

# A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners

This Policy Brief outlines a “linkage-based” approach to combating militant Islamist propaganda tailored for practitioners. It argues for a two-tiered approach to counter-terrorism strategic communications that addresses a spectrum of target audience motivations: *antis*, *curious*, *engaged*, *tacit supporters* and *active supporters*. The first tier undermines the key arguments at the heart of militant Islamist narratives and offers alternative narratives. This approach is designed to dismantle the “systems of meaning” at the heart of militant Islamist propaganda via the deployment of pragmatic- and identity-choice messages tailored to dissolve the linkages violent extremists draw between themselves and solutions *and* their enemies and crisis. The second tier uses strategies of network disruption and disengagement strategies to catalyse behavioural changes in target audiences away from joining or acting on behalf of violent extremist groups like al Qaeda or so-called Islamic State (IS). These tiers are mutually reinforcing: the first degrades the appeal of violent extremist messaging in an effort to constrict those who may become engaged in or even supporters of violent extremists while the second disturbs the trajectory of individuals from tacit to active supporters. The framework is designed to not only assist practitioners with synchronising campaign planning and message design but provides a way to categorise messaging and facilitate metric collection for better informed decision-making.

ICCT Policy Brief  
November 2016

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## About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

## Introduction

This Policy Brief outlines a “linkage-based” approach to counter-terrorism strategic communications<sup>1</sup> for practitioners seeking to combat the appeal of militant Islamist propaganda.<sup>2</sup> The two-tiered strategy is based on the findings of a series of publications released by ICCT’s Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) Project:

- “A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict”<sup>3</sup>
- “Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism”<sup>4</sup>
- “Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications”<sup>5</sup>
- “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda”<sup>6</sup>

It thus draws on some of the latest research in the field concerning how humans tend to interpret information and make decisions, the strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda and the most effective ways to counter it. From local non-government community-led initiatives to national or even transnational governmental efforts, it is widely recognised that on-the-ground practitioners in regular contact with target audiences are best positioned to infuse their messages with the required nuances for it to resonate. But what this Policy Brief tries to offer practitioners is a broad framework to help shape and categorise that messaging, synchronise campaign planning and message design, and guide metric collection to inform better decision-making.

<sup>1</sup> The key principles of the “linkage-based” approach were previously published in H.J. Ingram, “An Analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2016), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551>.

<sup>2</sup> The term “militant Islamist” refers to Islamists who advocate/engage in violence as a tool for socio-political change. As shorthand, the term “violent extremist” (reference to the actor/s) and “violent extremism” (reference to the propaganda or agenda) is also used here.

<sup>3</sup> 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), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Haroro-Ingram-Brief-History-Propaganda-June-2016-LATEST.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> J.M. Berger, “Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CVE-Policy-Brief-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> H.J. Ingram & A. Reed, “Lessons from history for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 4 (2016), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Ingram-CTSC-June-2016-3.pdf>.

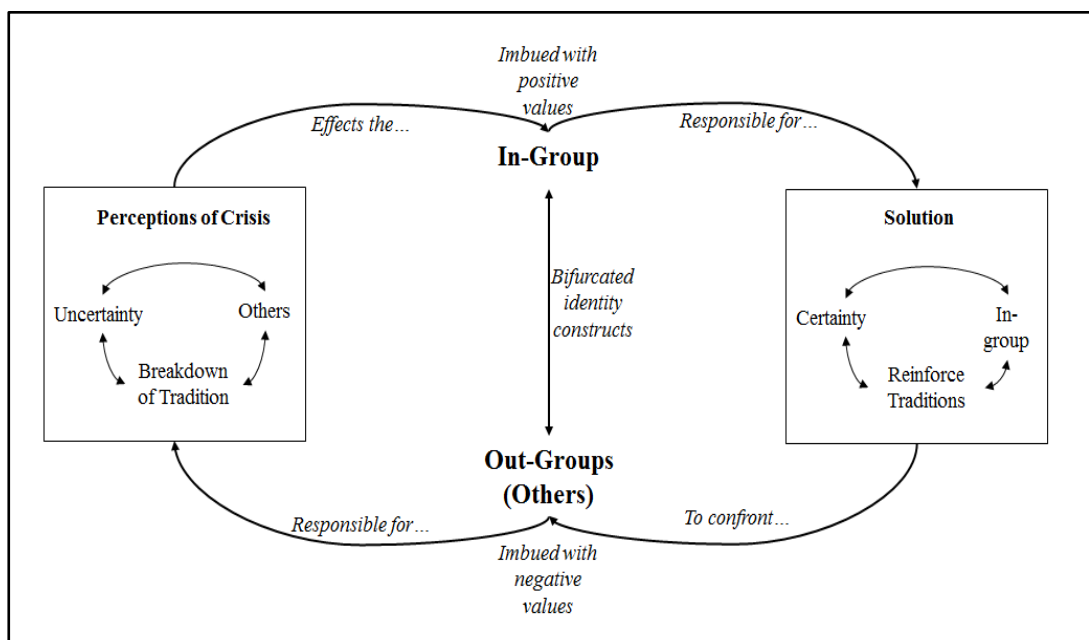
<sup>6</sup> H.J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no.9 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Ingram-Deciphering-the-Siren-Call-of-Militant-Islamist-Propaganda-September2016.pdf>.

## The Strategic Logic of the “Linkage-Based” Approach

Before exploring the nuances of this strategy, it is important to consider the strategic logic that underpins this approach.

### What is the Violent Extremist “System of Meaning”?

Violent extremist propaganda is designed to provide its audiences with a “competitive system of meaning” which acts as the lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world.<sup>7</sup> It is thus *central* to the appeal of militant Islamist propaganda. At the heart of this “system of meaning” is typically a single overarching statement or “pitch”: “we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately-aligned) Muslims (the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow in-group identity are enemies (i.e. out-group identities or Others) who are responsible for the *ummah*’s (Muslim community’s) crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the militant Islamist politico-military agenda).” Graphically represented in Figure 1, militant Islamist propaganda uses a combination of narratives and imagery to connect these powerful in-group and out-group identity constructs with crisis and solution constructs. Propaganda plays a central role in shaping and solidifying this network of “mental models”<sup>8</sup> that constitutes the “system of meaning” for violent extremists and their supporters.



**Figure 1: Violent extremist “system of meaning” and its self-reinforcing dynamic**

Militant Islamist propaganda deploys a diverse range of messages designed to reinforce different aspects of their system of meaning. For example, some messages focus on showing how enemies are causing crises (i.e. Other-crisis linkages) while others will show how their particular group is providing solutions to crisis (i.e. in-group-solution linkages). This diversity of messaging is about much more than just providing

<sup>7</sup> H. J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change” (2016), pp. 8-19.

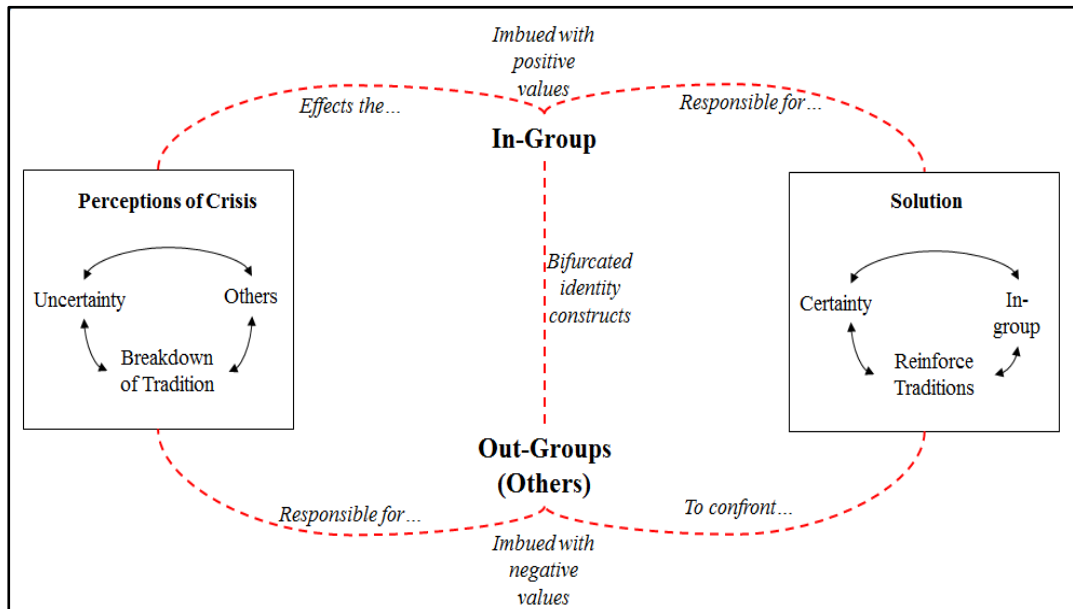
<sup>8</sup> For more, see D. Norman, “Some observations on mental models”, in D. Gentner and A. Stevens, eds., *Mental Models* (New York: Psychology Press, 1983), pp.7-14.

audiences with a variety of arguments to support its central “pitch” and an array of “hooks” to attract audiences characterised by diverse motivations. It is also reflective of the cyclically reinforcing nature of militant Islamist propaganda (see Figure 1). After all, the more that perceptions of crisis increase and out-groups (i.e. the enemies of violent extremists) are framed as responsible, the more urgent the need for solutions and the more the in-group (i.e. violent extremists) will be seen as best equipped to implement it. These dynamics may shape the way an individual perceives not only broader socio-political issues but also how personal issues are understood such may be the pervasive influence of the violent extremist “system of meaning” to that person.

What emerges from this perspective is that ideology is a tool that is used selectively by violent extremists to construct their “system of meaning” *in response to* psychosocial and strategic factors. In other words, militant Islamist propagandists select certain ideological concepts and contentions over a myriad of others to win support for their agenda within a certain political, socio-economic and cultural context in an effort to leverage target audience motivations. Naturally, militant Islamist propaganda inverts this relationship by proclaiming their agenda emerges from a rigid and pre-ordained truth, disconnected from socio-historical context and human psychology. Ideology-centric counter-terrorism efforts are based on the latter and thus immediately succumb to the militant Islamist’s “propaganda trap”. Moreover, attempting to counter extremism on a purely ideological basis (e.g. the jurisprudential merits of a particular interpretation of *jihad*) is unlikely to resonate with those most susceptible to extremism because it ignores contextual factors (e.g. perceptions of crisis) that render individuals susceptible to violent extremist propaganda. After all, ideological interpretations will tend to resonate in certain contexts: the more extreme perceptions of crisis, the more extreme the solutions that will be deemed necessary to address them and thus the more extreme the ideological justifications. Counter-extremism efforts that fixate on critiquing militant Islamist ideology without addressing the “real world” crisis and the need for solutions risks being an exercise in futility if not counter-productivity. The “linkage-based” approach offers an alternative.

## Why is Attacking the Violent Extremist “System of Meaning” the Focal Point of this Strategy?

As its name suggests, the “linkage-based” approach uses tailored messaging to target those crucial linkages that violent extremist propaganda forges between themselves and solutions *and* their enemies and crisis (Figure 2). Violent extremists understand that the more an individual can be lured into adopting their “system of meaning”, the more susceptible that individual will be to supporting their group such that, on occasion, they will even use violence to express that support. This is why the strategy outlined in this Policy Brief deploys two lines of effort.



**Figure 2: Dismantling the violent extremist “system of meaning”**

The first tier<sup>9</sup> deploys messaging designed to discredit the violent extremist’s “system of meaning” and offers alternative narratives. Its primary (but not sole) targets are those who have yet to adopt the violent extremist “system of meaning”. This is achieved by using *negative messaging* that attacks the linkages violent extremists attach between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis. *Negative messaging* emphasises the harm of certain choices and seeks to diminish the appeal of violent extremists (i.e. proscribed terrorist groups and their supporters) by attaching them to crises. This is augmented by *positive messaging* that is geared towards emphasising the benefits of certain choices and boosting the appeal of oneself and/or allies by linking their actions to solutions. The second tier<sup>10</sup> uses disengagement (i.e. *negative*) messaging and network disruption strategies targeting those who are already inside, i.e. who already adhere to, the violent extremist’s “system of meaning”.

The strategy proposed here is deeply rooted in a nuanced understanding of the psychological, social and strategic drivers of militant Islamist propaganda.<sup>11</sup> Using tailored messaging to break down key linkages in violent extremist propaganda is designed to have a multilayered effect on target audiences. From an ideological

<sup>9</sup> Tier 1 is largely based on H. J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Tier 2 is largely based on J.M. Berger, “Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism”, (2016).

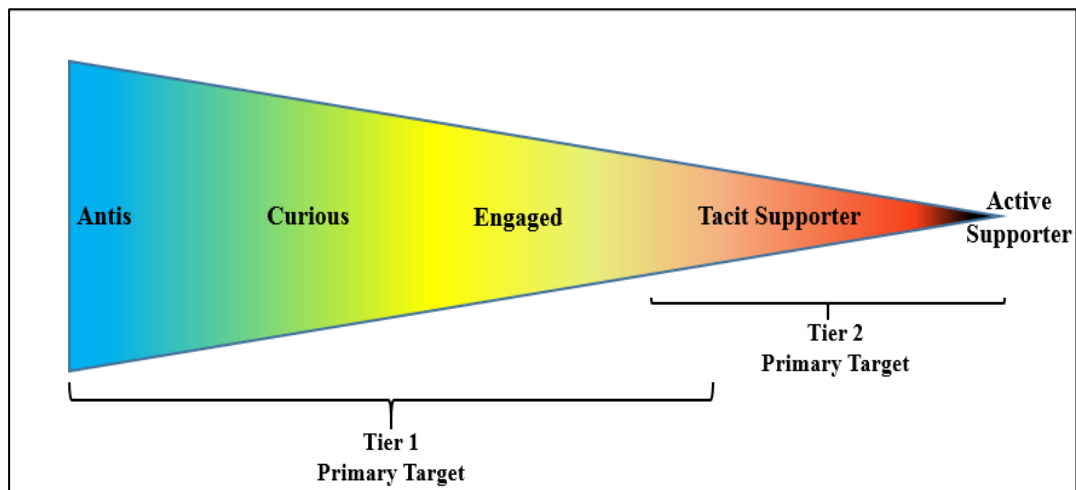
<sup>11</sup> For more, see H.J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, (2016).

perspective, it represents a powerful means to erode the appeal of violent extremist ideology without directly engaging in “tit-for-tat” counter-proselytisation. From a psychological perspective, it is an approach that leverages the psychology of uncertainty and identity (amongst others) to undermine the psychosocial appeal of militant Islamist propaganda. Strategically, it deploys a time-tested propaganda weapon by using messaging to leverage the say-do gap, i.e. exacerbate the disparity between an enemy’s words and actions whilst showing the close alignment of one’s own words and action. Moreover, it uses a strength of violent extremist propaganda – the close, mutually-reinforcing dynamics of its contentions (Figure 2) – against it. After all, the more that these linkages can be dissolved in the minds of potential supporters, the more vulnerable the whole “architecture” of that “system of meaning” becomes and the greater the space for alternative narratives.

## Framework Principles

The two-tiered framework outlined here is based on the need to devise counter-terrorism strategic communication efforts which:

1. Address the full spectrum of target audiences that may be vulnerable to violent extremist propaganda or who may be useful to counter it. As illustrated in Figure 3, the two tiers of the “linkage-based” strategy target a broad spectrum of target audience motivations: *antis*, *curious*, *engaged*, *tacit supporters* and *active supporters*.



**Figure 3: Target audience spectrum and two-tier targeting**

2. Focus on countering and offering alternatives to the propaganda produced by proscribed terrorist organisations (i.e. violent extremists) and their supporters rather than opaque and subjective notions of “extremism”. It therefore offers an alternative to often counter-productive de-radicalisation/intervention strategies that tend to be focused on ideology-centric counter-proselytisation. Moreover, narrowing counter-terrorism/counter-extremism efforts on proscribed terrorist organisations and their supporters ensures efforts are more focused (aiding efficiency) and grounded in rule of law rather than arbitrary distinctions between what is and is not “acceptable” belief.

3. Ensure that overall campaign strategy and message design are synchronised. This is achieved by interlocking the two tiers of the strategy and establishing message categories within which are sets of *positive* and *negative* messaging themes.
4. Provide a framework for practitioners to collect metrics to gauge the efficacy of the overall campaign, message categories and message themes. This architecture connects campaign planning to message design to assist with assessing efficacy and better informing decisions about future campaign and message design.

## The “Linkage-Based” Approach

Shown in Figure 4, the “linkage-based” approach to counter-terrorism strategic communications is characterised by two tiers or lines of effort. Tier 1 has dual purposes.<sup>12</sup> The first is to dismantle the “system of meaning” advocated by violent extremists. It achieves this by deploying messages that variously attack the linkages violent extremists attach between themselves and solutions *and* their enemies and crises. This is known as *negative messaging* because it emphasises the harm of target audiences making certain choices and seeks to diminish the appeal of violent extremists. The second purpose is to use *positive messaging* that emphasises the benefits of certain choices and seeks to boost the appeal of oneself (e.g. government) and/or allies (e.g. community groups). Tier 1 efforts address a broad target audience spectrum from “antis” to “engaged”. This messaging should, as much as possible, be synchronised with supportive actions in the field (e.g. CVE initiatives). Without messaging being coordinated with actions and vice versa (i.e. reducing the say-do gap), the credibility of both can be significantly undermined.

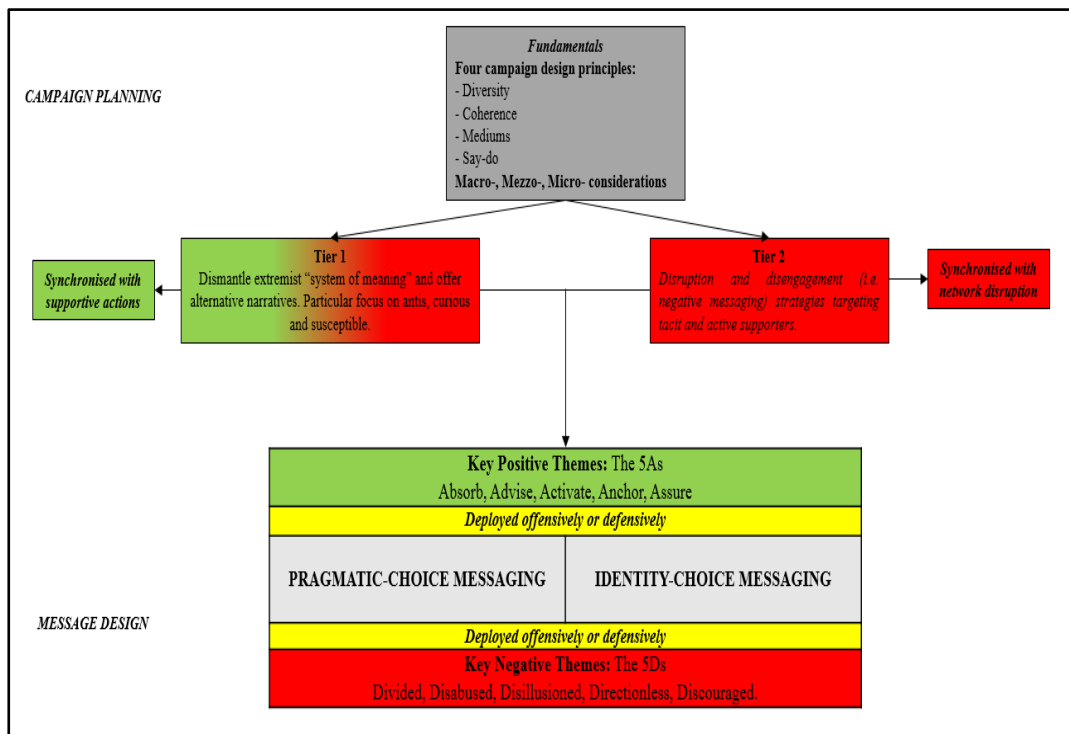


Figure 4: The “linkage-based” approach

<sup>12</sup> Tier 1 is largely based on H. J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, (2016).



Tier 2 also has two purposes.<sup>13</sup> The first is to use disruption strategies against online and offline violent extremist networks. In an online context this involves the targeted shutting down of violent extremist accounts. Offline, this requires officials to target violent extremist networks and their supporters using appropriate arms of the state. The second is to use disengagement narratives via *negative messaging* targeting tacit and active supporters of violent extremism to trigger behavioural changes away from support.

The two tiers are complementary. As Tier 2 efforts disrupt violent extremist networks, this slows the dissemination and even production of their propaganda thus creating opportunities for Tier 1 efforts to fill the void. As Tier 2 deploys *negative messaging* against violent extremist networks, this further augments the *positive* and *negative messaging* deployed as part of Tier 1 (and vice versa).

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<sup>13</sup> Tier 2 is largely based on J.M. Berger. "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", (2016).

## Target Audience

Overall, the two-tiered strategy targets the full spectrum of target audience motivations as detailed in Table 1.

Target audience	Aims
<b>Antis:</b> those against the violent extremist groups.	<p>Limit inadvertently undermining their counter-extremism efforts.</p> <p>Provide support, particularly via supply of raw materials (e.g. footage, technical support).</p> <p>Effective messaging may be supported or disseminated by antis.</p>
<b>Curious:</b> those consuming violent extremist propaganda.	Undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of <i>negative</i> and <i>positive messaging</i> to address varied audience motivations.
<b>Engaged:</b> those who adhere to the violent extremist group's "system of meaning" and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks.	<p>Undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of <i>negative</i> and <i>positive messaging</i> to address varied audience motivations. Disengagement narrative strategies (i.e. <i>negative messaging</i>) should increasingly be prioritised.</p> <p>Disrupt violent extremist networks.</p>
<b>Tacit supporters:</b> those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks.	<p>Focus on <i>negative messaging</i> as a disengagement strategy from violent extremist networks.</p> <p>Disrupt violent extremist networks.</p>
<b>Active supporters:</b> those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.	<p><i>Negative messaging</i> as a means to drive disengagement.</p> <p>Aggressive targeted disruption of violent extremist networks.</p>

**Table 1: Audience motivational spectrum**

Recognising this range of target audience motivations (and the countless nuances between the categories) is crucial for three reasons. First, it is a means by which to identify the target priorities of a communication campaign. For example, if one's target audience is dominated by those who are "curious" or "engaged" to violent extremism then messaging should be prioritised accordingly. It is also important to recognise that the majority of people sit between antis and curious with little risk of radicalisation/attraction to violent extremism. Second, it is also a means by which to select people to "focus group" messaging prior to public release. Third, this is a basic means to consider who is consuming one's messaging and whether targeting strategies need to shift. For example, if messaging is largely being consumed by "antis" who are already against violent extremism when the target audience should be those who are "engaged", then the metrics being collected will be misleading.

## Campaign Design

The campaign design principles featured in the “linkage-based” approach were drawn from CTSC Project analyses of the history of propaganda during conflict which identified a suite of macro-, mezzo- and micro-level considerations, as well as four campaign design principles, that are crucial to the success of counter-terrorism strategic communications efforts.<sup>14</sup> While the macro-, mezzo-, and micro-level considerations have been detailed in subsequent CTSC publications,<sup>15</sup> it is worthwhile reiterating the four principles due to their centrality in campaign design planning:

1. Produce a diversity of messaging that leverages pragmatic- and identity-choice appeals which are deployed both defensively and offensively (with an emphasis on the latter).
2. All messages should cohere around core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative.
3. Use a variety of mediums for communication to maximise the message’s reach, timeliness and targeting.
4. To maximise the intended effects of strategic communications efforts and minimise inadvertent second and third order effects, messaging should be synchronised with “real world” initiatives (e.g. strategic-policy/politico-military efforts) and seek to nullify the effects of the adversary’s activities.

Drawn from a comprehensive historical analysis, these four principles offer crucial guidelines for planning a strategic communications campaign.

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<sup>14</sup> See H.J. Ingram. “A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict”, (2016); H.J. Ingram & A. Reed. “Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications”, (2016).

<sup>15</sup> For more, see J.M. Berger. “Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism”, (2016); H.J. Ingram & A. Reed. “Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications”, (2016).

## Message Design

The deployment of messages under the assumption that the “facts will speak for themselves” is deeply misguided and ignores a large body of empirical research.<sup>16</sup> All messaging should be designed and deployed with a persuasive intent. It is for this reason that the “linkage-based” approach fuses three strategies into its message design thinking: (a.) pragmatic- and identity-choice messaging, (b.) offensive and defensive messaging, and (c.) leveraging the say-do gap. As illustrated in Table 2, these considerations are captured in an interlocking message design plan.

<b>Key Positive Themes: The 5As</b> Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, Assure	
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
<b>PRAGMATIC-CHOICE MESSAGING</b>	<b>IDENTITY-CHOICE MESSAGING</b>
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
<b>Key Negative Themes: The 5Ds</b> Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, Discouraged.	

**Table 2: Messaging categories, sub-categories and themes**

At the heart of the “linkage-based” approach are two key categories of messaging designed to drive pragmatic-choice (based on a “rational” cost-benefit consideration of options) and identity-choice (based on identity considerations) decision-making processes in its audiences (see Table 2). This ensures that all messaging is geared towards leveraging one or even both of these powerful motivational drivers in its target audiences. Depending on that target audience, practitioners also need to consider whether the message will be deployed offensively (i.e. to control the narrative and/or elicit a response from one’s enemy) or defensively (i.e. to counter an adversary’s messaging). Another consideration is whether the message will be *positive* –i.e. it emphasises the benefits of certain choices and boosts the appeal of oneself and/or allies – or *negative* – i.e. it emphasises the harm of certain choices and diminishes the appeal of violent extremists. Framing all messaging within such an architecture helps to broadly organise and synchronise a messaging campaign. It is within these broad guidelines that decisions regarding specific messaging themes can be deliberated.

<sup>16</sup> For more, see “World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior”, Washington, DC: World Bank (2015); D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012). H. J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, pp. 6-8.

## The 5As of Positive Messaging

The 5As represent important messaging themes for *positive messaging* and can be used for both pragmatic-choice and identity-choice purposes. Deployed effectively and across a coherent campaign plan, the 5As may have a self-reinforcing effect that can deliver compounding beneficial returns.

Five As	Purpose of theme	Pragmatic-choice sample	Identity-choice sample
<i>Absorb</i>	Target audience is part of a positive and worthwhile community (emphasis on collective identity).	Promote target audience’s involvement in activities that benefit their community (e.g. charity, sport).	Inclusive messaging that focuses on community/national identity.
<i>Advise</i>	Clarity about how pertinent issues/events affect target audiences.	Clear messaging about the impact of counter-terrorism laws (e.g. response to blowback against community).	Demonstrate how counter-terrorism efforts do not focus on a single community.
<i>Activate</i>	Promote how participation in collective/community has benefits for individual and collective.	Support of government/community groups has practical benefits to target audience members.	Support of government/community group fosters shared individual and collective identities.
<i>Anchor</i>	Target audiences are characterised by a range of individual identities and behaviours that are positive and worthwhile (emphasis on individual identity).	Emphasise the range of positive and empowering activities which members of the target audience are engaged (e.g. opposite to “persecuted victim”).	Emphasise the range of identities that define an individual (opposite to “black and white” worldview of violent extremists).
<i>Assure</i>	The facts support the positive claims/activities of the messenger (e.g. government).	Promote efforts of the messenger and allies to address target audience problems.	Highlight how law enforcement and government agencies are working to support target audience as equal citizens.

## The 5Ds of Negative Messaging

The 5Ds encapsulate important messaging themes for *negative messaging* and can be used for both pragmatic- and identity-choice purposes.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the 5Ds can be mutually reinforcing resulting in compounding returns.

Five Ds	Purpose of theme	Pragmatic-choice sample	Identity-choice sample
<i>Divided</i>	Violent extremists disagree on key elements of movement.	Violent extremists spend more time fighting each other.	Violent extremists say they support Muslims but condemn and kill them.
<i>Disabused</i>	The facts undermine our view of the violent extremists.	Highlighting the number of Muslims violent extremists kill.	Hypocritical rhetoric of "purity" when engaged in drug-taking and rape.
<i>Disillusioned</i>	Participation in violent extremism does not deliver on promises.	Violent extremist actions did not achieve the results promised	Violent extremists present a fabricated image of "purity" inconsistent with practices like rape, drug trafficking and torture.
<i>Directionless</i>	Violent extremists do not have a clear and tangible agenda.	Violent extremists do not have a clear strategy to succeed (e.g. military losses) or shifting messaging about goals.	Violent extremist claims are inconsistent, misleading and do not have an executable vision.
<i>Discouraged</i>	Violent extremist ultimately cannot win.	Violent extremists consistently fail politico-militarily.	Violent extremists make the plight of Muslims worse.

## Additional Theme Selection and Message Design Suggestions

1. To maximise the relevance and resonance of a message, use real examples. For *negative messaging*, use disgruntled former members of violent extremist networks to maximise credibility. *Positive messaging* should also use real examples that are carefully selected for that specific messaging purpose. For example, presenting "success stories" from a range of fields – e.g. sport, academic, business, art or music – to champion community "role models".
2. Engage in a dialogue with target audiences for valuable insights into their needs and tailor messaging accordingly. As often as possible, ensure "focus groups" are comprised of target audience members. For example, online this would involve the establishment of virtual focus groups using engagement metrics.
3. Messaging needs to be synchronised with "real world" events and activities. This may require counter-terrorism strategic communications and CVE practitioners to engage with government and non-government agencies to shape initiatives (and vice versa) to maximise the effects of both message and action.
4. While both non-violent and violent groups tend to describe their enemies using similar language, violent groups tend to describe themselves as pure, infallible and

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Berger. "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", (2016).

uniquely responsible for fixing the crisis. This highlights the importance of *positive messaging* as a buffer for target audiences who may perceive crises but have not radicalised to the point of wanting to support violent extremism or engage in violence themselves. Effective *positive messaging* needs to take advantage of opportunities that emerge as a consequence of events (e.g. highlighting the beneficial impact of community efforts), actions (e.g. highlighting the beneficial impact of government initiatives) or even violent extremist messaging (e.g. rebutting perceptions of crisis perpetuated by propaganda). It also underscores the importance of offensive and defensive *negative messaging* against tacit and active supporters to counter in-group constructs of purity and infallibility.

5. Simple messaging should dominate a communication campaign. More complex messaging that requires target audiences to engage in deliberated and considered thinking should be (a.) carefully timed to take into account contextual factors and (b.) preceded by a series of simpler messages that “prime” the target audience.
6. A target audience under stress is unlikely to be able to process complex messaging and will respond intuitively thus with a greater susceptibility to cognitive biases. During such periods of acute crisis, simple messaging should dominate the campaign.
7. One of the greatest appeals of militant Islamist propaganda is the simple “black and white”, “us versus them” worldview it offers audiences. “Black and white” cannot be defeated with more “black and white”. Instead, anti-violent extremism efforts must focus on re-framing the discourse by highlighting the variety of identities (e.g. gender, student, sportsperson) that constitute an individual or collective and the diversity of their engagements. Put another way, only colour can defeat “black and white”. This leads to the next point.
8. Western government-led counter-terrorism strategic communication efforts that focus on “re-constructing” Muslim identities and even Islamic ideology are more likely to be counter-productive. After all, secular Western governments engaged in defining what is and is not legitimate belief is hubristic and validates the claims of militant Islamist propagandists. It is also deeply harmful to the many Muslim “moderates” (i.e. antis) that are actively (and often quietly) engaged in their own communities. While Western governments may have the best of intentions and may even feel that “something” needs to be done in this area, direct engagement in any counter-proselytisation approach must be avoided.
9. While Western/non-Muslim practitioners must avoid ideology-centric strategic communications strategies, it is important for Muslim practitioners to attack the jurisprudential credibility of violent extremists. This framework offers those practitioners a broad framework within which to frame these jurisprudential contentions to ensure it addresses broader contextual concerns.
10. Collecting data on the efficacy of a particular message, a category of messaging (e.g. *positive* or *negative* messaging) and the overall campaign is essential for shaping future campaign and message design decisions. Of course, the specific data collected by practitioners will depend on their unique requirements and may include:

- a) Quantitative and qualitative "focus group" responses (pre-release testing).
  - b) Message reach (who and how many accessed the message).
  - c) The amount of a particular message category or message theme produced in a campaign (e.g. 50% divided-pragmatic, 20% disillusioned-identity and 30% advise-pragmatic messaging).
  - d) Message engagement data to facilitate comparative (e.g. inter-theme) analysis.
  - e) Quantitative and qualitative target audience feedback to messaging.
  - f) Provocation of defensive counter-message from violent extremists.
11. Priority should be given to the production of offensive messaging. While defensive messaging is important to counter violent extremist propaganda, an important indicator of success in the "information battle" is reflected in who is producing more offensive messaging and eliciting the most defensive messaging from their adversary.

## Conclusion

This Policy Brief has sought to provide practitioners with a broad and flexible framework through which to synchronise campaign planning and message design in their efforts to confront violent extremist propaganda. There is no "silver bullet" answer to effective strategic communications and practitioners must liaise closely with their target audiences to identify the specific appeals and creative elements that are most likely to resonate. However, this framework can help to subtly shape how that message is designed and its role within the context of other messages and the campaign more broadly. The Annex contains a Checklist for Practitioners to assist with application of the "linkage-based" approach in practice.



# Annex: Practitioners Checklist

## Campaign Planning – The Fundamentals

The Four Principles	What this means for practitioners
<p>Produce a diversity of messaging that leverages pragmatic- and identity-choice appeals which are deployed both defensively and offensively (with an emphasis on the latter).</p>	<p>Prepare messaging strategies that take into consideration the following message design suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pragmatic- and identity-choice</li> <li>- Offensive and defensive</li> <li>- <i>Positive messaging</i> and the 5As</li> <li>- <i>Negative messaging</i> and the 5Ds</li> </ul>
<p>All messages should be cohered by core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative.</p>	<p>This simple overarching narrative, mirroring that of violent extremists, may help to cohere a messaging campaign: <i>violent extremists and their supporters are responsible for crises, “we” (oneself/allies) strive to and have done more to offer solutions.</i></p> <p>Practitioners should always consider how their messaging supports this overarching narrative/pitch.</p>
<p>Use a variety of mediums for communication to maximise the message’s reach, timeliness and targeting.</p>	<p>Identify what mediums of communication will most effectively reach the target audience, identify the limitations of those mediums and incorporate other mediums that make up for those limitations.</p>
<p>To maximise the intended effects of strategic communications efforts and minimise inadvertent second and third order effects, messaging should be synchronised with “real world” initiatives (e.g. strategic-policy/politico-military efforts) and seek to nullify the effects of the adversary’s activities.</p>	<p>Synchronise messaging with events and initiatives that affect the target audience. Regularly engage with target audiences to ensure messaging maximises the real world “effects” of, for example, CVE actions (and vice versa).</p>

## Target Audience

Target audience	What this means for practitioners
<b>Antis:</b> those against the violent extremist groups.	Who should be prioritised and how is this campaign and its messages addressing this target audience and others?
<b>Curious:</b> those consuming violent extremist propaganda.	
<b>Engaged:</b> those who adhere to the violent extremist group's "system of meaning" and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks.	
<b>Tacit supporters:</b> those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks.	
<b>Active supporters:</b> those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.	

## Message Design

Based on the target audience assessment, what messaging should be given highest (i.e. higher rate of production) to lowest (i.e. lower rate of production) priority, taking into account the full spectrum of messaging options?

<b>Key Positive Themes: The 5As</b> Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, Assure	
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
PRAGMATIC-CHOICE MESSAGING	IDENTITY-CHOICE MESSAGING
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
<b>Key Negative Themes: The 5Ds</b> Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, Discouraged.	

## Metric Collection – Basic Sample

By placing messaging categories and themes into a framework, it then becomes possible to define metrics for success, collect data and make comparative assessments to guide campaign and message design strategies.

For example, based on target audience analysis, priority may be given to producing divided- pragmatic, disabused-identity, absorb-pragmatic and assure-identity messages. These message types can then be linked to metric collection – in this case focus group feedback, reach and counter-message provocation.

<b>Message type</b>	<b>Focus group feedback</b>	<b>Who was targeted and how many (Reach)</b>	<b>Provoke a defensive response from violent extremists</b>
<i>Divided (Pragmatic)</i>			
<i>Disabused (Identity)</i>			
<i>Absorbed (Pragmatic)</i>			
<i>Assure (Identity)</i>			

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November 2016

How to cite: Ingram, H. J. "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 6 (2016).

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The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

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