Containing the Narrative: Strategy and Tactics in Countering the Storyline of Global Jihad[1]

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ABSTRACT

It has long been recognised that telling a better story is an important part of countering the appeal of Global Jihad. The 'War on Terror' will be difficult to win if the 'War on Ideas' is lost. The mushrooming literature on terrorism notwithstanding, the counter-narrative issue has been the subject of surprisingly scant academic attention. Part of the problem is that this is an issue with relatively little empirical work. Still, significant inferences for a counter-narrative strategy can be drawn from existing research. Here we argue that counter-narratives must be tailored to different audiences and must be designed to attack particular mechanisms of radicalisation. In contrast to the top-down approach that has thus far been advocated to confront the claims of Global Jihad 'head on', what is actually needed is a bottom-up approach that reaches

vulnerable individuals early on by means of a nuanced approach that is sensitive to the multiple logics of radicalisation.

Global Jihad narrative in the pyramid model

The meta-narrative of Global Jihad can be broken down into four separate narratives. The *political narrative* is concerned with the evils of the West, including a neo-Marxist take on global inequities and distributive effects arising from Western hegemony and exploitation whose roots can be traced to Islam's best-known cultural historian, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). The *moral narrative* focuses on the internal contradictions of liberal democracies, which profess freedom as their core value and equality and justice as their subsidiary values, although these values are unrealisable ideals and indeed drivers of a society's moral decay. The *religious narrative* legitimises violent struggle to defend Islam against the crusader West. The *social-psychological narrative*, finally, employs a classic in-group/out-group strategy to brand as infidels those who do not buy into this syllogism, while promoting the brotherhood of arms as a means of countering social exclusion and of fulfilling a yearning for adventure and sacrifice that compels the 'true believer'.

This sounds all too familiar to the astute historical observer. The parallels in the meta-narratives that accompany Global Jihad on the one hand, and Germany's Red Army Faction and Italy's Red and ETA on the other hand, are striking, notably where the political, moral and social-psychological narratives are concerned. A key difference is the religious component that sets Islamic jihad against Western crusaders.

We have here historical echoes of the religiously-motivated civil wars that ravaged Europe throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; much of this is old wine in new bottles. The difference now is both the global scale of the struggle and the destructiveness of modern weaponry at the disposal of those intent on doing harm. We know how the story of Europe's religious strife ends, which makes it tempting to dismiss the meta-narrative of Global Jihad as an atavistic reaction that will be eviscerated by modernisation, analogous to what Karl Deutsch had famously postulated about nationalism. Modernisation, however, did not eradicate nationalism – it actually fostered its proliferation. Similarly, the diffusion of the Global Jihad narrative must be taken seriously. Understanding this narrative, who it is that joins in what parts of the narrative, and why, is necessary to begin constructing and targeting effective counter-narratives.

The Global Jihad narrative is conveniently analysed in terms of a pyramid of radicalisation in which the base includes Muslims who currently do not accept any of the Global Jihad narrative (Figure 1). A layer above the base represents those who sympathise with the first step of the jihadist frame: that the West is waging a war on Islam (Global Jihad level 1, pyramid second level). Next higher in the pyramid are Muslims who believe that jihadis are acting in defense of Islam and that their actions are morally and religiously justified (Global Jihad levels 2 and 3, pyramid

third level). Higher yet in the pyramid are Muslims who believe there is an individual duty to support and participate in the defence of Islam (Global Jihad level 4, pyramid fourth level).

There is some complexity here: Islam distinguishes between defence that must be mandated by legitimate authority, a group responsibility, and defence that is an individual obligation of every good Muslim. Osama bin Laden has argued that the current threat to Islam justifies an individual obligation not dependent on having state or religious authority behind it, and we here identify belief in the individual obligation as the highest, most radicalised level of the narrative pyramid.
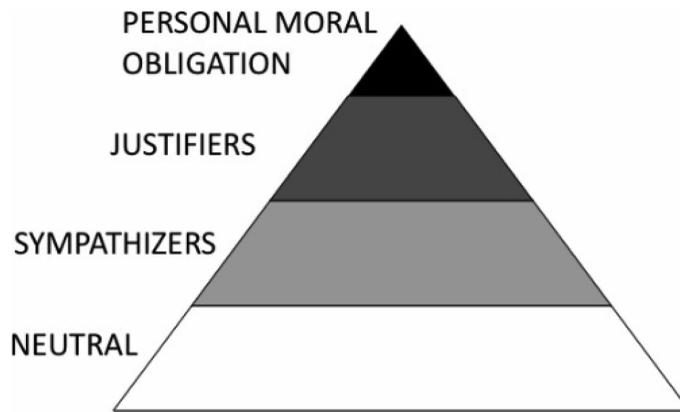

Figure 1 – The narrative pyramid

The implication of a pyramid model of the Global Jihad narrative is that the lower levels represent more people, with lower levels of radicalisation. Polling data offer some support for this implication.

ICM telephone polls of U.K. Muslims have asked the following question: "President Bush and Tony Blair have said the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam. Do you agree or disagree?" In November 2004, 80% of a national sample of 500 Muslims disagreed, that is, endorsed the idea that the war on terrorism is a war against Islam. In other words, about 80% of U.K. Muslims agreed with level (1) of the Global Jihad narrative.

A July 2005 ICM poll of U.K. Muslims asked a more extreme question: "Do you think any further attacks by British suicide bombers in the UK are justified or unjustified?" This poll was conducted after the July 7, 2005 bombings in the London underground, and 5% of a national sample of 500 Muslims said that further attacks were justified. In other words, about 5% of U.K. Muslims agreed with levels (2) and (3) of the Global Jihad narrative.

Unfortunately, we have not found any polling data asking about the individual obligation for jihad, level (4), but we speculate that the number agreeing would be less than 5%.

It is worth noting that in the case of U.K. Muslims in 2004-2005, the pyramid model is misshapen insofar as the neutral base of the pyramid, those who do not accept even the first level of the Global Jihad, that the West is engaged in war against Islam, is smaller than the next level. Only 20% of U.K. Muslims do not see a war on Islam, whereas 80% do see a war on Islam. Descriptively, then, the base of the pyramid is smaller than the first level of opinion.

An important implication of the pyramid model of radicalisation is that different parts or combinations of the Global Jihad narrative are held by Muslims in different layers of the pyramid. Here we do not suggest that all who justify suicide bombing also see a war on Islam, but we expect that most do. Similarly, not all who feel a personal moral obligation for jihad also defend suicide bombing, but we expect that many do. In short, those who accept more radical elements of the Global Jihad narrative are more likely (but not 100% certain) to accept less radical elements. Given that different subsets of Muslims accept different elements of the Global Jihad narrative, it seems likely that the origins, or sources or predictors of acceptance differ for different elements.

Again, polling data offers some support for this implication. The 2007 Pew poll of U.S. Muslims included two items similar to the items already cited from two different ICM polls of U.K. Muslims. Doubts about the war on terrorism are represented by this item: "Do you think that the U.S.-led war on terrorism is a sincere effort to reduce international terrorism or don't you believe that?" Justification of suicide bombing is represented by the following item: "Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?"

Seeing the war on terrorism as insincere and seeing suicide attacks in defence of Islam as justified are only weakly correlated ($r = .05$; 74% of respondents who say suicide attacks are often or sometimes justified also say the war on terrorism is insincere, whereas 63% of respondents who say suicide attacks are rarely or never justified also say the war on terrorism is insincere). In other words, there is little association between these two aspects of the Global Jihad narrative: knowing who believes one aspect seems to say little about who believes the other aspect.

Given this weak correlation, it is not surprising that the predictors of the two beliefs are different. By our calculation from Pew data, the best predictor of seeing the war on terrorism as insincere is belief that the U.S. made the wrong decision in using military force against Iraq ($r = .38$). But believing the U.S. made the wrong decision in Iraq does not predict justifying suicide attacks in defence of Islam ($r = .00$). In fact, the Pew poll does not include any strong predictor of justifying suicide attacks; the best of the weak predictors is age, with younger respondents justifying suicide attacks more than older ($r = .16$).

The opinions correlated here are from the lower layers of the opinion pyramid (Figure 1), the levels of neutrals, sympathisers, and justifiers of terrorism. The data come from a poll in which very few respondents can be expected to come from the apex of the opinion pyramid, where individuals feel a personal moral obligation to act in defence of Islam.

No question about personal moral obligation was included in the poll. Still one might wonder what the correlation would be among individuals at the apex. That is, what would the correlation be among apex individuals between seeing a war on Islam and justifying jihadist violence? As we would expect all at the apex to agree with both items, both seeing a war on Islam and justifying violence, the correlation would be approximately zero. Without variation there can be no co-variation, and it is co-variation that is measured in a correlation coefficient.

In short, polling data for U.K. and U.S. Muslims suggest that different aspects of the Global Jihad narrative are held by different subsets of U.S. and U.K. Muslims, and that the predictors of different aspects of the narrative also differ. But although we have sufficient data to parse this phenomenon, we do not have enough empirical evidence to gauge its micro-causal mechanisms: we know very little about the distal and proximate conditions that explain why any given individual happens to be more receptive to any one element of the narrative than another. In short, we have some idea who is likely to be more (or less) prone to the narrative; but not knowing why the narrative has traction with any given individual makes it difficult to devise an effective counter-narrative strategy. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence cited here is sufficient to conclude that when it comes to counter-narratives, one size does not fit all.

Global Jihad action in the pyramid model

For decades psychologists have studied the relation between beliefs and feelings (cognition and attitude) and action (behaviour). There is no simple generalisation to be made about this relation. Under some circumstances, beliefs and feelings are good predictors of action (in a voting booth, for instance). In most circumstances, however, beliefs and feelings are weak predictors of action (when strong social norms run counter to an individual's attitude, for instance). Cognitive science has consistently argued that most behaviour is not well explained by attitudes. This obtains for violence commitment by extremists: belief in and of itself is an unreliable predictor of an individual's predisposition towards committing acts of terrorism (Taylor, 2010). One reason is that when action consistent with beliefs and feelings is costly (such as committing oneself to a suicide bombing), the gap between belief and behaviour is likely to be large. Thus is the situation for the Global Jihad narrative: the opportunity cost of believing in a war on Islam and feeling that suicide attacks are justified in defence of Islam is relatively low; action in defence of Islam is disproportionately

costly in time, energy, and, at least in Western countries, risk of incarceration or death.

The gap between belief and action is evident in the contrast between polling data and security reports in the U.K., where 5% of adult Muslims saw reported suicide attacks as justified but only several hundred terrorism-related arrests have been made since 9/11. The 5% of Muslims projects to about 50,000 of the roughly one million adult Muslims in the U.K., indicating that only about 200 of the 50,000 U.K. Muslims have acted on their beliefs in the Global Jihad narrative. The difficulty for security forces is finding this needle in the haystack: the one among hundreds who will act on belief in even the most extreme aspects of the Global Jihad narrative.

A similar situation exists in the U.S. According to the 2007 Pew poll of an estimated 2.3 million U.S. Muslims, 8% find suicide attacks justified *often* or *sometimes*, but fewer than a hundred terrorism-related arrests have been made since 9/11.

The gap between the Global Jihad narrative and Global Jihad violence, at least in Western countries, indicates the need for another pyramid model, the pyramid of action (Figure 2). Here the base includes all Muslims who are politically inert, whatever their beliefs or feelings. The next higher level represents activists, engaged in legal and nonviolent political action, although some may join in one or another part of the Global Jihad narrative. Hizb ut-Tahrir members, for instance, are legal activists in both the U.K. and in the U.S. (Hizb had its first national meeting in the U.S. in Chicago in July 2009), even though Hizb, like Osama, is striving to re-establish a supra-national Caliphate.

Higher yet are radicals, engaged in illegal political action that may include violence. Finally, at the apex of the action pyramid are the terrorists – radicals who target lethal violence at civilians.

It is important to distinguish between non-violent and violent political behaviour, because, ultimately, it is the latter that is of primary concern for the purposes of public security. The former is of interest only if there is evidence that it presages the latter. For example, the movement for voting rights for women, and the civil-rights movement militating for racial equality, were both considered radical and engaged in some illegal political action. With the benefit of hindsight, however, would we judge them as a liability or as an asset to the body politic?

We believe that the borders between the levels of the action pyramid represent the most important transition points of radicalisation in action: from doing nothing to doing something; from legal political action to illegal political action; and from illegal political action to killing civilians. It is important to be clear, however, that the action pyramid is neither a conveyor belt nor a stage theory in which an individual must progress through each succeeding level in a linear fashion to become a terrorist. It is not necessary to be an activist to become a radical, nor is it necessary to be involved in nonviolent radical action to move to violent radical action.
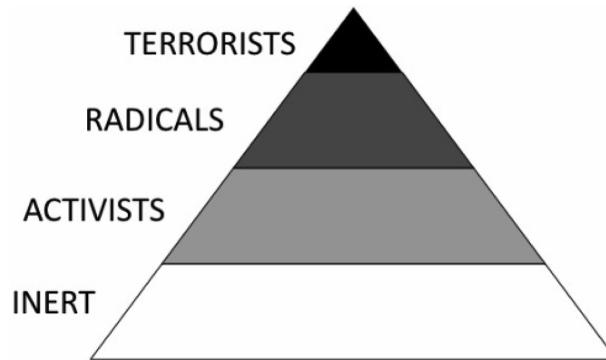
Figure 2 – The action pyramid

Mechanisms of radicalisation

Any attempt at formulating a stage theory of radicalisation in action is contradicted by the multiple mechanisms of radicalisation identified at individual, group, and mass levels. The following mechanisms of radicalisation have been identified, mostly from case materials about terrorist groups and terrorist individuals. No claim is made that this is an exhaustive list; indeed, additional mechanisms have been identified since the first publication of this approach by McCauley and Moskalenko (2008).

Nor is there any claim that each mechanism is sufficient for radicalisation to illegal political action and protest. Rather multiple mechanisms are usually seen at work on the same individual, and the combination of mechanisms may be synergistic rather than simply adding independent pushes toward radicalisation. Personal and group grievance, for instance, probably tend to induce one another. Personal grievance will lead an individual to interact with others sharing the same grievance, and the personal becomes political. Similarly group grievance that moves an individual to political action will often lead to experiences of police repression, and the political becomes personal.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

1. *Personal grievance.* An individual is angry and seeks revenge for government action that harms self or loved ones. Personal grievance usually does not lead to action unless interpreted as part of some larger group grievance. Chechen Black Widows revenging brothers and husbands killed by Russians are a commonly cited example.

2. *Group grievance.* Identification with a group perceived as victims can radicalise an individual who has not personally experienced any grievance. This includes 'lone-wolf terrorism' and 'sudden jihad syndrome', with such examples as the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, as well as Mohammed Rea Taheri-azar, and Momin Khawaja.

3. *Self-persuasion in action – the slippery slope.* This mechanism is rooted in the famous Milgram experiment and is consistent with the image of a 'conveyor belt', where people are gradually radicalised in a step-by-step process.

4. *Love*. Individuals can join an existing radical group because someone they love – friend, romantic partner, family member – asks them, or because they want to aid and protect a loved one. Sometimes a member of a radical group may cultivate a personal connection with a potential recruit.

5. *Fear*. In a failed state, individuals can join a militant group because they feel safer with friends with guns than on the street alone. Examples are found among militants of the FARQ in Colombia and sectarian groups in Iraq.

6. *Thrill, Status, Money*. This mechanism depends on individual preferences, usually those of young males. Examples include joining the US Marine Corps, setting Improvised Explosive Devices in Iraq or Afghanistan, or joining a street gang.

SMALL GROUP LEVEL

7. *Group polarisation*. Discussion among members of a like-minded group moves members further in the initially agree-upon direction. Two tendencies contribute: individuals not wanting to fall behind in representing group-favoured values, and hearing a preponderance of arguments in the group-favoured direction.

8. *Group competition*. Radicalisation can occur when non-state actors compete with a state, compete against non-state groups (often in the form of 'outbidding' other groups), and when factions of the same group compete with one another (such as multiple fissions within the IRA).

9. *Extreme cohesion under isolation/threat*. This multiplier of group dynamics (mechanisms 7 and 8) occurs for underground groups, cults, and small groups in combat.

MASS LEVEL

10. *External threat*. This mechanism is at work at both the group level (mechanism 8) and the mass level. External threats lead to increased group identification, magnified ethnic entrepreneurship and the power of leaders, sanctions for in-group deviates, and idealised in-group values. An example is the U.S. reaction to 9/11 and the Somali diaspora's reaction to Ethiopian (Christian) troops entering Somalia in 2006.

11. *Hate*. An essentialised and dehumanised view of the enemy facilitates killing by ethnic or religious category, including civilians as well as militants and the military.

12. *Martyrdom*. Martyrs can radicalise a mass audience by their example of sacrifice. A classic example is the 1981 hunger strike in which 10 IRA/INLA prisoners perished but the Republican cause was resuscitated.

For the purpose of understanding the radicalisation pyramid, it is important to notice that five of the six individual-level mechanisms do not depend on accepting new ideas from a radical ideology or narrative. Personal grievance, slippery slope, love, fear, and thrill-seeking can move individuals to radical action, including joining an existing radical group. In particular, these five mechanisms do not depend on the existence or acceptance of the narrative of Global Jihad.

In many cases, a radical narrative or ideology is learned *after* an individual joins a radical group. In these cases the narrative is less a cause than a rationalisation of commitment to radical action. In rational-choice terms, we might say that the purpose of the narrative is to reduce transaction costs of group interaction by building and reinforcing group cohesion and group consensus about action. Narratives may thus be better conceived of as enablers rather than as drivers of radicalisation. Here it is important to notice that, to the extent that narratives are developed out of action and small group commitments, the potential for blocking radicalisation by counter-narratives is limited.

Relating the two pyramids

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that relating the two pyramids, the narrative pyramid and the action pyramid, is anything but straightforward. Figure 3 represents, for each action level, a possible distribution of acceptance of the four aspects of the Global Jihad narrative.

In this representation, acceptance of narrative elements is correlated with levels of action, such that accepting a personal moral obligation for jihad – relative thickness of the black band within each action level – is most likely among the terrorists and least likely among the inert. Similarly, belief in none of the aspects of the Global Jihad narrative – relative thickness of the white band within each action level – is most likely among the inert and least likely among the terrorists.

But the correlation is only probabilistic, not deterministic. A few individual jihadist terrorists may accept no part of the Global Jihad narrative – for instance an individual who joined a terrorist group for the thrill of guns and fighting. And there may be a few politically inert individuals who feel a personal moral obligation for jihad – for instance an individual who does not want to hurt his parents by leaving for jihad.
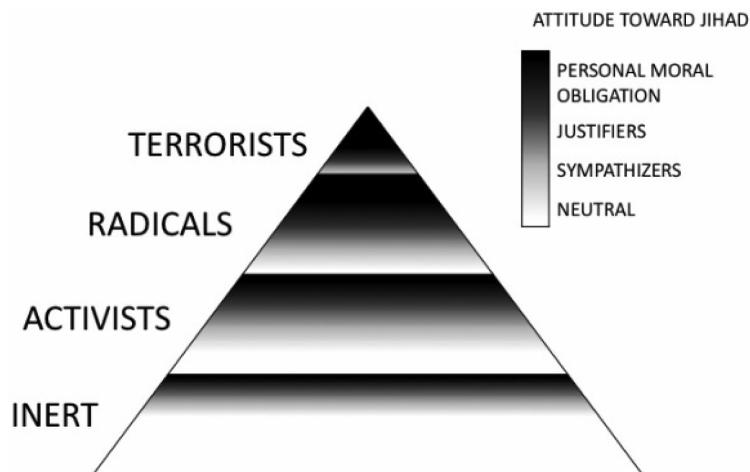

Figure 3 – Possible distribution of acceptance

As already described, it is neither obvious nor known what parts of the Global Jihad narrative appear with what frequency in different levels of the action pyramid. Mechanisms of radicalisation that do not depend on ideology or narrative imply that the Global Jihad narrative is not necessary for radicalisation in action. It seems likely that participation in a radical jihadist group soon teaches most or all of the Global Jihad narrative, but the narrative is not necessary to initiate radical action.

Particularly needed is a better understanding of how individuals and groups shift between sympathy, justification, and support for illegal political activity (Sageman, 2007) and the way this shift relates to the "multiple economic, social, political, and organizational relations that span borders" (Schiller *et al*, 1992, p. 1; see also Bobbitt, 2002). Are there tipping points that put individuals 'over the edge' into action? Does a critical mass of drivers need to be accumulated for individuals to cross thresholds? Are there quantum leaps from illegal political action such as banned marches and property damage to lethal violence against human targets? What precipitates such leaps?

We turn now to consider briefly issues of efficacy and human rights that are raised by recognising the weak relation between narrative and action.

Efficacy and efficiency issues

Security and intelligence agencies' mandate is not to control radicalisation but to protect against violent threats. A common presumption is that radical ideas can translate into a violent threat, and not just any type of violence but politically-motivated violence that is directed at general populations, less for the purpose of inflicting physical harm as for maximising psychological impact in order to disrupt legitimate authority and the capacity to govern.

Whereas bravado about violence proliferates among radicals, not only are they unlikely to act on it, but those most likely to act also do not come from the circle of radicals engaged in bravado. To the contrary, those prone to violence are fully aware of the costs associated with their activity and, as rational actors, will thus be intent not to draw attention to themselves. In other words, zeroing in on 'narrative radicals' is likely to generate an ineffective diversion of resources from 'action radicals', as false positives proliferate.

Taken together, the three pyramids indicate that the relationship between radical ideas and radical violence is problematic. It is akin to claiming that people who are attracted by child pornography are necessarily paedophiles: only a fraction of people who look at child pornography actually act out as paedophiles and paedophiles are not necessarily attracted to child pornography. Taylor (2010) has also highlighted similarly problematic causal inferences that are commonly drawn with respect to gambling, hate activities, and the relationship between new media, especially radical content posted on the Internet, and political violence.

Another parallel to the problem of focusing on 'narrative radicals' is the search for suspicious financial transactions. In accordance with the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Initiative, many countries have now enacted legislation that requires

banks to flag suspicious transactions, usually defined by an arbitrarily low threshold (usually about $10,000). As a result, the number of suspect transactions has grown exponentially. Yet, the resources devoted to acting on those flagged transactions have grown arithmetically (at best). As a result, the number of false positives has escalated while detection of genuinely illicit transactions has actually declined (Takáts, 2009).

Instead of conceiving the process of radicalisation as a pathway (Bux, 2007; see also Hegghammer, 2006; Horgan, 2008; Kirby, 2007; Kohlmann, 2008; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2009), a conveyor belt of sorts with a mechanistic understanding of individuals set on a quasi-determinist trajectory, the evidence points, instead, to plural pathways with no profile trajectory (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2009). Models that treat radicalisation as a single pathway that starts at political sympathy and ends in political violence, run the risk of oversimplifying what is actually quite a heterogeneous process by making many of the variables that matter exogenous to the model (Magouirk *et al*, 2008; see also Smith *et al*, 2002: Hamm, 2007). Examples exist of individuals who "self-radicalise" (Kirby, 2007, pp. 415-28), individuals who are specifically targeted by recruiters (Hegghammer, 2006, pp. 39-60; see also O'Neil & McGrory, 2006), individuals recruited by family or friendship groups (Magouirk *et al*, 2009), and more recently individuals who are radicalised through media, largely the Internet (Kohlmann, pp. 95-109; see also Sternersen, 2008; Lia, 2006).

Human rights issues

Arguments of efficacy aside, there is the human rights perspective to be considered. Democracies have an unfortunate history of labelling any serious challenge to the status quo as radicalism. While the history of the rise of the modern security and police state throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries need not detain us here (Emerson, 1968), states cannot be careful enough when endeavouring to control or censor thought and beliefs. Indeed, the rise of democratic pluralism can be read as the struggle against state control and censorship of views from the margins. Some secularists today would like to attribute many of the world's ills to religion (Dawkins, 2006). Their inference is that any type of extremist religion ought to be marginalised or banned. The problem with this approach is that it misses the crux of the problem: only actual violence is the responsibility of security forces.

Democracies are premised on the assumption that freedom of speech and thought should prevail, which is why free speech is protected from arbitrary government interference. Only under very specific circumstances is an utterance in and of itself a crime. Rather, the criminal justice system in a democracy is generally structured to deal with acts of crime *ex post facto*. Intent and motivation are not normally punishable; they only factor into the degree of punishment.

Nor is it defensible in a liberal democracy to use ethnic origin or broad religious affiliation alone as grounds to justify closer scrutiny. To be sure, profiling has long been an important part of law enforcement (del Carmen, 2008). However, the effectiveness of profiling as a counter-terrorism tactic remains under-evaluated (Gabbidon *et al*, 2009). Not knowing its effectiveness makes the practice all the more controversial. When employed security officials who have been adequately trained in

the tactic, profiling has proven to be an effective and efficient instrument (Blumkin & Margalioth, 2008).

Operation Jetway and Operation Pipeline, both of which employ behaviour-recognition patterns have been used effectively by law enforcement agencies, particularly drug enforcement units, in North America for over a decade. Similar training has been used for many years by the Israeli security forces as a tool for combating terrorism, in particular to prevent suicide bombings. Behaviour pattern recognition training, however, is very different than racial profiling. The former has been established in case law as an acceptable law enforcement practice (Kerr & McGill, 2007), while the latter has only served to alienate entire communities. Such alienation is counter-productive in that it reifies collective identity and congeals a captive audience which hitherto had been much more multipolar and thus less receptive to the Jihadi narrative.

With courts as reticent to convict based on terrorist motivation and intent as on creed or belonging, and with political opinion not necessarily translating into actual illegal action, focus on the Global Jihad narrative is not a fruitful domain for intelligence and law enforcement. Rather, the war of ideas that can be tracked in polls, focus groups, web sites and video releases must be separated from the war on terrorists. The pyramid of narrative and the pyramid of action can together contribute to this kind of understanding and this kind of action.

Another way to tackle the aim of counter-narratives is to invert the problem. The evidence in this article suggests that one way to think about Global Jihad is as a massive 'free-rider' problem: grievances may be shared widely, but the call to arms is not. Moreover, those who share the call to arms may have motives other than grievances to join the fight. For a counter-narrative strategy to be strategic, then, it should (1) frustrate the violent extremists by exacerbating their free-rider problem and (2) capture those individuals who join in the meta-narrative without the meta-narrative driving their behaviour.

The evidence in this article suggests that the way to aggravate the free-rider problem is to widen the gap between narrative and behaviour. That is best done by (1) raising the costs associated with acting on violent beliefs (which liberal democracies' legislators and security forces appear to have done quite successfully in recent years), and (2) mitigating the mechanisms of radicalisation that can push some individuals to bear such costs nonetheless. On both points, the findings of research on counter-narratives corroborate findings from work on opposing terrorist organisations (e.g. Berman, 2009, Sageman, 2004).

Operationalising counter-narratives: Top down or bottom up?

One approach to the war of ideas would give priority to top-down counter-narratives that target (1) individuals who are higher up in the pyramid and (2) individuals who are particularly prone to an upward trajectory in the pyramidal model. The more radicalised individuals higher up the pyramid are in one sense an easier target because there are fewer of them. This makes the counter-narrative easier

to tailor but also makes it more difficult to communicate the message to the target audience. In addition, those individuals who are already more radicalised are likely to be more resistant to counter-narratives.

The second set of individuals is even more complicated to address because, in each level of the pyramid – in both the narrative pyramid or the action pyramid – only a few will move toward greater radicalisation in any given period of time. And, as we shown, there are many mechanisms of radicalisation and thus many different paths to radicalisation. The number of paths is calculated by counting up all possible combinations of the twelve mechanisms identified. A 'profile' of individuals likely to show increased radicalisation is thus unlikely to be helpful.

Tentatively, then, we conclude that the 'top-down' approach is not promising. Radicals and terrorists are difficult to reach and difficult to move, and no profile exists for predicting those most susceptible to radicalisation. A lesser but still significant problem is that focusing on the more radicalised presents a real predicament for research. The higher up in the radicalisation pyramid people are – whether narrative or action pyramid – the less likely they are to collaborate with researchers for fear of risking the attention of security forces.

Thus, we lean toward the view that the war of ideas should give priority to a 'bottom-up' focus on the lower levels of the two pyramids. The public-opinion evidence cited in this article has already suggested how we can make some inroads into understanding what are sometimes referred to as 'at-risk' or 'vulnerable' communities. Polling data can assess the percentages of Muslims who accept either none of the Global Jihad narratives; level one of the narrative, the 'war on Islam'; and levels two and three of the narrative, the justification of suicide bombing in defence of Islam. Polling data could track changes in these percentages as evidence of success of counter-narratives, and in the long run provide an evidence-based science of counter-narratives against the Global Jihad narrative.

A poll along these lines surveying Ottawa Muslims as conducted by the authors provides another kind of evidence relating to counter-narratives (McCauley *et al*, 2010). Results of the poll indicated, not surprisingly, that respondents approving one militant group (e.g. Hamas) were likely to approve of others (e.g. Hezbollah, Al Qaeda). Similarly, results indicated that respondents approving one Western country (e.g. Canada) were likely to approve others (e.g. U.S., Israel). More surprising was the fact that approval of militant groups was unrelated to approval of Western countries. Approval of Hamas was not related to disapproval of Israel, for instance.

If replicated for other Muslim populations, these results would have significant implications for countering the Global Jihad narrative. It seems that we cannot count on turning Muslims against Islamic militants via counter-narratives that help Muslims feel more positive toward the West. Similarly, perhaps we cannot count on making Muslims more positive toward the West by turning them against Islamic militants. Although it is easy to assume that Muslims must choose between Islamic militants and the West (e.g. Rosenau, 2006), our results suggest that the war of ideas against the Global Jihad narrative must have two separate and independent targets: moving Muslims against militants and moving Muslims toward the West.

Finally, it is important to raise another kind of difficulty with counter-narratives, no matter whether the target is top-down or bottom-up. The danger is that a message

may be effective with the target audience but have unintended consequences for those not immediately targeted. In this, counter-narratives are similar to more kinetic forms of counterinsurgency: both can have collateral damage that undermines political goals. For instance, a message arguing that Islam does not approve killing enemy civilians might combat acceptance of suicide bombing in defence of Islam, but might at the same time reinforce, at least implicitly, that Western countries are enemies engaged in war against Islam.

Conclusion

We have argued that the war of ideas against the Global Jihadist narrative must be distinguished from the war against active terrorists. The 9/11 Commission (2004, p. 363) concluded in its final report that eliminating al-Qaida as a formidable danger ultimately requires "prevailing in the longer term over the ideology that gives rise to Islamist terrorism". However, from the analysis in this article it follows that violent political action must be the focus of security forces, whereas the war of ideas is in the political realm of choosing and promoting political policies.

In combating terrorism, it is always tempting to focus on the apex of the pyramid that represents the most immediate threat. We suggest instead that counter-narratives should take a bottom-up approach. Their payoff is likely to be greatest among sympathisers and those at-risk of becoming sympathisers as it will be more difficult to persuade already committed supporters: the higher in the pyramid an individual is located, the less traction counter-narratives are likely to have. Rather than positing a stark division between the West and Islam that insists on the superiority of Western values, counter-narratives should focus instead on mitigating mechanisms of radicalisation to make extremism and associated violence as unattractive and costly as possible. Ideology is a poor predictor of behaviour; counter-narratives need to target actual mechanism of radicalisation instead.

Counter-narratives run the risk of what the military refers to as the 'ready-fire-aim' problem: we think we know the source of the problem when, in fact, the issue is more complex and nuanced than it initially appears. No matter how well-intentioned, a counter-narrative strategy is prone to diffusing scarce resources without a measurable effect or spawning unintended consequences if not carefully conceptualised and operationalised. In this regard, we contend that different parts of the Global Jihad narrative are held by different audiences, and that each part, its prospective audience, and the enabling mechanism(s) of radicalisation must be targeted separately for counter-narratives to be effective.

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