



Countering ISIL's Ideology: Keep It Limited, Focused, and in Tune with Lessons Learned

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The rise of ISIL from the ashes of al Qaeda has also resulted in renewed calls to counter the ideology of violent extremism – a popular mantra chanted in the years after 9/11 that has gone through ebbs and flows based on the pace and magnitude of jihadist terror attacks. But any true examination of the past decade's countering violent extremism programs should conclude that combating al Qaeda and now ISIL's ideology would for the most part be a waste of time. By almost all accounts the world faces more jihadist extremism today than it did the day after the September 11, 2001 attacks. All of this despite the millions of dollars spent in countering violent extremism (CVE) programs to win the "Hearts and Minds" of vulnerable populations from Morocco to the Philippines. Sure, CVE advocates will always trumpet the anecdotal Hallmark card story of a young man on the path to al Qaeda, who after hearing a positive commercial promoting peace and prosperity, suddenly switched directions and returned to join a representative, egalitarian democracy. These stories represent anecdotes and not trends.

Across North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and now large parts of Europe, young men have joined ISIL in droves willing to fight and die in Syria and Iraq in the name of Islam. This jihadist wave has occurred despite truckloads of funding spent by more than a dozen Western countries to positively engage young Muslim men. The cynic might argue that CVE programs, when correlated to the magnitude of today's radicalization and recruitment, actually accelerated extremism. The cynics are likely wrong, but at best we can say the majority of CVE efforts have had a negligible or no effect on extremism. There are some silver linings in the past decade's CVE history that may provide limited methods for eroding the appeal of ISIL's extremism. But before visiting those instructive points, let's examine why past CVE efforts have been ineffective so as to avoid repeating efforts of limited consequence.

Since 9/11, programs to counter jihadi ideology have suffered many ills and most of these programs, if pursued against ISIL, will result in the same fate - investment without a return. A core CVE effort has been the employment of credible, so called "Moderate Voices", to counter the narrative of extremism. These programs generally fail for three reasons. First, young militants seek out extremism because moderate theology did not suit them. It's illogical to believe that most will reject the appeal of an extreme ideology by being presented with a tamer version of Islam by cleric they do not know nor respect. Second, recent deradicalization programs in the Middle East have shown that moderate voices rarely get through to young men committed to violence in

the name of terrorist causes. The throngs of ISIL recruits today and the recidivism of al Qaeda members supposedly deradicalized post incarceration illustrate this point. Third, “Moderate Voices”, often backed by Western secular democracies, use religious justifications in an attempt to influence young recruits. But today’s ISIL recruits often have limited understanding of their religion. They instead find motivation to fight in Syria and Iraq because of social and psychological reasons rather than simply ideological justifications. Fourth, “Moderate Voices”, who may in fact be credible, are often challenging the religious opinions of ISIL members of no credibility. In the era of Do-It-Yourself-Jihad, everyone is a cleric and selectively chooses the religious proverb of choice to justify their actions and resulting violence. The religious authority of the “Moderate Voice” will not likely register with the foreign fighter recruit more motivated by the conduct of violence than the Koran.

Community engagement programs to counter ISIL’s ideology will likely achieve no more success than credible outside voices. Most recruits come from communities or enclaves within communities that either overtly or tacitly supports al Qaeda or now ISIL’s jihadist ideology. Even if the communities do not condone ISIL, parents have been notoriously bad at detecting the radicalization and recruitment of their children, especially when recruits increasingly encounter ISIL online where it’s difficult for parents to have oversight. Most ISIL recruits, particularly in the West are isolated, so connecting with them through community programs remains difficult. Lastly, community engagement must happen preemptively, before recruits are radicalized and recruited. Today, the West reactively conducts community engagement long after ISIL’s narrative has taken hold in disenfranchised communities and produced foreign fighters.

Engagement in the online space has proven a struggle for the West as well. The Internet and social media, by design, allow users to access highly desired content and block out undesirable content. Those attracted to ISIL’s online narratives can simply avoid or disengage from Western messages that positively promote an alternative to jihadist extremism. Additionally, Western online engagement remains highly constrained by bureaucratic approval processes and slow development timelines. Jihadi social media moves in seconds and minutes, but Western responses occur over days, weeks and months. Lower quality, slow developing, lackluster counter narrative content will never match the proclivity of ISIL’s online media campaign.

Rather than countering ISIL’s ideology, the West will be better served to undermine it. As discussed in two recent articles, [“The U.S. Can’t Destroy ISIL, Only ISIL can destroy ISIL”](#) and [“How about some Unconventional Warfare? Thoughts on Countering ISIL”](#), the best approach will utilize some critical lessons learned since 9/11 to help ISIL defeat itself by focusing on making its members villains rather than martyrs. Western efforts should focus on several key methods that have proven successful in other counterterrorism campaigns to include the decline of al Qaeda in recent years.

1. *Deny ISIL success on the battlefield* – ISIL’s greatest appeal is its success. Defeating ISIL on the battlefield and promoting these defeats through traditional and social media in vulnerable communities will undermine the desire for new recruits to join the fight. Foreign fighter recruits are fickle. They want to be part of a winning effort. If ISIL begins to lose, their media efforts will change from truth to propaganda, and new recruits will recognize this shift.
2. *Showcase infighting between jihadi groups* – The fighting between al Qaeda and ISIL in Syria should be used to great advantage by the West. As seen with al Shabaab’s decline in Somalia, foreign fighters being killed by fellow jihadists in al Qaeda or ISIL will strongly dissuade new recruits.

3. *Illustrate the divide between ISIL's Iraqi dominated leadership & their foreign fighter recruits* – Foreign fighters have a minority role in ISIL's leadership despite providing the majority of the group's manpower. ISIL's leaders routinely use foreign fighters to settle personal scores rather than jihadist objectives. Bring these stories from jihad's frontlines to the home front of future foreign fighters.
4. *Strongly promote the criminal behavior of ISIL members* – ISIL calls for an Islamic State governed by Sharia law, but young foreign fighters and their leaders in Iraq and Syria routinely participate in unjust and criminal acts against the population. Reporting these injustices in vulnerable communities will dissuade foreign fighter recruitment.
5. *Abuses on local populations* – The harsh punishments and violence exacted on local populations for alleged offenses will be attractive to some recruits. But for most young men in vulnerable communities, such violence, particularly against women and children will undermine ISIL's narrative.
6. *Defector messages from returning foreign fighters* – As seen in Algeria in their fight with the GIA in the 1990s and utilized elsewhere, messages from defectors from ISIL's ranks detailing their disappointment in ISIL and the truth about the group's jihad will likely be the most effective tool in dissuading future recruits.
7. *Use targeted social media to produce and disseminate messages directly into vulnerable audiences* – ISIL dominates the online space, but the West has chosen to pursue CVE largely in the physical rather than virtual world. Targeted social media video content with defector videos, inside accounts of ISIL's brutality and criminality, details of Muslim-on-Muslim violence, foreign fighter follies, if done to the level of ISIL's production, will have a destructive effect on ISIL's recruitment efforts.

The West should perform these counter narrative campaigns specifically on those communities around the world that have now produced three generations of foreign fighters. Openly available foreign fighter data shows where these foreign fighters have come from and where the focus for countering ISIL must be levied.

In conclusion, the West must realize that even when ISIL declines, and it will, a failure to sustain the above outlined efforts to erode the jihadist narrative will only result in al Qaeda, ISIL or jihad's next incarnation reemerging again amidst the next Muslim conflict in a failed or failing state.