Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism

Drawing on ICCT's Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) Project's Research Papers "Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption" and "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict", this Policy Brief lays out a multi-tiered framework for counter-terrorism strategic communications programmes and concrete evaluation of programme results. The Policy Brief proposes highly focused interventions which can be evaluated quantitatively and deployed across multiple platforms, using an evolving set of messaging themes that are informed by the results of evaluation and reiterated with adjustments to improve efficacy.

About the Author

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About ICCT

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Introduction

The field of strategic counter-terrorism communications has been blessed, or cursed, with an overabundance of creativity. Many ideas for countering violent extremism (CVE) or preventing violent extremism (PVE) have been advanced, but they are often ungrounded in existing research on disengagement from armed movements, with many approaches based on assumptions that have been largely discredited, such as claims that poor economic conditions or lack of education contribute to violent extremism.[1] The wide scope of these efforts often results in programme proposals that are unwieldy and are never implemented.

Disengagement Over De-Radicalisation

Rather than try to solve all of the world's problems in the name of CVE – an outlier challenge involving fractional percentages of any given population – this paper approaches the issue with a limited scope. The goal of CVE programmes should be to encourage disengagement from violent extremist social networks. Participation in VE social networks – i.e., knowing someone who is a violent extremist, either online or off – is one of the few reliable indicators that someone may present a security concern.[2] Disrupting extremist efforts to draw vulnerable individuals into their social networks is a practical, achievable goal. Because messaging is intrinsic to these VE recruitment networks, particularly in the West, initial efforts should focus on countermessaging and disruption, with an eye toward developing findings on effective themes and approaches that can inform offline efforts.

A review of the literature on disengagement reveals that participants in armed movements – including but not limited to terrorist groups – can be prompted to leave chiefly by negative perceptions about the movement in question.[3]

Family considerations also featured prominently in decisions to disengage. Family issues are complex and individualised. For instance, some of the appeal of countercultural extremist movements lies in differentiating from parental values. In other cases, such as dysfunctional families, an intervention can be ineffective or counterproductive. While such interventions should be explored, they are difficult to fit into programmatic guidelines. Additionally complicating efforts to address the most significant VE challenge in the current global environment, the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) has been very successful at repelling family interventions.

Disengagement is a preferable goal to "de-radicalisation," which is frequently the focus of CVE and always the focus of PVE. Disengagement is the process by which individuals

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[1] E. Benmelech and E. F. Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?", No. w22190. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016, http://www.nber.org/papers/w22190; C. Berrebi, "Evidence about the link between education, poverty and terrorism among Palestinians." Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy 13, no. 1 (2007). Other examples are found in J.M. Berger, "Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 5 (2016), .

[2] M. Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century.* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); More recently: S. C. Reynolds, *"German foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq",* Diss. Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2016; C. Goerzig and K. Al-Hashimi, *Radicalization in Western Europe: Integration, Public Discourse and Loss of Identity Among Muslim Communities,* (Routledge September 15, 2014), p.18.

[3] Detailed in "Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption," pp. 19-23. See also F. Demant, M. Slootman, F. Buijs & J. Tillie, "Decline and disengagement: An analysis of processes of deradicalisation", IMES Reports Series, (2008), (pp. 1–208). Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies.

cease to be mobilised in support of a violent extremist movement. De-radicalisation is the process by which individuals cease to hold extremist beliefs.

De-radicalisation is worth pursuing as a separate line of effort, but such approaches are problematic as a direct, measurable way to reduce violent behavior, because they deal with the internal thought processes of individuals. Disengagement focuses on behavior and thus is less subjective and more quantifiable. It is also easier to design programmes that promote disengagement without relying on questionable assumptions about the causes of violent extremism.

Extremist Processes

Radicalisation Model

Discussions of radicalisation have been controversial at times, due to the lack of a clear definition of what it means to be radical. Radicalism is not a bad thing, per se, and can include such activities as the pursuit of civil rights. Additionally, only a tiny percentage of people with radical views will become terrorists, with the vast majority participating only in social activism. Finally, some models have been focused on jihadism to the exclusion of understanding a process that pertains to multiple ideologies.[4]

Nevertheless, it is useful to have some sort of model to understand the process that sometimes leads to violent participation in extremism. The model proposed here is intended to provide measurable transitions that can be used to identify audiences for strategic counter-terrorism communications.

A six-step process model is proposed, which people who are vulnerable to engagement with violent extremist social networks can exit at any point:

1. Curiosity – recruitment target's first contact with a VE ideology.

2. Consideration – target evaluates the VE ideology for credibility, relevance.

3. Identification – target identifies him/herself as an adherent of VE ideology.

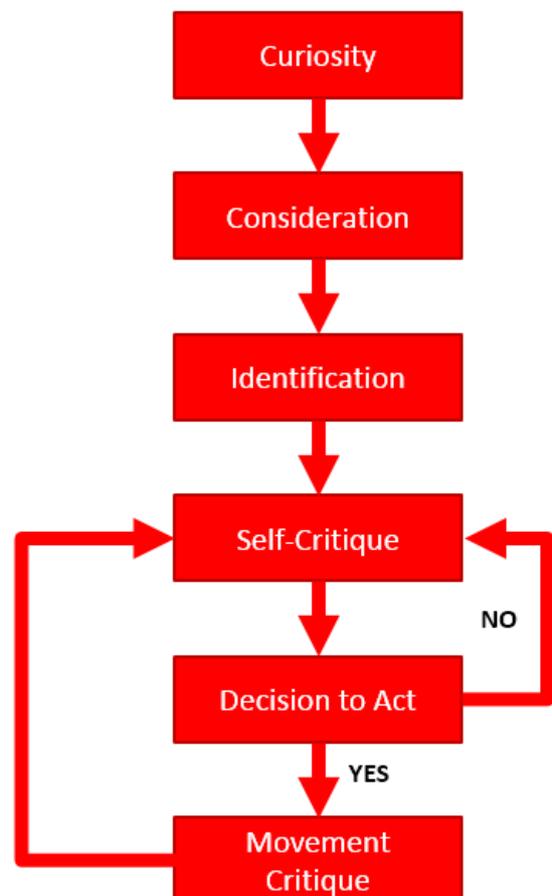4. Self-critique – target asks whether he or she is doing

Figure 1: A typical radicalisation model

[4]M. German. "Debunked NYPD Radicalisation Report Just Won't Die," ACLU.org, February 11, 2013, https://www.aclu.org/blog/debunked-nypd-radicalisation-report-just-wont-die.

enough for the cause. If the answer is yes, the self-critique repeats periodically. If the answer is no, the target proceeds to the next step.

5. Decision to act – target decides whether to undertake violent or material action on behalf of VE ideology. If the decision is made to act, the target proceeds to Movement-critique. If decision is not to act, the target either disengages from the radicalisation process or revisits an earlier stage.

6. Movement-critique – target asks if the cause is doing enough for him or her. If the movement is not seen as deserving of the sacrifices a target makes on its behalf, the user may disengage. If the movement is seen as worthy, the self-critique repeats and more action may be taken.

These steps are not always linear, and some at-risk individuals may skip steps entirely, but most people will pass through most of the stages. After the sixth step, the self-critique is reiterated. The typical route is pictured in Figure 1.

IS Recruitment Process

As discussed at length in the author's paper "Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy,"[5] IS has taken a five-step approach to recruitment.

1. Discovery – Target's first contact with IS.

2. Create micro-community – IS introduces recruiters to target's environment.

3. Isolate target from mainstream – Recruiters encourage target to cut ties with mainstream, friends and family.

4. Shift to private communications – Recruiters move from open-source to closed.

5. Identify and encourage most-likely action – In both open and closed source communications, recruiters promote actions including *hijra* (emigration to IS territories), "lone wolf" attacks, and more advanced social media activism such as promoting the return of suspended accounts and taking part in organised posting campaigns.

It should be noted that this process has already been subjected to significant disruption by the growing number of social media suspensions targeting IS supporters.[6] Account suspensions have made discovery difficult, although far from impossible, and based on anecdotal observation, they have had an especially negative impact on the second step. IS's "micro-community" strategy relies on users being constantly available for conversation under the same name and user handle, in order to build trust. When accounts are frequently suspended, and sometimes replaced with fake accounts posing as known community members, this stage of the process becomes difficult.

[5] J.M. Berger, "Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.8, Issue 10, October 2015, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/tailored-online-interventions-the-islamic-states-recruitment-strategy.
[6] J.M. Berger and H. Perez, "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter," George Washington University's Program on Extremism (2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.

However, suspensions have facilitated the third step, isolation, for users who proceed that far in the process. When a potential IS supporter's account is repeatedly suspended, he or she is more likely to follow only IS supporters when returning with a newly created account. Additional research to evaluate the pros and cons of these competing dynamics is recommended.

Five Ds of CVE

In keeping with the models discussed above, violent extremist networks seek to elicit one or both of the following responses from participants:

1. Adoption of extremist belief

2. Decision to act, through material support or criminal activity

CVE programmes rarely distinguish between these two outcomes. There are many challenges in trying to shape belief, including tactical challenges and a limited ability to measure success. Disrupting the decision to act is a more practical and deployable approach, since it can be measured more reliably and it addresses the most fundamental problem presented by violent extremism – namely, violence.

A review of the literature on disengagement strongly suggests that people leave armed movements and terrorist groups because they develop negative perceptions of the group, rather than moving directly to the adoption of positive counter-values.[7]

These perceptions can be used as levers to discourage engagement with, and action on behalf of, violent extremist movements. These levers address both extremist belief and the will to act. CVE programmes should test each lever using all available metrics to determine their effectiveness. Specifically, in an online environment, it is possible to track users who are in contact with VE social networks and to track whether and when they cease contact (such as by unfollowing VE influencers or abandoning efforts to seek information about VE organisations). The Five Ds of CVE, which are derived from qualitative and quantitative case studies on disengagement,[8] seek to produce the following outcomes among target audiences:

- Divided: *VE participants do not agree on key elements of the movement.*

    o Sample message: If al Qaeda and IS cannot agree on tactics, maybe both of them are wrong.

- Disabused: *The facts undermine our view of the VE organisation.*

    o Sample message: IS has killed thousands of Sunni Muslims, despite its claim to only target unbelievers.

- Disillusioned: *Participation in VE movement does not deliver expected benefits.*

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[7] See "Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption", Case Studies
[8] Ibid.

> ○ Sample message: People who brought their families to IS territories seeking a wholesome Islamic environment for their children discovered that the situation was unsafe and immoral.

- Directionless: *Our ideology is good, but we don't have a clear path toward action.*

  > ○ Sample message: Whether one believes in the virtue of Islamic governance or not, jihadist use of force to attain this goal has consistently failed and left Muslims worse off than before.

- Discouraged: *Our ideology is good, but we can't win.*

  > ○ Sample message: The jihadist experiment has consistently failed.

The Five Ds reinforce each other, and producing one outcome in the target audience may lead to others. For instance, disillusionment can lead to division, if the integrity of VE leaders and influencers is called into question. If the movement is directionless, it can lead to disillusionment, division and discouragement. If a target audience is disabused of notions about the VE organisation's success, they may reject the group's current strategy, leading to directionlessness, and ultimately discouragement.

Action-Message Matrix

Radicalisation Stage	Recruitment Process	Counter action or message
Curiosity: Target searches for VE content, seeks out contact with VE adherents.	**Discovery:** Recruiters create supply of propaganda, make it searchable online, and engage with questions from targets. Recruiters seek targets among populations they see as vulnerable (for instance, lonely people seeking marriage).	**Suspension:** Deny recruiters platforms for dissemination and engagement. **Messaging:** Steer clearly identified targets to CVE content using promoted search results, promoted social media posts (disabused, disillusioned, discouraged).
Consideration: Target engages in conversations to flesh out the pros and cons of a VE ideology or movement.	**Micro-Community:** Recruiters surround target with VE adherents who attempt to make friends and sway decisions.	**Suspension:** Deny recruiters platforms for community-building. Degrade trust by raising questions about identities of users returning from suspension (directionless). **Messaging:** Steer targets to CVE content (divided, discouraged). Steer targets to objective sources of information (for instance, IS users have been observed following well-informed Western

		analysts who track the conflict in Syria). **Social Engagement:** Family attempts to dissuade target, non-VE users or CVE activists befriend targets. Those engaging can draw on guidelines related to messaging to guide conversations.
Identification: Target begins to identify as adherent of VE ideology or member of VE organisation.	**Isolation:** Recruiters attempt to convince targets to cut contact with family, friends, outside information sources.	**Suspension:** Track targets and refrain from suspending accounts in early stages of identification, as this will accelerate isolation. **Messaging:** Steer toward objective sources and content that emphasises themes of division and disillusionment. **Engagement:** Persist with interventions and friendly overtures in early stages of identification in an effort to prevent isolation.
Self-Critique: Target asks whether he or she is doing enough for the movement.	**Shift to private communications:** Recruiter attempts to influence target to conclude that he or she is not doing enough for the movement.	**Law enforcement:** Surveillance. Users at this stage are unlikely to be reached through messaging. **Engagement:** Urgent family or community engagement. Non-arrest contact with law enforcement (discouraged).
Decision to act: Target decides to take action on behalf of VE movement.	**Identify and encourage specific action:** Recruiter attempts to direct target toward specific action desired by VE movement.	**Law enforcement:** Investigate and arrest.
Movement critique: After action, target asks whether movement is doing enough for him or her.	**Reinforcement:** Members of VE movement reinforce community bonds and express appreciation.	**Encourage defection:** Publicise exit paths for nonviolent offenders, plea and sentencing deals. Promote widely to target audiences and community around target audiences (i.e., give families and friends ammunition to argue for defection).

Macro-Mezzo-Micro

As discussed in the ICCT paper "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict"[9] and the corresponding Policy Brief, "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications,"[10] strategic communications can be usefully framed on three levels:

- Macro – Reach, relevance and resonance of messaging
- Mezzo – Medium, messenger and format
- Micro – Rational- and Identity-Choice, defensive/offensive, say-do gap

The Macro-Mezzo-Micro framing helps policymakers maximise the effectiveness of messaging programmes, based on historical trends in propaganda and persuasion, and identifying the key elements of a strategic communications campaign, including content, format and method of delivery.

For purposes of the programme outlined herein, the following elements are identified:

Macro	Mezzo	Micro
Reach: People who have been exposed to VE networks, rather than broad audiences that are only fractionally at risk	Medium: Targeted ads on social media and search engines, allowing for measurement of engagement	Rational choice: Focus on disabused, disillusioned, discouraged, directionless Identity choice: Focus on divided, disillusioned
Relevance: Messaging focused primarily on disincentives to VE participation, relevant specifically to people who are considering VE participation	Messenger: Attributed primary and third-party sources. For instance, governments and NGOs can spread messages under their own names, but they can also disseminate independent reporting and amplify subject-matter experts.	Defensive: Undermine VE claims (utopian society, military success) Offensive: Undermine VE credibility on issues not directly addressed by VE organisations (hypocrisy, unintended consequences, collateral damage); aim to provoke defensive response.
Resonance: Measured using social media metrics	Format: Text, video, audio; news stories and produced content. Experiment and evaluate to see what works.	Narrow Say-Do Gap: For example, refrain from offensive messaging about collateral damage in temporal proximity to coalition incidents; aggressively investigate incidents when they occur; ensure and promote accountability.

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[9] H. J. Ingram, "A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7,* no. 6 (2016).
[10] H. J. Ingram and A. Reed. "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 4 (2016).

Key CVE Recommendations

Based on the principals laid about above, a coordinated CVE messaging and disengagement campaign should fall within the following guidelines:

- Target audience should be limited to people already exposed to violent extremist propaganda or social networks, or those demonstrably seeking such exposure (for example, by using clearly identifiable search terms).

- The goal of messaging and other countermeasures (such as suspending the social media accounts of recruiters) should be to sever contact between the target audience and extremist social networks.

- Based on research that examines why people disengage from armed movements, messaging should seek to promote negative views about specific VE movements, rather than to instill positive social values.

- Messaging programmes should correlate to quantifiable models of radicalisation and extremist recruitment, and results should be evaluated based measurements of how the target audience disengages from the VE network, rather than broader metrics such as likes, followers and impressions.

- Programmes should address all of the key elements of an effective messaging programme, including macro, mezzo and micro considerations.

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