice, and peace. Since the founding of our great democracy, we have supported and encouraged oppressed people everywhere to pursue freedom. As the world’s preeminent democracy, we have a responsibility to carry the global torch of freedom. We do this by rejecting hate and extremism, ending dictatorships and freeing nations, and leading the international community in continuous efforts to protect individual human rights and human dignity. We have a duty to the liberal order and to preserve peace in the world, at all costs. This is the

⁴⁸ See the complete list of materials reviewed in Appendix C.

burden we bear for our greatness and a responsibility that is carried not only our leadership but by each of our citizens.

The narrative first presented by Bush has remained consistent across presidents and administrations. Overall, it is fairly moralistic and esoteric. Very often, the generic U.S. narrative is accompanied by specific counter-points aimed at certain radical Islamist claims. These counter-points are presented and discussed in the following sections.

1. Message Craft

The U.S. narrative centers on two core frames, the United States is an international beacon of freedom and human rights, and U.S. leadership is critical to preserving international order. America positions itself as the world's international peacekeeper and calls on its people to consider oppressed people (i.e., Iraqis, Syrians) as brothers in need of protection.⁴⁹ There is a heavy focus on the duty America has to encourage freedom and promote democracy. This duty encompasses the preservation of basic human rights including women's rights, religious freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom to choose a government along with denouncing any and all violence or oppression. Examples of these frames are presented in Table 2.

⁴⁹ Some Presidents more than others use Christian or biblical values and language, such as a "brother's keeper" when discussing the conflict with either al-Qaeda or IS. As a result, the issue is sometimes framed as a religious contest between Christianity and Islam. While U.S. identity surely has Christian based-components, the issue is more complicated than such assessments belie, especially given the institutional separation of church and state and the diverse identities and religious beliefs of the American people.

Table 2. Examples of U.S. Core Frames.

<i>President Bush</i>	“At the same time, the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets, we’ll also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan... The United States of America is a friend to the Afghan people.” ⁵⁰
<i>President Obama</i>	“And long after the current messengers of hate have faded from the world’s memory, alongside the brutal despots, and deranged madmen, and ruthless demagogues who litter history—the flag of the United States will still wave from small-town cemeteries to national monuments, to distant outposts abroad. And that flag will still stand for freedom.” ⁵¹
<i>Secretary Clinton</i>	“You know why we have to do all of this? Because we are the indispensable nation. We are the force for progress, prosperity and peace....So because the United States is still the only country that has the reach and resolve to rally disparate nations and peoples together to solve problems on a global scale, we cannot shirk that responsibility. Our ability to convene and connect is unparalleled, and so is our ability to act alone whenever necessary.” ⁵²
<i>Secretary Kerry</i>	“We need to fulfill the responsibility that we all share to uphold the global norms, to defend freedom in all of its dimensions, and to respect the rights and the dignity of every single human being.” ⁵³

2. Core Frames

In support of these core frames, leaders frequently emphasize U.S. resilience, which is a subtle, reinforcing acknowledgement of the contest between the “West” and radical Islamists (think we will outlast you). This combination of frames can be seen in the selection from President Obama’s 9/11 memorial speech presented in Table 2, “and long

⁵⁰ George Bush, “Presidential Address to the Nation,” White House, October 7, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html>.

⁵¹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the National Defense University,” White House, May 23, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense->

⁵² Hilary Clinton, “Remarks on American Leadership,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 31, 2013, <https://www.cfr.org/event/remarks-american-leadership-0>.

⁵³ John Kerry, “Remarks at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs,” U.S. Department of State, October 26, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/10/263653.htm>.

after [the bad people are gone]...the flag of the US will still wave.” Other examples of the resilience frame are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Examples of the Resilience Frame.

<i>President Obama</i>	“Thirteen years after small and hateful minds conspired to break us, America stands tall and America stands proud. And guided by the values that sustain us, we will only grow stronger.” ⁵⁴
<i>President Trump</i>	“But America cannot be intimidated, and those who try will soon join the long list of vanquished enemies who dared to test our mettle... Woven into that beautiful flag is the story of our resolve.” ⁵⁵

In constructing its narrative, the United States prefers to use spin, metaphor, and artifacts as its framing techniques. Certainly, the U.S. narrative incorporates frequent undertones of tradition, but it is often referenced via objects (artifacts), such as the Constitution, or people used as objects, like the Founding Fathers. Again, from President Bush’s speech to the nation on 9/11, “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.”⁵⁶ This speech shows symbolism—the light of freedom, and includes a metaphor—America as the beacon, like the light. Under the symbolism is the spin of America as the light for everyone in the world; arguably, an exclusively positive view of the U.S. global position and actions.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at 9/11 Memorial,” White House, September 11, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/11/remarks-president-911-memorial>.

⁵⁵ Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at the 9/11 Memorial Observance,” White House, September 11, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-9-11-memorial-observance/>.

⁵⁶ George Bush, “Statement by the President in his Address to the Nation,” September 11, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

⁵⁷ Considering these frames, it is not difficult to see how other countries interpret them as being patronizing and imperialist, a common complaint raised against the United States. Where from the U.S. perspective, “champion of free people” is only positive, from an alternative position, it may be viewed as “our view of freedom is the only view of freedom; your idea of freedom isn’t really free.”

C. STORIES OF THE ENEMY: COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Much muddying of the water occurs when comparing an established nation state with hundreds of years of history behind its narrative to an emerging state with no history to it and no access to the traditional channels of diplomacy and communications that an established state enjoys. As discussed earlier, the United States does not have a true counter-narrative to IS; rather, it has an alternative narrative delivered along with specific counter-messages. Regardless of the inequities, it is still worth understanding the interaction between the messaging of IS and the U.S., particularly in the context of determining if there is a need to develop a specific domestic counter-narrative.

When describing the exchange of stories as narratives and counter-narratives, there is an inherently adversarial frame; yet, in reality, the stories interact much more with each other than suggested. They are more like dance partners than fencing partners. The stories do not exist in total separateness, coming together in pointed exchanges- touché. They are at their very essence both continuously re-created through their repeated engagement with each other. Trying to separate the two stories completely into “theirs and ours” makes academic analysis possible but also carries an artificiality in that it sanitizes what is a messy and complex process. With that in mind, this section brings the narratives together to satisfy the natural curiosity of how they align and explores the broad counter-messaging that has taken place in a predominantly diplomatic context.

1. U.S. Counter-Messaging to IS

The U.S. efforts to discredit IS and its narrative coalesce around four key points: brutal violence, illegitimacy as a government, military loss, and perversion of Islam. This choice of counter-message points in part reflects the United States’ own narrative; they align with U.S. ideas about what kind of values it has, i.e., justice, human dignity, freedom. Summed up, U.S. counter-messages sound like this: IS is a horrifically violent but tawdry adversary who twisted Islam to justify its bloodlust and greed. As a representative example, in a speech to the nation after the attack in San Bernardino, CA, President Obama stated:

ISIL does not speak for Islam. They are thugs and killers, part of a cult of death, and they account for a tiny fraction of more than a billion Muslims

around the world—including millions of patriotic Muslim Americans who reject their hateful ideology. Moreover, the vast majority of terrorist victims around the world are Muslim. If we're to succeed in defeating terrorism we must enlist Muslim communities as some of our strongest allies, rather than push them away through suspicion and hate.⁵⁸

In this same speech, statements that reflect the core frames and the resilience frame discussed earlier are also present. It is fairly common for the frames to be used alongside the counter-messages, which makes them appear as if they are in fact frames themselves; however, counter-messages are notably more direct and specific. Where the narrative says, “we are the champion of democracy,” the counter-message says “the holiness they claim is unfounded, they have perverted Islam.” This point is key: narratives are more universal and strategic; messages are more tangible and tactical.

From a technique perspective, the U.S. approach to counter-messaging is best described as measured and point-for-point, or similar to a debate. For each frame that IS presents, the United States responds in the tone of *the facts do not support your position*. Through testimonials of disenfranchised fighters, photos, and statistics (when available), U.S. counter-messaging centers on evidence. In fact, when describing the CSCC’s strategy under President Obama, former director Rashad Hussain said, “When amplified properly, we believe the facts speak for themselves.”⁵⁹ Table 4 shows how the IS frames and the U.S. counter-messages align.

⁵⁸ Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on the San Bernardino Terrorist Attack and the War on ISIS,” CNN, December 6, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/06/politics/transcript-obama-san-bernardino-isis-address/index.html>.

⁵⁹ Greg Miller and Scott Higham, “In a Propaganda War against ISIS, the U.S. Tried to Play by the Enemy’s Rules,” *Washington Post*, May 8, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html?utm_term=.cae6e263cf27.

Table 4. Point-to-Point Comparison of the IS Narrative and U.S. Counter-messages.

IS Frame	IS Message	U.S. Counter Point	U.S. Message
<i>Contest to Survive</i>	- Existential fight for survival against the West	<i>Violence Military Loss</i>	- Barbaric; gruesome executions
	- War is necessary to preserve Islam		- Enslave women and young girls
<i>Piety/Pious (Just) State</i>	- Practicing the true form of Islam	<i>Perversion of Islam</i>	- Losing territory, leaders and fighters
	- State founded in piety; divine right to statehood		- Low recruitment
	- Charity		- Not true Islam (Islam is a religion of peace)
<i>Effective (Just) State</i>	- Sharia	<i>Illegitimacy</i>	- Ideas rejected by a majority of Muslims
	- Functioning state; schools, roads, businesses, etc.		- Kill mostly Muslims
	- Sharia and Islamic justice		- Not recognized government
	- Opportunity for children (a better life)		- Can't govern effectively; can't pay workers
			- Losing territory

2. Analysis

On the face, this presentation of facts point-for-point seems reasonable. If IS says it has a legitimate government with functional roads and schools, is that true? No, well proving that discredits them so let us show the world what life is really like in the “caliphate.” It is a logical, organized approach. It also reflects several of the critical flaws that are prevalent throughout U.S. thinking about counter-messaging.

Returning to the idea of who responds to IS messages—young men with a desire to be part of something bigger than themselves, perhaps seeking to further their commitment to their faith—how motivating or compelling might “facts” be to this group? If the goal of a counter-message is to deter them from identifying with the IS narrative, “facts” are

probably not emotionally appealing contributions to their emerging identities.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in some cultures, directness and facts are not preferred styles of communication. It can be off-putting and seem aggressive in areas where storytelling, the use of parables, and polite deference are more common.⁶¹

Looking more deeply at this idea of “facts,” what the United States claims to be “fact” is often more subjective than the word “fact” conveys. For example, how does someone compellingly argue what factually constitutes a better future for someone’s children or what factually constitutes a prosperous life? Clearly, there are cultural differences in how any one person defines a “better future” or a “prosperous life.” When the U.S. argues that “the facts” do not support that IS provides this type of life, it is doing so from a U.S.-centric perspective, which is a deeply arrogant position to take. It implies that the United States is the world’s foremost authority on what it means to have a good life, one that meets with *its* approval. This is precisely the charge leveled against the United States in this region: arrogance, imperialism, and disregard for others.⁶² When the “facts” are disputable relative to the audience’s perspective, the counter-message has nothing to stand upon unless it is *certain* the target audience has the same worldview. In this case, the counter-message may end up doing more harm than good.

This point leads directly to the issue of credibility and the perceived authenticity of the messenger. In considering the counter-messages presented, several examples stand out in which the United States cannot possibly be a credible speaker. First, and most notably, is in regards to the idea that IS is “un-Islamic.” Although perhaps a well-meant attempt to be inclusive of mainstream Muslims, this language is particularly pernicious for two reasons, (1) viewed as a predominantly Christian nation (globally), the United States cannot possibly be an authority on the subject of what constitutes “genuine” Islamicness, and (2) it inadvertently reinforces the IS narrative that the United States is waging war with Islam. When presidents come forward and say, “these people are not true Muslims,” no

⁶⁰ What makes messages persuasive and appealing is further addressed in Chapter IV.

⁶¹ Farwell and Hamre, *Persuasion and Power*, 164–165.

⁶² Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik, “Countering Violent Extremism,” Brennan Center for Justice, March 16, 2017, <https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/countering-violent-extremism>.

matter how it is intended, it can easily be presented by IS as evidence of a campaign against Islam. Who is to say that it will stop with just this group of Muslims; it could always be another and another until none remain.

Even U.S. counter-points to IS' famed use of violence have credibility issues. The IS narrative casts violence as justified for the sake of preserving the faith; and presumably to their "true believers," *any action* is defensible for that cause. No amount of condemnation is useful as a counter-point. Furthermore, because IS uses violence as a symbol of victory, counter-points can be reframed as the mewing of the losing side. For example, of course the United States condemns our violence, because they see that we are powerful challengers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by design, the U.S. condemnation (of the violence) validates that a contest/competition/conflict is occurring in the first place. This is partly why it is so difficult to work against contest as a core frame. To IS followers, there is no alternative for the group to achieve its goal of statehood, and therefore, the need to fight (fiercely, with violence) is even more compelling.⁶³ When the United States responds to the use of violence, as IS leaders know that it must, it gives them status as an adversary and suggests that IS *is actually a threat* to the United States, which fuels the narrative cycle and elevates IS' status with its followers.

These issues show how challenging it is for the U.S. government to present an IS counter-narrative in an official capacity. Neither IS or the US is viewed by the other or the world at large exactly as they present themselves. It is for this reason that throwing a counter-narrative out into space is ineffective. The receiver of the narrative has frames of their own and pre-existing beliefs about the United States and IS that influence the degree to which they accept and reject the groups' ideas about themselves and each other. The risk may be greater than the reward.

D. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Any discussion on the efficacy of a potential counter-narrative must begin with an understanding of the current landscape. IS and the U.S. have narratives that are interacting

⁶³ This ties into the prophetic nature of the group's narrative; a good discussion of that issue can be found in Reed and Dowling, "The Role of Historical Narratives," 97–100.

through various strategic communications and diplomatic outlets. Each architects its narrative differently and uses different tools. IS prefers to emphasize conflict using physical violence symbolically and weaving threads from the past into its narrative tapestry, connecting its current fighters to their ancient ancestors. The United States focuses on its role as the champion of freedom and human rights, spinning itself as the leader upon which the peace of the globe rests. In countering the IS narrative, the U.S. chooses to emphasize IS' brutality, illegitimacy, military ineffectiveness and its warped version of Islam but it faces credibility problems on several of those points that call into question the value of such efforts.

IV. WINNER TAKE NOTHING

No that is the great fallacy: the wisdom of old men. They do not grow wise.
They grow careful.

—*A Farewell to Arms*

All public messaging campaigns begin with a goal around which a strategy takes shape. In the best cases, this strategy is accompanied by objectives to which tactics are aligned and measures assigned so the campaign can be monitored and adjusted to ensure it achieves its ultimate goal.⁶⁴ Tactics are usually audience and strategy driven, requiring data and research about the target audience to determine both where and how they consume the types of information the campaign intends to deliver. This data forms the backbone for a set of profiles that the campaign uses to tailor its content (frames and framing techniques) and delivery mechanisms. Performance metrics are selected, assessment periods assigned, and then, the campaign begins.

As discussed previously, the United States lacks for any such strategy, tactics, evaluation plan, or data. Yet, agencies are still working on counter-narrative programs and Congress has asked them to continue this work. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that some shared purpose or goal underlying their efforts must exist. To examine the potential or desired objectives of a counter-narrative campaign, a review of official sources was conducted and common themes recorded until a set of five overarching objectives emerged, as presented in Table 5.

⁶⁴ International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014), 3, https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Developing%20Effective%20CN%20Frameworks_Hedayah_ICCT_Report_FINAL.pdf.

Table 5. U.S. Counter-messaging Objectives.

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Type of Objective</i>
1. End the recruitment of fighters.	Tactical
2. Stop radicalization.	Strategic
3. De-radicalize individuals.	Tactical
4. End sympathy for their cause.	Strategic
5. Engender sympathy for our cause.	Strategic

Overall, these five objectives appear consistently across the content reviewed and they are often presented as if they are all one or are interchangeable. This interconnectedness of ideas is important for two reasons. First, as subsequent analysis shows, they share underlying assumptions, so as one set of assumptions is disproved, it impacts multiple objectives. Second, as discussed earlier, imprecision (looseness) in defining goals often leads to an inability to effectively identify and reach the target audience, ultimately leading to failure.

Of these five desired or stated objectives, two clearly fall into the mission space of public diplomacy, strategic communications, or propaganda, depending on how the definitions are applied. Returning to the definitional boundaries outlined in Chapter II, objectives four and five, to end sympathy for their cause and to engender sympathy for our own, belong in these other domains and are necessarily out of scope for a counter-messaging effort.⁶⁵ In the military mission space, these objectives would fall under MISO or PSYOPS. These efforts attempt to win “hearts and minds,” and presumably, the U.S. government does not embark on formal campaigns to win the “hearts and minds” of its own people. Consider the words of former CIA Director David Petraeus who, in discussing “hearts and minds,” offers, “the prize in current and future conflicts is increasingly *the will, control, and loyalty of the populations* rather than a tactical military victory of the death of terrorists or insurgents (emphasis mine).”⁶⁶ Clearly, such a goal is firmly out of bounds

⁶⁵ While these objectives may be part of the outcome of a counter-messaging campaign, as an objective, to mean a stated goal, these are properly categorized in diplomacy, strategic communications, or propaganda, regardless of how people feel about that particular word.

⁶⁶ Farwell and Hamre, *Persuasion and Power*, 143.

for a democratic government, and as such, objectives four and five are dropped from further analysis.

This chapter then explores the appropriateness and efficacy of the remaining three objectives by comparing them to the results of the literature review to answer the questions, is it an appropriate goal for law enforcement or homeland security, and if so, to what extent is it achievable?

A. OBJECTIVE ONE: END RECRUITMENT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The threat posed by foreign fighters, including those recruited from the US, traveling to join [ISIL] and from homegrown violent extremists are extremely dynamic.

—James Comey, FBI Director⁶⁷

Since IS fighters are imported to the battlefield, stopping the flow of those fighters is both a priority domestic security issue and a necessary military objective. According to estimates from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), some 250 people traveled from the United States to Syria, presumably to join IS.⁶⁸ Once trained and battle-tested, domestic law enforcement agencies fear these fighters may return and continue to engage in violence in the homeland or encourage others to do so.⁶⁹ The general assumption made is that a counter-message campaign can do something to stem the flow of travelers. To deconstruct how policy makers may have arrived at this conclusion, Figure 2 presents a diagram of the assumptions and beliefs underlying this goal.

⁶⁷ Comey, “Fifteen Years after 9/11.”

⁶⁸ Julian Hatter, “FBI: More Than 200 Americans Have Tried to Fight for ISIS,” *The Hill*, July 8, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/247256-more-than-200-americans-tried-to-fight-for-isis-fbi-says>; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*, 5.

⁶⁹ Nicholas J. Rasmussen, *Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror* (Washington, DC: National Counterterrorism Committee, 2015), 1, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/Countering_Violent_Islamist_Extremism.pdf. For the United States, the greater threat is not necessarily in its own citizens returning as fighters; rather, it is the threat of Europeans from allied nations using their “clean” passport to gain access to the United States.

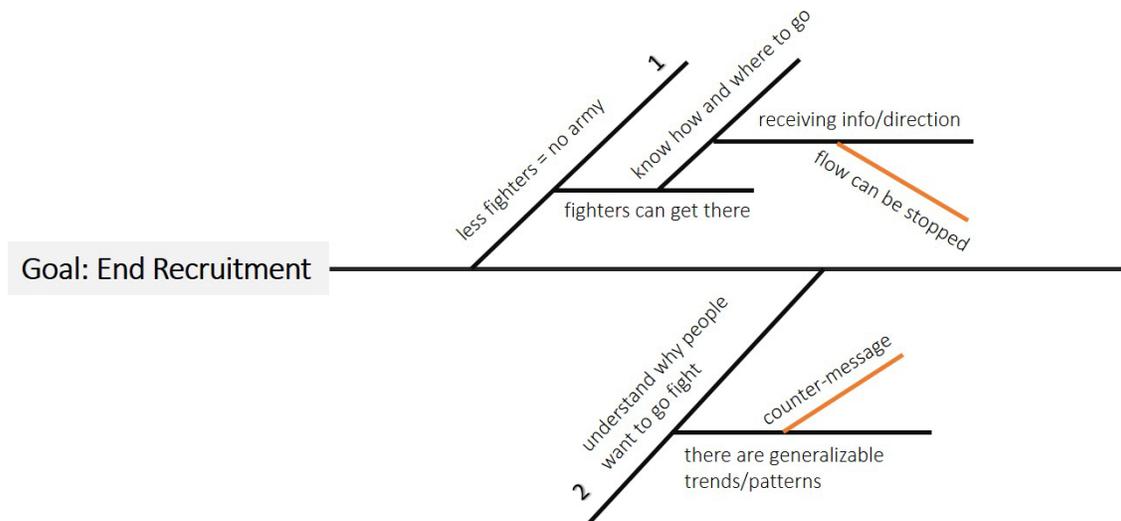


Figure 2. End Recruitment Problem/Assumption Diagram.

If the goal for objective one is to end the recruitment of fighters, to follow the problem map, ask *why does this matter?* Branch 1 identifies that fewer fighters lead to a smaller army or perhaps no army at some point. What assumptions are built into that conclusion? First, that the aspiring fighters can get to the battlefield, which in this case, means they know how to evade detection of law enforcement and where to go when they arrive in country. How would they know how to do this? Presumably, someone is directing them or they are somehow receiving instructions. Therefore, stopping the flow of this information could lead to fewer aspiring fighters reaching the battlefield. This assumption is actionable, as represented by the orange bar in Figure 2 and law enforcement could *do something* to impact the objective. The next question is whether a counter-messaging campaign is the best action to take to stop the flow of information. No, probably not. Counter-messaging does not eliminate the alternative messages; it simply counters them, so that is not useful for the actionable assumption in Branch 1. However, there are alternative actions law enforcement could take, and in fact, the belief that the information supply can and should be cut off from would be fighters generated a good deal of debate

and led to the criticism of social media companies for their perceived lack of responsiveness to shutting down IS accounts.⁷⁰

As Branch 1 cannot be addressed through counter-messaging, consider Branch 2. This assumption is of a different nature; it is causal rather than outcomes based, so the approach here is to ask *why do we think we can end recruitment?* Branch 2 answers with, because *we believe that we understand why people want to go and fight*. Built into this approach is the belief that these reasons are generalizable or trendable, and therefore, a broadly appealing counter-point can be offered. The actionable assumption is that a counter-message can be developed by law enforcement and homeland security officials that will inhibit recruitment. So, what efficacy might a counter-message campaign have based on these assumptions? The literature offers a few points to consider.

First, the idea that “*we understand why people want to go and fight*” borders on other disproved theories about the so-called “root causes” of terrorism. There remains a pervasive belief that terrorism has its roots in socio-economic and geo-political issues of poverty, lack of upward mobility, perceptions of government ineptitude and corruption, lack of redress in the government system, and other associated problems commonly found in underdeveloped nations.⁷¹ Evidence of this belief can be seen in the State Department and United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) *Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism* both as explicit statements and through the objectives set forth and funded by the agency.⁷² Applied to the domestic space, this is visible when people talk about IS recruits as being “marginalized” or “failures,” and data proves this assumption

⁷⁰ Peter Bergen, *Hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment*, Senate, 114th Cong., 1st sess., May 7, 2015), 4–18, <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Bergen-2015-05-07.pdf>.

⁷¹ Tore Bjørgo, *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, Realities, and Ways Forward* (London: Routledge, 2005), 33–42; Christmann, “Preventing Religious Radicalisation,” 24–26.

⁷² Department of State and USAID, *Joint Strategy on CVE* (Washington, DC: Department of State and USAID, 2016, 3–7, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PBAAE503.pdf).

is not true. IS does not just recruit mentally ill, marginalized, social outcasts; most of the 250 had jobs, educational opportunities, hobbies, and friends.⁷³

Second, Branch 2 reflects a built-in assumption that whatever is known about why individuals travel can be generalized across a large and diverse population. Commonly accepted principles of research and the literature strongly discredits this assumption.⁷⁴ As previously discussed, there is little similarity in the group of travelers from the US besides a tendency to be young and male.⁷⁵ Furthermore, as noted earlier, there is a significant bias in the rather limited data law enforcement can access. Notably, it only reflects those who actually attempted to or succeeded in traveling. The sample does not include everyone who outright rejected recruitment attempts or those who considered it, but then ultimately declined to travel. Since this data is not ever likely to be available to law enforcement, it means whatever understanding of motivations does exist, it will always be at best incomplete. As important as positive motivators are, an understanding of why people rejected recruitment and travel is equally, if not more, meaningful when considering a counter-messaging campaign. Further discussion about how messaging is part of radicalization and identity development is presented under objective two.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, Branch 2 encapsulates the assumption that the government is capable of crafting the right message and delivering it to the right individuals at the right time to effectively stop them, which may generously be called a “needle in the haystack” fallacy. Supposing that the target audience can even be effectively identified, revisiting the discussion from Chapter III on narratives and credibility, it is reasonably unlikely that a message presented by the government will be considered a credible source to an individual considering travel overseas to join a “caliphate” dedicated to fighting this same government. Presumably, this is why the Department of Homeland

⁷³ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*, 16; Jenkins, *The Origins*, 20; Christmann, “Preventing Religious Radicalisation,” 23.

⁷⁴ Applying extremely small sample findings across an entire population is known as external validity; it is a known flaw and bias.

⁷⁵ Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, *The Travelers*, 16; Jenkins, *The Origins*, 20; Christmann, “Preventing Religious Radicalisation,” 23.

Security's (DHS') current efforts in counter-messaging focus on using "community voices," but since the government funds these voices, they too are likely to be discredited.⁷⁶

From a positive vantage point, the communications literature offers that if a campaign were to focus specifically on deterring travel, not on any underlying causes, the scope is narrow enough for a viable behavior-change campaign. Such an effort is comparable to smoking cessation where the campaign is designed to influence young people away from dangerous behaviors. With smoking, besides social costs, there are tangible consequences such as the loss of personal income on high cigarette taxes and long-term health costs. The same would be true with attempting to travel overseas; there are tangible consequences like serious criminal penalties if caught. Research validates that anti-smoking campaigns have demonstrated success, but over many decades, and as a part of comprehensive programs.⁷⁷ Recommendations based on the success of these campaigns include achieving high message exposure rates in the target audience over a sustained period of time, making a significant long-term investment in the campaign, and expecting change to occur over a generation, as opposed to in the near-term. These recommendations provide some insight into what may be required to run a successful counter-message campaign for aspiring foreign travelers.

Ultimately, while deterring travel overseas to join IS may be a very appropriate law enforcement goal, and even theoretically an achievable one, the likelihood that law enforcement or homeland security officials will craft a credible message and be able deliver it to the target audience with sufficient exposure to generate meaningful results is very low. Capturing any data that contributes to even probabilistic assessment of success is also very unlikely; proof of causality or even correlation cannot be determined without follow-on qualitative fieldwork to confirm any potential trends.

⁷⁶ To the point made by Southers in the report on CVE in Minneapolis, it also assumes the government funds the right community voices and that the government is capable of determining who has authenticity to the community.

⁷⁷ Melanie Wakefield et al., "Effects of Anti-Smoking Advertising on Youth Smoking: A Review," *Journal of Health Communication International Perspectives* 8, no. 3 (2003): 229–247; Sarah Durkin, Emily Brennan, and Melanie Wakefield, "Mass Media Campaigns to Promote Smoking Cessation among Adults: An Integrative Review," *Tobacco Control* 21, no. 2 (2012): 127–138.

Grade: appropriateness of objective for law enforcement: Strong; efficacy of counter-messaging in achieving objective: Weak

B. OBJECTIVE TWO: STOP RADICALIZATION

Addressing radicalization to violence and recruitment in the information space is a key piece of any serious, meaningful, and enduring approach to countering violent extremism long-term.

—Meagen M. LaGraffe Chief of Staff, Global Engagement Center⁷⁸

Curtailing radicalization is a broader societal issue, although certainly, the outcome of radicalization when also mobilized to violence is a law enforcement problem. Since 9/11, research on radicalization has flourished as government priorities focused on understanding the radicalization process in hopes of finding a means to disrupt it. A great deal of misconceptions remain about radicalization, particularly in policy circles and several of these feature prominently in the ideas and assumptions about counter-messaging and its possible role in countering radicalization. Figure 3 presents the thought diagram of the radicalization goal.

⁷⁸ Meagan M. LaGraffe, *ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media*, Senate, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., 2, July 6, 2016, https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/investigations/hearings/isis-online-countering-terrorist-radicalization-and-recruitment-on-the-internet_social-media.

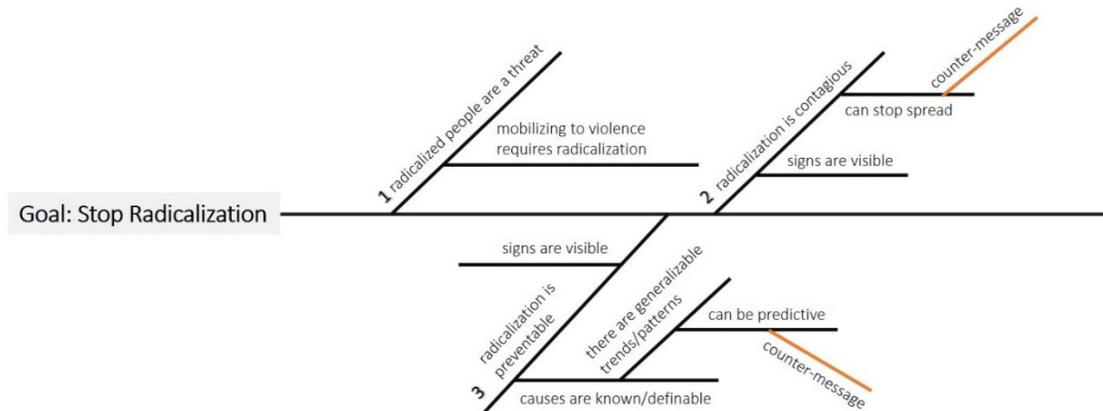


Figure 3. Stop Radicalization Problem/Assumption Diagram.

Bound up in the idea that ending radicalization is a worthwhile objective from a law enforcement and homeland security perspective, as opposed to a social one, is the belief that radicalization and violence are one and the same. Branch 1 reflects this assumption, as *radicalized people are a threat*. Why, because to mobilize to violence someone has to radicalize first, *ipso facto*, radicalized people must be dangerous. There is nothing specifically actionable about this belief. It is simply offered as a justification for counter-radicalization programs as an outright fact. However, there is no evidence to support this belief. It is possible for persons to hold radical ideas without acting upon them violently; conversely, it is possible for persons to be violent without espousing radical ideas.⁷⁹ Conflating the two concepts—radicalization and mobilizing to violence—impedes efforts to address them, as they are separate, although sometimes overlapping, paths.

Related to this idea that radicalized people are a threat is the idea reflected in Branch 2; that radicalization is contagious, meaning it can spread throughout a community like a virus. This particular simile appears often in the language used to describe radicalization. For example, Professor Peter Bergen from New America describes radicalization in Congressional testimony as, “Think of ISIS as a pathogen that preys on weak hosts in the

⁷⁹ Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins, “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (September 2015): 958–975.

Muslim world. In fact, there is something of a law: The weaker the Muslim state the stronger will be the presence of ISIS or like-minded groups.”⁸⁰ There are two adjacent assumptions related to this virology theory of radicalization. The first is that visible signs or symptoms of radicalization would necessarily signal the need for intervention. The second is that there *is* an intervention that can effectively stop the “spread.” This approach leads to the actionable assumption (noted by the orange bar) that a counter-messaging campaign is one such intervention, which could perhaps behave like a drug acting to destroy the “bad” radical ideology. Intertwined with these two assumptions are ideas about the internet and social media and their role in the spread of radical ideas.⁸¹ A closely associated belief as shown in Branch 3 is that it is possible to prevent radicalization in the first place. Again, the question asked is *why do we think we can prevent radicalization*, and the answer, because *we know what causes it*. Present again is the belief that these causes coalesce into useful patterns or trends upon which predictions can be made about who is at-risk for radicalization, and therefore, a broadly appealing counter-message can be designed for this audience. So, what is the efficacy of either Branch 2 or Branch 3 counter-messaging? The literature has much to offer.

Radicalization is truly a complex problem. It is a process comprised of multiple independent variables that interact with each other in unpredictable ways, constantly changing and re-shaping the individual.⁸² Like other complex problems, it is two seemingly contrary things at once; it is simultaneously an extremely individual and a highly socialized

⁸⁰ Peter Bergen, *ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media, Testimony before U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations*, Senate, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., 11, July 6, 2016.

⁸¹ To prove this point, look no further than the title of hearing in which Bergen made the statement *ISIS Online...*

⁸² Complex or wicked problems are different from complicated, linear problems in that it is not possible to predict how the independent variables will interact with each other. For example, imagine many cars at an intersection with no road signs. As cars and pedestrians move through, it would be impossible to determine the specific path any one car or person would take before they started because each other car or person interacting with them will change their trajectory. The variables are responsive to each other in unknowable ways, causing the whole traffic system to change.

process, and for this reason, predicting or trending radicalization has proven impossible.⁸³ Consistent with a complex problem, if and when signs of radicalization are visible, they are often meaningless until action occurs. They only have value as indicators in hindsight, which is to say they can confirm but not predict radicalization. Nevertheless, there are dozens of models of radicalization, each with its own method and utility.⁸⁴ Broadly speaking, they coalesce around the idea that there are pre-existing factors (indicators) that for some individuals when presented with a trigger, catalyze a complex interaction where new ideas about self are explored, tested, rejected, and refined through socialization until a new sense of identity emerges. As every individual's radicalization process is unique, the usefulness of these models lies predominantly in their ability to explain, not to predict. Work being done today enables a *potential* future state in the modeling science of radicalization; it remains unknown if the data will ever have predictive value but it certainly cannot if no researcher lays the groundwork. Policymakers unfortunately appear to confuse these purposes.

Communications as a process is a key facilitator of radicalization because it is the primary means by which people and groups create and express identity.⁸⁵ In other words, by talking about who they are and want to be with others, people either support or amend their idea of themselves. Many misleading ideas about radicalization stem from misunderstandings about the role communications can or does play in an individual's journey to radicalize. Figure 4 illustrates the high-level relationships between communications as a process and radicalization as a process. Its purpose is not to model

⁸³ Allison Smith, *How Radicalization to Terrorism Occurs in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2018), 16, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250171.pdf>; Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle," 960–961; Ferguson, *Countering Violent Extremism*, 10–12.

⁸⁴ For a reasonably comprehensive overview of various models see Christmann, "Preventing Religious Radicalisation," 23; Hafez and Mullins, "The Radicalization Puzzle," 958–975.

⁸⁵ Cristina Archetti, "Violent Extremism, Media and Communication: Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Interconnectedness" (workshop, Terrorism, Radicalisation, and (Counter) Narratives, University of Leeds, May 26, 2012); Wendy Wood, "Attitude Change: Persuasion and Social Influence," *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (2000): 539–570, DOI: 10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.539; Chong and Druckman, "Framing Theory," 107–100.

radicalization but rather to illustrate the partnership between these processes at various stages in an individual's journey.

Figure 4 shows an individual with some or many pre-existing factors (i.e., personal change, social grievance) that when triggered lead them to desire a change in themselves or their life. This presents a cognitive opening where the individual's identity becomes fluid (in varying degrees, depending on the individual) and they begin to seek out or respond to ideas about who they are and who they could or should be. This is a point during which recruiters hope to engage people, because in theory, new ideas of self can be incorporated into the existing identity.⁸⁶ Also, at this point, communications plays a significant facilitation role since seeking and receiving ideas may include for example: talking to others, consuming digital media (i.e., videos, online materials, social media accounts), or reading. As new ideas are presented, they are checked against the "me" identity as defined by the consumer and are either discarded outright or considered and incorporated to some degree. As this process is repeated, a tentative identity emerges and the individual may begin to test it. At this juncture, communication becomes important again, as the person may do or say things that align with their new sense of self, i.e., post very religious statements, share pro-IS media, or dress differently. However, in some cases, individuals show no outward signs of their inward transformation. Individuals at this point in their journey are mostly likely to seek validation and recruiters work to isolate them from the groups that normally provide it (i.e., family and friends, and replace them with a new radicalized group).⁸⁷ If the recruiter is successful, and the do/say actions, the individual emerges with a new radicalized identity.

⁸⁶ Recall that IS uses anchoring as a framing technique in their messaging and this is a powerful way to link old ideas of self to new ideas of self.

⁸⁷ To put this concept in social identity terms, a new in-group is created of other like-minded, radicalizing persons who replace the previous in-group of friends or family. It is critical to recognize how incredibly small this potential pool of like-minded people is; nationwide, about five percent of American Muslims are sympathetic to violent jihadist ideas. That's equivalent to about 165,000 people, only one percent of whom believe that terrorist tactics are sometimes justified. (Statistics from Jenkins, *The Origins*, 16).

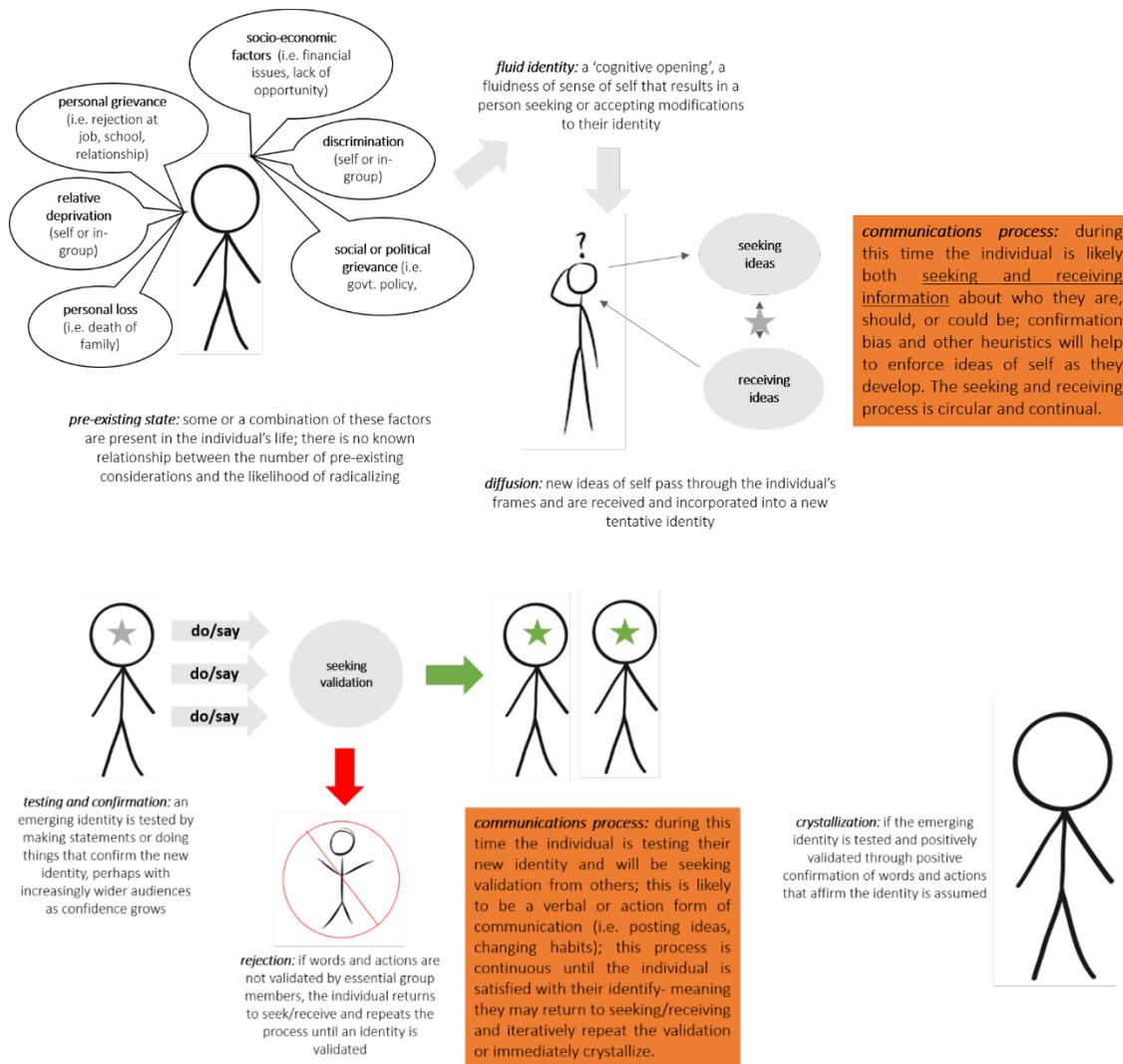


Figure 4. Radicalization Milestones and Communications Processes.

Between deciding that they are open to changing their definition of self and crystalizing a new “radicalized” identity, an individual may take an infinite number of paths. They may spend varying degrees of time at each milestone in their transformation; they may skip or repeat portions. They may become dormant for a time and then re-activate their interest when additional triggers impact them. It should be clearly understood then that radicalization is not a linear process and communications parallels it; that is to say, for every individual, the role and nature of communications is as unique as the pathway to radicalization.

Yet, policymakers have persistently believed that it is possible to prevent or intervene in this process. (Off-ramping and de-radicalization are discussed under objective three.) Since messaging is a key partner to the radicalization process, the prevailing logic has been that counter-messaging can work to stop radicalization in the first place. Given what is known about radicalization and the complexity of the process, it is pretty clear that counter-messaging is not likely to be an effective tool. Because radicalization is a social process, a third party (from the out-group) cannot offer meaningful messages about who an individual is, could, or should be. Interestingly, there is strong evidence that officials fully comprehend this concept. For example, the 2011 White House CVE strategy explicitly states, “Government will often be ill-suited to intervene in the niches of society where radicalization to violence takes place.”⁸⁸ Yet, the same document goes on to say, “We must actively and aggressively counter the range of ideologies violent extremists employ to radicalize and recruit individuals by challenging justifications for violence and by actively promoting the unifying and inclusive vision of our American ideals.”⁸⁹ This cognitive dissonance suggests that deeply entrenched biases are inhibiting an evidence-based approach to this issue.

Beyond whether or not it is possible, a compelling case can be made that preventing radicalization is an extremely inappropriate goal for law enforcement and homeland security officials. By virtue of the First Amendment, radical ideas are not illegal, and the people espousing them cannot and should not be targeted for believing them. The inherent consequence of conflating radicalization and violence is an invitation for law enforcement to be in business of policing ideas. A good example of the tension this creates is the case of Omar Mateen and the Pulse nightclub shooting. Mateen was under investigation for 10 months but ultimately FBI agents were forced to close the case because no prosecutable

⁸⁸ White House, *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (Washington, DC: White House, 2016), 3, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publicationns/2016_strategic_implementation_plan_empowering_local_partners_prev.pdf.

⁸⁹ White House, 6.

actions took place.⁹⁰ Two years later, he perpetrated one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history and claimed it for IS. However, up and until Mateen took *action*—i.e., mobilized to violence—there was no appropriate or legal role for law enforcement. Although law enforcement did their job, public perception failed to distinguish the radical ideas from the violent man and the FBI was wrongfully criticized.

Closely associated with these ideas about radicalization is an obstinate belief that the internet and social media are increasing or accelerating its “spread.” In part, this belief also seems to be at the root of the “contagion” approach to radicalization. These beliefs are based on the assumption that the accessibility of information on the internet and on social media platforms or apps is causally related to an increase in the number of people radicalizing, which is simply not true.⁹¹ First, while it is true that the internet improves the accessibility of information, it is not true that this accessibility equates to an increase in information being comprehended, retained, accepted, and incorporated by an individual into their worldview. This long disproven belief has its roots in a theory of communications dating back to World War II known as “hypodermic needle effect,” which held that mass media messages could cause a helpless audience to do whatever the messenger pleased.⁹² This theory assumed that messages had the same effect on everyone, regardless of their background or values, and for obvious reasons, this is not true. To put it in today’s terms, this theory is equivalent to believing that a “persuasive” TV commercial could cause everyone who saw it to buy a product, regardless of need or preference. This thinking is recognizable in the often parroted idea that teenagers are sitting in the basement watching IS YouTube videos and helplessly being transformed into radicalized lone-wolf terrorists. If that were so, the number of attacks occurring in the United States would be staggering.

⁹⁰ Del Quentin Weber, “The FBI Investigated the Orlando Mass Shooter for 10 Months—and Found Nothing, Here’s Why,” *LA Times*, July 14, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-fbi-investigation-mateen-20160712-snap-story.html>.

⁹¹ Archetti, “Terrorism Communication and New Media,” 50–54; Michael Mealer, “Internet Radicalization: Actual Threat or Phantom Menace” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2012) 57–60.

⁹² Daniel Riffe, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), 5–6.

Communications theory does offer an alternative explanation for how persuasive messaging works that more accurately reflects how and why ideas are shared and become “contagious.” In the real world (outside the laboratory), the decision by a message consumer to accept a piece of information (a message) is a function of their existing social and psychosocial state, i.e., their identity.⁹³ Before being accepted or remembered, the message further interacts with the message consumer’s needs, wants, and ideas. The message must meet a need (provide gratification), reflect their existing cognitive value judgements, for example about how good or bad the world is, and align to their existing ideas about what is important or what they believe their network thinks is important.⁹⁴ Research suggests that people share those ideas or pieces of information that increase their social capital with their preferred network (in-group), have practical value, are related to everyday life, are associated with strong emotions, and are presented as stories.⁹⁵ Reflecting on how IS crafts its messages and the frames it chooses in constructing them, it is clear that within the target audience, many of these criteria are met. They use emotionally evocative stories that relate to everyday life and often have practical value. Therefore, that information gratifies the message consumer, increases their social capital if they share it, and reflects what they believe is important. Ideas spread, not because of social media platforms, but because they are crafted in such a way to meet the message consumer’s needs. Social media platforms are just communications *tools*; they are facilitators in the same way any other “traditional” platform facilitates the exchange of information.

As a final point, it is important to recognize that ultimately research into the radicalization process finds that when it comes to the actual mobilization to violence, face-to-face interaction is almost always occurring. Recruiters may use the internet to spot people and cultivate them as leads, but they are frequently passed off to others for personal interaction. Consider this statement from a study of the Minneapolis-St. Paul CVE program:

⁹³ Riffe, 7.

⁹⁴ Riffe, 7.

⁹⁵ Jonah Berger, *Contagious* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

In every incident reported during fieldwork, face-to-face interaction was a critical element of the recruitment process. Social media interaction and links to extremist online content reinforce the messages that recruiters offer in person. To be sure, digital communications plays a role in recruitment, but at least in the Somali community in Minneapolis-St. Paul, in-person interaction is irreplaceable.⁹⁶

Other case studies confirm this finding.⁹⁷ Again, people are not passively surfing the internet and being assaulted with terrorist propaganda that infects them with radical ideas and turns them into a threat to the homeland. Suggesting as much greatly exaggerates the threat and encourages unnecessary fear and suspicion. In a Pew Research poll, 15 percent of the American general public believed, “there was a great deal of support for extremism,” when in reality, only a tiny fraction of people support the use of violence.⁹⁸

Grade: appropriateness of objective for law enforcement: Very Weak; efficacy of counter-messaging in achieving objective: Very Weak

C. OBJECTIVE THREE: DE-RADICALIZATION

CVE counters the violent extremist recruitment, focusing on the root causes of many underlying motivations, and working to prevent those drivers, or provide “off-ramps” for individuals who may have taken steps toward embracing violent extremism.

—George Selim, Director DHS Office of Community Partnerships⁹⁹

Where ending radicalization suggests invention before ideas take hold, de-radicalization or “off-ramping” refers to interventions that occur once radicalization is ongoing or complete. Discussions about the de-radicalization or rehabilitation of those arrested after 9/11 for engaging in or supporting terrorism are becoming more common as

⁹⁶ Southers and Hienz, *Foreign Fighters*, 20.

⁹⁷ Mealer, “Internet Radicalization,” 31–43.

⁹⁸ Jenkins, *The Origins*, 16.

⁹⁹ George Selim, *Director of the Office for Community Partnership, DHS, Written Statement presented to the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Hearing: ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media*, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., July 6, 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg22476/html/CHRG-114shrg22476.htm>.

some prison terms come to an end. Many of the assumptions about de-radicalization are the same as those made about radicalization. Figure 5 presents the diagram of de-radicalization as a goal.

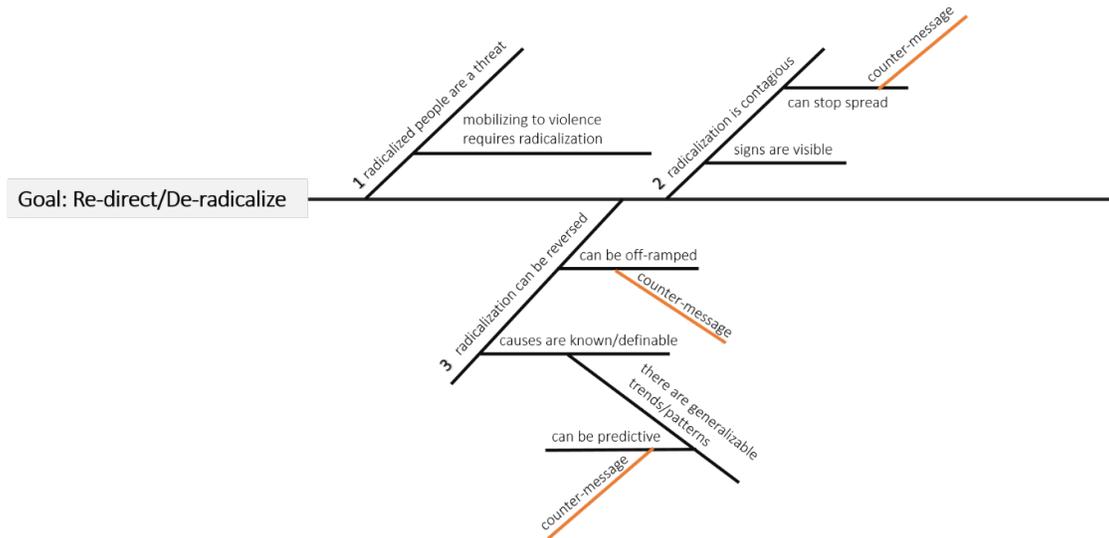


Figure 5. De-radicalization Problem/Assumption Diagram.

Branches 1 and 2 repeat the ideas discussed under radicalization. However, Branch 3 is unique, and while some of the same conclusions are reached, the origin of the assumption is different. Here the question is *why do we think we can deter or de-radicalize individuals* and the answer is *because we believe radicalization can be reversed*. This conclusion presents a new question for the literature: is this possible?

The first significant point to be made in consideration of “de-radicalization” is, what exactly does the term encompass? Often, “de-radicalization” refers to a whole swath of initiatives that include rehabilitation, disengagement, demobilization, reform, reintegration, or reconciliation.¹⁰⁰ Each of these terms means something different and is arguably distinct, although perhaps the tangible outcomes are similar. To rehabilitate

¹⁰⁰ John Horgan and Max Taylor, “Disengagement, De-radicalization and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research,” in *Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge: European and American Experiences*, ed. Rik Coolsaet, 2nd ed. (London: Ashgate, 2013): 173–175.

someone does not require them to renounce their beliefs; whereas to reform them suggests an ideological change of some magnitude. Disengagement from a radical group and demobilization from violence or armament can also occur without requiring a person to reject a particular ideology. In a wholly different vein, reconciliation may imply a process that involves working with impacted victims or the community. It is clear then that depending on what the actual goal is for such efforts, the approach may be very different, and therefore, no practical conversation about efficacy can occur until clarity in terminology. For the purpose of this analysis, since it is not clear what policymakers mean by the term, it is used and taken literally to mean rejecting radical Islamist ideas.

On the point of can an individual be literally de-radicalized, the evidence within the literature is conflicting, perhaps on account of the imprecision in terminology just discussed. Frequently lauded examples from Saudi Arabia and Singapore do not provide transparency about their programs or outcomes, and hence, cannot be realistically assessed.¹⁰¹ Studies on former Egyptian militant Islamist leaders draw competing conclusions with some researchers claiming successful de-radicalization and others finding the opposite.¹⁰² Some research attempts to compare de-radicalization programs to gang interventions, but there are mixed ideas about the utility of such endeavors as well.¹⁰³ In short, there is no definitive answer; researchers can only seem to agree on the fact that more research is needed.

Regardless of how possible de-radicalization is, again, it is an extremely inappropriate goal for law enforcement. Now, de-mobilizing someone who is violent or rehabilitating them into society after imprisonment to reduce recidivism (like with traditional crime) is different, and hence, the need for clarity in terminology. Law enforcement does have a role to play in processes that support disengagement from violent behavior and working with offenders or at-risk individuals to live peacefully in society, but

¹⁰¹ Horgan and Taylor, 174.

¹⁰² Dina Al Raffie, "Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Exploring De-radicalization Claims of Former Egyptian Militant Leaders," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 1 (February 2015): 27–48.

¹⁰³ Patel and Koushik, "Countering Violent Extremism," 18. Typically, the argument made against this is incompatibility of samples for comparison; i.e., external validity.

they do not have a role in trying to change or amend a person’s religious, social, or political beliefs.

Even if this goal were appropriate, which it is not, returning to the radicalization process discussed under objective two, it seems *extremely* unlikely that any formal government intervention would be successful in re-directing or deterring a budding radical Islamist. The best point at which to “off-ramp” an individual in that process is likely to be in the testing phase during which a family member, mentor, cleric, or friend can possibly reject any unhealthy behavioral changes or ideas, but assuming that the rejecting individual remains influential; i.e., is still a member of the radicalizing person’s in-group. Current DHS and FBI CVE efforts focus on the role that family and community can play in offering alternatives to radicalization; however, in the case of several overseas travelers, family members were reluctant to step in because at the point where the individuals remained open to re-direction of their behavior, increased piety for example, was considered positive. It was only in hindsight, after they left, that it appeared problematic.¹⁰⁴ If family could not conclusively identify the need for intervention, certainly a counter-messaging campaign with far less precision in target audience would not be useful in disrupting this process.

Grade: appropriateness of objective for law enforcement: Very Weak; efficacy of counter-messaging in achieving objective: Very Weak

D. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This chapter set out to review each of the three objectives for U.S. counter-messaging efforts to determine if they are appropriate and achievable. Objective one to end recruitment is an appropriate goal, but counter-messaging is unlikely to have much impact on it. Law enforcement has access to other tools that are far more likely to be influential. Objectives two and three to stop radicalization and de-radicalize individuals are highly inappropriate goals for law enforcement and counter-messaging is extremely unlikely to have any impact on them. These objectives share key faulty assumptions, namely that radicalization is causally related to violence, that the internet and social media spread

¹⁰⁴ Southers and Hienz, *Foreign Fighters*, 13. This hindsight bias is another clue to indicate a complex problem where the patterns only become clear retrospectively but remain unknowable at the time.

radicalization that can “infect” people, and that blanket messages distributed to loosely targeted audiences can impact individual or group identity. Besides not having a positive impact, there is a subjective argument to be made that failed attempts in these endeavors can result in a strong negative impact that damages the government’s credibility and narrative.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Haroro J. Ingram, *Terrorism Prevention in the United States: A Framework for Filling the CVE Void* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2018), 2–4, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Terrorism%20Prevention%20Policy%20Paper.pdf>; Patel and Koushik, “Countering Violent Extremism,” 36.

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V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was not well to drive men into final corners; at those moments they could all develop teeth and claws.

—*A Red Badge of Courage*

In the end, there is only one possible conclusion to make about domestic counter-messaging: stop. There is simply no evidence to suggest that any current or future efforts will succeed. As this thesis presents, there are serious gaps in data and misunderstandings that contribute to persistent calls to develop such programs. A summary follows of the mistaken ideas that need to be eradicated from the discussion about countering violent extremism, radicalization, and messaging:

- Radicalization is equivalent to violence.
- Telltale signs, patterns, or trends about those who travel or those who radicalize that can be used to predict who will travel or radicalize in the future.
- The internet and social media platforms increase the “spread” of radicalization.
- Radicalization is contagious and it can infect people; messages can infect people and cause them to change their identity or behavior.
- Broadly disseminated messages can impact individual or group identity.

Now more than ever, a need exists to return to the basics of definitions. Often, when policymakers discuss counter-narratives and counter-messaging broadly, they mush together the global audience and the domestic one. This level of imprecision has allowed concepts that are effective and appropriate for U.S. diplomatic work or military efforts in war or conflict zones, such as COIN, PSYOPS, and MISO, to be considered in domestic homeland security work. By the very nature of what these programs are designed to do—

to influence opinions about the government and gain control over the population—it is wildly inappropriate to apply them to one’s own people. Yet, these ideas persist and receive Congressional funding. It is essential that moving forward, practitioners draw a bright line between military information operations and domestic homeland security work.

Furthermore, in the space of definitions, policymakers and practitioners need to arrive at some consensus about what “de-radicalization” means and what de-radicalization programs should entail. Within the coming decade, as prison sentences end for some who supported terrorist organizations post-9/11, there is a pressing need to consider how individuals will be successfully re-integrated into society. This space has perhaps the greatest potential to be meaningful and actionable for law enforcement and yet has the least research behind it. No progress can be made until there is clarity in what the terms associated with de-radicalization mean and which of them should apply to domestic programs.

If counter-messaging is not the solution, other alternatives must be considered. It is clear that as vitriolic rhetoric increases and tensions around group identity rise in the United States, homeland security practitioners will increasingly be pressed to deal with narratives and the consequences that arise when narratives collide. Regardless of ideology, whether it is radical Islamism, white supremacy, black separatism, or anti-government militancy, intergroup conflict that results in violence is a genuine security risk for communities. While it is tempting to look to the government to shut down and counter hateful narratives that espouse violence, the principles of democracy demand extreme caution. Who is to be the arbiter of what constitutes radical thought? Is it linked to a threat assessment of some kind? Which government agency should have within its mission to design campaigns that inform the American people what they should and should not believe? If it is risk- or threat-based, it is likely to fall into the portfolio of law enforcement and intelligence agencies where the possibilities for abuse are practically limitless, even in the best of circumstances when it is assumed those responsible for such efforts truly have the best interests of the country at heart. In the end, the responsibility for countering hateful rhetoric and violent narratives lies with society itself in its non-profit, civic, and religious organizations, and with

individual people. Government leaders must take painstaking care not to enflame hate but there can be no government program to fight radical ideas.

Practitioners then should do two key things. First, correct the mistaken ideas about radicalization and messaging when they arise, and second, be champions of evidenced-based approaches. Misleading ideas, some that inspire fear and hate, grow stronger when “reasonable” people and experts do not counter them. The findings in this thesis are far from new; the research supporting them goes back almost a decade. It is time to pay attention to it; it is time to stop accepting simple explanations for complex problems. No simple solution exists to resolving the identity conflicts presently threatening the homeland, including radical Islamism.

CVE programs offer many tempting Siren calls, a number of which contain the same faulty logic used to justify counter-messaging. In pursuit of meaningful programs, practitioners at *every level* can ask the questions that led the author to uncover so many false ideas. No one should assume that someone else has done so. (Clearly, at the highest levels of government, this systematically failed to occur over a period of years.) If the drive for data and evidence-based practices rests with only federal agencies and Congress, it will be a lifetime before any results are seen. However, every day, law enforcement and homeland security officials are working in their communities and these individuals are the most powerful voice for change. They must ask “why” and “how do you know” with greater frequency. Gaps remain in the research around CVE, but it is still worth asking every time, *how strong is the evidence* to support this idea?

In supporting local practitioners, DHS, the FBI, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and Congress should re-focus and re-align their research objectives. Rather than looking at ways to stop “bad” ideas and attempting to pattern an empirically unpredictable thing, they ought to look closely at why some individuals in the “at-risk” category *do not* radicalize and what can be done in communities to strengthen these critical factors. The communities affected by violent ideologies are rich with examples of people who choose not to participate. Ask why, and how can their success be replicated?

Money spent on fruitless efforts to influence the American people will do nothing to improve national security and prolonging the myth of “yet to be seen” benefits distracts practitioners from finding *real* solutions and doing meaningful work. The bias that continues to drive these programs has a name: sunk cost fallacy. Senior government leaders need to let go of efforts that have produced nothing so their staff can re-direct towards work with greater possibility. Questions need to be answered about de-radicalization and its efficacy, about the nature of “radical ideas” and if the brain treats them differently, and about how people have organically defeated radicalization within at-risk communities and populations. It is time to stop standing beside the lamppost with a flashlight; it is necessary to move forward into spaces that still lay dark.

APPENDIX A. REVIEW OF CURRENT US PROGRAMS

This appendix presents what is known about the programs and efforts undertaken from approximately 2014 to 2016 by the DHS, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the FBI, and the Department of State (State) across the broad category of CVE, which includes counter-messaging. These programs get their origin from the previously discussed 2011 Obama administration CVE strategy *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*.¹⁰⁶ Table 6 presents the funding for these programs in FY16 derived from publicly available budget justification documents. As these documents offer little transparency about the specifics of how the funds are spent, it is very difficult to determine what percentage is used specifically for counter-messaging; nevertheless, they offer some sense of the U.S. investment in this arena.¹⁰⁷

Table 6. U.S. CVE Programs by Agency, Purpose, and Funding.

Program	Agency	FY 16 Funds	Description/Purpose
Think Again Turn Around ¹⁰⁸	State Global Engagement Center	\$16–32M	Messaging campaign targeting international Muslim audience; video, twitter account, funds to third party non-profit(s) for engagement and graphics
Don't Be A Puppet	FBI	UNK	Messaging campaign for teenagers promoted through schools; online game
CVE Program	DHS/DOJ	\$20M	Law enforcement training, local CVE pilot program (engagement councils), outreach campaigns and efforts, Office of Community Partnerships

¹⁰⁶ White House, *Strategic Implementation Plan*, 5–6.

¹⁰⁷ For additional review of U.S. programs, albeit not unbiased, readers can see Patel and Koushik, “Countering Violent Extremism.”

¹⁰⁸ It is likely that the use of funds shifted from what was described in budget documents as the focus changed from “Think Again, Turn Around” to a more segment paid-advertising campaign.

The following sections review each of these programs and what is known about them: how they were designed, any performance measures, and how they were publicly received.

A. U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT

While outside the domestic mission space, and clearly, non-U.S. persons focused, the programs established by State come closest to a comprehensive counter-narrative campaign and are the best examples of the U.S. government's efforts on this front.¹⁰⁹ In 2011, President Obama established the CSCC by executive order to combat radical Islamist messages.¹¹⁰ The birth of this unit coincided with the White Houses' release of a strategy for CVE (see other federal programs). The first effort from this office was what is referred to cynically as the "Happy Muslim" campaign, a failed paid advertising segment that featured Muslims happily living the quintessential American life.¹¹¹ The ads were supposed to run in traditionally Muslim countries including across much of the Middle East but were canceled after heavy criticism. The intent according to State was to show a unity of values shared between American Muslims and other Muslims abroad.

Subsequently, in 2015, the CSCC launched a second campaign called "Think Again, Turn Around" that featured a parody video with the tagline "Run don't walk to ISIS land," which attempted to juxtapose IS propaganda claims against reality. It also included a Twitter handle that engaged in direct communications with IS sympathizers and

¹⁰⁹ According to the State Department's website, the Global Engagement Center specifically intends to influence foreign audiences abroad, making it technically outside the scope of this study. However, it is not only one of the *only* coordinated counter-narrative efforts; it has existed the longest and produced the most product for consideration.

¹¹⁰ Barack Obama, Executive Order 13584, "Developing an Integrated Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative and Establishing a Temporary Organization to Support Certain Government-wide Communications Activities Directed Abroad," Code of Federal Regulations, title 3 (2011): <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2011/09/15/2011-23891/developing-an-integrated-strategic-counterterrorism-communications-initiative-and-establishing-a>; Barack Obama, Executive Order 13721, "Developing an Integrated Global Engagement Center to Support Government-wide Counterterrorism Communications Activities Directed Abroad and Revoking Executive Order 13584," Code of Federal Regulations, title 3 (2016): <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/03/17/2016-06250/developing-an-integrated-global-engagement-center-to-support-government-wide-counterterrorism>.

¹¹¹ Claire Cozens, "U.S. Scraps Muslim Ad Campaign," *Guardian*, January 17, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/jan/17/advertising>.

associates online. The goal of these materials was to expose IS propaganda by emphasizing its brutality and hypocrisy (see Chapter II on Narratives). Widely criticized and mocked by IS with a counter-parody video, the campaign brought about the end of the CSCC, which was replaced with the Global Engagement Center (GEC). At this point, State shifted most of its efforts away from direct messaging to supporting influential voices, such as the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.¹¹² These materials often featured defector's stories and other facts focused content. It is difficult to determine the level of funding provided to these groups due to the complexity and limited transparency in publicly available budget documents.

Figure 6 from the GEC website is a representative sample of the video content produced by the CSCC and the GEC prior to 2017. Each video garnered on average a few hundred to a few thousand views and were of relatively low production quality. As noted previously, they predominantly feature defector narratives and attempt to directly challenge claims made by IS in its media.

¹¹² For more about this organization, see the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, <http://www.icsve.org/>.

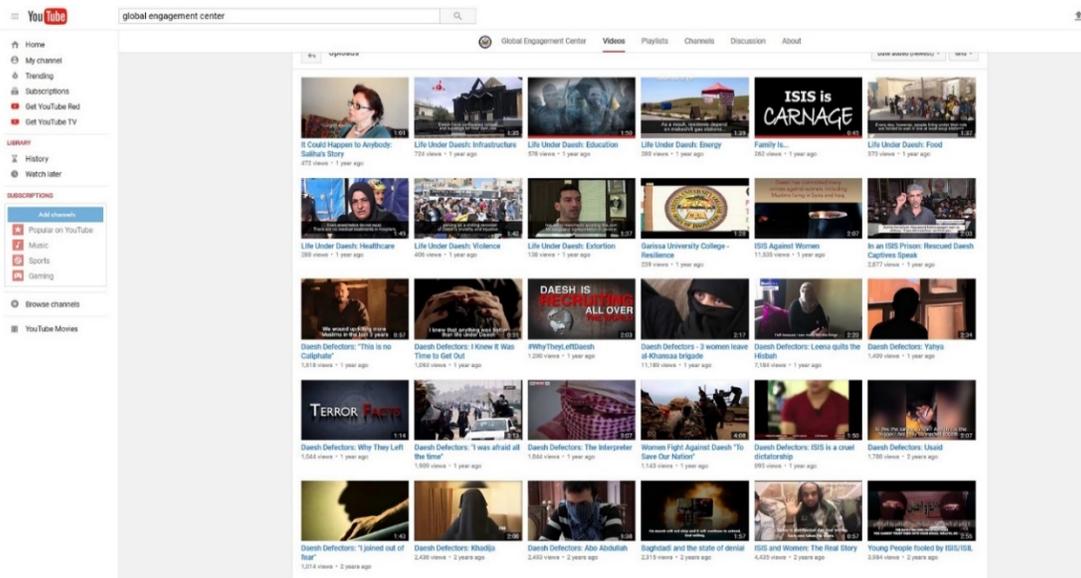


Figure 6. Global Engagement Center Video Content (Old).¹¹³

Moving forward, in 2017, the GEC began using Facebook data and direct marketing (paid advertising) to specifically target vulnerable Muslim youth abroad with anti-IS video content.¹¹⁴ The new campaign features animated characters and runs in numerous languages. It is pushed directly to the devices of youth meeting a set of criteria based on content consumption and searches. Although it is not possible to prove this campaign has in fact deterred recruitment, the videos have been viewed over 14 million times, which certainly suggests some degree of market penetration.

Even though State’s work is entirely outward facing, the evolution of its programs reflects hard-earned lessons learned and should not be discarded. In its early failed attempts, clues about the importance of the authenticity of the speaker, the imperative of translation, and the appropriate application of symbolism through imagery are visible. The newer campaign with its audience driven push tactics is a better example of good counter-

¹¹³ Source: “Global Engagement Center,” YouTube, video, accessed July 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wmdEFvsY0E>. This link states the video is unavailable and also states “This video is private.”

¹¹⁴ John Warrick, “How a U.S. Team Uses Facebook Guerilla Marketing to Peel of Potential ISIS Recruits,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/bait-and-flip-us-team-uses-facebook-guerrilla-marketing-to-peel-off-potential-isis-recruits/2017/02/03/431e19ba-e4e4-11e6-a547-5fb9411d332c_story.html?utm_term=.97cfe80c1475.

messaging and is a good starting point to building a larger, more robust effort for foreign audiences.

B. FBI

The FBI runs the only domestic facing counter-narrative campaign in the portfolio. The “Don’t Be a Puppet” campaign is an anti-radicalization web-based game platform targeting at-risk teenagers. It was launched with a particular emphasis on working through the school system. According to a study by the Brennan Center for Justice, this program included a “Preventing Violent Extremism in Schools” guide and instructed school administrators that there was “an emerging trend of young people embracing violent radical ideologies.”¹¹⁵ While the content does not explicitly say the target audience is young Muslims, teachers associations and Muslim organizations were outraged, calling the effort “ideological policing and surveillance” within schools.¹¹⁶ Based on the content alone, these complaints are unfounded as Figures 7 and 8 clearly show that the website addresses all types of extremism, not just religious extremism. However, the perception likely comes from the outreach strategy and rollout approach; the launch and promotion efforts appeared to concentrate on areas with considerable Muslim populations, such as Minneapolis-St. Paul. The FBI has remained silent on the effort, as has Congress. There is no accessible public data regarding the cost of the program or its reach.

¹¹⁵ Patel and Koushik, “Countering Violent Extremism,” 22–23.

¹¹⁶ Mazin Sidahmed, “FBI’s Don’t Be a Puppet Targets Muslim Youth, Teacher’s Union Says,” *Guardian*, August 26, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/aug/26/fbi-dont-be-a-puppet-terrorism-muslim-teachers>.

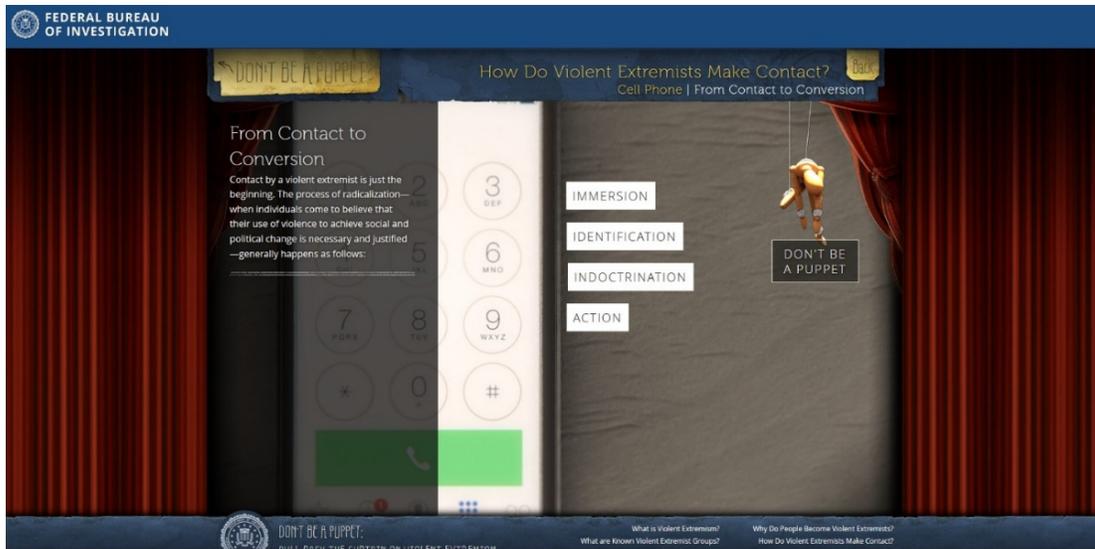


Figure 7. Don't Be A Puppet Screenshot—How Do Violent Extremists Make Contact?¹¹⁷

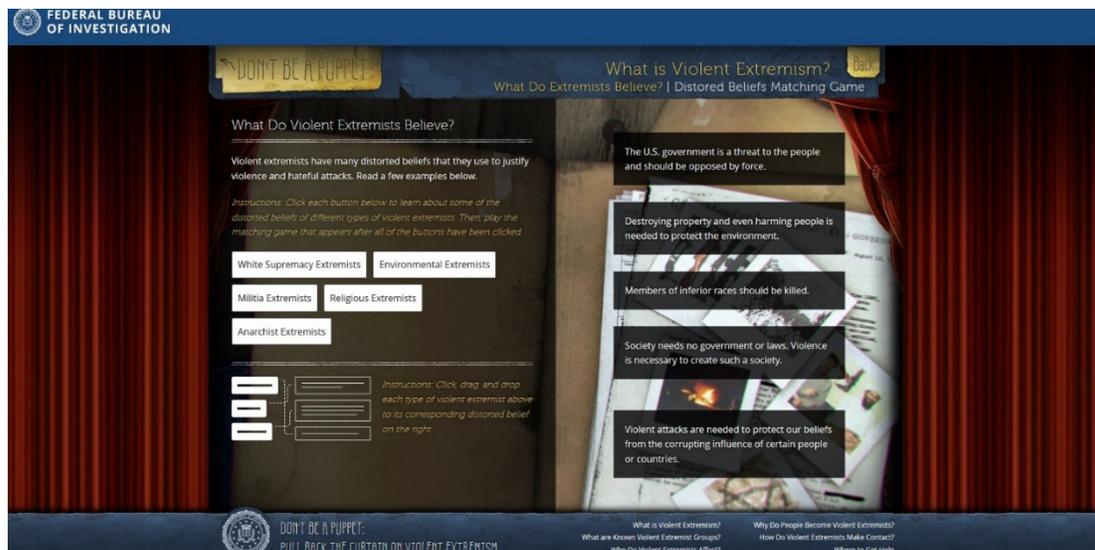


Figure 8. Don't Be A Puppet Screenshot—What is Violent Extremism?¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Source: “FBI Don’t Be a Puppet,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed August 20, 2016, <https://cve.fbi.gov/how/>.

¹¹⁸ Source: “What is Violent Extremism?” Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed August 20, 2016, <https://cve.fbi.gov/whatis/>.

C. DHS/DOJ PILOT PROGRAMS

DHS and DOJ have quietly funded pilot programs in several major U.S. cities around community-led CVE. The stated purpose of these efforts was to initiate community conversations about radicalization. Very little documentation is available with regard to these programs except a few references to them in a comprehensive CVE literature review by START.¹¹⁹ As budget line items, the programs are described as efforts to train and educate law enforcement and foster community discussions. They also include efforts to fund community voices to engage in domestic counter-messaging, such as a youth anti-IS video competition. Little detail is provided, so it is difficult to know what percentage of the funds shown in Table 6 are actually committed to messaging exclusively; presumably rather little.¹²⁰ The Muslim community appears fairly skeptical about the true intention of the programs; the lack of transparency about content and outcomes makes it difficult to address their concerns.

D. SUMMARY

In total, these efforts have all been widely criticized by various private non-profit organizations, the press, and some members of Congress.¹²¹ As noted earlier, a 2016 report from the House Homeland Security Committee criticized the efforts of the Obama Administration by claiming it failed to address domestic radicalization.¹²² Around the same time, Congress commissioned the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to fully audit

¹¹⁹ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, *Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement, and Deradicalization Programs* (College Park, MD: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2016), 2, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_SurveyingCVEMetrics_March2016.pdf.

¹²⁰ Susan B. Epstein, Marian L. Lawson, and Cory R. Gill, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs*, CRS Report No. R44391 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 15–16, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44391.pdf>; Office of Justice Programs, *FY 2017 Budget Request at a Glance* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2017), 5, <https://www.justice.gov/jmd/file/822111/download>.

¹²¹ It is worth noting that similar efforts in the United Kingdom have also faced stiff criticism, despite the greater occurrence of attacks there, as have fledging efforts in Canada and Australia. For all these cases, the United States included, it is difficult to determine the fairness of the claims because little to no data is available to review.

¹²² House Homeland Security Committee, *A National Strategy to Win the War against Islamic Terror*, 2.

all CVE programs and tasks assigned under the 2011 strategy and Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP). GAO collected outcome data and progress reports from each agency with assigned tasks and the auditors also conducted interviews with key personnel. Released in April 2017, the GAO report provides the most comprehensive empirical assessment of U.S. efforts in the CVE and counter-messaging mission space to date; its concerning conclusions were presented in the Executive Summary. As an explanation for the lack of conclusive findings and measures, the auditors describe how the assessment working group responsible for developing an assessment process for the 2011 SIP was never implemented, and consequently, no performance measurements or assessment was conducted until NCTC initiated a voluntary cross-agency review in 2015.¹²³

As it relates to messaging specifically, the tasks assigned to DHS were reported as status “needs attention,” confirming no major work had been conducted in counter-messaging domestically. There are other tasks aligned with the pilot programs that border on messaging, such as NCTC’s community awareness briefing (CAB), but absent visibility into the content, it is impossible to say where this effort falls, if at all, within strategic communications.

¹²³ House Homeland Security Committee, 19.

APPENDIX B. METHODOLOGY

At its inception, the purpose of this study was to determine if counter-messaging is a practical tool for countering domestic Islamist extremism. As discussed earlier, criticism of the U.S. effort against IS has been incisive and persistent. Using IS as a representative of the broader group of Islamist extremists, this study began with the origin question, is the U.S. actually failing with regards to counter-messaging for this audience? From the onset, there were significant challenges in answering this question. Foremost among these, no public strategy exists for counter-messaging, and consequently, no published objectives or data on the programs. Lacking this information, it is impossible to determine an answer empirically. Figure 9 reflects how the question of failure was initially presented and explored.

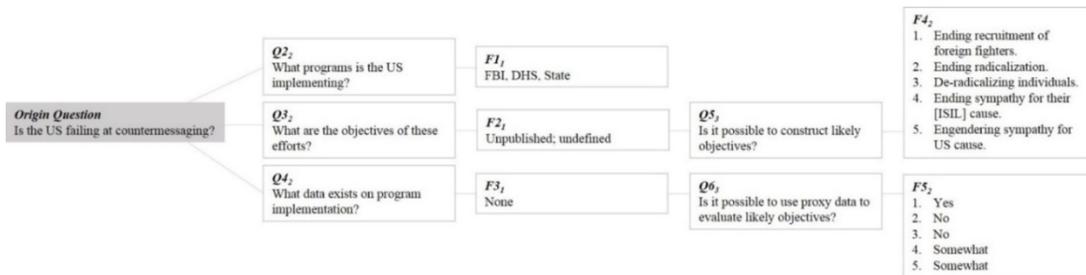


Figure 9. Original Research.

After arriving at these findings, a natural next step was to ask *why does the United States believe it is failing*, followed with *could it ever succeed*? This pair of questions is what this paper answers, and in so doing, exposes a number of logical fallacies and misconceptions that are more clearly visible when logic is systemically applied to the issues. Figure 10 shows the progression of the second main research question.

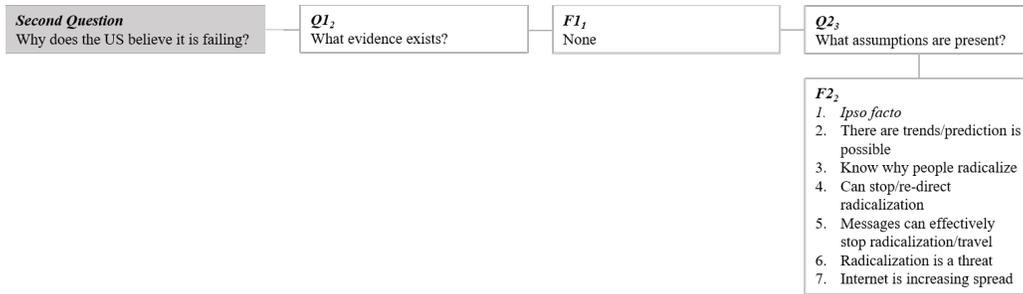


Figure 10. Second Research Question.

This paper includes five streams of research combined together. It contains within it a program analysis of U.S. CVE programs, a policy analysis of U.S. government messaging for radical Islamism, a comprehensive five field literature, an original review of IS messages (using the framework method), and a root cause analysis of strategy and objectives in counter-messaging. These five parts were not all originally in the research plan but they become necessary as the work progressed. They were therefore not conducted in a linear progression from research question to conclusion; rather, the research process was more exploratory and wandered off at times to develop a more complete understanding of sticky wickets as they were uncovered. The simplest way to present the methodologies then is to do so by component; the five research streams are explained in the following sections.

A. PROGRAM ANALYSIS

The first of all the research undertaken was the program analysis. The program analysis began with the collection of publicly available information about existing CVE programs and especially any counter-narrative or counter-messaging programs. No specific scoping restrictions were applied. Generally, the author focused on guiding strategy documents, budget justifications, program descriptions and any visible outcomes, and empirical reviews of the programs. Fewer documents were available on the topic than might be desired; however, since the program analysis itself was not the primary goal of this paper, no interviews were conducted and no specific documents were requested from the agencies reviewed. The GAO report, which included both interviews and extensive data calls, served as a reasonable substitute. To further the author's understanding, the sample

for review was expanded from its initial set of documents to include testimony and news articles. This review's conclusions from are presented in Appendix A.

B. COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

Second, although at times simultaneous to the program analysis, a literature review across five fields was conducted that included political communications, strategic communications, political science, sociology, and terrorism studies. Initially, the literature review was scoped with key words or phrases, such as, "radicalization" "internet and radicalization," "messaging," "message framing," "(IS/ISIL/Daesh/ISIS) communications," and "digital communications and terrorism." From these types of searches, core articles and books were collected that the author used to expand the review by using works cited and works referenced lists. Several iterations of expansion yielded the final set of literature reviewed, around 100 some publications including several comprehensive and meta-literature reviews.

The original purpose of the literature review was simply to check the field and confirm that widely accepted ideas were accurate. As it became obvious that this assumption was not true, the literature review grew in size and significance as evidence in favor of or against specific ideas was sought out from multiple sources. Once the assumptions and most likely objectives were identified, the literature review served as the primary source of evidence to validate or invalidate various ideas.

C. IS NARRATIVE STUDY

For a separate project prior to this paper, the author conducted original research on IS message frames. As this thesis developed, it became evident that there was utility in introducing this research, even though it was not published. For the message frame project, a sample of English-language IS media was collected in 2016 via open source online searches on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Google. These searches yielded a set of stills and videos that the author viewed preliminarily for coding using the framework

methodology.¹²⁴ Table 7 presents the first round of coding with “Initial Categories” and the “Description” or the specific items that led to category selection along with “Sub-Categories,” which make note of major themes to be explored in second round analysis.

Table 7. IS Message Frames Preliminary Categories for Analysis.

Initial Categories	Description	Sub-Categories
War	<i>Dialogue/Words</i> Confrontational Anti-U.S., anti-West, anti-Israel Against God Warriors of God	<i>Images</i> Imagery of battle Military Display of weapons/tactical assets
		Victory over enemies Challenge against enemies Validation of righteousness
Religion	Religious foundations/basis Piety	Pious practices Religious institutions
		Statehood based on religious right Administration of statehood with piety
Government Administration	Government administration	Functioning state Normal life
	Crime and punishment Sharia/holy law	Administration of punishments
		Effective statehood Quality of life Justice system

¹²⁴ Joanna Smith and Jill Firth, “Qualitative Data Analysis: The Framework Approach,” *Nurse Researcher* 18, no. 2 (January 21, 2011): 52–62, DOI: 10.7748/nr2011.01.18.2.52.c8284.

Due to the very large volume of data available, after the first screening, the author selected a sample of 14 videos and 18 photos generally representative of the initial code categories but also diverse and conducted detailed coding.¹²⁵ In the detailed coding, the author separated findings into two sets of matrices, frames and framing techniques. Table 8 shows the coding matrix for frames and presents the markers the author used when coding in detail. Table 9 goes on to identify the final outcome of coding with themes. The author also reviewed existing literature to compare findings prior to naming the themes.

Table 8. Code Matrix: Markers for Coding with Preliminary Categories.

Description of Identifiers for Coding		Initial Categories
<i>Dialogue/Words</i>	<i>Images</i>	
<i>Confrontational</i> jihad, enemy, battle, war	<i>Imagery of Battle</i> battles/conflict, military victory, desecration of the enemy and enemy soldiers, killing of captured enemies and/or spies	Victory over enemies
<i>Anti-US, anti-West, anti-Israel</i> U.S., Saudi Arabia, UN, Jews, enemy banners		Challenge against enemies
<i>Against God</i> kuffar, unworthy, unrighteous, evil, Shia, apostate	<i>Military/Display of Weapons</i> weapons, training, soldiers in formation, battle flag	Validation of righteousness
<i>Warriors of God</i> martyr, lions, faithful		
<i>Religious Foundations/Basis</i> religious text/scripture reading or quotes, the Caliphate	<i>Pious Practices</i> prayer, niqab, burqa, reading or reciting text, charity gifts	Statehood based on religious right
<i>Piety</i> the Prophet, Sharia, religious calls to action (to join), charity, mercy	<i>Religious Institutions</i> Mosque, religious leaders	Administration of statehood with piety

¹²⁵ See Appendix B Supplement for a list of assets accessed. The author screened out a number of execution videos, which represent a fair portion of available data for analysis in an effort to find examples of government administration and piety. The total sample reflects a balance of themes but is not weighted to the proportion of representation in the total media content.

Description of Identifiers for Coding		Initial Categories
<p><i>Government Administration</i> the Caliphate, structure of government, government offices, purpose and function of offices</p>	<p>Functioning State Infrastructure, government officials working, schools, construction projects,</p> <p><i>Normal Life</i> happy children, traffic, full markets, people walking/chatting, cafes</p>	<p>Effective statehood</p> <p>Quality of life</p>
<p><i>Crime and Punishment</i> justice, rule of law, courts</p> <p><i>Sharia/Holy Law</i></p>	<p><i>Administration of Punishments</i> executions, stoning, lashes, government officials, law enforcement</p>	<p>Justice system</p>

Table 9. IS Message Frames Framework for Analysis.

Identifying Markers Used in Coding		Initial Categories	Themes	Frames
<i>Dialogue/Words</i>	<i>Images</i>			
Confrontational Anti-U.S., anti- West, anti-Israel Against God Warriors of God	Imagery of battle Military/display of weapons	Victory over enemies Challenge against enemies Validation of righteousness	Engaged in battle for survival God supports victory over unholy enemies	Contest
Religious foundations Piety	Pious practices Religious institutions	Statehood based on religious right Administration of statehood with piety	Pious people Pious governance	Pious State
Government administration	Functioning state Normal life	Effective statehood Quality of life	Effective governance	Effective State
Crime and punishment Sharia/holy law	Administration of punishments	Justice system	Just governance	Just State

With regard to framing techniques, the author first reviewed relevant literature and then selected six techniques to look for when coding in the second review.¹²⁶ The author selected framing techniques based strongly on a model from Fairhurst and Sarr, although in some cases, they were renamed or combined to make them clearer for this paper. Table 10 presents the coding matrix used for framing techniques in the detailed analysis. The first column “Techniques” names the six techniques chosen while the “Description” column identifies the code markers associated with each frame. Since framing techniques are primarily used to impart an emotion into a message, coding for them is fairly subjective. The author coded based on her perception of emotion and a different researcher might

¹²⁶ Gail Fairhurst and Robert A. Sarr, *The Art of Framing: Managing the Language of Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 125–126.

perceive different emotional connotations. For this reason, the author tried to give examples of how each technique could be recognized.

Table 10. IS Message Frames Coding Matrix for Framing Techniques.

Techniques	Description	
	<i>Sounds Like/Looks Like</i>	<i>Feels</i>
Metaphor	Analogous, this is like that <i>Ex. re-enacted battles of the Crusades with narration describing current enemies</i>	Contextual, amplifies the surrounding emotion
Storytelling	Tales of greatness, mythological in proportion, prophetic- destined, <i>Ex. Battle of Dabiq, apocalypse, Mahdi</i>	Epic, righteous, glory-filled, triumphant, harrowing, adventurous, daring, courageous
Tradition	Reference to historically grounded ritual, ceremony, practice, events to impart meaning <i>Ex. Sharia, historic battles, glory of Islam</i>	Connected to the past, grounded, holy, sacred, ancient, ancestral, inherited
Artifact/Symbolism	Use of an object or reference that confers additional meaning <i>Ex. holy leaders, holy places, victories, American flag, ISIL flag, mountains, lion</i>	Contextual, implied emotion
Spin	An representation of exclusively the positive or negative of something <i>Ex. ‘there are no innocents’</i>	Contextual, amplifies the surrounding emotion
Political Jamming	A form of satire akin to what is traditionally called “propaganda” where symbols are reframed to mock the originator <i>Ex. Suicide Squad, London Falls</i>	Humorous, sarcastic, ironic

There are some notable limitations to this research. First, Arabic language skills and a thorough understanding of Islam are required to make the most informed coding decisions. As much of the decision in coding is subjective, and many of the markers are nuanced, the author felt at a great disadvantage in not having a strong background in regional history, the languages, and the appropriate cultural and religious context. Second, the potential sample size for a project is enormous; determining how to select the sample and identifying what is a sufficient sample size remain difficult, particularly for data requiring trending. In this regard, different samples might yield different outcomes that could be perceived as contradictory findings. As the material is often pulled down, it is rather challenging to research it effectively on a small scale.

D. POLICY ANALYSIS FOR U.S. COUNTER-MESSAGES

After introducing the IS message frame data described in the previous section, the author determined it was necessary to attempt a scaled back version of analysis for U.S. messages. A policy review of Presidential and Cabinet level speeches over the previous three administrations was therefore initiated. The same code process was used, but the sample size was much smaller. The same framing techniques were drawn upon, and although the results are less comprehensive, they do have an evidence base. The results of that research are presented immediately following the section on IS messages.

E. ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

In bringing everything together, the final portion of the research was the root cause analysis. The author took the results from the program analysis, the policy analysis, and the literature review, and developed a framework of likely objectives and asked “why” until all the assumptions that belied them had emerged. Table 11 maps these assumptions that are ultimately validated or invalidated against the literature. The findings are presented in detail in Chapter IV.

These assumptions are important to understand because they are the theoretical foundation on which the United States built its CVE programs, and subsequently, diagnosed its own failure. Table 11 deconstructs public statements made by senior leaders regarding the outcome of either IS or U.S. engagement in counter-messaging and aligns

them with the two most common associated ideas, along with the evidence cited by the source to support them. The table then aligns each set of statements with influencing ideas that are either directly or indirectly inferred to be causally related to the statement by the source. In other words, these ideas are the assumptions that bridge the statement and supporting evidence to the conclusions drawn. Finally, the table shows the conclusion or recommendations made by the source. In some cases, the conclusions are implied where in others they are explicitly stated. In total, the table shows a set of entwined beliefs that when aligned to the facts in subsequent chapters, are unable to withstand scrutiny.

Table 11. Root Cause Analysis Map of Rationale behind U.S. Counter-messaging Efforts Constructed from Analysis of Official Sources.

Sample Statement	Key Idea	Supporting Evidence	Measures	Influencing Ideas	Conclusions for Action
<p>“Today’s terror surge has serious consequences for the U.S. homeland. Extremists have redoubled their efforts to send operatives to our territory, and they are influencing individuals already here to carry out acts of terror.”¹³⁹</p>	<p>Radical/extreme Islam is a threat to the U.S./U.S. persons.</p>	<p>Successful and thwarted domestic attacks/plots by Islamic extremists</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of plots or attacks - Losses from plots or attacks - Costs of preventing loss from plots or attacks 	<p>Radicalization is causally related to violence.</p>	<p>It is possible to de-radicalization people; de-radicalization will reduce loss (attacks/plots).</p>
				<p>Losses/potential losses from attacks carried out by Islamist extremists are substantial.</p>	
<p>“ISIL’s widespread reach through the Internet and social media is most concerning, as the group has proven dangerously competent at employing such tools for its nefarious strategy.”¹⁴⁰</p>	<p>IS is uniquely successful at radicalizing individuals to follow an extreme form of Islam.</p>	<p>Successful recruitment of U.S. persons to ‘join’ IS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of U.S. persons recruited - Followership of U.S. persons 	<p>The Internet and social media is accelerating radicalization and increasing IS’ success.</p>	<p>It is both possible and necessary to control the idea space of the Internet and social media to prevent the further spread of radical Islam.</p>
		<p>Successful recruitment of fighters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of persons ‘joining’ IS 		<p>Consumption of media content from Islamist extremist groups is causally related to radicalization.</p>
		<p>Successful inspiration of domestic plots and attacks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of plots or attacks attempted by radicalized U.S. persons 		

¹³⁹ House Homeland Security Committee, *A National Strategy to Win the War against Islamic Terror*, 6.

¹⁴⁰ Comey, “Fifteen Years after 9/11.”

Table 11 demonstrates how asking “why” repeatedly reveals various assumptions and conclusions that may otherwise have remained hidden. For each of the three workable objectives, their individual root cause diagram is presented along with their findings in Chapter IV. Table 11 is also very representative of the problems within all of CVE, not just messing. Often, desirously simple solutions and ideas are offered for what are truly complex problems. Buyer beware, such simplicity is often masking ignorance.

F. APPENDIX B SUPPLEMENT—CATALOG OF IS MEDIA ASSETS REVIEWED

1. Videos

- Family Guy—Allah Akbar:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGKHV_D0EIE
- 300:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJ6sGIjWXqM>
- Allah Akbar:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OO7mAEeNRoo>
- Sponge Bob—Allah Akbar:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yXoR1BIpLU>
- GTA:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HPweIoLJak>
- Assassin’s Creed:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nIN6Ciw1Ws>
- We Have the Swords:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kRZnoYkVUc&list=PLYiK0Cagt_R0ucRgnGUK0C7LTpMxPiLwY
- Child Training Camp:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzo1kgJ4Uh8&feature=youtu.be>

- No Respite:
<http://heavy.com/news/2015/11/new-isis-islamic-state-news-pictures-videos-no-respite-english-language-propaganda-full-uncensored-youtube-daesh/>
- Come on Rise:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/08/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-come-on-rise-constancy-nasheed-omar-mateen-lone-wolf-attacks-full-uncensored-youtube-video/>
- Wilayat al-Jazirah:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/08/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-wilayat-al-jazirah-wilayah-hisbah-religious-police-sharia-law-hudud-hadd-executions-stonings-floggings-full-uncensored-youtube-video/>
- Music Video:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-my-revenge-nasheed-ma-vengeance-nachid-french-english-full-uncensored-youtube-video/>
- Structure of the Caliphate:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-al-furqan-media-amaq-news-pictures-videos-the-structure-of-the-khilafah-full-uncensored-youtube-video-mp4-download/>
- Orlando Attack:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/06/official-isis-islamic-state-orlando-terror-attack-english-video-youtube-mp4-download/>
- Where to Flee:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/05/isis-islamic-state-news-pictures-videos->

where-to-flee-english-subtitles-wilayat-al-fallujah-iraq-mass-execution-iraqi-forces-full-uncensored-youtube-video/

2. **Photos**

- Child Solider—8/20:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJVwY9LgPs4/?tagged=isis>
- Desert Soldiers:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJVwDhpABUU/?tagged=daesh>
- Suicide Squad:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJQw0W5BNeg/?tagged=daesh>
- Flag—BW:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJJJJsLhHWe/?tagged=daesh>
- Child Eating Grapes:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJVM4O7gSY4/?tagged=isis>
- London Falls:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BJVDwXAAWRH/?tagged=isis>
- Ramadan:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-ramadan-eid-al-fitr-mayaddin-syria-photo-report/>
- Harvest:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/08/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-vegetable-harvest-al-shirqat-iraq-wilayat-dijla-tourism-photo-report/3/>
- Lone Wolf:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/05/new-isis-islamic-state-news-that-they->

live-by-proof-abu-muhammad-al-adnani-threatens-west-paris-france-english-translation-promotional-propaganda-poster/

- Candy Shop:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/04/isis-islamic-state-candy-shop-baklava-bakery-photo-report/13/>
- Battlefield Execution 1:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/08/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-amaaq-news-pictures-videos-attacks-of-sacrifice-mp4-syrian-arab-army-soldiers-executed-executing-battlefield-combat-footage-screenshots/>
- Battlefield Execution_2:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-syrian-arab-army-saa-beheading-full-video-screenshots/>
- Battlefield Execution_3:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-syrian-arab-army-soldiers-troops-saa-executed-beheaded-desecration-but-in-the-end-it-will-become-an-anguish-for-them-full-uncensored-youtube-video-mp4-screenshot/>
- Dead Enemies_1:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/08/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-iraqi-army-soldiers-corpse-desecration-photo-report/>
- Moral Punishment_1:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-had-hudud-adultery-adulterer-photo-report/>
- Moral Punishment_2:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-hadd-hudud-sharia-law-punishment-amputation-wilayat-raqqqa-syria-photo-report/>

- Moral Execution_1:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-kot-nangarhar-crossdresser-afghan-police-execution-photo-report/>
- Religious Police_1:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-amaq-news-pictures-videos-hisbah-sharia-law-capital-punishment-wilayat-khair-bulldozer-bull-dozer-full-uncensored-youtube-video-screenshots/>
- Public Execution_1:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/06/new-isis-islamic-state-daesh-news-pictures-videos-apostate-beheading-american-coalition-syrian-arab-army-saa-treason-wilayat-khayr-photo-report/>
- Post-Nice Twitter Meme and Instructions:
<http://heavy.com/news/2016/07/isis-islamic-state-bastille-day-july-14-nice-france-promenade-des-anglais-terrorism-amaq-news-official-statement/>

APPENDIX C. LIST OF ITEMS REVIEWED FOR POLICY ANALYSIS, PROGRAM REVIEW, AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE U.S. NARRATIVE

A. SPEECHES

- President Obama, Speech on the Anniversary of 9/11:
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/11/remarks-president-911-memorial>
- President Obama, Remarks at the National Defense University:
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>
- President Obama, Address to the Nation on the San Bernardino Terrorist Attack and the war on ISIS:
<https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/06/politics/transcript-obama-san-bernardino-isis-address/index.html>
- President Obama, Speech on Combatting IS:
<http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/index.html>
- President Trump, Remarks on 9/11 Memorial Observance:
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/11/remarks-president-trump-911-memorial-observance>
- President Bush, Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation:
<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>
- President Bush, Remarks by President Bush on the Global War on Terror:
<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/rem/64287.htm>

- Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Remarks on American Leadership at the Council on Foreign Relations:
<https://www.cfr.org/event/remarks-american-leadership-0>
- Secretary of State John Kerry, Remarks at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/10/263653.htm>
- Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Remarks to US Department of State Employees:
<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/05/270620.htm>

B. EXECUTIVE ORDERS AND LEGISLATION

- Executive Order 13584:
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2011/09/15/2011-23891/developing-an-integrated-strategic-counterterrorism-communications-initiative-and-establishing-a>
- Executive Order 13721:
<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/03/17/2016-06250/developing-an-integrated-global-engagement-center-to-support-government-wide-counterterrorism>
- 114th Congress, HR 2899 CVE Act- and related S 2522, S 3456, HR 3075

C. REPORTS

- Countering Violent Extremist Act of 2015 Report 114-344 to Accompany HR2899
- GAO Report to Congressional Requesters, “COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: Actions Needed to Define Strategy and Assess Progress of Federal Efforts”

- Department of State and USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism (May 2016)
- “A National Strategy to Win the War Against Islamist Terror,” House Homeland Security Committee
- National Defense Strategy, 2018
- National Security Strategy 2015 and 2017

D. BUDGET DOCUMENTS

- Office of Justice Programs FY2017 Budget at a Glance
- U.S. Department of Justice FY2017 Budget Request National Security Fact Sheet
- Matthew Weed, CRS Insight, Global Engagement Center: Background and Issues
- Congressional Budget Justification U.S. Department of State FY 2016

E. TESTIMONY

- Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, “Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror,” Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security (February 11, 2015)
- Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, Opening Statement on Counter-ISIL before the Senate Armed Services Committee (October 27, 2015)
- Honorable Alberto M. Fernandez, Written Testimony Submitted to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (July 6, 2016)

- Michael Steinbach, Executive Assistant Director, FBI, Written Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations on the Federal Government’s Efforts to Monitor, Disrupt, and Counter Terrorist Propaganda with Particular Focus on the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s (ISIL) Online Communications (July 2016)
- George Selim, Director of the Office for Community Partnership, DHS, Written Statement presented to the US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Hearing: ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media (July 2016)
- Meagan M. LaGraffe, Chief of Staff, US State Department Global Engagement Center, Before the 114th Congress U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (July 2016)
- Professor Peter Bergen, New America, Written Statement presented to US Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Hearing: ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization and Recruitment on the Internet and Social Media (July 2016)
- James B. Comey, Director FBI, Statement before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Fifteen Years After 9/11: Threats to the Homeland” (September 2016)

F. WEBSITES

- Global Engagement Center (U.S. State Department):
<https://www.state.gov/r/gec/>

- Don't Be a Puppet (FBI):
<https://cve.fbi.gov/home.html>
- Think Again Turn Around (video):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wmdEFvsY0E>
- International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE):
<http://www.icsve.org/topics/isis-defectors-speak-internet-memes/> (receive state department funding)

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