THE TROUBLE WITH COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Contents

ABSTRACT

Counter-narratives are routinely suggested as responses to the vast amounts of propaganda available online, from groups such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda; and the idea of using them to prevent terrorism is gaining momentum. International organisations such as the EU and UN are including them in their CVE strategies, leading to a push for member states to do the same, in spite of a great deal of criticism and lack of any actual evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method.

Taking its point of departure in three counter-narrative initiatives introduced in the third Danish national action plan on countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation, this report explores the challenges related to using counter-narratives within the Danish preventive framework in particular and in CVE strategies in general.

The report finds that broad counter-narrative campaigns are neither necessary nor appropriate, and that the potential negative side-effects are not acceptable when measured against the expected benefits. The report ends by suggesting alternative approaches.

CHALLENGES

- Actual evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method of minimising the impact of narratives and of preventing acts of violence is lacking.

- Counter-narratives are in essence reactive; using them is therefore in practice a recognition of the terms laid down by the declared opponents. In being so, they may in practice reinforce the very narratives they are attempting to stifle.

- Confrontational counter-narratives, which engage directly with a narrative to expose, correct or ridicule it, run the risk of being automatically rejected.

- Broad counter-narrative campaigns are not necessary, as the propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State only attracts few individuals, and addressing the many in an attempt to reach the few is a scattergun approach that carries the risk of unwanted or even counter-productive side effects.

- The lack of knowledge about why and how the narratives and propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State attract audiences, makes it difficult to construct attractive counter-narratives, even if the relevant audiences could be identified.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise that no single response can ever be constructed, as there are many different pathways to acting violently with reference to an ideology, and many different reasons why, individuals or groups become attracted to extremist propaganda and its narratives.

- Learn from experiences with other types of preventive work that attempting to prevent future problems is accompanied by risks. Always weigh these risks and their probability against the expectable positive effects and their probability.

- Break down the ambitious project of preventing terrorism into manageable sub-projects, which have clearly identified audiences, sub-objectives, methods, designated actors, and that take into account the potential risks.

- Clearly differentiate between violent acts and radical ideology, as there is no documented causal relationship between them.

- Instead of attempting to counter extremist propaganda and its narratives by engaging with them, counter them by providing alternatives.

- With regard to individuals or groups that are already attracted to extremist narratives or propaganda, the grievances that the individual or group is currently seeking to address through the ideology, must be identified on a case by case basis. These may be foreign or domestic political grievances, individual or personal grievances, and may be real or perceived. Then corresponding alternative ways of addressing them can be provided.

- Inspiration for providing ways of addressing individual and personal grievances may be found in the methods already being employed in Denmark. Yet, there is also a need to develop societally acceptable ways of addressing foreign or domestic political grievances that can serve as real alternatives to what groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State currently present.

- In the broader population, the focus should be on bolstering general resources through capacity-building and inclusion; embracing diversity, openness, and freedoms to avoid feelings of marginalisation and the polarisation of society; strengthening critical thinking and knowledge about how propaganda works; and addressing real social or individual issues that may in the long run leave individuals vulnerable to any risks, including but not limited to involvement in extremist milieus.

- On this general level, provide alternatives by facilitating open debates about difficult subjects, such as violent conflicts and international politics, where constructive and productive ways of engaging with them can be presented.

BACKGROUND
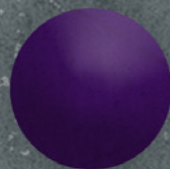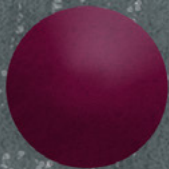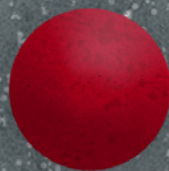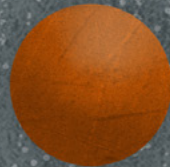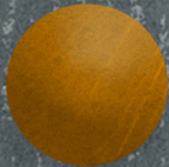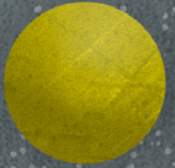
Counter-narratives or counter-propaganda are routinely suggested as responses to the vast amount of propaganda from groups such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda that is readily available online, and the idea of using counter-narratives as a way to prevent terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation is increasingly gaining momentum. International organisations such as the EU and UN are increasingly including counter-narratives in their Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies, leading to a push for member states to do the same, in spite of a great deal of criticism and the lack of any actual evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method for such purposes.

Counter-narrative is a broad and ill-defined concept that is used in very different ways; consequently, actual counter-narrative campaigns differ greatly. Gemmerli (2015) identifies three main categories of counter-narratives currently being promoted, namely *direct counter-narratives*, which confront the ideology and lifestyle of extremism; *positive alternatives*, which, among other things, support moderate voices; and *improving digital competences and the ability of vulnerable people to reflect critically*. Many more could be added to these, including but not limited to promoting non-violent ways of addressing political grievances, promoting a narrative about a given society as full of opportunities and promoting narratives about the victims of terrorism. However, the present report is primarily concerned with the category that Gemmerli labels *direct*.

In line with Biggs & Feve (2013), here we use the concept counter-narratives interchangeably with counter-propaganda to refer to intentional and direct efforts to deconstruct, discredit or demystify violent extremist messaging through ideology, logic, fact, or humour. Following Ferguson (2016), we add that these efforts take place within a political, policy, or military context and that they are in essence reactive. Using them is therefore in practice a recognition of the terms laid down by the declared opponents. In doing so, they may in practice end up reinforcing the very narratives they are attempting to stifle.

The present report takes its point of departure in three new counter-propaganda initiatives introduced in the national action plan, 'Forebyggelse og bekæmpelse af radikalisering og ekstremisme' (Countering and preventing radicalisation and extremism), put forward by the Danish government in October 2016. It explores the challenges related to using counter-narratives that engage directly and confrontationally with a particular ideology to expose, correct, or ridicule it, within the Danish preventive framework in particular and the challenges of using them in CVE strategies in general.

In the Danish 2016 action plan, one action point concerns countering extremist propaganda and preventing online radicalisation through seven new initiatives (Government of Denmark 2016, 29). While the first three of these initiatives deal with the physical mapping, restriction, and prosecution related to material content, the remaining four address the assumed radicalising power of the propaganda and its narratives by engaging civil society in counter-narrative campaigns.

The four new initiatives

- New pedagogical tools for strengthening critical thinking and digital literacy among children and young people.

- A civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason', to seek out and engage critically with relevant online forums and thus challenge extremist views.

- A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation.

- A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms to present alternatives to extremist propaganda.

Evidently, the first initiative falls under Gemmerli's category of *improving digital competences and the ability of vulnerable people to reflect critically*, whereas the remaining three fall under the category of *direct counter-narratives that confront the ideology and lifestyle of extremism.* The introduction of these three initiatives indicates a deviation from the underlying logics that have so far informed and shaped the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation, which is somewhat surprising, given how little evidence there is of counter-narratives being an effective method.

This report first briefly introduces the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation, including the new initiatives introduced in the government's national action plan from 2016. It then goes on to summarise the evidence of the utility of counter-narratives as a method and from there engages with the many challenges related to this method, particularly when counter-narratives are formulated as direct confrontational campaigns that directly engage with a narrative to expose, correct or ridicule it, and when the many are addressed in an attempt to reach the few.

The report finds that such counter-narrative campaigns are neither necessary, nor appropriate, and that the potential negative side effects and their probability are not acceptable when measured against the expectable benefits and their likelihood.

While this report primarily highlights the potential pitfalls involved in counter-narrative work, it also suggests alternative approaches to countering the propaganda and narratives of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, which revolve around providing alternatives.

Strategies to counter and prevent extremism and radicalisation not only aim to detect and foil planned terrorist attacks, they also aim to proactively minimise the number of individuals who are ready, willing, and able to carry out such attacks. This can be done in many ways, and trying to contain the effectiveness of propaganda by countering it may appear to be an unproblematic, soft alternative to harsher methods. The trouble is, however, that it can easily turn into a *scattergun approach*, which can lead to unintended or even counter-productive side effects.
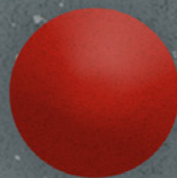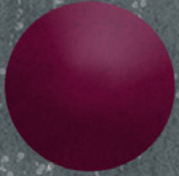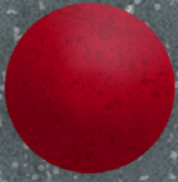
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THE DANISH APPROACH

The Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation, is based on extensive multi-agency collaboration between various social-service providers, the educational system, the health-care system, the police, and the intelligence and security services. It includes state, regional, and local actors, and is structured around efforts targeted respectively at the wider Danish society, extremist individuals and groups, and individuals involved, or in imminent danger of becoming involved, in illegal activities. The initiatives developed for individuals primarily revolve around help to self-help through, for example, mentoring, counselling, and exit programmes, whereas the initiatives developed for the wider Danish society, primarily revolve around capacity-building in order to improve general conditions on both the societal and the individual level.

> For a more thorough introduction to the Danish approach, see Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, *An Introduction to the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalization*, DIIS Report 2015:15.

In Denmark, efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism are increasingly being framed within the so-called *Prevention Pyramid*, a tool for identifying different target groups and appropriate ways of addressing them. In the government's national action plan (2016), the pyramid identifies the following target groups and corresponding efforts.

INDIVIDUALS IN EXTREMIST MILIEUS
Targeted level:
Intervening efforts

INDIVIDUALS AT RISK OF RADICALISATION
Specific level: Anticipatory efforts

EVERYBODY
General level: Strengthening efforts
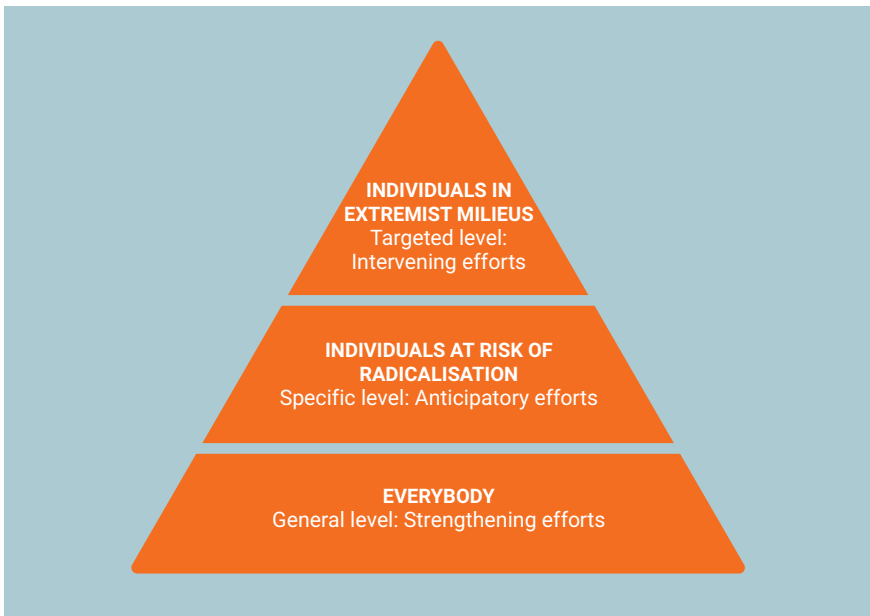
As a tool, the prevention pyramid has been borrowed from prevention programs involving health issues, substance abuse and crime, indicating another central aspect of the Danish approach, namely the incorporation of experiences from the prevention of other issues in other contexts. Drawing on experience from preventing, for example, crime and substance abuse does not necessarily imply the assumption that violent extremism is the same or even comparable, but it does imply an assumption that social dynamics – particularly on the general level – may be the same, regardless of the potential problem one is attempting to prevent from ever arising in the future.

For the three target groups identified in the pyramid, we can identify implicit sub-objectives, applied methods for reaching them, designated actors, and perhaps most importantly in relation to the present report, the potential risks.

Visualising the Danish approach in the table on the following three pages, enables us to identify gaps and potential methods that are not yet included, to which we shall return in the final section of the present report. It also enables us to identify the potential risks that are directly relevant to the use of counter-narrative campaigns, as suggested in the 2016 action plan. We shall return to these after a short clarification of the evidence for the utility of counter-narratives as a method, which is relevant to an assessment of whether the potential risks are proportional and therefore acceptable.

TARGET GROUP	SUB-OBJECTIVE	HOW	EXISTING METHODS	NEW METHODS IN THE 2016 ACTION PLAN	ACTORS	POTENTIAL RISKS
Individuals in extremist milieus	Preventing terrorism in the near future by interrupting plots and convincing individuals to leave extremist milieus	Interrupt Dissuade Support disengagement from extremist milieus Provide alternative ways to address grievances or desires	Exit programs to facilitate disengagement from violent extremist milieus Mentoring on making personal changes Therapy Advice on gaining access to resources available to all citizens (e.g. housing, employment, career advice, therapy, medical assistance) Coaching relatives to support the individual	Civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason' to seek out and critically engage with online forums and challenge extremist views A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda	Security and Intelligence Service Police Prison and Probation Service Mentors Coaches for parents NGO centre for counselling Professionals who already have a good relationship	Aggravating Pushing further underground Making investigations more difficult Pushing individuals or groups to do exactly what one is trying to avoid Compromising freedom of speech or religion Providing arguments for groups or individuals with an interest in identifying double standards to promote polarisation

TARGET GROUP	SUB-OBJECTIVE	HOW	EXISTING METHODS	NEW METHODS IN THE 2016 ACTION PLAN	ACTORS	POTENTIAL RISKS
Individuals at risk	Preventing terrorism in the future by convincing individuals to not join extremist milieus	Change risky behaviour Provide alternative ways to address grievances or desires Promote desired behaviour	Mentoring on making personal changes Advice on gaining access to resources available to all citizens (e.g. housing, employment, career advice, therapy, medical assistance) Coaching relatives to support the individual	Civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason' to seek out and critically engage with online forum and challenge extremist views A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda	Mentors Coaches for parents NGO centre for counselling Professionals who already have a good relationship	Distortion of proportions Stigmatisation Marginalisation Polarisation Pushing individuals or groups to do exactly what one is trying to avoid Compromising freedom of speech or religion Providing arguments for groups or individuals with an interest in identifying double standards to promote polarisation

TARGET GROUP	SUB-OBJECTIVE	HOW	EXISTING METHODS	NEW METHODS IN THE 2016 ACTION PLAN	ACTORS	POTENTIAL RISKS
Everybody	Preventing terrorism in the distant future by minimising vulnerability to any risk, including engagement in extremist milieus	Build capacity and resilience Promote well-being, social cohesion, and active citizenship	Already existing general social interventions Building a critical sense and understanding of individual and human rights through primary and secondary school Teaching materials on digital literacy, critical sense and propaganda techniques for primary and secondary school and after-school clubs	New pedagogical tools for promoting children's ability to participate in social relations and critically reflect A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda	Professionals in day-care, primary and secondary schools Civil society, including family, community, associations, clubs, etc.	Distortion of proportions Panic Mistrust Stigmatisation Marginalisation Polarisation Pushing individuals or groups to do exactly what one is trying to avoid Compromising freedom of speech or religion Providing arguments for groups or individuals with an interest in identifying double standards to promote polarisation

THE EVIDENCE FOR THE UTILITY OF COUNTER-NARRATIVES AS A METHOD
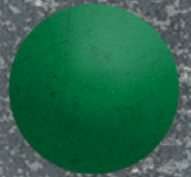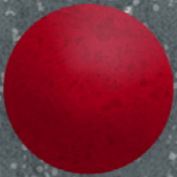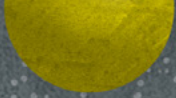
In a recent study of the existing academic and grey research literature relevant to the development of media and communications strategies to counter violent extremism, Ferguson (2016), concludes that the focus on counter-narratives as a strategy to prevent terrorism, is tied to the underlying assumption that consuming violent words will lead to committing violent deeds (2016, 9), in other words, that ideas cause violent actions and therefore that ideas are the root cause, which must be removed. This leads to the sub-assumptions that, since propaganda is crucial to mobilisation, counter-propaganda must be crucial to countering it, and that real-world violent acts can be prevented by removing or falsifying ideas.

Evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method for intervention is absent.

Ferguson finds that the scientific support for these assumptions is sparse and that, although 'there is some evidence suggesting patterns of discourse and communication such as hate speech, dehumanisation, and identity-based narratives (or propaganda) can contribute to conditions where IBV [Identity Based Violence] or VE [Violent Extremism] becomes more likely, the causal relationship remains unproven' (2016, 10), and further, that evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method for intervention is absent.

With regard to the central assumption that ideas cause action, Ferguson concludes that the literature does not support it, but rather shows that 'it is possible for individuals to hold, express, and consume extreme views, without transgressing to violence' (2016, 11). In other words, the same pathway, such as the adoption of an extreme ideology, can lead to different outcomes, what is known as *multifinality*.

In addition to the lack of evidence that radical ideas always lead to violent acts, recent research also indicates that radical ideas are not always preconditions for violent acts, which are justified by reference to them.

The assumption that ideas precede and cause action is tied to a specific understanding of radicalisation to violence, which supposes an intellectual process through which an individual or a group is convinced by and adopts an ideological cause, thereby overcoming their assumed natural aversion to the use of violence and resulting in the acceptance and ultimately the use of violence to advance the cause. Recent Scandinavian research, however, questions this understanding, indicating that this is not the only process through which individuals or groups can

come to act with reference to an ideology. In other words, different pathways can lead to the same outcome – for example, violent acts – which is what is known as *equifinality*.

Nesser (2015), offers a typology of core members of jihadi terrorist cells in which four distinct types are identified: entrepreneurs, protégés, misfits and drifters. In this typology, two general clusters of pathways into involvement in terrorist plots are identified, namely an ideological-political one (the entrepreneurs and their protégés) and various more personal ones (the misfits and the drifters).

Hemmingsen, Crone & Witt (2016), have suggested that the intellectualist under-standing of radicalisation should be supplemented with other understandings of the processes through which individuals come to act violently with reference to ideolo-gy. To understand how individuals with a violent, criminal background transform their criminal violence into political violence, they introduce the concept of *the politi-cization of violence.*

Related to this, Crone (2016), suggests 'that ideology is not necessarily a precondi-tion for violence, but that prior experience with violence is more often a precondition for engaging an extremist ideology' (2016, abstract). Crone argues that not only pre-vious experience of violence through crime, but also the attraction of violence and attempts to gain access to it by travelling to conflict zones, 'may pave the way for an extremist engagement, sometimes including a loose or superficial affiliation with an extremist ideology' (2016, 594).

Expanding on this work, we suggest that there are at least three different pathways through which individuals and groups come to act violently with reference to an ide-ology:

Intellectual radicalisation into violent extremism. A process through which an indi-vidual or group becomes convinced by an ideological cause and, after accepting the use of violence to promote it, actually acts violently. This implies a change of attitude followed by a change of behaviour.

Politicisation of violence. A process through which an individual or group for whom violence is already part of the communication repertoire adopts an ideological cause and begins to frame and/or understand violence as more noble. This implies a change of attitude, but not a change of behaviour.

> **Utilitarian attachment of ideology.** A process through which an individual or a group attaches an ideological cause to their own agendas, whether political or personal, in an attempt to legitimise them. This does not necessarily imply a change of behaviour or attitude, as the attachment of an ideological cause may be superficial or even purely rhetorical.

We are not suggesting that ideology, narratives, and propaganda are irrelevant, but rather that they may play several different roles and that this leads to a need for several different responses; some of which are not focused on the ideology, narratives, or propaganda themselves, but rather on the purposes for which they are adopted or attached.

> **Although we speak of different pathways through which individuals and groups come to act with reference to an ideology, it is worth mentioning that individuals very rarely travel alone or in a vacuum. Rather, this almost always takes place in interaction with broader constituent environments that frame violence with reference to ideology as more prestigious or legitimate.**

Although we speak of different pathways through which individuals and groups come to act with reference to an ideology, it is worth mentioning that individuals very rarely travel alone or in a vacuum. Rather, this almost always takes place in interaction with broader constituent environments that frame violence with reference to ideology as more prestigious or legitimate.

Finally, it is worth noting that the focus on narratives and counter-narratives as relevant to preventing terrorism also appears to be tied to the underlying assumption that becoming convinced by an ideological cause (intellectual radicalisation) is a process through which the individual or group is manipulated or even brainwashed with misinformation. Counter-narratives are therefore intended to involve corrections of misunderstandings and lies. Granted, there may be specific cases where vulnerable individuals have been manipulated by recruiters, and the notion of brainwashing may be fed by the ex-post rationalisations of individuals who regret becoming involved in a particular cause. Yet, we should be very careful not to overestimate the extent to which this is actually documented.

If becoming convinced by a cause is not always the starting point or the reason why individuals or groups act violently with reference to an ideology, then perhaps the cause, the ideology, the narratives, or the propaganda should not always be at the centre of attempts to prevent terrorism. If a group or an individual is not convinced by an ideology but rather seeks it out to use it for other purposes, then exposing, correcting or ridiculing the ideology is unlikely to change anything.

In such cases, the focus should be on uncovering the purposes for which individuals and groups are using the ideology and then attempting to provide alternative, societally more acceptable ways of serving those purposes. In some cases, addressing the ideology or the narratives may be exactly what is needed, but in others it may be a waste of time. Even in cases where addressing the ideology or the narratives may be relevant, it is unlikely that doing so in a confrontational manner by correcting, exposing or ridiculing it will have the desired effect.

THE RISK OF SIDE-EFFECTS WHEN ADDRESSING THE MANY TO REACH THE FEW
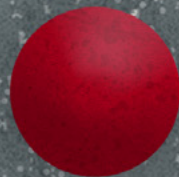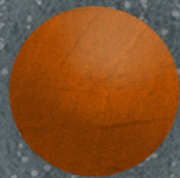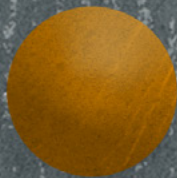
There is nothing to indicate that the ideology, narratives, or propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, appeals to the general population or has the potential to mobilise the masses. Rather, it appears to resonate with only a small selection of those exposed to it, and when it does resonate, it does so in different ways and for different reasons.

Recent studies by Gendron (2016) and Rudner (2016), have revealed that, like other marketing campaigns, extremist narratives and propaganda have various aims and objectives such as information, recruitment, training, and financing; is delivered in an array of different formats such as text, speech, videos, pictures, etc., through various mediums for example, websites, magazines, and social media platforms; and is aimed at specific target audiences. Although some of the mediums are open for all to view, in most instances a search effort is required on the part of the audience.

This to a much lesser extent includes international news media reproductions of narratives and propaganda, which falls outside of the scope of this report. For discussion of this aspect, see Magder (2003) and Thussu (2003).

In the recently published collection of papers on *Violent Extremism Online*, edited by Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis & Chen (2016), several of the authors discuss how the receiving process is an active one, where each individual has his or her own reasons for seeking out and interacting with violent extremist content. As such, the response to narratives and propaganda differs from one audience member to another. Our lack of understanding of how the interpretation and construction of meaning differ from recipient to recipient will be further discussed in Section 5. For the moment, it is important to note that this knowledge would also aid us in understanding why only few individuals, although exposed to the same messages as many others, respond with active participation in violent acts (Aly 2016, 108).

The activity of the audience also determines what narratives and propaganda they are exposed to. Research on violent extremism online by Gendron (2016), Weimann (2016), and Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis & Chen (2017, 4–5) reveals that the interactivity of social media, such as interest groups on Facebook, allows terrorist groups to identify individuals who sympathise with them and, by viewing their profiles, to determine what parts of their messaging will have most resonance. This indicates that recipients of extremist propaganda are not necessarily random, naïve individuals who are brainwashed upon contact, but active individuals who, for an often complex

combination of reasons, interact with such narratives and propaganda (Aly 2016; Sageman 2014). This further illustrates three points. First, extremist propaganda only appeals to individuals who are already open to it. Secondly, such individuals interact with these narratives and propaganda from first contact, sometimes to the point where they become part of their production and even distribution. Thirdly, if an entire population were exposed to the same violent extremist message, only few individuals would begin to interact with it.

> **Recipients of extremist propaganda are not necessarily random, naïve individuals who are brainwashed upon contact, but active individuals who, for an often complex combination of reasons, interact with such narratives and propaganda.**

Returning to the three direct Danish counter-propaganda initiatives that were introduced in the national action plan presented by the Danish government in October 2016, they appear to be attempts to reach the few by addressing the many. This might look like an easier option than attempting to identify the individuals and groups who are actually susceptible to the propaganda and addressing only them, but that may be a risky attempt to cut corners.

- A civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason', which is to seek out and critically engage with relevant online forums, challenging extremist views.

- A support and training programme providing professional assistance to civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation.

- A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms to present alternatives to extremist propaganda.

As mentioned in Section 2, experience with the prevention of health issues, substance abuse and crime has previously been incorporated into the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation. Not least the ambitious Ringsted Project by Balvig, Holmberg & Sørensen (2005) and Balvig & Holmberg (2006), which was a large-scale study of young people's use of legal and illegal substances and the effects of preventive campaigns, is a point of reference. This project followed all young people between the ages of 11 and 24 living in Ringsted munici-

pality from 2001 to 2004. The project confirmed that campaigns aimed at preventing young people's risk behaviour through information, scare campaigns, or education rarely have a positive effect; that social exaggerations can affect behaviour; and that attempting to prevent a problem by directly addressing it, may lead to distortion of proportions both in the eyes of those attempting to prevent the problem and in the eyes of the target group. With regard to the potential counter-productive side-effects of addressing the many with counter-propaganda in response to the propaganda of groups such as Islamic State or al-Qaeda, this is particularly relevant.

In the Danish approach, the earliest type of prevention, aimed at everybody, has previously revolved around the notion of social cohesion, that is, building on those capacities in society that make the population resilient to negative forces. Specifically, the aim has been to strengthen norms, mutual trust, and social networks within the nation as a whole, local communities and organisations, as well as personal networks and families. The aim being to enhance the ability of society, to dominate and expel unwanted disturbances and abnormalities by reinforcing positive social norms and values such as inclusion and democracy, thereby minimising the likelihood that members of society look elsewhere for a place to belong and in doing so become susceptible to for example, propaganda.

As part of this, some initiatives that are designed to affect only a specific group, deemed vulnerable and at risk of for example, radicalising, have been implemented for the whole population so as to avoid both real and perceived discrimination, marginalisation, and polarisation of society.

> **The project confirmed that campaigns aimed at preventing young people's risk behaviour through information, scare campaigns, or education rarely have a positive effect; that social exaggerations can affect behaviour; and that attempting to prevent a problem by directly addressing it, may lead to distortion of proportions.**

Considering the counter-propaganda initiatives in the Danish 2016 action plan, certain problems arise. Firstly, they revolve around providing alternative narratives, where certain attitudes, beliefs, forms of religious practice, etc., are highlighted as normal in relation to the Danish society's values and political structure. The problem is that it risks having an exclusionary effect in terms of how such a normality is de-

fined in our modern heterogeneous society. The risk is that those who do not recognise themselves in this normality are left feeling even more marginalised and stifled, as described by Gemmerli (2016a, 2016b). Since these initiatives are directed at everyone, this could potentially affect more people than the few who would have been attracted to the propaganda had they been left to themselves.

> **The risk is that those who do not recognise themselves in this normality are left feeling even more marginalised and stifled.**

Related to the above, broad counter-narrative campaigns inadvertently risk strengthening assumptions that anything outside the 'normal' is negative. This is in direct contrast with the aim of bolstering societal cohesion through generalised targeting. As such, counter-narrative campaigns risk being counter-productive to the attempts to support the positive potential of vulnerable and 'at risk' groups and to draw them together with those communities that are considered strong. At the general level, diversity and social cohesion should be promoted in various forms and through various mediums, separately from counter-terrorism and -radicalisation agendas, while at the same time paying attention to the risk of other activities compromising such efforts.

Given the risks of marginalisation and polarisation, an alternative way of minimising the appeal of the narratives and propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State by addressing the entire population could be to ensure that the media of a given society reflects its diversity, providing young people in particular with recognition and positive images of interrelationships.

Another risk with such broad counter-narrative initiatives is that they may make the 'problem' appear bigger than it is. Forcefully waging counter campaigns may provide a counter-productive illusion of presence, impact and frequency, which can lead to intensified curiosity among individuals who would not otherwise seek out material or environments where these narratives are present.

In the hope of affecting the few among the many through a broad counter-narrative campaign, it is crucial to remember that individuals are attracted to and use extremist propaganda for a wide variety of reasons. Some individuals may be attracted to radical and extreme ideologies, rejecting moderate perspectives on, for example, religion. Others may reject or want to escape from normative restraints; experience

feelings of marginalisation in relation to advocated 'normality'; be thrill-seekers; or be attracted by violence itself. In these cases, the acceptance of narratives and propaganda can simply be a way to rationalise and legitimise their behaviour. Consequently, it is difficult to employ broad counter-narratives and impossible to select 'voices of reason' that are appropriate and that will have a countering effect for everyone. Therefore, even when the government encourages non-state actors to take part in a counter-narrative campaign, this will most likely be ignored for a whole series of reasons.

Additionally, in launching campaigns that involve religion, the risk is not simply the failure of such a strategy, but that the government's involvement in supporting and promoting, for example, a 'moderate Islam' will be construed as partisan and discriminatory, contradicting the declared secularism of the state and thereby becoming a symptom of double standards, again risking further marginalisation and polarisation. Rather than trying to formulate a standard counter-argument that fits all, the focus should be on exploring how different individuals use extremist propaganda and for what purposes.

It should now be clear that broad counter-narrative campaigns are not necessary, as extremist propaganda only attract few individuals, and that addressing the entire population to reach the few is risky. The question that remains is whether directing counter-narratives at specific target groups is even an option. As indicated in Section 3, evidence that counter-narratives are an effective method is absent. However, this, of course, does not mean that they cannot be effective. The trouble, however, is that we do not know enough about why individuals are attracted to such propaganda, what parts of it they are attracted to or how they consume it. This means that any counter-narrative would essentially be based on guesswork.

THE CHALLENGE IN ATTEMPTING TO CONSTRUCT COUNTER-NARRATIVES IS THAT WE DO NOT KNOW HOW AND WHY THE NARRATIVES WORK
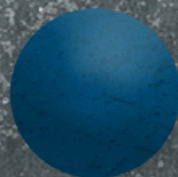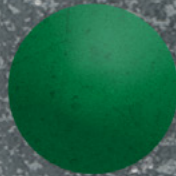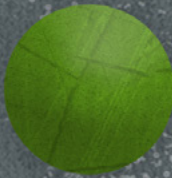
Echoing the general lack of support for assumptions about a simple causal relationship between ideas and actions described in Section 3, Bigo, Bonelli, Guittet & Ragazzi (2014) caution that, while so-called 'self-radicalisation' associated with the Internet constitutes a main area of concern for European law enforcement agencies and intelligence services, the impact and role of new technologies for recruitment and propaganda purposes should not be overestimated. Although the use of these technologies to communicate narratives and propaganda cannot be denied, there is a lack of support for the assumption that there is a direct causal relationship between online (violent) extremist narratives and propaganda and offline violent acts.

According to Aly (2016), there is a lack of studies on how audiences receive, interpret, decode, internalise, and in some cases act on the messages embedded in violent extremist narratives and propaganda. As previously described, the focus on counter-narratives as a way to prevent terrorism is tied to the erroneous assumption that terrorist messages reach and influence a submissive audience. As such, broad and generic counter-narrative campaigns that attempt to portray a 'true reality' and correct the lies of the propaganda, risk sending the signal that the target audience is regarded as ignorant and naïve individuals who have been fooled. That is not necessarily a constructive starting point for convincing the target audience to listen with an open mind.

Instead, since it is increasingly recognised that radicalisation to violence is a dynamic and complex process, it is imperative to consider the significance of audience members and their social and political contexts. The same narrative will, for various reasons, be received, interpreted, and processed differently from one person to the next, and possibly from one moment to the next.

Since varying and complex combinations of factors play into radicalisation to violence, narratives and propaganda may appeal to different individuals in different ways. Different parts of the same propaganda may attract different individuals, depending on what he or she is listening for, and different individuals may be attracted to the same specific part of the propaganda for different reasons.

Looking at past cases, certain themes emerge, which could offer some clues to the underlying motivational factors that make violent extremist narratives and propaganda attractive, with the caveat that the categorisation is not in any way absolute nor applicable to all cases; there are many different reasons why individuals are attracted to the narratives and propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State. While some similarities to Nesser's typology (2015), and the pathways developed in Section 3 can be found, the reader should be aware that those concern the

pathways through which individuals and groups come to act violently with reference to an ideology, whereas the present refers to the attraction of narratives. This implies that we are speaking of an engagement with the narratives and propaganda, which does not necessarily imply acting violently. Nor does it mean that there is a straightforward connection between why individuals are attracted to the narratives and their reasons for committing acts of violence if they do so.

> **Since it is increasingly recognised that radicalisation to violence is a dynamic and complex process, it is imperative to consider the significance of audience members and their social and political contexts.**

Propaganda answers to a pre-existing dissatisfaction or complaint, feelings of alienation, isolation, marginalisation, and a search for belonging. Individuals who already feel displaced socially may seek an external explanation for this. This may include individuals with poor social skills and relations; individuals who have experienced personal failures for example, at school or place of employment; youths from broken or troubled families; individuals from mixed ethnic backgrounds or the children of immigrants, who find it difficult to balance and navigate different cultures and traditions simultaneously; persons with a mental illness or affliction; and so on. Common to such individuals are that they are socially and/or economically vulnerable. External influences can reinforce these feelings and perceptions, as well as direct the vulnerable person's attention to an explanatory cause. A negative, media-fuelled public discourse about refugees can, for example, attune individuals with grievances to the narratives and propaganda of both the extreme right and militant Islamism. Such influences can naturally also derive from personal relations, social settings, etc. Once a course is set, the individual typically pursues the narratives and propaganda actively both on- and offline. However, this does not necessarily mean that the individual will come to accept and use violence as a means of expression, nor does it rule out that these individuals are already using violence as a means of expression. It does also not mean that the individual will stay loyal to the extremist cause. According to Roy (2008) and Hemmingsen (2010), there are examples of youths who have jumped between different extremist environments to support different causes as a means to express their grievances. Therefore discrediting the ideology they are adopting or attaching is unlikely to have the desired effect. Instead, it is necessary to identify what the underlying problems are in order to address them directly, and offer alternative solutions and provide the resources required to use them.

Propaganda answers to a longing for adventure, a need to commit heroic deeds, or a willingness to commit violence. For some, it is the thought of adventure and committing heroic deeds that is the attraction of extremist propaganda. Here it is important to separate those who simply admire, for example, the fierceness of Islamic State's warriors, from those who are ready to join them and actively participate in the violence. As a way to address the former, one constructive approach might be to distort the image that terrorists are heroes. Roy (2008) suggests avoiding depicting terrorists as powerful evils, as to certain audiences this can solidify their heroic image. Instead he suggests that their failures and weaknesses be highlighted. As for individuals who are actively seeking adventure, with a readiness to commit heroic deeds, they might be offered alternative and societally more acceptable ways to achieve this. For others, the violence itself is the draw. In other words, the violence in the narratives and propaganda is the initial attraction, sometimes followed by an ideological commitment. Roy (2008) refers to this as 'aftermath rationalisation', where the given ideological narrative is used as a means to justify and rationalise the main motivator, namely violence. While for some individuals the ideological commitment will develop over time, others will never be true believers. This nuance is crucial to work into any attempted counter-measures, as it will determine whether to focus solely on countering the fascination with violence as a means of expression, or whether it is necessary to consider an ideological aspect as well.

Propaganda answers to a sense of indignation, perceived injustice, or solidarity. In such a situation, extremist propaganda may speak to those who perceive some sort of injustice against certain groups or individuals, causing feelings of indignation. It may also inspire a sense of solidarity with the perceived victims. This could, for example, be blaming Western governments for civilian deaths in Iraq and Syria or a perceived imperialism, as suggested by Roy (2008), where Muslim 'brothers and sisters' must be freed from Western oppression. In such cases, the violence is justified in terms of an already existing war, and solidarity is expressed by answering the call to arms. Similarly, extreme right narratives and propaganda may play on the refugee crisis and militant Islamist attacks in Europe to incite violent uprising. According to DuVall (2008), those who are motivated by fighting oppression should be deflected from using violent means. The public discourse that justifies violence as effective or necessary should be publicly challenged and questioned, and the promotion of civil resistance as a powerful force for change should be legitimised and supported by states, the international community, and news media. In such a context, it is crucial to identify what parts of the narrative or propaganda strike a chord, so the appropriate alternative actions can be suggested. In short, alternative and societally more acceptable ways of addressing the injustices, be they perceived or real, should be provided.

Propaganda answers to a pre-existing ideology. The extremist propaganda can also speak to those with a pre-existing ideological commitment. Using the example of militant Islamism, some of these individuals will only have a basic knowledge of Islam in general, while others are more proficient. Individuals who only have a superficial connection with or a basic knowledge of Islam are more easily convinced by a charismatic individual claiming to have better knowledge, while those who have in-depth knowledge can be more critical of such individuals. It is thus important to identify the personal level of knowledge and ideological commitment in order to offer appropriate challenges and alternatives. Due to the graduations of the pre-existing ideologies, some may already hold very conservative or radical views, simply promoting a moderate view of Islam as the truth will not be effective and risks being automatically rejected. Roy (2008) suggests that we should stop speaking to Muslims through the lens of terrorism, promoting good versus bad Islam. Instead, we should de-couple religion from violent acts and highlight secularism by seeking to accommodate Islam as simply another religion in a Western context. In other words, the focus should be on inclusion and tolerance of different ideologies and rejection of unlawful and violent behaviour. At the general level, we should also ensure that there is access to education in religion and politics, as well as available resource persons who have wide knowledge in these fields, and can answer questions that youths may have. At a personal level, we should make an effort to identify the degrees of ideological commitment and actual beliefs in order to provide educated challenges from sources well versed in that particular area.

> **While ideology, narratives and propaganda are not necessarily the primary motivator or cause of becoming involved in violent activities, they can help qualify a context in which individuals are able to participate on their own, varied, terms. Any counter-effort should thus aim to identify the actual attraction in the specific case and offer alternatives accordingly.**

The variety and complexity of reasons for the appeal of (violent) extremist narratives and propaganda should now be clear. While ideology, narratives and propaganda are not necessarily the primary motivator or cause of becoming involved in violent activities, they can help qualify a context in which individuals are able to participate on their own, varied, terms. Any counter-effort should thus aim to identify the actual attraction in the specific case and offer alternatives accordingly.

It is also crucial to consider how narratives and propaganda are being distributed. Recently there has been a heightened focus on dissemination through Internet platforms, which have undeniably become central sites for accessing violent extremist material. However, according to Ferguson (2016), it is still personal, offline contact that is the most effective tool of violent extremist recruitment, not online narratives and propaganda. Individuals may consume and interact with online material, but according to Ferguson that is not the determining factor. Therefore, offline interactions should not be lost sight of in the current focus on online distribution. Broad counter-narrative campaigns are not equipped to address, for example, the relational and emotional aspects of physical person-to-person contact.

The online structure can nevertheless be an enabler in terms of access. For example, in the case of militant Islamism, physical meeting points are most often gender-segregated; whereas online platforms such as Twitter reach all genders simultaneously. This is an example of what Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis & Chen (2017, 2) refer to as the Internet's 'capacity to expand reach and influence'. According to Weimann (2016) the technology is also useful in the sense that it allows encrypted interaction through, for example, WhatsApp, Skype, the use of encryption keys etc. Additionally, activity can be moved to the Deep or Dark Web, where initiated users can become further engaged with violent extremist material, which can prove difficult to identify and reach for outsiders, including those engaging in counter-narrative activities. Shutting down surface websites should therefore be done with caution, as such places could offer opportunities to identify, observe, and collect information that may be useful not only in security service and law enforcement activities, but also in the strategic formulation of constructive alternatives.

Social media sites are popular venues for communicating narratives and propaganda due to their interactive nature. While the volume of activity on specific sites such as Facebook and Twitter can be observed and documented, their actual effect is not yet known. A mixture of writing, pictures, audio and video clips, etc. are posted on each of these sites. While one can count the number of interactions, this says nothing definitive about the number of consumers, nor does it reveal which of these mediums has the most influence. We know that the Internet allows for an international audience, but we do not yet know what difference, if any, it makes that specific communications are translated into local languages or if, for example, certain combinations of delivery sites and mediums have a particular influence.

It is also uncertain who the distributers of the narratives and propaganda are. Online dissemination offers the option of anonymity, as well as the marketing of personas. This means that it is often uncertain from whom the narratives and propaganda

actually originate. It would, for example, be possible for extreme right groups to create false militant Islamist social media profiles, or vice versa, to incite polarisation in society. Most social media platforms also allow users to comment on and share material, and at present we do not fully understand the effect this has on the audience. From mere observations, it is impossible to know whether, for example, it is the original post itself or the comments and shares that influence the interactively engaged audience the most.

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The final challenge to address here is whether it is possible to actually identify the few. As argued above, the narratives and propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State do not appear to find resonance in the general population or mobilise the masses, but they can play various roles for those who, for various reasons, are willing to listen to and actively seek them, as well as engage with them. In the process of shedding light on the many challenges related to counter-narrative work, not least the risks associated with attempting to reach the few by addressing the many, we have attempted to suggest alternative ways of addressing the few. The question is, however, how do we actually identify such individuals and analyse their motivations so that appropriate alternatives can be provided?

Returning to the prevention pyramid provided in Section 2, the targeted (top) level and the specific (middle) level include individuals in extremist milieus and individuals deemed to be at risk of radicalisation. It is implied that such individuals are open to violent extremist narratives and propaganda, which in theory should make targeted counter-narrative work straightforward. Yet, challenges remain.

Both levels rely on the identification and categorisation of individuals and groups as vulnerable, at risk and involved in extremist milieus. The question is how these categories are defined, as well as how individuals are sorted into them. Recognising that radicalisation to violence is not only a complex and dynamic process, but also relative to the given context surrounding an individual, it will rarely be the exact same combination of factors that causes a person to become vulnerable, become an extremist, or accept violence as a means of expression. Similarly, individuals will have different reasons for being open to narratives and propaganda, and have varying

degrees of receptiveness. Additionally, the external expressions will vary. Categorising individuals within the prevention pyramid will therefore be a question of judgement from one case to the next.

CONCLUSION
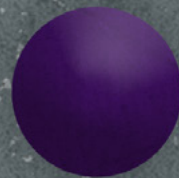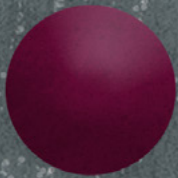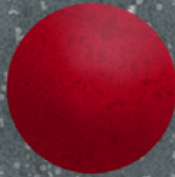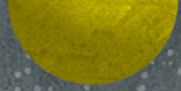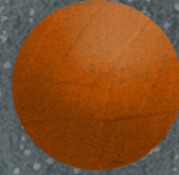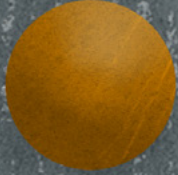
Countering extremist narratives and propaganda has numerous challenges, and whether counter-narratives are constructive methods to preventing terrorism remains questionable. Taking its point of departure in three new counter-propaganda initiatives, introduced in the third national action plan on countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation presented by the Danish government in October 2016, the present report has shed light on the risks involved in addressing the many to reach the few and argued that these risks are disproportional to the expectable effects of broad counter-narrative campaigns. It has also shed light on the many challenges related to confrontational counter-propaganda, which engages with ideology and narratives by exposing, correcting, or ridiculing them. Lastly, it has explored how and why narratives are attractive to different audiences and how this poses challenges to counter-narrative and counter-propaganda campaigns.

> **Countering extremist narratives and propaganda has numerous challenges, and whether counter-narratives are constructive methods to preventing terrorism remains questionable.**

Although we conclude that counter-narratives and counter-propaganda are problematic and not in line with the underlying logics that have so far informed and shaped the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalisation, we do recognise that extremist propaganda and narratives will remain a policy and security focus for the foreseeable future. We have therefore suggested alternative, more targeted, and more qualified ways of attempting to counter them, which would fit better with the Danish approach and minimise some of the challenges.

Although we identify clear weaknesses in the Danish approach, we recognise that it is presently among the most progressive CVE strategies available. We also believe it holds potential for the development of more qualified and targeted ways of countering the narratives and propaganda of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State, which revolve around providing alternatives instead of engaging with it. Although we find the prevention pyramid to be simplistic and constraining, we acknowledge that it is an established, recognisable, and practical preventive frame that offers a way to organise and systematise counter-efforts. We also feel that it could be a point of departure for developing a tool – or a business plan – to help break down the ambitious project of preventing terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation into manageable sub-projects, which have identified sub objectives, methods for reaching them, des-

ignated actors, and which take into account the potential risks. Below, we therefore collect our suggestions within the framework of a revised version of the prevention pyramid.

While narratives and propaganda are not necessarily the primary motivator for individuals who commit acts of violence, they do offer a space wherein individuals can qualify a context and be able to participate on their own, varied, terms. Instead of engaging with the ideology by attempting to expose, correct or ridicule it, attempts should be made to identify and provide alternative ways of serving the purposes, which the ideology is used to serve. Any counter-effort should therefore aim to identify the actual attraction in the specific case and offer alternatives accordingly. Some inspiration for more targeted and qualified approaches can be found in the methods already being applied in Denmark, but even here there is potential for improvement.

First of all, the prevention pyramid must be modified, separating those who indicate a willingness to use violence as a means of expression from those who do not. This will add another level to the triangle and thus another category to use in the identification of how and why the audience members are listening to the narratives and propaganda, what the sub-objectives are, and how they can be achieved.
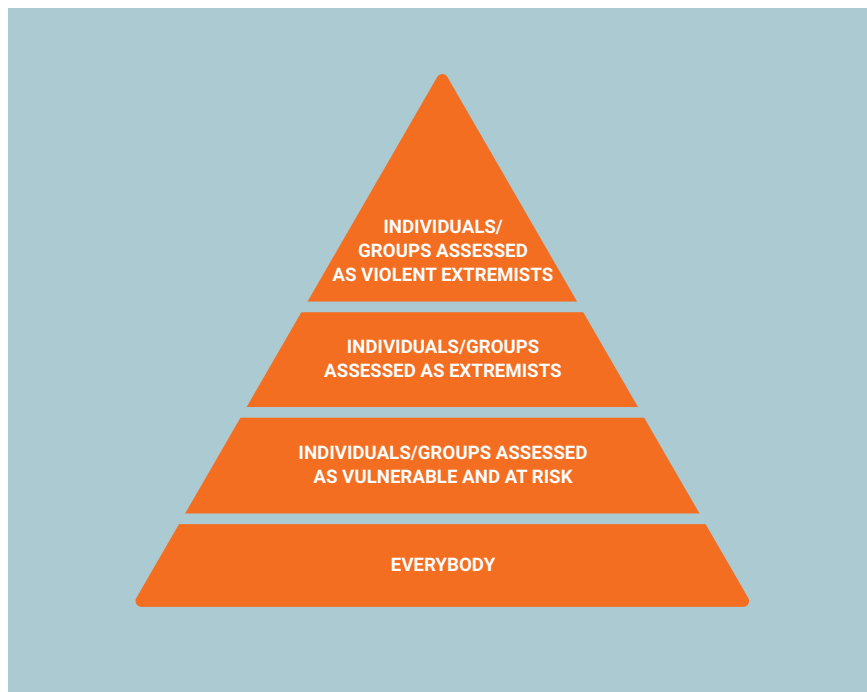
On the three top tiers of the pyramid, the focus must be on providing alternative ways of addressing the grievances that the individual or group is currently seeking to address through the ideology. These can be foreign or domestic political grievances, such as the violent conflict in Syria or politics in Denmark, or more individual or personal ones, such as a search for action and adventure, a place to belong, or a way to become a hero.

At present, the Danish approach includes several methods for providing alternative ways of addressing personal and individual grievances, but alternative ways of addressing political grievances are scarce.

We strongly recommend focusing on developing societally more acceptable ways of addressing foreign or domestic political grievances, which can actually serve as real alternatives to the ways currently presented by groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

Being fully aware that this is a sensitive and contentious subject, we strongly recommend focusing on developing societally more acceptable ways of addressing foreign or domestic political grievances, which can actually serve as real alternatives to the ways currently presented by groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

To provide alternatives for both types of grievance, we suggest focusing on relational approaches, building trusting human relations with individuals who are assessed to be violent extremists, extremists, or vulnerable. Such relations can potentially draw on both offline and online communication.

Returning one last time to the three new direct counter-narrative initiatives introduced in the Danish 2016 action plan, this implies that the ways in which they are put into practice will determine whether they become constructive, problematic, or simply irrelevant.

- A civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason' to seek out and critically engage with relevant online forums, challenging extremist views.

- A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation.

- A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda.

If these voices of reason and young people have the necessary knowledge and are able to thoroughly analyse the underlying motivations of those with whom they critically engage, they may be able to introduce real alternative ways of addressing grievances, whether political or personal, real or perceived, making them a constructive addition. If not, then they will at best be irrelevant and at worst make matters worse, particularly if they fall into the trap of attempting to expose, correct, or ridicule the ideology, or simply promote their own normality as superior.

At the bottom of the pyramid, the aim should be to build general resources within the general population, particularly children and youth. The focus should therefore be on capacity-building and inclusion, embracing diversity, openness, and freedoms in order to avoid feelings of marginalisation and polarisation of society; on strengthening critical thinking and knowledge about how propaganda works; and on addressing real social issues that may in the long run leave individuals vulnerable to any risks, including but not limited to engagement in extremist milieus.

On this general level, we also recommend providing alternatives by facilitating open debates about difficult subjects, such as violent conflicts and international politics, where constructive and productive ways of engaging with them can be presented. It is crucial in this context that these alternative ways must be real and have real potential for actually making a change.

The present report has shed light on some of the challenges related to counter-narratives and to the counter-propaganda initiatives introduced in the Danish action plan, put forward in October 2016, as well as offered suggestions for improvements. This is, however, a vast and underexplored area that requires more research to enable the development of effective and proportional ways to counter extremist propaganda and its narratives within the Danish preventive framework, as well as within other frameworks.

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