



National Coordinator
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Countering Violent Extremist Narratives



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6 Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons from Cases of Terrorist Dropouts¹

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Introduction

As the United States continues to fight militarily to disrupt the efforts of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the U.S. government has slowly come to the realisation that military force alone cannot defeat violent extremism. There has been increased recognition that capturing and killing all terrorists is not a realistic strategy, and that we must spend more time understanding how and why individuals are becoming terrorists. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld posed this fundamental question in an infamous 2003 memorandum, asking 'Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?'² At the time, however, there was little genuine focus in the U.S. government on determining the answer to this difficult question.

Today, more than seven years after 9/11, the focus of U.S. and international counterterrorism efforts has shifted, and there is far more attention being paid to the 'softer' side of the fight against terrorism alluded to by Secretary Rumsfeld. There is a growing consensus now that countering the ideology that drives this extremism has become critical in the effort to prevent and defeat the violence that emerges from it. Al-Qaeda's ideas, and those of like-minded groups, must be challenged with a counter-narrative of stronger appeal. There is also a growing recognition that as the U.S. and other parties begin crafting their own narrative to counter that of radical groups in this so-called battle of ideas, it is necessary to better understand the radicalisation process that leads to terrorism. Otherwise, it will be impossible to understand what messages will resonate among terrorist recruits and be effective to counter this radicalisation process. Illustrating this increasing focus on studying and understanding the radicalisation process in the U.S., in 2007, the New York Police Department released a valuable assessment analysing how and where radicalisation occurred in eleven terrorist cells in the West. The federal government also addressed this issue in the July 2009 National Intelligence Estimate titled 'The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland'.³

However, there has been little focus on the flip side of the radicalisation equation – understanding those who have decided to *leave* terrorist organisations. In order to determine what kind of counter-narrative might be effective among those seemingly hardened individuals already in terrorist organisations or those well along the path to radicalisation, it is useful to look at examples of people who have voluntarily walked away from these organisations. Therefore, this chapter seeks to address the question: What lessons for developing successful counter-narratives can be learned by analysing individual cases of terrorist dropouts? Determining the reasons for a change in perspective could help governments craft messages designed to peel people away from terrorist organisations; this is one vital element of an effective counter-narrative. Figuring out who might be best positioned to deliver this message is another key angle from which to view the efficacy of a counter-narrative strategy. Having a better grasp of this 'drop-out' phenomenon may also enable governments to better predict whether an individual – or even a cell – is likely to follow through with an attack. Second, it may make it easier for governments to determine which cell members are particularly vulnerable to targeted deradicalisation efforts.

Developing an effective counter-narrative strategy will not be an easy task. An effective counter-narrative will need to address not only those vulnerable to the extremist message, but also those on the path toward radicalisation and those already radicalised. It is clear, therefore, that the U.S. government and others cannot develop a single, overarching counter-narrative expected to work across the board.

The spread of the extremist narrative

Before examining the stories of those who have voluntarily walked away from terrorist organisations, it is useful to survey the state and strength of al-Qaeda's current appeal. Understanding why individuals are still attracted to Bin Laden's message is key to fighting against it. Despite signs of weakening, the underlying extremist narrative offered by al-Qaeda and its affiliates remains strong and compelling for some. Al-Qaeda charges that the U.S. and the West, more broadly, are at war with Islam and that the Muslim world must unify to defeat this threat and reestablish the caliphate. As evidence for their narrative, extremist groups point to the war in Iraq, Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, and U.S. support for Israel.

Al-Qaeda's recruitment extends to distant witnesses of these radical policies, far beyond, for example, detainees at Abu Ghraib. Instrumental to this wider success is the group's ability to connect individuals' local grievances to a global narrative. In fact, there is strong evidence that al-Qaeda's efforts to spread its destructive ideology have encouraged terrorist groups previously focused on more local targets, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (formerly known as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), to shift their ideological focus to the global struggle. By appropriating the al-Qaeda brand, other so-called homegrown terrorists have become far more dangerous than they otherwise would have been. And terrorists inspired by, but with no direct ties to, al-Qaeda continue to perpetuate violence globally, justified by al-Qaeda's global narrative.

The reasons the extremist narrative finds fertile soil in so many societies around the world are as various as the societies themselves. Some young Muslims may respond to a radicaliser's message because they feel excluded from their societies, trapped as they are in poverty or hopelessness within authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and beyond. Others, well-off and well-educated, live in Western democratic nations, but struggle with issues of belonging and identity and find that the radical message resonates with their experience and circumstances.

After looking at the reasons why, and processes by which, individuals are radicalised, it is clear that, as a senior British intelligence official stated, 'there is no single path that leads people to violent extremism.' Rather, as the official continued, 'social, foreign policy, economic, and personal factors all lead people to throw their lot in with extremists.'⁴

That being said, there has been a spate of seemingly good news in the counterterrorism arena over the past year, as former terrorist leaders and clerics have renounced their previous beliefs. Former Egyptian Islamic Jihad head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr Fadl), whose treatises al-Qaeda often cited to justify its actions, has written a new book rejecting al-Qaeda's message and tactics. Shaykh Salman bin Fahd al-Awda, an extremist cleric whose incarceration in the 1990s by the Saudis reportedly helped inspire Osama bin Laden to action, went on television to decry al-Qaeda's operations, asking bin Laden, 'How much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed [...] in the name of al-Qaeda?'⁵ In the United Kingdom, former members of the radical group Hizb ut-Tahrir established the Quilliam Foundation, which describes itself as 'Britain's first Muslim counter-extremism think tank'. Quilliam aims to undermine the ideological foundation of radical extremism by refuting its premises. It is still too early to gauge the impact of these various recantations, but nonetheless they are certainly promising signs, at the very least.

Four lessons learned for crafting a successful counter-narrative

1. Undermine terrorist leadership

As with the radicalisation process, which seems to differ from person to person, there is not one clear overarching reason why individuals have walked away from terrorist organisations. The reasons for a change of heart can be strikingly prosaic: family, money, petty grievances. But they can also revolve around shaken ideology or lost faith in a group's leadership. Among such varied reasons, however, several common themes emerge when examining why different dropouts have left terrorist organisations. Governments may be able to take advantage of the knowledge of these trends to better formulate appropriate counter-narratives.

In studying the various terrorist dropout cases, it seems clear that 'Naming and Shaming', or undermining terrorist and extremist leadership, should constitute one part of the approach. Crafting messages that significantly detract from leaders' authority and credibility is vital. A general lack of respect for a group's leadership has often been a factor in dropping out of terrorist organisations. Essam al-Ridi, an Egyptian veteran of the 1980s jihad against the Soviets, testified during the 1998 East African embassy bombings trial that he resented taking battlefield orders from bin Laden and others who lacked military experience during the Afghan jihad. The decisive factor for al-Ridi's change of perspective was in a battle in which many jihadis died – in his view needlessly – as a result of inept leadership. In this battle, al-Qaeda declared a victory nonetheless. Al-Ridi has stated, '[m]y judgment as a person living here, not in the hereafter, is that this is pure killing. If you don't know what you're doing, you are killing your people [...] I became more angry and more opposing what's happening in Afghanistan and what's happening to Osama and how he became a leader of his own.'⁶

Ziad Jarrah, one of the 9/11 hijackers, was unhappy with Mohammed Atta's leadership while the 19 plotters were in the U.S., and the two often clashed. Jarrah had been on his own for most of his time in the U.S. before 9/11 and strongly resisted Atta's attempts to exert more direct control. At least in part due to his problems with Atta, Jarrah, who eventually became the hijacker pilot on the United 93 flight, was contemplating dropping out of the plot during the summer of 2001. In an emotional conversation, Ramzi Binalshibh – the Hamburg-based liaison between the cell plotting the 9/11 attacks and al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Afghanistan – persuaded Jarrah to stay.

Noman Benotman, the former leader of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), also turned his back on the terrorist cause, abandoning not only LIFG but al-Qaeda as well.⁷ Benotman had real differences with bin Laden over the direction of the global jihadist movement, and Benotman claims to have asked the al-Qaeda Emir to leave behind the terrorism business in 2000, contending that they were fighting a losing battle. After 9/11, Benotman resigned from his position in LIFG, concerned that the U.S. would likely respond to the attack by targeting both al-Qaeda and his own organisation.⁸

Perhaps then, the U.S. efforts to undermine AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by showing a video which made clear that he did not know how to handle a gun was potentially effective. Taking steps to avoid building up the reputations of terrorist leaders also likely has merit as a counter-narrative. For example, before 9/11, President Clinton said that he tried to avoid mentioning bin Laden's name too often in order to avoid making him a bigger hero in some parts of the world than he already was.

2. Highlight civilian/muslim suffering, hypocrisy of the Islamist narrative

An effective counter-narrative should also demonstrate civilian and Muslim suffering at the hands of the terrorists. Showing the resultant deaths of Muslims and focusing on the hypocrisy of the ideology is a worthwhile endeavour. A review of terrorist dropouts does indicate that this tactic has potential. Disillusionment with the terrorists' strategy and ideology has been, historically, a major reason people have left such groups. Some have felt that their fellow members or leaders have pushed their ideology too far.

One example is Omar bin Laden, Osama's fourth son. He had spent nearly five years living in Afghan training camps but, following 9/11, Omar quit al-Qaeda and called its attacks 'craziness', according to journalist Peter Bergen. He continued, '[t]hose guys are dummies. They have destroyed everything, and for nothing. What did we get from September 11?'⁹

Nazir Abbas, one of the top commanders in Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), left his organisation for similar reasons. He trained hundreds to become terrorists in the JI camps that he helped to establish. He later questioned a bin Laden *fatwa* in 2000, which said that killing Americans and Jews everywhere is the highest act of worship and good deeds. It was following this *fatwa* that Abbas began to turn on JI and cooperate with Indonesian counterterrorism authorities. He held that jihad was to be fought only on the battlefield in defence of Islam and believed, in accordance with what he had always been taught, that fighting a holy war did not include the killing of civilians. In fact, Abbas later admitted feeling 'sinful' after the 2002 Bali bombings, since he had helped train the bombers.¹⁰ Abbas felt that his fellow members in JI had an incorrect understanding of the JI mission. True jihad, according to Abbas, was taking place in Afghanistan and the Philippines, against an enemy attacking a Muslim community. Since leaving JI, Abbas has not only turned against the organisation by providing the Indonesian government invaluable information, he has also testified against the group's leadership. Interestingly, Abbas did not think that attacking a repressive government was wrong; his qualms with JI and other terrorist organisations' actions extended only to their violence against civilians. Abbas stated, 'I couldn't understand that exploding bombs against innocent civilians was jihad. That was the difference that made me escape from the group.'¹¹

Al-Ridi began helping the U.S. government for similar reasons, explaining that he wanted to cooperate because 'I have an interest in helping you because I think Osama has ruined the reputation of Muslims'.¹² Another useful example is Abu Hadhifa, a long-time member of the Algerian jihad who rose to become the leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) forces in eastern Algeria. Hadhifa dropped out of AQIM and turned himself in to Algerian authorities in June 2008,¹³ according to his family, after reasoning that the jihad in Algeria was illegitimate.¹⁴

A counter-narrative that emphasises the terrorist groups' hypocrisy of targeting Muslims and civilians might resonate with those having similar doubts in such organisations. In this way, the U.S. could show that, as National Counter-Terrorism Center Director Michael Leiter has explained, 'it is al-Qaeda, and not the West, that is truly at war with Islam.'¹⁵

3. Portray terrorists as criminals, highlighting hypocrisy of terrorist narrative

In a related manner, painting terrorists as common criminals may help demonstrate the impurity of their ideology and supposed religious conviction. Terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, are increasingly involved in a variety of criminal activities. For example, the al-Qaeda cell that executed the devastating 2004 Madrid

train bombing plot, which killed almost 200 people, partially financed the attack by selling hashish. The terrorists who carried out the July 7, 2005, attacks on the transportation system in London were also self-financed, in part through credit card fraud. In Southeast Asia, the al-Qaeda-affiliated JI financed the 2002 Bali bombings, in part, through jewellery store robberies.

While terrorist groups are involved in a wide array of criminal activity, ranging from cigarette smuggling to selling counterfeit products, the nexus between drugs and terror is particularly strong. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, 19 of the 43 U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations are definitively linked to the global drug trade, and up to 60 percent of terrorist organisations are suspected of having some ties with the illegal narcotics trade.¹⁶ Terrorist groups are particularly attracted to the drug trade because of the potential profits. Beyond selling the product, drugs provide many different avenues of revenue such as taxes on farmers and local cartels, and fees for providing 'security' for all aspects of the supply chain including production, trade, and distribution. Groups like the Afghan Taliban, the Colombian FARC, and the Lebanese Hezbollah generate significant resources from the extortion fees they collect from drug cartels and poppy or coca farmers operating in their 'territory'.

While it may seem to be a contradiction for religiously oriented terrorist groups to rely on criminal activity, these groups seek to justify these seemingly hypocritical actions. In 2006, Khan Mohammed, an Afghan Taliban member convicted last May of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism, explained his involvement in the Afghan drug trade as part of his desire that 'God turn all the infidels into corpses', adding, 'whether it is by opium or by shooting, this is our common goal'.¹⁷ A leader of Fatah al-Islam, an al-Qaeda-linked group based in Lebanon, rationalised his group's bank-robbing activities by noting that 'stealing money from the infidels, from the usurious banks and the institutions which belong to the infidel regimes and states, is a legal thing which Allah has permitted us to do. This money is being seized from them and instead directed towards jihad'.¹⁸ Such a spike in terrorists' criminal activity can be used to the West's advantage in trying to apprehend these groups, namely, by portraying such groups as ideologically hypocritical.

4. Focus on life as a terrorist

The fourth theme in a counter-narrative should be a focus on the reality of life as a terrorist. If people are joining because the terrorist lifestyle seems glamorous or because they believe they are fulfilling some larger purpose, demonstrating the reality will help to dispel these myths. Terrorist recruits are often treated badly by these organisations and the reality of life for a terrorist has often driven people out of them. If this message can be promulgated, the counter-narrative would certainly be strengthened. To best exploit this theme, there should be a platform for former members to speak about their unsatisfying lives as members of a terrorist organisation, hopefully emphasising that it simply does not live up to the hype. It is surprising that such seemingly trivial, petty factors can drive seemingly committed terrorists to drop out.

Through studying the personal stories of terrorist dropouts, it can be discerned that the individual operatives' perceived lack of respect from leaders was influential in their decision to break from the radical group. L'Houssaine Kherchtou, a Moroccan who trained to serve as bin Laden's personal pilot, grew bitter after a bin Laden aide turned down his request for \$500 to cover the costs of his wife's Caesarean section. He grew livid when al-Qaeda subsequently paid the expenses for a group of Egyptians to renew their passports in order to travel to Yemen. 'If I had a gun,' Kherchtou later testified, 'I would shoot [bin Laden] at that time'.¹⁹ When the organisation moved to Afghanistan, Kherchtou said that he refused to accompany them,

thus violating his oath to a stingy bin Laden. From then on, he no longer considered himself to be a member of al-Qaeda.

Others have also bailed for financial reasons – often regarding low wages as a sign that they were not being treated with adequate respect. Jamal al-Fadl, a Sudanese radical who was one of al-Qaeda’s first members, fumed over his salary while al-Qaeda was based in Sudan. He began embezzling funds and stole approximately \$100,000 from bin Laden, according to his testimony in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings trial. When bin Laden got wind of al-Fadl’s theft, he ordered him to repay the money. Al-Fadl, after handing back about \$30,000, fled from al-Qaeda, fearing retribution.

A counter-narrative should also focus on fear – to bring home the reality of why an individual should be afraid to be a suicide bomber, for example. Given the fact that some have abandoned a planned attack even at the last minute, a fear-awareness approach could have an impact. This factor appears to have been significant in the case of Sajid Badat, a British citizen who was trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to serve as one of the shoebombers. On December 10, 2001, after completing his al-Qaeda training in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Badat returned home to the U.K. His mission was to blow up an airplane travelling from Europe to the U.S. while his associate, Richard Reid, would do the same on another plane. On December 22, Reid’s attempt was thwarted by his fellow passengers when he tried to light his device on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami. Badat, however, abandoned the plot, leaving his dismantled bomb in his parents’ house in the U.K. He had written to his parents earlier of a ‘sincere desire to sell my soul to Allah in return for Paradise’. Yet, Badat ultimately dropped out because, as he told prosecutors, he wanted to ‘introduce some calm to his life’.²⁰

Mohammed al-Owali fled the scene of the 1998 embassy bombing in Nairobi before he could carry out what was supposed to be another component of the suicide attack. While he did not drop out of al-Qaeda, his fleeing the scene may prove useful in considering why terrorists do not follow through on their assignments to commit suicide attacks. In the failed July 21 attacks in London, one of the bombers, Manfo Kwaku Asiedu, a 32-year old British Ghanaian, abandoned his bomb in a West London park. While not much is known about him at this point, it can be presumed that fear was a factor in this last-minute decision.

Presenting the message

Another critical element of devising a successful counter-narrative strategy is recognising that governments are not always the most effective messengers for presenting the counter-narrative. There is certainly a role for the U.S. government and other governments to play. There are many cases, however, where other actors may make more effective and credible messengers.

1. The role of former terrorists

Former terrorists and extremists are one obvious party that could be employed to transmit the counter-narrative. Their presenting the narrative would resonate particularly strongly compared to that of unknown government officials. As demonstrated by al-Zawahiri’s defensiveness in his lengthy question-and-answer session over the internet in the summer of 2008 in the face of Dr Fadl’s public recantations, the voices of former jihadists appear to be the ones al-Qaeda fears most. These experienced al-Qaeda critics could deliver particularly strong messages about the reality of life as a terrorist and effectively leverage their disillusionment with the cause to lure both potential and active terrorists away from extremist groups.

The U.S. government in particular must also better understand who can wield influence in the Muslim communities throughout the world. These potential messengers can include activists, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, media personalities, and students, among others. U.S. embassies should play a leading role in trying to identify exactly who these people are and then determine how to incorporate them most effectively into the meta-narrative.

2. The role of families

Additionally, the families of terrorists can also play an important role in trying to persuade individuals to leave terrorist organisations. Ties and contact with family have been major factors in causing individuals to reconsider their membership in these organisations. It is possibly for this reason that Atta forbade the 9/11 hijackers to contact their families to say goodbye. The wobbliest of the hijackers, Jarrah, resisted calls to cut ties with his fiancée in Germany and his family in Lebanon, thus souring his relationship with Atta, according to the 9/11 commission.²¹ A number of recruits who left their families to join terrorist groups often returned home before carrying out their mission as part of their pre-determined plot. After renewed contact with their families, many trained terrorists subsequently decided to abandon the plots in which they had been selected to participate.²²

This is exactly what happened to Saud al-Rashid and Mushabib al-Hamlan, two would-be 9/11 plotters. Both men bailed after leaving the fanatical, insular atmosphere of the Afghan training camps and returned home to Saudi Arabia. After getting a visa to enter the U.S., Hamlan contacted his family, despite clear al-Qaeda instructions to the contrary. He found out that his mother was ill and decided not to return to Afghanistan, despite intense pressure from his handlers. Hamlan later moved back in with his parents and returned to college. Similarly, Badat, the would-be shoe bomber, appears to have decided to abandon the plot once he returned to the U.K. and resumed contact with his family.

Strengthening the counternarrative in the future

The bottom line is that countering the terrorist narrative is a complicated task with no easy solution. There are a variety of steps beyond the four themes illustrated above that should be taken in the pursuit of successful counter-radicalisation and counter-narrative programs. For instance, the counter-radicalisation programs that are now springing up in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia should be better coordinated. The establishment of a ‘Counter-radicalisation Forum’, where the policymakers and practitioners from the countries engaged in these efforts can compare notes and best practices would be an important step forward. This organisation could also perform independent assessments of each country’s success and press for needed improvements, while recognising, however, that not all countries view the counter-radicalisation problem the same way. The Counter-radicalisation Forum should conduct comprehensive assessments on all aspects of the radicalisation cycle, including why people join terrorist organisations and why some choose to leave; how the radicalisation and deradicalisation process may be different in other parts of the world; how radicalisation is changing as the terrorist threat evolves; and what the realistic limits are in the deradicalisation process.

A comprehensive study exploring the drop-out phenomenon could also have great practical benefits for the U.S. and its partners. Governments could use the knowledge gleaned to shape their counter-radicalisation programs, which are growing in popularity throughout the world. Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia and Singapore, as well as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, are among the

countries that have put these types of programs into place in recent years. Yet it is clear from a preliminary review of individuals who have quit or defected that there are many different factors at play – ranging from strategic disagreements to financial disputes – that drive seemingly committed terrorists to change course. This seems to suggest that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is likely to produce only marginal results and that more flexible and tailored programs are necessary.

This type of study could also have a number of benefits for law enforcement and intelligence agencies’ counterterrorism efforts. Figuring out why individuals have walked away from terrorist groups may enable governments to better predict whether an individual, or even a cell, is likely to follow through with an attack. Understanding dropouts should also make it easier for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to determine which terrorists might be induced to switch sides, and how the government should proceed to encourage this.²³

There is a great deal that governments could learn from one another as they develop their programs. For example, several of the European countries’ innovations appear to have particular domestic applicability for the U.S.:

- The United States should take a page from the British and ensure that all relevant government agencies fully understand the U.S. strategy and adhere to coordinated counter-radicalisation and counter-narrative strategies. At the very least, the U.S. government should focus on minimising inter-agency tensions that will possibly *contribute* to radicalisation. The U.S. government’s outreach to Arab-Americans and Muslim communities has been driven almost exclusively by its law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Attorneys’ offices, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security. While this contact is important, Muslim communities must see the government as consisting of more than its law enforcement arms. It is therefore critical that engagement is broadened to include service-providing entities, such as the Health and Human Services Department, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.
- In the U.S. system, the only place for a local citizen to turn to with concerns about potential radicalisation is the FBI. The government should work with communities to develop alternative non-law enforcement mechanisms at the local level, both governmental and nongovernmental alike, to address radicalisation concerns. The city of Amsterdam’s ‘Information House’ is a model worth emulating.²⁴

European governments, on the other hand, could learn a great deal from the robust system the U.S. government has in place to protect and defend civil rights. Some of the many, albeit little known, examples include:

- Justice Department lawsuits against schools and employers for prohibiting students and employees from wearing hijabs.
- Justice Department prosecutions of hate crimes against Muslims.
- The Department of Homeland Security’s Office for Civil Liberties and Civil Rights, the focus of which has been on addressing and resolving complaints (including those of Muslims) associated with the no-fly lists, profiling and naturalisation backlogs.

Though U.S. efforts are little-known and unique in the arena of counter-radicalisation, they have, thus far, succeeded in countering the al-Qaeda narrative and, as such, should be better publicised domestically and abroad. These actions will help to reassure Muslim-American communities, alert them to outlets for

resolving their grievances, encourage greater cooperation with law enforcement and other government agencies, and reduce the resonance of the radical extremist global narrative.

Conclusion

There is no obvious silver bullet to countering the terrorists’ message, and as this review of various dropout cases reveals, there is certainly not one, simple overarching solution in this complicated arena. As such, the U.S. and other governments worldwide should focus on developing a multi-layered counter-narrative strategy, incorporating many different elements, designed to appeal to a wide variety of people. Looking back at cases where individuals have voluntarily left terrorist organisations, four themes seem to emerge that should be included in any counter-narrative campaign. They are:

1. Undermining the authority and legitimacy of terrorist leaders;
2. Highlighting the targeting of Muslims and civilians in terrorist attacks (which violates core beliefs of Islam);
3. Portraying terrorists as criminals who fail to live according to just Muslim principles; and
4. Focusing on the difficult, financially unstable, fear-filled life of a terrorist.

Beyond carefully *crafting* the counter-narrative, governments must also be mindful of how they *deliver* the counter-narrative. Utilising former terrorists may prove quite advantageous given their ability to directly connect with – and counter – the terrorist narrative. In addition, terrorists’ family members have successfully persuaded recruits, as well as active radicals, to leave behind extremist organisations. Working with terrorists’ families, therefore, may enable the U.S. government and its partners to effectively transmit their counter-narrative. Finally, counter-radicalisation efforts should be increasingly coordinated across national boundaries, thereby enabling individual programs to be strengthened through international cooperation.

Better understanding not only why people join but why they leave terrorist organisations is key to developing a message that resonates with those considering joining these groups, and perhaps even those already on the inside. While the recent statements of clerics and leaders who have rejected al-Qaeda and its ideology are certainly promising developments, the reality is that counterterrorism authorities currently lack a comprehensive understanding of how best to assemble and disseminate a counter-narrative. Until all aspects of the radicalisation cycle are better understood, including the reasons for abandoning the extremist cause, it will be difficult to develop an effective strategy to defeat the terrorist narrative and win the softer side of the fight against terrorism.

1 This paper is largely based on a lecture delivered at the Expert Meeting in the Hague in June 2009. Furthermore, it includes material from the Washington Institute’s Presidential Task Force Report, entitled ‘Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization.’ This report was released by the Institute in March 2009, and can be found at <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PTF2-Counterradicalization.pdf>>. The author served as one of the three co-conveners and primary drafters of that report.

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- 21 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2004, p. 246.
- 22 See for example D. McGrory & Z. Hussain, 'New Wave of British terrorists are taught at schools, not in the mountains', *Times Online*, 14 July 2005, retrieved 1 November 2009, <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article543782.ece>>.
- 23 The 9/11 plot offers some interesting examples in this regard. While Ziad Jarrah is the most obvious example of someone who might have been willing to turn on his co-conspirators, Said Bahaji – another member of the group in Germany now commonly referred to as the 'Hamburg cell' – may have been even more vulnerable. Bahaji, the only German citizen in the group, was described by associates after 9/11 as insecure, a follower, and not knowledgeable about Islam, which was not surprising given his own acknowledgement that he became a 'strong Muslim in a very short period of time.' One observer said that he did not fit in with the rest of the group because he was 'too German, too pedantic, too Western.' He was also quite weak, both physically and mentally. He left the German Army after a brief stint, and in Afghanistan after 9/11 he complained about the physical conditions and questioned the purpose of the 9/11 attacks. See C. Simpson, S. Swanson & J. Crewdson, '9/11 Suspect Cut Unlikely Figure in Terror Plot', *Chicago Tribune*, 23 February 2003.
- 24 See the Washington Institute's Task Force Report, 'Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization'.

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The NCTb helps to make the Netherlands a safer place to live

The task of the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism is to minimise the risk and fear of terrorist attacks in the Netherlands and to take prior measures to limit the potential of terrorist acts. The NCTb is responsible for the central coordination of counterterrorism efforts and ensures that cooperation between all the parties involved is and remains of a high standard.