



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Challenging Extremist Ideology, Propaganda and Messaging: Building the Counter-narrative April 2015

Violent extremism has been a predominant regional and global security challenge for several decades, and is becoming more attractive to disenfranchised people all over the world. A combination of theology, political ideology, and media savvy messaging make groups like Daesh,¹ Al Qaeda and al Shabab relevant and uniquely positioned to broadcast their vision on a global scale. While military actions continue to disrupt the efforts of violent extremist groups, countering the underlying ideology that drives these groups is critical to defeating their brand of violent extremism. This raises new questions of how one can prevent the rising influence of extremist groups. One way is to develop “counter-narratives” that challenge extremist ideology and then broadly disseminate these messages through online and offline means. But who should craft these counter-narratives and what is the best means for delivering their messages? What is the appeal of extremist ideology?

To assess these questions, the Hollings Center for International Dialogue and the EastWest Institute convened a roundtable dialogue in Istanbul, Turkey, on April 27-29, 2015. The 22 participants at the dialogue included current and former policy makers, activists, journalists, artists, practitioners and diplomats. Countries represented included Turkey, Tunisia, Belgium, Morocco, Pakistan, Lebanon, Serbia, Germany and the United States.

The rich discussion yielded five important messages that are relevant for civil society, policy makers, academics, activists and the citizens who are living under the constant threat and shadow of extremists:

1. Extremism is not the result of Islamic faith or practice; it is a result of political, social and economic grievances and impasses that the people of the Middle East have found themselves in as a result of authoritarian regimes, bad governance and foreign interventions.
2. Violent extremism is not exclusive to people who manipulate Islam; other religions or beliefs are also vulnerable to manipulation. Singling out Islam as the only source of extremism is perceived by Muslims as discriminatory.
3. There is a multiplicity of counter-messages and narratives. It is important not to confine the counter-messages to religious themes, but to be able to draw on personal stories as well.
4. Muslim-majority countries need to reassess approaches to democracy and citizenship and ensure the inclusivity of their institutions. The alternative to Daesh’s self-proclaimed state needs to be a compelling, inclusive project.
5. Media outlets should show critical awareness of the possible negative side effects of their outputs. The replication of inflammatory language and propaganda for sensationalist purposes can perpetuate Islamophobia and do more harm than good to counter-extremism efforts.

This is not about Islam: Putting Extremism in Context

Extremist groups that grip to so-called religious motives often claim to be in the midst of a clash of civilizations. In their depiction of the world, differing religions and cultures are essentially incompatible and bound to fight for

¹ The authors of this report have chosen to use the Arabic abbreviation *Daesh* instead of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham / Syria), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or IS (Islamic State).

domination. This worldview, based on the assumption that religious, cultural and other differences are irreconcilable, is the nemesis of a pluralistic society. Therefore, participants suggested that the international community, civil society and media exercise caution in calling for the need to reform Islam, because this implies that the religion itself is to blame, perpetuating the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric of the extremists.

A participant described this as “the ISIS trap”: when Daesh claims to have committed certain atrocities in the name of Islam, debating what is or is not ‘Islamic’ implies that Daesh has a right to speak on behalf of Islam. Additionally, the outrage against these atrocities sometimes takes the form of protesting Islam as a whole or propagating Islamophobia. This reaction also plays into the extremist argument that “the world is against Islam.” For example, the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Conference that the White House convened in early 2015 concluded that extremism is not exclusive to Islam. Yet, 99 percent of the invitees were Muslim, inadvertently perpetuating the stereotype. As was pointed out by one participant, all religious texts have the potential to be manipulated when in the wrong hands. The examples of Buddhist Monks committing atrocities against Muslim populations in Burma or the ethnic cleansing of Muslim populations by Christian militias in the Central African Republic are cases in point.

Despite the efforts to take the debate outside the realm of religion and to put it in a more accurate context, Muslims are often asked to respond to questions about the relationship between Islam and extremism. Therefore it is useful to know what Islam says about excess and extremes. Speaking at the dialogue, one participant, a scholar of Islamic studies, explained that the self-designation of Muslims as “*Ummah Wasat*,” meaning the “moderate community,” was used synonymously with “just community” in pre-modern Islam. It was used to describe a society that was not given to excess, as exceeding legitimate limits was seen as unjust, and thus unacceptable in Islam. Extremism could be contained by excommunicating the extremist viewpoints, a process that can be observed throughout Islamic history. This scholar provided the example of the Kharijites, a rebel group that rose against Caliph Ali in the seventh century, using the Quran as their reference. They had scarce regard for the sanctity of human life, using economic and military means to impose religion on others. These extremist views and tactics led to the marginalization of the Kharijites by other Muslims due to their “willful transgression of moral behavior.”

The rise of modern extremist groups, such as Daesh, parallels this example, with one notable difference. In the absence of a strong legitimate political authority that enjoys the consent of the people, Daesh has been able to rise to governance. Daesh has surfaced in areas where the state has collapsed; its expansion was made possible by political conditions, a lack of legitimate government, and by the failures of international community. Additionally, extremist groups that infuse their messages with religious rhetoric can gain popularity among communities that lack basic religious literacy capable of challenging this manipulation of the mainstream orthodoxy. Coupled with poverty, economic uncertainty and humiliation suffered by formerly middle class people, these conditions enabled Daesh to surface as an alternative governing force.

Participants also explained the need for exercising caution in terminology selection when referring to extremist groups. These groups claim to be in jihad with their enemies, but succumbing to that argument is dangerous. “Jihad” in Arabic means “righteous struggle”; however most Muslims do not recognize the actions of Daesh or Al Qaeda or their likes as legitimate jihad, as described by the Quran. They violate the rules of theological jihad, not only on an ethical level but also on a historical level, as determined by theory and philosophy of Islamic law, or “*Fiqh*”. Scholars of Islam at the conference were also skeptical of Daesh’s theological grounding when it comes to the claim of establishing an Islamic state. In Islamic literature, Said Kutb and others have portrayed an Islamic state as utopia or an ideal, but this aspiration was a product of their time when their ideal society was an egalitarian, socialist society, and one that they described by borrowing Islamic vocabulary. “*Dawla Islamiyya*” (Islamic State) is not a classical Islamic term; it does not exist in pre-modern literature.

Extremist Appeal on Individual Level

When it comes to understanding how people are convinced to join the ranks of extremist groups, American or European Muslims (or converts) receive disproportionate attention. Several participants noted that foreign recruits account for a small percentage of overall fighters, and also represent an incredibly small percentage of the total Muslim population in their home countries. To decipher the appeal of extremist groups, and especially that of Daesh, which is “an almost ahistorical establishment” in the words of a participant, the two key places to study are Syria and Iraq. Communities here have lived under war or civil strife for several years, have experienced foreign military presence in their country, have had a history of totalitarian rule and have been troubled by sectarian tension. In these cases, religion is not the primary driver of radicalization of the individual. Among the main motivations are moral outrage at invaders, the search for a new identity and a longing for meaning and belonging. Daesh has been able to recruit mainly among Syrian and Iraqi youth because these boys and young men are upset at the lack of security and order in their communities and would like to take matters into their own hands. They are also in search of a meaning and identity in what they perceive to be an insecure world.

Participants then discussed individual determinants of how one could be more prone to joining extremist ranks. A common thread that leads youth to extremism, and something that Daesh preys on, is the lack of parental attention. In the absence of a role model, such as a father or an older brother for young men, there is an unfilled void that Daesh exploits. These young people, striving to find their identity, feel they can earn recognition and respect in the hierarchy of an extremist movement. Participants who worked with at-risk youth reported that Daesh fighters or commanders who roam the neighborhoods are perceived as charismatic, strong and influential. In addition, there are material rewards: in many cases Daesh will offer cash rewards and regular salaries to those who join. This opened up an interesting discussion on the crisis of masculinity in the Middle East. When men, who are traditionally the providers and protectors of the family, are stripped of this role because of war or economic crisis, they turn to desperate measures to reclaim their dignity. A participant mentioned recent brain-mapping data that showed that violations of dignity, even if verbal, are mapped in the same area of the brain as physical harm.

Some participants at the dialogue drew attention to the image that Daesh is projecting: unlike other extremist organizations, their focus is less on destruction and more on constructing a truly Islamic state. As one participant put it, “Daesh is inward-looking rather than outward-looking.” When examining Daesh’s messaging, both online and through other media, it is worth noting that Daesh is not directly asking people to become suicide bombers or fighters, rather, it is calling on them to join in building up their version of an ideal Muslim state. The gravitas of Daesh appealing to young minds is the idea that Muslims can build a society that is based on absolute justice, promising a remedy to global injustices. Some participants reiterated that Islam cannot be reduced to a state, as the Quran guides individuals in their own spirituality and lives, but does not prescribe a system for state governance at all.

In an increasingly connected world, Daesh has developed highly sophisticated and enhanced methods of recruitment that are not limited to traditional religious spheres, but include the Internet and social media in addition to the conventional platforms for disseminating information, such as television and print media. As many parents are technology illiterate, they are weakened in their ability to prevent their children from accessing the harmful propaganda of extremist groups. The imagery in these messages, especially those of Daesh, emanates a new style of masculinity. Furthermore, mosques are often seen more as social centers than simply houses of worship, which Daesh uses to disseminate their rhetoric. Some participants drew attention to video games produced by extremist groups and how this medium’s target audience, namely children, is affected indiscriminately. Engaging with such games spreads propaganda rapidly and effectively, introducing an enemy. A practitioner who works on analyzing extremists’ profiles quoted one of her interviewees as saying “the game helps kill the guilt” associated with engaging in violent acts. Others pointed to the fact that while this is obviously very harmful, Western culture has been producing similar video games and movies where villains are often Arabs or Muslims portrayed in a barbaric light.

An interesting aspect of the discussion related to Tunisia and why, despite its relative success after the so-called Arab Spring, it is still the top exporter of fighters that join Daesh and other groups in Syria. The Tunisian participant weighed in by pointing to the period of high unemployment, poverty, and political disillusionment that Tunisian society has undergone. She stated: “Politicians after the revolution are offering a new discourse, but Daesh is offering action. There are no new faces in politics that can appeal to youth. Conventional media offers no outlet for self-expression to the youth. There is an identity crisis in the new generation: there is no Ben Ali oppression anymore, but there is uncertainty.”

What role for Muslims?

Contrary to the mainstream media depiction of the moderate Muslim community as a “silent majority,” there was agreement among the participants that the moderate Muslim community is anything but silent in its response to extremist groups. One participant noted efforts to highlight instances of moderate Muslims denouncing Daesh and their actions, such as creation of an online database to highlight these messages. However, they may not fit the stereotype or the expectations of non-Muslims, because most of the time they point out that there are two sides to this problem. As much as extremism is spread through manipulation of religion, it is also spread because of a reaction against the aggressive policies of the West in the Middle East and Afghanistan. On the one hand, there are Muslims who are trying to balance the debate and distance it from the essence of the religion. On the other hand, there are those Muslims who are so appalled by the groups committing such atrocities in the name of Islam that they would like to dissociate themselves completely from these debates. Both groups of Muslims, as voiced by some participants, feel uncomfortable having to respond to every act of terrorism. However, the dialogue was enriched by the contributions of American Muslims, who were both critical of the American Muslim community and of the current reality that puts them in an uncomfortable position.

“I am heartbroken that it is not possible to be 100% Muslim and American at the same time. So many people worked so hard to create this American Muslim identity, yet American identity has been flattening.”

The main critique was that American Muslim youth today lack religious literacy. One participant said: “There is extremely problematic lack of knowledge among American Muslims as to what Islam is and who Islamists are. The reason we need more religious literacy is for people to recognize that what the extremists are doing is un-Islamic. Muslims need to keep control of Islam.” Another participant who studies the issue from the Central Asian angle underlined that while religious literacy is important, it is even more important for communities to consume and think critically about information given to them. Others added that the Quran is full of passages that say Islam belongs to people who use their minds and engage in critical thinking. Going into “auto-pilot mode” when thinking about religion is dangerous. As one participant noted, “Minimalist interpretations of Islam yield a community that is not awake and aware.”

Participants pointed to another layer of lack of knowledge on theoretical and civic engagement-based political action and generally on how change occurs. A participant noted that individual transformation, meaning being at peace with oneself, is different from social transformation. The popular Arab uprisings of 2011 were both a result and product of community transformation, but individual transformation has yet to occur. According to a participant who works on education reform, “in order for someone to induce change, they have to be aware of their agency which requires reflexivity and intellectual honesty. What enables this is a theology of liberation, which requires a pedagogy of critical thinking.” This recommendation, paired with some regional participants’ call for the need to introduce

peace education from a very early age, is a concrete action step that the international development community can pursue more rigorously.

If the call for self-reformation of American Muslims was the primary message, a secondary message at the dialogue was for non-Muslims to recognize the everyday discrimination and Islamophobia endured by their fellow Muslim citizens. A participant observed that “there is a waning of recognition of the exceptional experience of American Muslims. The marginalization takes away from the ability to reform our understanding of Islam. Our oppression takes up so much space that we don’t talk about the things we need to talk about.”

In response, another participant quoted the Lebanese author Amin Maalouf, who stated that whatever part of one’s identity is under attack becomes the most prominent. One of the participants coined the term “*Sharia-ization*”, or using an increasingly Islamic discourse, which is the reaction to legitimate political grievances that come from a strained relationship with Western governments. In his interpretation, sharia-ization is a political posture, not a religious one. So the outreach effort to these disenfranchised people both in the US and in other Western countries needs to address these political grievances first by ensuring inclusive mechanisms that reflect the true diversity of societies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The international community needs to support building stable and just institutions for inclusive governance. During the Arab Spring, the activists on the street were rarely voicing the need to embrace religion or pointing at “the West” as the enemy; instead, they were demanding that their voices be heard in and by decision-makers. In authoritarian states, people are left with very few institutions to work with as means of opposition and, in the absence of any alternative political parties or movements, what remains are usually religious institutions. While previously religious groups acted as a bridge between state and society, keeping people from radicalizing, this void has now been filled by radicals who are now playing an interlocutor role between the frustrated, religious people and the state. In these circumstances, local actors are the natural ally for building resilience within communities, acting as civil society and helping with counter-messaging. Local councils must be empowered to respond to and provide structure and forums to express frustrations and a means to find peaceful solutions.

“Poll after poll, Muslim populations have demonstrated their will for democratic governments over dictators.”

It is important for states and communities to support local de-radicalization programs, whether these are programs to reintegrate people who were formerly part of extremist groups, or to nip extremist ideology in the bud. De-radicalization programs should not only focus on the individual or the limited group of people they are trying to de-radicalize, but instead involve families and communities, who eventually will have to carry the main burden of reintegration. Participants who are practitioners in the field pointed out the need for baseline data and measurable indicators on the success and failures of de-radicalization and reintegration programs. Currently, there is a lack of evidence-based, gender- and age-specific research. This would help policymakers and practitioners in better tailoring de-radicalization efforts to specific contexts. Governments, researchers and practitioners should collaborate in order to better share and replicate best practices in affected areas around the world.

In terms of preventing extremist propaganda on the Internet, banning or removing extremist content has shown to be crude, expensive and counterproductive. Instead, governments should make it more difficult to access this content and make it undesirable by using selective takedowns and prosecutions. Governments can create Internet-

user panels for better controls and complaint mechanisms. They can also organize media literacy programs, especially for rural communities where the parental generation lacks knowledge about these new technologies; yet, at the same time, the younger generation is at risk of being lured by extremist content. The international community should share best practices in the cyber arena. Other good practices include direct de-radicalization or demilitarization by direct engagement and communication, focusing on alternative forms of communication, such as arts and peace coalitions that have been organized in Syria, and promote peace education. Different and nuanced strategies should be tailored to different groups and contexts.

Another important takeaway from the dialogue was that language matters. Labels and references to certain phenomenon have profound impact on the perception of affected communities on the ground. In widely-read and regarded foreign policy outlets, the vocabulary used (“contagion”, “inhumane”, etc.) dehumanizes the people who join extremist ranks, assuming they have no chance of coming back and rehabilitating. A participant quoted Maya Angelou who said “We are all human; therefore nothing human can be alien to us,” and added that all humans have the same capacity for evil as well as good. Evil acts do need to be condemned, but preventing evil requires understanding the root causes.

Mainstream media plays a crucial role: their broadcasts and tone determine whether a situation will receive inflammatory reactions or not, but most participants were pessimistic about mainstream media exercising caution in not sensationalizing these stories. There was agreement that an act of terrorism is just that and does not need other qualifiers such as “Islamist” or “Christian” and so on.

In terms of the role that Muslims need to play in challenging extremist interpretations of Islam, some are bothered that their personal stories of identity disappear when they have to become “professional Muslims” and to fend off accusations against Islam. These personal stories are often inspirational and might pave the way for good counter-narratives. American Muslims at the dialogue were already active in the struggle against extremism, but underlined their demand to be known for who they are and not necessarily just for their Muslim identity.

Participants agreed that what is perhaps just as important as the message is the messenger. Artists, intellectuals and civic figures who can emanate strong, confident Muslim identities and who are rooted in strong tradition would be effective in reaching out to frustrated, disenfranchised Muslims. It is important not to cede the ground to extremists on the issue of religion, but it is essential to actively engage with religious texts and use religion and religious scholars to build counter-narratives based on justice and include peace-seeking language.

Finally, while Daesh takes the limelight today, the policy world and academia should not lose sight of other groups like Al Shabab, Boko Haram and Al Qaeda who continue to operate and cause atrocities in their respective geographic regions.



The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey. Its core programs take place in Istanbul—a city whose historic role as a crossroads makes it an ideal venue for multinational dialogue. To learn more about the Hollings Center’s mission, history and funding: <http://www.hollingscenter.org/about/mission-and-approach> or follow us on Twitter: [@HollingsCenter](https://twitter.com/HollingsCenter).



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