Strategic communications and foreign fighters

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Question

Identify examples of counter-radicalisation strategic communications projects in conflict-affected and nearby states aimed at preventing young people from becoming foreign fighters. Present the lessons learned emerging from these projects and evaluations of them.

1. Overview
2. Defining strategic communications
3. The impact of strategic communications
4. Lessons learned and recommendations
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1. Overview

Strategic communications are activities that enable an understanding of target audiences, identify effective conduits, and develop and promote ideas and opinions to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour (Thatham, 2008, p. 3).

There is limited coverage of strategic communications programmes specifically aiming to prevent the recruitment of citizens who travel to conflict zones to become foreign fighters[1]. There is relatively more coverage of strategic communications with respect to broader counter-radicalisation or countering violent extremism (CVE) approaches, but there are few case studies and rigorous evaluations.

Strategic communication efforts have increased greatly in recent years, but relatively few details are available in the public domain (Schmid, 2013, p. 11). The majority of case studies in the literature are from the US and in Europe, with limited detail on programmes in conflict-affected and nearby states.

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[1] The Global Counterterrorism Forum define foreign fighters as 'individuals who leave their home countries to participate in conflicts abroad, acquiring skills and an ideological commitment that could be used in acts of terrorism in their home countries or elsewhere' (GCTF, 2014a, p. 1).

These often focus on measures to prevent the recruitment and travel of citizens from European countries as foreign fighters, rather than citizens of conflict-affected or nearby countries. A few case studies were found in conflict-affected or nearby countries where foreign fighters are known to have originated. These are based on descriptive accounts of the activities, with little or no substantial evaluation.

Some authors doubt the effectiveness of strategic communications activities to date. Schmid (2014) states that the strategic communications efforts of western governments have not been able to reduce the appeal of extremist narratives in Muslim-majority countries. Holtmann (2013) contends that, based on current evidence, it is doubtful that radicalisation on the internet or in real life can be countered through strategic communications.

The recommendations and lessons learned in the literature appear mainly to be based on counter-radicalisation activities based in or funded by the US or Europe. In many cases, the recommendations made are normative, or based on expert opinions. Key points include:

- **Countering ideology:** It may be important for strategic communications to counter the ideology underlying extremism. This entails challenging assumptions, beliefs, and meanings; targeting contradictions; and highlighting political differences (Tretheway et al., 2009, pp. 9 - 14).

- **Using credible messengers:** Governments are more effective when they play an indirect role and support civil society in the design and delivery of alternative narratives. Credible messengers include former violent extremists and foreign fighters; the victims of violent extremism; those from conflict zones; and individuals with influence over at risk youth, including young people themselves. Cultural, religious, and local authorities can also provide powerful voices to delegitimise extremist groups purporting to protect their constituencies (Briggs and Frenett, 2014; Fink and Barclay, 2013).

- **Understanding the audience:** Potential and returned foreign fighters, and those from the wider society who could stop potential recruits from travelling have different counter-narrative needs. It is crucial to understand the specifics of extremist groups and the contexts in which they operate, as well as admitting the validity of grievances that recruiters use and offering constructive means of addressing those grievances (Ashour, 2010; Briggs and Frennet, 2014).

- **Online campaigns:** Efforts directed at committed extremists may offer insignificant returns. It may be more worthwhile to target politically aware contributors to blogs and social media who empathise with the grievances of extremists, but who are undecided as to how these grievances should be addressed (Fink and Barclay, 2013).

- **Positive messaging:** It is important to channel frustration and concern by providing a positive alternative to those considering travelling to conflict zones to become foreign fighters. This may include emphasising non-violent options such as charitable giving (GCTF, 2014b).

- **The importance of actions:** The communication of foreign or domestic policy via strategic communications can fail if it is not followed up with actions. Credibility gaps arise when there is a mismatch between words and deeds. It is important for politicians and soldiers to be perceived as honest (ISD, 2014; Holtmann, 2013).

- **Whole of government approaches:** Inter-governmental units such as the UK's Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU), and the US Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC) are held up as good practice examples (ISD, 2014).

- **Evaluation:** Some states have struggled to develop or implement reliable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Governments should work together to establish a monitoring and

evaluation framework so that even small-scale activities can be compared and evaluated (Briggs and Feve, 2013; Fink and Barclay, 2013).

2. Defining strategic communications

According to Fink and Barclay (2013, p. 14), strategic communications is a relatively new and poorly understood concept. It is often confused with concepts such as 'public affairs' or 'public diplomacy', but it is different. It has more of a focus on how others may interpret actions and words.

Thatham (2008, p. 3) defines strategic communications as a 'systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational, and tactical levels'. They help to understand target audiences, identify effective channels, and develop and promote ideas and opinions through those channels to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour (ibid).

Brigs and Feve (2013, pp. 6-7) outline a strategic communications 'counter-messaging spectrum' comprised of the following overlapping elements:

- **'Government strategic communications:** actions to get the message out about what government is doing, including public awareness activities.
- **Alternative narratives:** actions that aim to undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than what we are 'against'.
- **Counter-narratives:** actions to directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messages.'

3. The impact of strategic communications

There is limited understanding on what makes strategic communications effective. Briggs and Feve (2013, p. 1) stress that 'counter-narrative work as an area of public policy is in its infancy', and that any conclusions and recommendations should be treated as tentative.

There is evidence to suggest that extremist narratives have an impact on the processes of radicalisation and recruitment (Ashour, 2010). However, evidence on the impact of strategic communications aimed at addressing radicalisation is lacking (Taylor & Ramsey, 2010). According to Holtmann (2013), none of the existing de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation programmes have presented reliable data on how much the appeal of extremist narratives have been reduced.

Part of the challenge with evaluating strategic communications may stem from the fact that little is known about counter-radicalisation and what works (Schmid, 2013, p. 50). This is may be because results are hard to measure 'since, like other preventive efforts, if successful, the result is a non-event' (Schmid, 2014, p. 12).

In a literature review, Taylor and Ramsey (2010) contend that there is a lack of understanding on what constitutes content related to radicalisation (for example in the form of extremist narratives) and on the causal relationship between such material and extremist or violent acts. This may have implications for evidence-based strategic communications initiatives. Taylor and Ramsey (2010, p. 109) state that: 'Until we can be sure what the counter-narratives should be addressing, and how we can identify the content

and actors they should target, we will not be able to judge whether what we do either works, or even influences behavioural outcomes'.

Schmid (2014), reviewing the state of knowledge on counter-narrative work, argues that the strategic communications efforts of western governments have not been able to reduce the appeal of extremist narratives in Muslim-majority countries. This is because: 'The idea that one can shape and manipulate public opinion abroad by mere messaging without changing unpopular aspects of actual foreign policies (e.g. in the Middle East) is no longer tenable in an age of multiple, and increasingly interactive, public and social media channels' (p. 14).

Holtmann (2013) contends that whilst there have been some encouraging approaches from Europe, 'spending modest amounts of money on creating seemingly plausible "counter-narratives" and promoting "de-radicalization" in online social networks do not contribute much to reducing deep-rooted suspicions and mitigating conflicts…It is doubtful that radicalization on the Internet or in real life can be countered in this way.'

Authors also recognise that more research is needed on the foreign fighter phenomenon. Ranstorp and Hyllengren (2013, p. 31) argue that: 'More knowledge is, for example, needed about which factors influence and drive individuals who travel abroad as well as research about society's capacity to reintegrate these individuals.' The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF, 2014) states that there is uncertainly on whether counter-radicalisation efforts in a foreign fighters context are unique and whether there are any differentiating factors.

4. Lessons learned and recommendations

General principles for counter-narrative campaigns and messages

Briggs and Frenett (2014, pp. 12 – 14), based on a review of the drivers and motivations for travel, suggest a number of principles for counter-narratives aimed at potential foreign fighters:

- Counter-narratives may be turned around and used by recruiters. It is important to factor this in and avoid any obvious own goals.

- Those engaged in counter-narrative work should avoid engaging in heavy messaging and propaganda. It is better to identify credible voices, such as former fighters, to tell their stories in their own words.

- Communication that appears to tell young people what to do will often have the opposite effect. Counter-narratives should create doubt and encourage the target audience to be more analytical

- Counter-narratives can help people gradually along the road to changed thinking or action, but will not bring about wholesale change. Campaigns need to be realistic about their goals and outcomes.

- It is important that counter-narrative campaigns are responsive to events. Extremist groups looking to recruit young people often increase their efforts during periods of conflict.

- As well as targeting recruiters, campaigns should also target those in contact with, or who have influence over, at risk individuals. This includes families and communities, and frontline professionals, such as teachers and social workers. It is important to ensure that they have clear

information to allow them to interpret intentions, spot preparatory activities, and to know where to go with their concerns.

Countering ideology

According to Tretheway et al (2009, pp. 9 - 14), it is important for strategic communications to counter the ideology underlying extremism. This includes:

- **Challenging assumptions, beliefs, and meanings:** Ideology seeks to make ideas seem fixed, objective, and 'naturally occurring'. Countermeasures can emphasise their variable, complicated, and subjective nature.

- **Targeting contradictions:** Ideology obscures contradictions and smooths over tensions, inconsistencies and paradoxes. Countermeasures should reveal contradictions wherever possible.

- **Highlighting political differences:** Ideology presents the interests or concerns of people in power as the interests of all group members. The countermeasure is to promote and emphasise the competing interests of groups that an ideology tries to unite.

- **Breaching structures:** Ideology creates political rules and structures that reproduce or preserve ideologies. Attempts should be made to prevent these structures from being created and to promote alternatives that might replace, undermine, or circumvent them.

Credible messengers

Briggs and Feve (2013) suggest that governments should proceed cautiously with counter-narratives when they are the messengers. If a credibility gap exists between them and the audience then their efforts can be ineffective or counterproductive. Briggs and Frenett (2014) argue that western governments are often central to extremist narratives. Strategic communications in relation to issues such as western intervention in conflict zones can play into the hands of those recruiting foreign fighters.

There is consensus, based on evidence of current programmes and expert opinion, that governments are more effective when they play an indirect role. Briggs and Frenett (2014) state that government can use credible messengers such as former violent extremists and foreign fighters; the victims of violent extremism; those from conflict zones; and individuals with influence over at risk youth, including young people themselves.

Ashour (2010) contends that there is a 'critical mass' of former militants who have rebelled against the ideology that motivates militants and foreign fighters. They can provide a powerful message to potential young recruits through conveying their own experiences. He also identifies other independent and credible messengers to speak out against violent behaviour, including independent religious clerics, academic scholars, former officials, and civil society organisations.

Briggs and Feve (2013, pp. 25 - 28) state that a key role for governments is supporting and facilitating civil society efforts to design and deliver alternative narrative campaigns via direct funding and in-kind support. This includes capacity building programmes on how to construct messages, develop products, apply marketing strategies and measure results.

Understanding the audience

Fink and Barclay (2013, pp. 33 - 36), argue that understanding the audience is critical. There is a need to understand the following when delivering strategic communications:

- How information reaches and flows through communities.

- How the credibility of the information is determined.

- Whether formal or informal power structures are of greater importance in disseminating the message and shaping its interpretation.

- The individuals or groups that have the greatest potential to influence the behaviour of the campaign target group.

Ashour (2010) reinforces this by arguing that it is crucial to understand the specifics of the group in question and the contexts in which they operate, as well as admitting the validity of grievances that recruiters use and offering constructive means of addressing those grievances.

Barrett (2014) emphasises the importance of knowing how potential foreign fighters receive their news. They state that in the case of Syria, the reliance of potential foreign fighters on individual online posts makes them immune to and unimpressed by strategic communications campaigns using social media. They argue that policy makers underestimate the impact of these closed communication circles and overestimate the impact of their own campaigns.

Online campaigns

Fink and Barclay (2013, pp. 33 - 36) summarise the debate on whether online campaigns should target individuals identifying with extremist ideology or more tolerant online communities. Practitioners variously advocate one or both approaches. Many consider that efforts directed at committed extremists offer insignificant returns. It is more worthwhile to target politically aware contributors to blogs and social media who empathise with the grievances of extremists, but who are undecided as to how these grievances should be addressed.

Positive messaging

The GCTF (2014a) argues that it is important to channel frustration and concern by providing a positive alternative to those considering travelling to conflict zones to become foreign fighters. This may include non-violent options such as charitable giving.

The GCTF (2014a) also emphasise the importance of empowering youth, families, and civil society to take ownership in the development and messaging of positive counter-narratives. All of these groups can be constantly engaged and provided with relevant content and functional training on building counter-narrative content, outreach, and communications.

The importance of actions

The communication of foreign or domestic policy via strategic communications can fail if it is not followed up with actions. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue argues that this can lead to 'accusations and suspicions from target communities that large, shadowy central government units represent little more than well-oiled, propaganda machines' (ISD, 2014, p. 10). In many cases, counter-narratives suffer from a credibility gap between policies and the every-day realities of communities on the ground (Holtmann,

2013; ISD, 2014). For Schmid (2014, p. 14), 'credibility is the result of an alignment between words and deeds: it comes into existence when politicians and soldiers say what they do and do what they say and are perceived to be honest.

Whole of government approaches

The literature suggests that effective strategic communications by governments involves whole-of-government approaches. Briggs and Feve (2013) advocate for a streamlined approach with specialist interagency units such as the UK's Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU), and the US Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC). The ISD (2014, p. 7) states that these units have a key role in advising government, and leading on articulating government policy on key issues of relevance to countering extremism. This has been particularly visible in the context of the Syrian crisis through their work in developing campaigns to limit the appeal of travel to Syria.

Evaluation

Fink and Barclay (2013, pp. 33 - 36) argue that it is extremely difficult to measure the success of a preventive program where the desired outcome is a non-event. Measuring the impact of communication when individuals are conditioned by different social, cultural, political, or physical elements is almost impossible. Some states have struggled to develop or implement reliable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for counter-terrorism work.

Briggs and Feve (2013, p. 27) suggest that governments should work together to establish a monitoring and evaluation framework so that even small-scale activities can be compared. This is especially important given that there is little understanding about what makes an effective counter-narrative campaign.

5. Examples of strategic communications projects

Morocco

El Said (2012, pp. 32 -33) describes how since the 2007 Casablanca bombings, Moroccan authorities have used the media to spread the messages of toleration, moderation and a state-sanctioned version of Islam. This includes the licensing of several public and private religious radio stations, which broadcast religious discussions on issues related to Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic practices, and family relations.

Moroccan authorities have also encouraged the Ministry of Religious Affairs, religious institutions and religious scholars to establish their own websites to counter extremist ideologies. An example is *www.arrabita.ma*, which is run by the Al- Muhammadiyah Foundation. This website provides web-based lessons in religious education and peer group sessions (El Said, 2012, pp. 32 -33).

According to El Said (2012), most observers argue that it is too early to judge the effectiveness of these activities. Furthermore, Moroccan authorities have promoted official religious institutions and practices in isolation from its active civil society, which may have had negative effects.

Saudi Arabia

There are numerous Saudi government-run programs to educate the public about radical Islam and the dangers of extremism. Many of these are implemented through the Ministry of Interior, and are designed to confront extremism through the promotion of a more judicious interpretation of religious doctrine. The Ministry of Culture and Information has also initiated a series of projects utilising television, newspapers, and other forms of communication. Experts are loaned out to schools and mosques to speak about the dangers of extremism. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs sponsors lectures and classes at mosques, using speakers and materials recommended by experts on extremism (Boucek, 2008, pp. 8-10).

The Saudi government also supports non-governmental organisations such as 'Al-Sakina', which is financed by the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Religious scholars, psychologists and psychiatrists, sociologists and academics engage in online dialogue, using one-on-one engagement to counter the appeal of online extremist ideologies. It targets audiences found in online extremist forums, who may be individuals further along the path of radicalisation, such as those who express solidarity with violent operations but who have not participated in such activities (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 22).

Al-Sakina also houses an online database containing religious texts, research, news and educational materials about issues related to jihad, political violence and radicalisation (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 44).

US activities in conflict-affected or nearby states

Schmid (2013, p. 11 - 13) states that US strategic communications efforts primarily target Muslims in Muslim-dominated countries in the Middle East and South Asia. In 2012, the Pentagon had a budget of approximately one billion dollars, but little information is available in the public domain. The US Department of State also engages counter-narrative activity through its Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) (ibid).

Sabahi/Magharebia online news platforms

The US Africa Command (AFRICOM) sponsors both of these online news platforms. They aim to provide independent and impartial news coverage to counter misinformation - particularly on geopolitical developments that risk feeding into extremist narratives. Sabahi covers Kenya, Tanzania, Djibouti and Somalia, whilst Magharebia targets audiences predominantly in North and West Africa, including Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. Reporting on both platforms is heavily dominated by reports related to extremism, terrorism and counter-terrorism. Both platforms employ local journalists to write local opinion pieces (Briggs and Feve, 2013, p. 34).

Viral Peace

Viral peace is a capacity building programme financed by the US Department of State. It aims to enhance the capabilities of community leaders and social media influencers around the world to create social media and online communications tools to counter extremist messages. The programme actively seeks out innovative social media-driven initiatives in order to provide them with seed funding (USDOS, undated).

Viral Peace promotes a decentralised approach, offering training and guidance, and encouraging participants with cultural and linguistic credibility to determine their own approach (ISD, 2013).

The programme has delivered a series of workshops in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with further workshops planned in India, Nepal and Pakistan. Participants learn about the tools and techniques relevant to the content and delivery of counter-messaging. Participants are advised on how to design narratives likely to resonate with their target audiences. The workshops are supported by online repositories of learning resources used during the workshop. There is also a train-the-trainers element, to enable local participants of the programme to implement the project in other areas (ISD, 2013).

Global cooperation on countering foreign fighters

The United States and EU have increased transatlantic cooperation on stemming the flow of foreign fighters and reintegrating them when they return. This is through providing positive alternatives to communities at risk of recruitment and radicalisation; countering terrorist narratives; and building the capacity of governments and civil society to counter violent extremism (The White House, 2014).

This includes cooperation in the following areas (The White House, 2014):

- **Balkans:** Building the capacity of Balkan governments and civil society to counter violent extremism, including counter-messaging.

- **Dutch-Moroccan-led Foreign Fighter Project:** A yearlong initiative, launched in February 2014, led jointly by Morocco and the Netherlands, to address the global phenomenon of foreign fighters.

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Key websites

- Perspectives on Terrorism http://terrorismanalysts.com/
- International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research: http://www.pvtr.org/
- Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: http://www.start.umd.edu/
- Center for Strategic Communication: http://csc.asu.edu/
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue – Counterextremism.org: https://www.counterextremism.org/

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