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Understanding Terrorists' Social Media Strategies and Online Narratives:

Approach to Countering the Threat and Providing Alternative Narratives

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Table of Contents

I-	6	
II-	8	
III-	13	
1-	Definition of Narrative	10
2-	Narratives of Radicalization	10
3-	Terrorist Group's Online Media Strategies	14
3.1.	ISIS	14
3.2.	Al-Qaeda	17
3.3.	The European Context	18
4-	Countering Terrorist Narratives & Providing Alternative Message	20
5-	Challenges	24
6-	Other Strategies	24
IV-	Conclusion	25
	Bibliography:	26





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Introduction

The drastic advances in digital and communication technologies have acted as the pillars of our modern society, by governing the dynamics of cyberspace and providing endless opportunities for connecting people via deflating concepts such as time and distance. Alongside with the Internet, mass media and social media outlets have facilitated the processes of globalization, removing any previously perceived geographical barriers. Yet, the very same mechanisms, which have transformed our community and have catalysed socio-economic and political movements, have also been recognized by terrorist organizations and exploited in the pursuit of their objectives. From the expansion of extremist groups and their worldwide recruitment policies, it has become evident that the threat of terrorism is not restricted to its region of origin anymore. The mass use of the Internet and social media has obscured the borders of extremism and has imposed an undeniable menace to global peace. Modern technologies have moved forward groups' objectives and accelerated the process of radicalization. Information sharing has assisted in the dissemination of extremist beliefs across the globe at a faster pace and has appeared as an important tool in the radicalization of individuals and their subsequent recruitment as terrorists.



Owing to the accessibility, availability, affordability, and wide reach of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and Telegram, terrorist organizations have progressively taken advantage of these platforms to convey their agenda and achieve their goals.

For the purposes of further exploring this alarming phenomenon, this paper will describe the interlink between the online space and Islamist radicalization through examining the genesis of social media platforms and the operations of violent extremist groups, which utilize them to advance their aims. It will explore the different layers of indoctrination and radicalization, relying on several theoretical foundations, highlighting their multiple roots, factors and stages. To exemplify that, it will use as case studies two internationally designated terrorist groups, namely the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, emphasising on their distinctive organisational frameworks, ideological backgrounds and social media strategies, while simultaneously drawing parallels and analysing their recruitment mechanisms and narratives. In regards to the latter, the research paper will illuminate in-depth the mainstream and media propaganda apparatus of the aforementioned outfits; dissect their online and offline narratives; review and analyse their most used mediums of communication, e.g. online media channels and mobile applications, while recognizing the opportunistic nature of terrorist groups and their ability to displace terrorist messaging activity between channels, when under threat of exposure, or whenever the platform has exhausted its potential utility. It will also highlight the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF), in other words, individuals, who have been lured from communities worldwide, oftentimes with the aid of digital technologies, to travel to conflict zones to join terrorist groups.



In order to put matters into perspective, the paper will discuss the already existing successful practices in the delivery of counter and alternative narratives and elaborate upon them for the current project; it will emphasize on the scope of action, which will be clarified and set out in a realistic and measurable overall objective; it will determine the exact target audience in order to adequately address their needs; it will determine its methodology by researching and relying on the correct methods and mediums for reaching out the target audience in order to secure their active participation; it will discuss the implementation of such campaigns while considering the challenges and limitations, which might arise; and, to conclude, the chapter will deliberate upon the sustainability and dissemination strategy of counter and alternative narratives campaigns in order to provide for the long-term sustained effects of the project.

I- Theoretical Framework

Terrorism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It is a global challenge and its threat has increased since the tragic incident of 9/11. Since then the major role of global communication technologies in the perpetration of terrorist attacks, the manifestation of extremist views and the recruitment of individuals has come to the attention of criminal justice bodies, policy-makers, scholars and governmental officials. The strategic use of mass and social media outlets is taking a prominent part in the amphitheatre of conflict (Schlegel, 2018). The distribution of certain '*terrorist narratives*' has underlined the necessity of generating counter-radicalization and alternative messages in order to ideologically overcome the issue (Reed, Ingram and Whittaker, 2017). Nevertheless, the backbone of any counter-radicalization and counter-terrorism



endeavours lies in understanding and rigorously analyzing the theoretical frameworks, which explain the radicalization phenomenon and subsequently the role of communication technologies in the genesis of violent extremism (McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017; Reed, Ingram and Whittaker, 2017).

Multiple theoretical models that attempt to explain the factors leading to the radicalization of individuals have emerged from the fields of psychology and social and political sciences. The following section will review the already existing literature and look closely at several theories, which examine the origins and development of terrorism, capturing the different stages of indoctrination, radicalization and jihadization.

One of the most detailed, comprehensive and long-term studies in radicalization dynamics, which has been conducted in recent years is by Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko (2017). According to them, radicalization processes should be divided into three sub-categories based on the aspects, which attract individuals. These are *Micro-*, *Meso-* and *Macro-* factors. The *Micro*, or individual-level mechanisms, include anger and vengeance for harm to self or loved ones (*personal grievance*); outrage for injustice done to a larger group or a cause the person holds dear (*group grievance*); participation in progressively more radical acts that culminate in terrorism (*slippery slope*); helping or protecting a friend or loved one, who is already radicalized (*love*); risk, glory and power-seeking, especially by young men (*status-seeking*); and escape from personal problems (*escape*). Finally, they argue, it comes *unfreezing*, which is a term coined by Wiktorovicz (2005), who explains that in times of personal disconnection, an individual could open up to new people and new ideas, which could act as floodgates to all of the abovementioned mechanisms.



Meso- factors relate to group grievances and aspects affecting the community identity. People could join a radical group either through self-persuasion or through connection with others (friends, loved ones, family members, like-minded people). Groups often compare themselves with other groups in order to demonstrate injustice and establish an us-versus-them mentality. This further generates strong cohesion, where members only trust each other. In this context, group thinking appears as a very mighty force in leading an individual or a group to commit a terrorist attack. According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2017), group-level factors include a shift towards extremist notions in like-minded groups (*group polarization*), and three types of radicalizing intergroup conflict – competition with state power as less committed members of the group drop off (*condensation*), competition for the same base of support (*outbidding*), and within-group competition (*fissioning*). When these four mechanisms multiply what takes place is *group isolation* – the level of cohesion and strength of group norms is so strong that members no longer have any alternative group standards.

Finally, *Macro-* factors refer to the major global aspects, which influence a group or an individual's decision-making and affect their performance and strategies. According to McCauley and Moskalenko (2017), mass-level factors include wider public recognition of the enemy as intrinsically evil and harmful (*hate*), mobilization of opinion and action by an individual's self-sacrifice and his/her designation as a martyr (*martyrdom*), and mobilization of new support for terrorism by state overreaction to terrorist attack (*jujitsu politics*).

Therefore, what becomes clear is how most of these factors are related to strong emotional grievances such as personal victimization, perceived injustice, discrimination, marginalization, anger, shame, fear or hate. As portrayed in his work on *Leaderless Jihad*, Sageman (2008) while recognising those intense



emotional aspects, such as status-seeking, humiliation and comradeship, he particularly emphasises on the role of Islamophobia in Western countries, which has oftentimes shown to be at the core of brewing outrage among the Muslim population, which in turn allows terrorist groups to hijack those personal feelings of discrimination and victimization and convert them into extremist narratives. This is further substantiated by Abbas (2019) who argues that radicalization and Islamophobia are mutually reinforced, by effectively feeding off the motivation, drivers and expectations of the other. This directly falls in line with the *jujitsu politics* radicalization factor, which is well described by Pyszczynski, Motyl and Abdollahi's (2009, p.12) research, which suggests that *"...many of the same psychological forces that lead terrorists to their violent actions also lead to counter-terrorist policies that create massive collateral damage. This collateral damage appears to further escalate the cycle of violence and may aid the targets of those attacks in recruiting people for the terrorist cause"*.

It is essential to note that the three types of *Micro-*, *Meso-* and *Macro-* factors should not be considered consecutive stages, as mass-scale mechanisms could have an impact over individuals and groups, while individual-scale mechanisms could affect groups and mass opinion. That is particularly visible from the *'lone wolf'* terrorism phenomenon. In addition to that, the *Micro-*, *Meso-* factors are considered mechanisms of radicalization to action, whereas *Macro-* factors generate radicalization of public opinion.

Therefore as McCauley and Moskaleiko (2017) continue, since the research, which has been dominating the discourse on radicalization dynamics has been predominantly focusing on a linear and thereof, predictable frameworks, which have rendered its accuracy rather erroneous as such frameworks profoundly lack attention on the transition from radical thought to radical action, they put



forward also the *Two-Pyramids Model*, which highlights the tremendous gap between radicalization to extremist opinions and radicalization to extremist action, in other words, the distinction between the processes of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs and the processes of engaging in terrorist activity. The reason for the stress on such differentiation stems from the fact that while a considerable fraction of a given population could hold extremist ideas, a very minute proportion of those will ever actually act upon them.

The *Two-Pyramids Model* consists of the *Opinion Pyramid* and *Action Pyramid*. The former distinguishes individuals who do not support a political cause (*neutral*); those who believe in the cause but do not justify violence (*sympathizers*); those who justify violence in advocacy of the cause (*justifiers*); and those who feel a *personal moral obligation* to engage in violence in defence of the cause. Meantime, the *Action Pyramid* describes individuals who are not involved with a political group or cause (*inert*); those who are engaged in legal political action for the cause (*activists*); those engaged in illegal activities for the cause (*radicals*); and those engaged in an illegal action that targets civilians (*terrorists*).

While, McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) warn that the pyramids are not a stairway model and individuals could skip stages and even as an exception some individuals could engage in jihadist action without jihadist ideas for certain reasons, the importance of this model lies in the necessity of understanding the difference between attitudes and behaviours in order for the government, intelligence and civil society bodies to draft comprehensive and accurate counter-terrorism and radicalization prevention policies and actions – “*Fighting extreme ideas requires different skills than does fighting terrorists*”.

Therefore, considering the vast span of factors that contribute to the radicalization of individuals, it does not come as a surprise that the globalization



phenomenon, under which falls the expansion of the Internet and digital space, have further acted as catalysts for the abovementioned processes. RAND Europe report, titled “*Radicalisation in the digital era*” (von Behr, Reding, Edwards and Gribbon, 2013, p.xi) clearly explains the reasons behind this increasing trend: i) Internet creates more opportunities for becoming radicalised; ii) Internet acts as an ‘echo chamber’ iii) Internet accelerates the process of radicalisation iv) Internet allows radicalisation without physical contact and v) Internet increases opportunities for self-radicalisation. The following chapters will further put those arguments into perspective by relying on the case studies of two terrorist organizations and their social media radicalization and recruitment strategies.

II- Online Media Apparatus

1- Definition of Narrative

‘Extremist narratives’ are currently at the forefront of concerns of international actors in their fight with terrorist beliefs and actions, often being addressed through so-called ‘counter-narratives’ or ‘alternative narratives’ (Russell, 2018). Yet, such expressions are often fraught with ambiguity and confusion, thus for the purposes of achieving conceptual clarity and understanding, which would further illuminate how such narratives actually assist terrorists in fulfilling their agenda, this paper will explore further their definitions.

As argued by Homolar and Rodriguez-Merino (2019, p.3): “*Narratives are discursive systems of meaning-making that are linked to the material world surrounding us ... People rely upon narratives to make sense of the world, to reduce its complexity, and to comprehend new information*”. Therefore, far from being simply stories or rhetorical tools for



the dissemination of information, narratives are socially constructed – they are born during social interactions and carry the purport of the social network. Narratives are knitted by personal experiences and a person’s understanding of the world around him. Narratives do not exist in a vacuum: They are constantly recreated by the individuals who belong to that social network and they further provide meanings to matters, which would be otherwise deemed incomprehensible. Hence, they act as the cornerstone of people’s creation of sense-making and sense-giving, operating as instruments for structuring information and encapsulating the vast number of events and phenomena, which constitute our daily lives. As explained by Toguslu (2019), *“by organizing the world around them based on coherent narratives rooted in credible sources, they [people] construct preferred ways of life”*.

Applying this logic to episodes of violent extremism, what becomes evident is how without the specific narratives of terrorist groups, which construct such incidents as acts of terrorism, those events could remain rather unintelligible (Graef, Da Silva, and Lemay-Hebert, 2018). In other words, to objectively categorize violent deeds as explicit acts of terrorism, what is integral is the discourse through which that event acquires a terrorist meaning. Therefore, the following subsection will explore the different contexts, which generate such discourses.

2- Narratives of Radicalization

As earlier explained in the theoretical framework, there are three main levels at which radicalization takes place, namely *Micro*, *Meso* and *Macro*; according to Reed, Ingram and Whittaker (2017), these are also the respective stages where extremist communication happens, referring to the scope of the narratives delivered, each with its own distinct set of considerations. For example, the



Macro-level considerations comprise of the outreach, purpose, and echo of the narrative, while the *Meso-level* relate to the specific medium, transmitter, and structure of the narrative. In the meantime, the *Micro-level* considerations correspond to the design of the specific message, relying on factors such as rational-choice (based on the individual's cost-benefit analysis of options), identity-choice (based on the individual's contemplation of his/hers identity), and the say-do gap (the difference between one's words and actions). That is important to note as successful counter and alternative narratives must adequately consider and address all three levels.

In addition to that, McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) further use their *Two-Pyramid Model* to break down the meta-narratives of terrorist organizations into four major categories and analyze the relationship between radical ideas and actions and their subsequent adequate address.

According to Leuprecht , Hataley , Moskalenko & Mccauley (2010), the first category is the *political narrative*, which is associated with the 'wrongdoings' of the West or the so-perceived external enemy, including a neo-Marxist interpretation of global inequalities and injustice arising from Western supremacy and exploitation of the rest of the world, particularly the Muslim society. The second category is the *moral narrative*, which depicts the discrepancy and contradictions between the core values of liberal democracies, e.g. freedom of speech, gender equality and justice for all, and the actual reality where such values are seen as unrealizable hypocritical ideals, and thus lead to moral decay. The third category is the *religious narrative*, which misuses religious scriptures to justify and legitimize violence, which targets the 'enemy' and is undertaken in the name of Islam. And finally, the *social-psychological narrative* relies on an in-group/out-group strategy that labels those who do not abide by these narratives



as infidels and promote a brotherhood of violence as means of responding to social exclusion, achieving a desire for adventure, heroism and status, emphasizing on a life of sacrifice of earthly delights to become a 'true believer'.

Such meta-narratives are all too familiar elements of the repertoires of Islamist jihadist groups. For example, as described by Ibrahim (2007) in his analysis of the evolution of ideas of Al-Qaeda founders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden:

“[M]ost of their writings and speeches neatly fit into two genres – religious exegesis, meant to motivate and instruct Muslims, and propagandist speeches, aimed at demoralising the West and inciting Muslims to action. [...] In certain respects, these two genres agree over certain grievances: that the West is oppressive and unjust toward Islam, heedlessly or out of malice spilling the blood of innocent Muslims all around the world; that the West supports ruthless and dictatorial regimes in the Islamic world; that the West is responsible for the Israeli occupation of Palestine; that the West has killed one million Iraqi children; and so on.”

Further added by Schmid (2014), the structural elements of al Qaeda's narrative to recruit followers and join its jihad include *basic grievance* (the West is at war with Islam, as a result of which the Muslim community suffers constant humiliation and discrimination, and corrupt Muslim leaders and their followers, who have turned away from Islam by allowing Western ideas to infiltrate, have further deteriorated the situation for the rest of the Muslim world, creating an impasse); the *vision of the good society* (the idea of a Caliphate, which is ruled only by Sharia law and where the order is restored); a *path from the grievance to the realisation of the vision* (the way to redemption and regaining the lost honour and glory of Muslims is through violent jihad against the enemy, which ultimately results in holy sacrifice).



In addition to that, other elements part of Al-Qaeda's narrative includes support for suicide attacks as a path towards 'martyrdom'; lack of differentiation between civilian and military targets in the fight against the enemy; the killing of Muslims, who do not follow the stipulated path and obstruct the way fulfilling the 'holy' mission; *Takfir*, or the course of ex-communication, where one Muslim declares another as a non-believer (*kafir*) for failure to accept or follow the practices deemed correct by jihadists; the pursuit of jihad as an individual obligation; *Dar al-Harb*, or a clash between the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world; establishment of sharia law everywhere across the world.

As it becomes clear, Al-Qaeda's narratives not only distinctly fall in line with the described by Leuprecht et al. (2010) four categories, but further show how the group has managed to shrewdly reduce an extremely complex reality into a black-and-white equation of good and bad.

A similar strategy is seen in the extremist propaganda of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Daesh, currently officially referred to as the Islamic State (IS). The group gained prominence in 2014 with the declaration of its worldwide Islamic Caliphate and well-designed narrative, which has not only breached transnational and territorial boundaries, turning its mission more into a dreamlike nebulous idea rather than a concrete movement but has managed to glamorize its actions, generating an almost "superstar" image, which seduces thousands of sympathizers across the globe (EFSAS, 2019). As explained by Fink and Sugg (2015), the similarities between the narratives of Al-Qaeda and ISIS are numerous - an obligation for the performance of jihad on behalf of all Muslims; the vilification of the West; the incompatibility of Islam with secular law and governance; branding of those abstaining from jihad as *kafirs* or apostates; and the support



for suicide attacks and lone-wolf attacks. Yet, the crucial difference between the two groups' narratives lies in the ultimate objectives they try to achieve via them. While al-Qaeda portrays itself as a militant organisation, which is in defensive jihad against the West and acts in retaliation for Muslim oppression, the narrative of the Islamic State builds upon a discourse of Islamic state-building and governance, with the highly structured and intricate design of establishing a Utopian state, which replaces the already existing ones and provides social services in accordance with Sharia law (Fink and Sugg, 2015). Moreover, as pointed out by Toguslu (2019), ISIS' performative narratives further emphasise on *hijrah*, or the migration to ISIS territory, often calling upon foreign fighters to leave their jobs, families and belongings to join the Caliphate and pledge allegiance to the group.

This is further reflected in ISIS' narratives of resilience and endurance as elaborated by Azman (2020). The *Baqiyah wa Tatamaddad* (Remaining and Expanding) so-called slogan of the terrorist outfit has demonstrated the group's determination for a global overarching Islamic Caliphate, which is no longer based solely in Syria and Iraq. ISIS' expansion to regions such as North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia has indicated its effective restructuring of the *wilayat* framework, signifying that the group is intact and well-functioning (Azman, 2020). The terrorist outfit has shown the ability and flexibility to adapt itself to the particular unmet needs of the people of different regions, taking advantage of local contexts such as political instability, corruption, public discontent and ongoing inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, thus presenting its utopia in accordance with regional demands and establishing a fit-all narrative, which allows it to broaden its pool for recruitment and reach out to a bigger audience which will facilitate the implementation of its objectives (EFSAS, 2019).



Through decentralization efforts, ISIS reduces its risk of downfall and spreads its chances for success (Clarke, 2019). Thus, he continues on arguing that while taking the example of the region of South Asia, explains that it is erroneous to perceive ISIS as a monolithic entity, as one could observe the mushrooming of multiple 'wilayahs', run by affiliated groups which exploit the local socio-political scenarios and grow their own capabilities. By acting under the banner of ISIS, such groups strive to obtain the status of 'true' defender of Islam.

"Just like a multinational corporation, IS is expanding operations in some areas while downsizing and streamlining capabilities in other parts of the organisation. Even if the decentralisation of IS provinces is not accompanied by a concomitant shift in the distribution of resources to these nascent franchise groups, including manpower and weaponry, what is clear is that IS is hedging its bets by dispersing organisational affiliates across the globe." (2019, n.p.)

Hence, what needs to be recognised is the fact that IS is not a homogenous entity; rather it consists of various semi-associated clusters of extremist actors, terrorist groups and individuals, who could even operate independently, displaying a complex reality where its ideological narrative becomes self-sustaining, imposing additional obstacles for its adequate address (Troy, 2019).

In addition to that, as highlighted by Fink and Sugg (2015), another major distinction between the narratives of Al-Qaeda and Islamic State is the approach to violence they undertake. While certainly, both groups resort to unforgivable levels of brute force and attack on civilians, among Al-Qaeda members there have been certain concerns to what extent such sheer brutality might alienate key followers, thus rhetoric on restraining unnecessary bloodlust has occasionally appeared; in contrast, ISIS appears to rely on its barbaric violence to attract more



recruits, shock the world and draw more attention on itself. That is particularly visible through its online media strategy.

3- Terrorist Group's Online Media Strategies

3.1. ISIS

Undoubtedly, ISIS has established itself as the biggest pioneer in making great use of the virtual space for the purposes of conducting its operations and consolidating its influence and control (Baumberger, 2019). Since its very establishment, the members of the extremist organization started taking advantage of online platforms to promulgate their ideology and foster others, especially young disenfranchised individuals, to support their cause, travel to the Middle East and participate in acts of terrorism (Schmid, 2015). The group further encouraged sympathizers to engage in lone-wolf terrorist attacks in other places around the world, often through the dissemination of elaborate high-quality video propaganda, which glamorized their actions and constructed around them an aura of eminence and mightiness (EFSAS, 2019). Their success was additionally fueled by their ability of rebranding the whole Jihadi phenomenon and promote it as stardom - turning it into an appealing subculture through the use of online magazines, clothing, rap videos, memes, political humour and other trending currents, which intrigue the young audiences (ibid).

While numerous researches have focused on IS' exploitation of different media platforms, to date, few contributions have focused on the group's actual online media strategy, rather than simply defining it as 'multidimensional'. Yet, that is essential to discuss considering the group's wide outreach among its Western



young audience, which is traditionally used to a very rich and sophisticated media content, thus fostering high levels of creativity and flexibility. Monaci (2017) identifies three key assets of IS' media strategy on the basis of her analysis of IS' *Dabiq* online magazine - synergistic storytelling, imaginary world-making, and semantic triggering. According to her, "*different media contents are not just different channels of distribution of the same message, but each medium is chosen for its specific aesthetic and communicative features in a transmedia communication strategy in which each medium "can do what it does best" to maximize the narrative impact*" (2017, p. 2846).

In other words, ISIS purposefully relies on different mediums, which are not simply interchangeable, but actually assist each other to effectively build its narrative through various angles and layers, incorporating a variety of cognitive associations, which encourage the movement from one platform to another. The group purposefully disseminates numerous messages, with a complex system of interrelated references on various platforms, in order to create an online imaginary story world, following a non-linear kind of narrative, which has a profound emotional impact on its target audience and encourages their interactive engagement through semantic triggers.

A good example is the IS' online magazine *Dabiq*, which was first published in 2014 through the dark web in a number of different languages, including English, French, Arabic and German (Monaci, 2017). The magazine, which was published by the terrorist group's main media producer Al-Hayat Media Network, by means of video links, symbolic images, songs (*nasheeds*) and hashtags regularly disseminated brand-like content, which was further streamlined on its social media channels, including YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Telegram, amplifying the reach of its message (ibid). The magazine further contained email



addresses and stated that “*The Dabiq team would like to hear back from its readers*“, illustrating how the group’s online propaganda is not simply top-down, but further encourages personal communication and interaction (Schlegel, 2018, p. 4). Schlegel (2018) continues on examining another challenge of IS’ propaganda material, namely its so-called *gamification*. She explains how jihadist groups aim to attract young audiences through elements of pop culture, such as video games, which introduce incentives of gaining status, prizes and new ‘levels’, while making their cause look ‘cool’. Games such as the Islamist version of *Grand Theft Auto* or the IS App, *Moalem Al-Hijaá* (Spelling Teacher), which is designed like a classic word-finding game, yet instead it shows the correct spelling of military weapons, constitute few examples among many others.

In another case, one of ISIS' most successful ventures was the Arabic-language application for mobile devices called ‘*The Dawn of Glad Tidings*’, or simply ‘*Dawn*’, which for a while was available for download in Google and Apple App stores and allowed its followers to keep up with the latest activities of the group in real-time. Downloading the app-enabled ISIS to gain temporary control over the Twitter account of the user and post tweets on his behalf, the content of which was determined by a member of ISIS’ social-media operation team. The tweets included text, links, hashtags, and images, and the same content was re-tweeted by all the accounts signed up with the application, generating a considerable amount of traffic on Twitter (Stern and Berger, 2015).

As explained by Berger and Morgan (2015) in their study of defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter, much of the group’s popularity on social media could be actually attributed to a relatively small group of hyperactive users, which number between 500 and 2,000 accounts, and tweet in concentrated amounts of time, generating a high volume of tweets. Klausen



(2015) further explains how regarding IS' Twitter reach out to followers from Western countries, the group relies on other Europe-based terrorist accounts to spread the message, primarily associated with the banned British organization Al-Muhajiroun and its leader Anjem Choudary. What that shows is how IS' locally produced propaganda narrative approaches a wider global audience through a complex and diffuse network of social media facilitators and disseminators. As summarised by Monaci (2017, p.2854):

“A transmedia narrative scattered among different platforms and contents seems more complex to comprehend than a single text or an online video. Nevertheless, the goal of a transmedia strategy is accomplished when the audience explores the entire story world through its multiple platforms and aesthetic dimensions. This also optimizes engagement in the sense of cognitive involvement to exploit opportunities for proselytism or even recruitment. To achieve this goal, every single component should give the audience an added value in terms of either aesthetic experience or additive comprehension of the story world.”

As argued by Mamaev (2018), jihadis often like hackers tend to go step ahead of authorities in their utilization of state-of-the-art technologies. This statement particularly applies to IS, which has carefully taken into consideration the mistakes of other terrorist groups and cunningly continue to exploit various communication tools to share its propaganda.

For example, as revealed in a 34-page manual on securing communications, developed by IS, which appeared across jihadi forums, apart from well-known applications such as Twitter, Justpaste.it, Telegram, iMessage and FaceTime, the group has been relying on other communication applications, considered having better end-to-end encryption such as Signal, and the German CryptoPhone and BlackPhone. In addition to that, apps such as FireChat, Tin Can and The Serval



Project was further described as suitable communication services particularly in the absence of Internet since users could gain access to them through Bluetooth. Mapps and Avast SecureLine were other applications suggested owing to their quality to mask the user's location and IP address (Zetter, 2015).

Moreover, the group launched in 2015 an official mobile app of its news outlet Amaq, through which it streams short news reports, including images and videos. Despite statements on behalf of Belgian authorities that the service was disrupted in late 2019 after blocking communication channels (The Brussels Times, 2019), the threat of the online presence of IS remains far from overcome. The terrorist outfit earlier had created an instant messaging application called Alrawi, which was only available on the Dark Web and is believed to have taken the place of Amaq, owing to its better encryption as well (Mamaev, 2018). Thus, the wide range of applications at IS' disposal, having their different goals and purposes, not only manifests the innovative thinking and cutting-edge technology the group resorts to, but it also demonstrates how the terrorist outfit has transcended the traditional boundaries of counterinsurgency and its defeat will no longer take place merely in the physical world. As Votel, Bembenek, Hans, Mouton and Spencer (2017) argue, the virtual space creates a safe haven for ISIS, providing it with the opportunity to retreat and rebuild its capacity in order to carry on with its activities in the real world, imposing another strain on intelligence and law enforcement efforts.

3.2. Al-Qaeda

In comparison with its barbaric rival the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda has taken the second place in regards to its utilization of social media technologies and thus has been widely seen as lacking innovation and modernization of its recruitment strategy (Koerner, 2016). Unlike its counterpart which is open to crowdsourcing



its social media activity, alongside its violent attacks, out to loosely affiliated individuals or those with no concrete ties (lone wolves), Al-Qaeda has applied much more scrutiny in coordinating and controlling its terror cells, which has resulted in its inability to attract as many individuals and reach out to followers outside of its regular recruitment pool (ibid). In addition, the group has been predominantly relying on hidden forums and controlled-access online platforms to discuss issues related to its jihadist movement, which has resulted in an indeed more ideological dialogue, yet it has limited its popular influence (Kuminski, 2018). However, the group does share a long history of its mainstream and social media usage which deserves to be recalled for the purposes of making comprehensive future forecasts.

Al-Qaeda was one of the very first terrorist organisations which recognised the importance of media outlets and exploited them to their advantage. One infamous case, which continues to remind of the group's cunningness is the sustained broadcasting of Osama bin Laden's audio and videotapes on *Al Jazeera*, the latter being chosen by the terrorist group as their preferred network for delivering its message to the larger audience (Lyons, 2013). It was during that time when Singapore's former Ambassador to the United Nations and prominent scholar, Kishore Mahbubani directed a question towards the American society, "*How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?*" (Schmid, 2014, p.12).

Kuminski (2018) explains how Al-Qaeda's communication strategy consists of a three-tiered system, where at the top leaders exchange messages through password-protected firewalls; in the middle, other major jihadi figures discuss matters related to strategy in forums, which could also be password protected, yet have slightly more open access to potential recruits; and, in the bottom, chat



rooms and independent websites allow for radicals and non-radicals to communicate in order to foster engagement in the jihadi cause. Yet, despite the group's clear reliance on modern technologies and the internet, being one of the pioneers in that field and having established a well-known 'brand' for itself, its current endeavours were not trumped with the same success as its rival. Particularly, in the case of the Al Qaeda's branch in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), its utilization of social media platforms such as Twitter has even been portrayed as a complete failure (Torres-Soriano, 2016). Scholars attribute this occurrence to the group's ideological aims – since Al-Qaeda tends to focus on the far enemy (the West), it is more likely to attract passive supporters rather than active willing to travel adherents (Postel, 2013; Kuminski, 2018).

In addition to that, looking closer at the group's propaganda narratives, for example through its online magazine *Inspire*, the jihadist outfit typically focuses on its elite and prominent leaders, whereas for IS, the latter places at the frontline the stories of ordinary fighters, moving the focus to the average individual, encouraging viewers to identify themselves with those on the screen (Koerner, 2016).

Thus, it quickly became visible how IS recognised Al-Qaeda's mistakes in order to grow their capabilities (Rogers, 2019); yet, as argued by Hoffman and Ware (2020), while IS was dominating the scene in the last six years, Al-Qaeda has been also quietly recalibrating its capacities, manifesting its resilience and increasing threat, hence the danger declared by bin Laden nearly a quarter of a century ago, must not be easily called off.

3.3. The European Context



Particularly in Europe, the online influence of terrorist organizations, especially in this case IS, could be determined by the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, who travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the so-called 'Islamic Caliphate' in the years of 2011-2016 (RAN, 2017). As reported by Bak (2019), since 2012 more than 5,000 foreign terrorist fighters came to Syria and Iraq from Western countries, with Belgium having the highest number relative to population size. As per a report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (Neumann, 2015), among the European countries with the largest number of fighters were France (1,200), Germany (500-600), United Kingdom (500-600), Belgium (440), Netherlands (200-250), Sweden (150-180), Austria (100-150) and Denmark (100-150). Clearly, having the capability of luring such an impressively large audience requires very sophisticated concerted efforts at crafting an appealing message online and recognizing the correct mediums for its subsequent dissemination.

A study conducted by Bouzar and Flynn (2017) on 809 French nationals that had attempted to leave France to join ISIS highlights seven separate narratives used by ISIS recruiters online. The jihadist recruiters were particularly targeting individuals who were believed to be susceptible to such narratives, which was confirmed during the initial interactions with the individual. As discussed in their research, the seven narratives are the following:

- *The Search for a Better World Narrative* – The recruiters try to build up an image of a utopian society, where brotherhood, equality and solidarity reigns and everyone is submitted to divine law. Recruits are shown videos of men and women from various backgrounds helping each other, cooking and eating together, children playing and IS members providing aid to the poor.



- *The “Mother Teresa” Narrative* – Recruiters exploit the willingness of young people, who want to work in the fields of social work, medicine, nursing or other occupations centred around helping others, by convincing the target that they need to join their ranks as they are most needed. That takes place through very graphic videos and images of children being killed by the so-called enemy, thus triggering a strong emotive response and empathy in the observer, who condemns the suffering and pain of the victims in the video.
- *The Saviour Narrative* – Recruiters when encountering someone who has recently lost a loved one, attempt to leverage the individual’s longing to be reunited with that person, by showing videos of a fairy-tale-like paradise in heaven and making predictions that the end is near, playing upon the individual’s grief.
- *The Marriage Narrative* – Predominantly directed at young girls, this recruitment narrative describes an opportunity to find a strong good husband, who will protect them. Often depicted through videos of hero-looking men, who fight for the so-perceived noble cause, young women are attracted to travel and marry them.
- *The “Lancelot” Narrative* – Targeting young men, this narrative attracts individuals who fantasize of being warrior-like heroes, being provided with a chance to prove their bravery and manhood. The videos associated with this narrative often promoted the theme of the oppressed who courageously stood up to protect their community and fight for vengeance, regaining their honour.
- *The “Zeus” Narrative* – Individuals recruited under this narrative try to impose Sharia law or God’s word on others. However, interestingly, more than often they themselves are engaged in forbidden risky behaviours (e.g.



drugs, unprotected sex, high-speed driving, etc.), thus acting as if they are omnipotent and have no limits. In summary, such recruits do not practice what they preach, but rather use the name of God to have others submit to them. The videos associated with this narrative are often overwhelmed with violent scenes portraying the ruthless killings of rebels.

- *The Fortress Narrative* – The young male, who were targeted under this narrative, were often propelled towards certain (often unorthodox) sexual obsessions and were terrified from yielding them. As a result, by joining a radical Islamist organisation they were searching for a way to suppress them and rediscover a better and purer version of themselves, “*building a fortress around their bodies*”, protecting themselves from such urges.

As Bouzar and Flynn (2017) conclude, such recruitment strategies effectively increase the dimensions of the recruiting pool, reaching out to individuals who are notably marginalized or disenfranchised from society. That is essential, since as argued by Weimann (2016), the future of terrorist groups primarily relies on the factor of recruitment, without which they cannot survive, recalibrate and prevail.

In another study issued by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (2017), which examines the online activity of extremist groups in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, the authors recognise three major categories of online content: (i) extremist groups that are pro-violence; (ii) propaganda material, such as calls for jihad or for support for imprisoned imams; and (iii) trends and attitudes towards the state, institutions and society in general. According to the report, the most utilized mobile applications by supporters of extremist groups were Facebook and YouTube, in comparison to Western European countries, which heavily



relied on Twitter. In addition to that, relocation to Telegram and Signal in case of interception was also a common phenomenon.

The list of case studies goes on and on. As argued by Glazzard (2017, p.12), “*in searching for examples of storytelling in terrorist propaganda, the problem is abundance, not scarcity*”. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the following section will examine how such terrorist narratives could be challenged and addressed in an effective, comprehensible and consistent manner.

4- Countering Terrorist Narratives & Providing Alternative Message

As described in the preceding sections, terrorist organizations systematically rely on particular online narratives in order to indoctrinate, radicalize and recruit new members, while maintaining and justifying their activities (van Ginkel, 2015). The numerous studies, which examine jihadist narratives analyse their discourse, key terminology, structure, messengers, mediums and objectives in order to deduce what is the underlying logic behind it and develop a counter-message, which would ultimately create a counterculture to those extremist ideas and ideologies and prevent them from spreading. In order to address terrorist narratives, counter-narratives are seen as necessary tools in the fight with violent extremism and terrorism, yet considering the wide scope of meanings applied to terms such as ‘counter-extremist narratives’, which render its definition rather ambiguous, the current research has chosen to rely on Briggs and Fave’s (2013) “counter-messaging spectrum”, which stratifies such efforts into three main groups: government strategic communications, alternative narratives, and counter-narratives. Government strategic communications are aiming at raising awareness about the strategies the government is undertaking in PVE and CVE,



presenting them in a positive light, forging relationships with key bodies and tackling misinformation campaigns. Counter-narratives, meantime, directly challenge the extremist propaganda, by attempting to deconstruct, expose and discredit its treacherous ideology and logic, via resorting to objective facts and truths. Finally, alternative narratives present alternative message, instead of engaging with the same extremist content, focusing primarily on positive values, such as communal harmony, diversity, tolerance, social inclusion, freedom and democracy.

In order to select which of the three approaches is most suitable for the given situation, van Ginkel (2015) argues that one must answer the question, “*Who is in control of the narrative?*” (p.1). In order to further clarify that, there are certain recurring elements that need to be taken into account: *target group, message, messenger* and *channel used for communicating the message*. It is imperative for the purposes of having a successful campaign to consider all four factors and coordinate them accordingly.

As communicated by the Radicalization Awareness Network’s Communication and Narratives working group (RAN C&N), which has developed the GAMMMA+ model for implementing efficient alternative and counter-narrative campaigns, understanding profoundly the needs, priorities, motivations, beliefs and influences of the target audience, how and where they communicate them to each other, and why they would be inclined to responding to one’s campaign is the basis of any intervention (RAN, 2019a). Therefore, knowing the group’s demographic information, their online and offline social networking patterns, their educational and professional occupations, alongside with their general interests are vitally important for engaging effectively with them (van Ginkel, 2015).



Second, the message promoted during the campaign must be highly relevant to the target group's needs and carry a positive social currency (RAN, 2019a). Campaigns that count on the constant stream of content, which fosters interaction with the target audience, and in that sense have to rely on quantity and authenticity rather than simply technical quality, appear more successful in generating impact (ibid). In addition to that, the language selected for undertaking the campaign must resonate with the lingo of the target audience (van Ginkel, 2015).

Even if the message of the campaign is designed to perfection, in the lack of credible messenger to disseminate it, all efforts of addressing and influencing positively the target audience will remain futile (ibid). The credibility of the messenger correlates with the extent to which he or she is being seen as a trustworthy individual by the target group (ibid). Here, van Ginkel (2015) outlines the main actors involved in the delivery of such messages:

- *Government actors* are best positioned in the formal communication of messages which fall in line with the government strategic communication campaigns, which predominantly focus on narratives of rule-of-law-based societies, which respect and protect human rights, diversity and pluralism. They further inform their audiences of their foreign policy decisions and measures adopted to mitigate any risks in terms of security. Government representatives could explain the rationales behind such operations and mitigate any misconceptions of governmental activities. The government could further play a small role in providing alternative narratives, yet that is rather limited, as it is better left to other actors.
- *Semi-public actors or front-line practitioners* are actors, including youth workers, social workers and medical practitioners who often enjoy one-to-



one communication with individuals from the target audience and are thus best situated in providing alternative narratives, alongside with counter-narratives. Their efficiency highly relies on their ability to build trust with the person in question.

- *Religious leaders and religious associations* are best placed in addressing extremist misinterpretation of Islam, thus directly tackling jihadist narratives and providing the individual with a correct reading of religion, thus offering both counter and alternative narratives.
- *Associations representing minority groups or migrants* are in a similar position to communicating alternative and counter-narratives as religious leaders.
- *Role models and youth leaders* are often public figures who are well respected in society and looked up by young people. They could play an apposite role in setting up an example and inspiring others to follow it, thus desisting from the path of radicalization. They are most effective in communicating alternative narratives.
- *Former jihadists* are also very important voices in the delivery of credible messages. Based on their own experience they could provide both counter and alternative narratives, by exposing the misleading and treacherous line of terrorist groups and fostering others to question their real intentions.
- *Victims of terrorism* also carry a significant role in providing counter-narratives by displaying the inhumane and barbaric nature of terrorist groups.
- *Educators* are essential in recognizing early signs of indoctrination and radicalization and thus addressing the underlying causes through special educational programs or open discussions and providing alternative narratives.



- *Family members and direct neighbours and friends* are also uniquely situated in recognizing early signs of radicalization and thus having an open dialogue with the individual in countering the narrative and offering alternative solutions.

The last step is choosing the correct medium of communication (ibid). The same manner, terrorist groups are using multiple platforms to communicate their message, successful public campaigns need to determine and resort to the right mediums for the distribution of their message. It is essential to consider using the right medium for the right purpose (RAN, 2019a). For example, the target audience could use Facebook as a source of news, but be more interactive and responsive on Instagram. Hence, if the aim of the campaign is to create short informative videos, then it would be best to disseminate it on Facebook. But if the aim of the campaign is to collect qualitative data, then using Instagram stories for polls, questions etc. could be the better option.

RAN Policy & Practice Workshop on Narratives and Strategies of Far-Right and Islamist Extremists published in 2019 presents the example of several well-known frames which terrorist groups exploit in order to attract followers and offers guidelines in dealing with those jihadist narratives through counter and alternative communication strategies (RAN, 2019b).

- Deconstructing the frame “*Islam is under attack*”: Jihadist groups often use as justification the claim that Islam is under threat from the West in order to trigger anti-western sentiments among a wider Muslim audience, for the purposes of exploiting any already existing local political grievances and legitimising their levels of violence. This particular frame could attract both individuals who hold strong religious or ideological views and those who are motivated mostly by political resentments, thus in order to



address those two target audiences, an efficient campaign should recognise whether to engage them either in theological discussions or rather act upon their psycho-social issues and address their emotions and grievances.

- Deconstructing the frame “*you will never be accepted, you will never succeed as a Muslim in Western societies*”: This frame plays upon identity issues, feelings of marginalisation, discrimination, injustice and vulnerability certain Muslims living in Western countries might experience. As such, any strategies aiming to provide an alternative narrative should emphasise on the sense of belonging and importance of being part of a diverse and equal society. In addition, they should also hear and acknowledge the hardships and discontent those people have experienced, alongside with recognising the levels of prejudice and intolerance that exist in Western societies, when engaging with their audience and addressing their needs.

The RAN Guidelines (2019b) further explain how jihadists purposefully rely on the dichotomous reading of events – us versus them, good versus evil, etc. Such a binary approach to reality helps them place everything in rigid black and white categories, where Muslim people should see themselves only through their religious identity, negating any cultural, ethnic or language factors. Unfortunately, those narratives tend to be additionally reinforced by the negative portrayal of Muslim people owing to the West’s so-called “war on terror”. Thus, for any counter or alternative narratives campaign to be met with success, a broader integrative discourse on identity should take place, which describes individuals as ‘holders’ of multiple different qualities and identities and avoid harmful generalisations.



5- Challenges

As discussed in a Practical Guide issued by EUROPOL (Reed and Ingram, 2019), lack of empirical evidence in the existing literature on the underlying effectiveness of counter-extremist narratives tends to undermine their usability. Too often such messages are based on a very simplistic “*hypodermic needle*” model of communication, portraying the audience as passive users, who respond similarly to opposing stimuli (being exposed to extremist narrative and counter-narrative in return), and thus in accordance change their behaviour and beliefs straightaway. Hence, it is argued that a causal relationship between the consumption of terrorist narratives and counter-narratives should not be so readily deduced.

Moreover, counter-narratives are primarily defensive in nature, counteracting the opposition’s discourse by discrediting it; thus, by simply responding to the adversary’s narrative, counter-narratives remain limited in power as they are shaped by the ideology of the opposing party. What’s more, they fail to address the question, *why* the violent extremist message was appealing in the first place. Therefore, the authors’ advice on supplementing counter-narrative campaigns with other approaches in order to avoid any limited results and enhance the chances for a positive impact (Reed and Ingram, 2019).

6- Other Strategies

As emphasized by Singh, Kerr and Hamburger (2016), critical thinking and reading become essential skills in the fight with extremist content online. Digital literacy classes must be promoted especially among the youth in order to encourage their analytical thinking and critical media content analysis. PVE &



CVE strategies should aim to inspire a sense of individual responsibility to fact-check the information one receives and expose fake news online (RAN, 2019b). Considering the omnipresence of the Internet, people will inevitably stumble across questionable or upsetting materials, however, it is the attitude to those materials which will define their actions – whether they will engage with it or report it.

The reason for that is the current inefficacy of social media censorship policies (Mackinnon, 2017). Although communication networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram have crafted various policies for suppressing extremist or hate speech online, often the suspension of accounts or elimination of violent content takes place after the materials have been already uploaded and reached hundreds of people. In addition to that, like the cutting off of a Hydra's head - with the closure of one account, multiple others arise. That is anticipated considering that terrorist groups are not accountable to any ethical protocols online and thus enjoy no restrictions unlike state or private actors (Bertram, 2016). Nevertheless, regulating the cyberspace while not jeopardizing one's online liberties should still remain a major priority for governments and private companies (Mackinnon, 2017).

Yet, taking down websites, filtering materials and other forms of blocking online content bear several hurdles. Not only democratic governments are wary of the political repercussions and potential loss of legitimacy if parts of the internet are censored, but they might not be even in a position to achieve that (EFSAS, 2018). If the website is hosted outside the country, the government might not be in a position to exercise authority over the hosting company (ibid). In any case, such measures often imply huge financial costs and considering the immensity of the



cyberspace, it is not realistic to expect that all potentially radicalizing content would be removed from the internet, or at least not on time (ibid).

Thus, suspension of extremist websites should indeed take place alongside with legal measures in order to send a message to terrorist groups that they could enjoy impunity in the cyberspace; yet, there must be a greater focus on the promotion of comprehensive media literacy strategies and online content analysis, since takedowns of websites and prosecution of terrorist deal with the symptom, not with the cause (Singh, Kerr and Hamburger, 2016).

IV- Conclusion

Given the multiplicity of drivers of radicalization, addressing violent extremism appears as a complex venture. The phenomenon has even aggrandized due to the exploitation of outstanding characteristics of the current interconnected world, such as the availability of digital technologies. Consequently, extremist activities have become harder to detect and predict, making traditional law enforcement techniques alone insufficient to deal with these trends, particularly in relation to tackling the root causes of the problem. Therefore, with the rise of terrorist incidents related to online radicalization, generating counter and alternative narratives and promoting media literacy strategies appears vital to the protection of human rights, freedom of expression, universal access to information and intercultural dialogue.

The intricate media and information landscape are in need of critical minds in the public in order to continue to serve its purpose properly. More attention should be paid to critical online content analysis in order to strengthen young people's safeguarding mechanisms vis-à-vis extremist messages.



Whatever one's mind consume, has a direct impact on their life. Therefore, young people should be encouraged, especially those highly susceptible to radicalization, to deflate the heroic narrative of Islamic jihad produced by terrorist groups, question the origins and intentions of the information they read online, gain theoretical basis and practical skills in recognizing signs of radicalization and preventing its spread, and leverage the influential role of communication technologies to promote the inclusive and egalitarian civic engagement online and offline in their pluralistic societies.

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