

VI. Editorials

Countering Al-Qaeda's Single Narrative

by Philipp Holtmann

What form should a counter-narrative to al-Qaeda's single narrative take? Its claim "Islam is under attack" successfully integrates multiple Muslim grievances into one meta-narrative. It has found credibility beyond an extremist fringe of Muslim societies and has been far more successful and attractive than any counter narrative that has been devised so far by Western counter-terrorist strategists. The question if al-Qaeda's meta-narrative merely creates an external scapegoat for problems that are to a great extent internal to Arab and Muslim societies should be the subject of an intensive, if not heated discussion within the counter-narrative debate.

Notwithstanding the establishment of de-radicalization and counter-radicalization programs in nearly three dozen countries (including Austria, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Jordan, Morocco, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States) there is still considerable confusion about the goals, methods, actors and ideas that should be employed for this ideological battle. To make matters worse, none of the existing programs has so far been presenting reliable data on how many extremists have been "healed," how many attacks have been prevented, and how much appeal Al-Qaeda's narrative has lost – if any. Saudi Arabia established one of the earliest de-radicalization and counter-narrative programs ("Sakina"), but could never be sure that those who were outwardly disengaging from terrorism, showing signs of moderation, did not remain extremists inside. A good number of them are back on the battlefields of jihad.

Conceptual Confusion Standing in the Way of a more Convincing Counter-narrative

The first problem to tackle is continuing disagreement among academic experts, policy-makers and counter-terrorism professionals regarding key concepts. Radicalism, extremism, political violence and terrorism are often equated. But not every critical radical is a fanatical extremist nor is every militant protest a prelude of terrorist violence. Alex Schmid has just written a groundbreaking contribution to the debate, which should be required reading for any policy maker who deals with the topic (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013). Processes of radicalization since 9/11 have also taken place on both sides, with some hitherto liberal Western states engaging in arguably illegal tactics, involving torture, targeted killings, international kidnapping (renditions),

while often denying basic fair trial rights to real and alleged 'enemy combatants.' One of the first steps in devising successful counter-narrative policies has to do with the recognition that Western reactions to terrorism have oftentimes been counter-productive, fostering further radicalization to extremist violence among young Muslims in Western Diasporas as well as in Muslim-majority countries.

American Efforts

The United States are at the forefront of global counterterrorism efforts but have not been the most credible source of communicative strategies against Al-Qaeda. Being war weary and wary, many policy makers in Washington cannot hear the word "jihad" anymore. The Pentagon spends one billion dollars on "strategic communication" (0,25 percent of the overall military budget), much more than the State Department which has to do things on the cheap. One contractor of the State Department trains voluntary individuals in Muslim at risk communities in online story-telling ("Viral Peace Program") to present alternative role models and narratives. An obscure private firm trains servicemen in psychological and information operations on the Internet to weaken anti-U.S. narratives and spread pro-U.S. propaganda with fake online identities ("sock puppets") via a "Multiple Online Persona Management Software." This appears to be an extension of "Operation Earnest Voice," the U.S. psychological warfare program to combat online jihadi propaganda in Iraq – an effort that has disastrously failed. Such American efforts inspire other major actors, notably the European Union to try and do likewise. One can only hope that the EU will do a better job. The best U.S. initiatives sometimes come from laymen, but are often quickly spoiled, such as the American embassy in Cairo's courageous Twitter feed against the arrest of the comedian Bassem Youssef by the Egyptian government.

Intercultural Communication

If one wants to devise adequate counter-narratives, one has to enter into, and draw from, larger socio-political and cultural debates. Necessarily, this should involve elements of self-criticism by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, including debates across the lines on individual, communal and national levels. On the community level, the biggest challenge is posed by Muslim Diaspora youths in the West, because they are the ones who are caught between two cultures and tempted to embrace an extremist agenda. Communities at risk need advisors familiar with their culture who can guide their members towards greater empowerment. Such advisors should not be perceived as representatives of the state. When it comes to counter-narratives, cultivating local grassroots voices can be more effective than parachuting in outside consultants. A good example is the Texas-based *Bayyina Institute*, whose Muslim scholars develop rational religious counter-narratives; another is

the “My Jihad” campaign by the Chicago office of the Council on Arab-Islamic Relations. With advertisements in the local transportation system, the campaign tries to reclaim from the jihadists that alternative key meaning of jihad, namely, making a valiant “effort toward a commendable goal.”

In general, cosmetic changes, such as spending modest amounts of money on creating seemingly plausible “counter-narratives” and promoting “de-radicalization” in online social networks do not contribute much toward reducing deep-rooted suspicions and mitigating conflicts between Muslim Diasporas and host societies, or between Muslims and non-Muslims in the larger ideological battle. It is doubtful that radicalization on the Internet or in real life can be countered this way. However, some steps in the right direction have been made. An example is the EU’s “No Hate Speech Movement” to further human rights awareness – yet hardly anyone has ever heard of it, which does not attest to an effective marketing strategy.

Any Successful Narrative has to be Backed up by Actions

This rule of thumb should take absolute priority. If you cannot walk the walk, do not talk the talk! Some local and national de-radicalization programs reinforced their narratives with genuine actions, but the narratives of many others against Al-Qaeda continue to suffer from a credibility gap between words and deeds, declaratory policies and realities on the ground. Realizing this gap should be the starting point for any counter-radicalization policy. “Selling” policies via a strategic communications approach will fail if one does not follow them up with deeds. This also means: First listen to the intended audience and seek dialogue with those deemed receptive to Al-Qaeda’s single narrative!

Real Experts Needed

Way into the twelfth year after 9/11 - where is the expert body in Europe that is able to counter the jihadist narrative? There are many academics with solid Middle East experience, cultural sensitivity and the appropriate language skills in the EU. Yet few of them have been invited to get involved in imaginative counter-radicalization work. They could give a helping hand in mediating between governments and communities at risk, crafting original counter-narrative programs and monitoring their effects on vulnerable youth – a youth that is exposed to the ideological onslaught of global jihad rhetoric on the one hand and anti-Islamic right-wing narratives on the other. While states are prepared to spend large sums on counter-terrorist hardware, including of the lethal kind, soft power approaches has been under-funded, allowing the terrorist narrative to continue to

dominate the Internet and through it, the minds of vulnerable members of Muslim diasporas.

Literature cited:

Schmid, Alex P. Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation and Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review. The Hague, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2013; Research Paper (91 pp.) available at: <http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/radicalisation-de-radicalisation-counter-radicalisation-a-conceptual-discussion-and-literature-review>

Schmid, Alex P. The Importance of Countering Al-Qaeda's 'Single Narrative'. In: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism (Ed.). Countering Violent Extremist Narratives. The Hague: NCTb, January 2010, pp. 46-57.

Halverson, Jeffrey R., H. L. Goodall, Jr., and Steven R. Corman. Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Info-Box: Narrative vs. Counter-Narrative

A narrative refers to “a spoken or written account of connected events” empowered by “the art of telling stories.” Simply speaking, a narrative relates to how something is being told so that it “sticks” (Halverson/ Goodall, Jr./Corman, 2011). An ideological narrative is linked to an overarching strategic goal “to win hearts and minds” and to provide a clear meaning to confusing events. By its nature it is hardly ever balanced, consisting of half-truths and big lies, serving the goal to mobilize mass support for a cause. As an instrument of psychological warfare, a narrative tries to make sense of (parts of) the world by mythologizing the own community, degrading enemies, often through conspiracy theories, and fostering salvation themes. A narrative is thus a powerful, culturally embedded story, which consists of a mosaic of coherent stories and employs all semiotic levels. This includes familiar symbolisms, evocative imagery, emotive music, popular tales and imperative theology/ideology. In a conflict, a narrative serves the goal to mobilize support for a cause in the battle (of ideas) with an enemy.

A counter-narrative also serves the strategic objective “to win hearts and minds” but has to be of greater veracity, credibility and legitimacy than the narrative it seeks to challenge.

Al-Qaeda’s single narrative encapsulates al-Qaeda’s ideology and provides a unified framework of explanations for many humiliated Muslims by telling an emotionally satisfying story to make sense of the world in which they live. The narrative contains a basic grievance, namely that Islam is under attack by the near and the far enemies at the same time. The near enemy refers to “corrupted Muslim governments and their collaborators,” who are on the payroll of the far enemy – “the zionized Neo-Crusader alliance” (NATO), which is allegedly commanded by the Americans, but controlled by the Jews.” There is a vision of a good, peaceful society, in which war is absent, and a path from the grievance to the vision is sketched by putting focus on struggle (jihad) on all levels against the alleged source of evil. Al-Qaeda’s single narrative claims to provide “true believers” with a strong sense of identity and brotherly love, enabling them to rationalize past personal or collective failings and to justify the use of violence against those who are either considered “guilty” or simply stand in their way to regain the supremacy Islam enjoyed in a glorious past (A.P. Schmid, 2010).

About the Author: Philipp Holtmann received his PhD from the University of Vienna. He does in-depth research on media jihad as well as on Muslim conflict and reconciliation issues and is a Research Associate with the Terrorism Research Initiative. His publications include 'Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Jihad Concept' (2009), *Virtual Leadership: How Jihadis Guide Each Other in Cyberspace* (2012), *The Symbols of Online Jihad* (2013), and "The Use and Genre of Huda' (encouraging battle songs) versus Anashid (praiseful hymns) in Jihadi Propaganda (2013)."