

The Strategic Logic of the “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda:

Conceptual and Empirical Foundations

The ICCT Policy Brief titled [‘A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda’](#) presented a two-tiered framework of interlocking guidelines for counter-terrorism strategic communications. This Research Paper methodically examines the strategic logic of the “linkage-based” approach by exploring its conceptual and empirical foundations. It begins by briefly outlining the strategy’s core principles and outlining the four bodies of research that inform its key components. First, the framework’s fundamentals of campaign planning – a suite of macro, mezzo and micro considerations and four strategic-policy principles – are based on a historical analysis of successful propaganda strategies during conflict. Second, empirical research regarding how humans tend to interpret information and make decisions, particularly the notions of automatic and deliberative thinking drawn from behavioural economics, informs the strategy’s campaign and message design guidelines. Third, Tier 1 efforts are designed to mimic the strengths and exploit the weaknesses of militant Islamist propaganda strategies; an approach based on analyses of primary sources. Fourth, Tier 2 efforts are based on empirical research regarding the impact of disruption and disengagement strategies upon violent extremist propaganda networks.

ICCT Research Paper
April 2017

Author:
Haroro J. Ingram

About the Author

Dr. Haroro J. Ingram

Dr Haroro J. Ingram is an ICCT Associate Fellow from the Australian National University's Department of International Relations. The Australian Research Council (ARC) under its *Discovery Early Career Researcher Award* funded the research featured in this publication. The author acknowledges that much of this research occurred while a visiting researcher with the Naval Postgraduate School's Defense Analysis Department (2014-2015) and as an ICCT visiting fellow (2016). He is also a lecturer with the National Security College (Australian National University). To contact the author, please send an e-mail to haroro.ingram@anu.edu.au.

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism. ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Introduction

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.... If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*.¹

The central purpose of the Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications (CTSC) Project has been to generate lessons from thematically diverse analyses to inform more effective counter-terrorism messaging efforts. ‘A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda’² offered practitioners – from those working in grassroots community-led non-government initiatives to governmental counter-terrorism efforts – a two-tiered framework of interlocking guidelines designed to cater to a broad spectrum of target audience motivations. It is a strategy that offers an alternative to ideology-centric approaches that is built on several bodies of research. At its heart are two mutually supportive lines of effort. The first tier is designed to undermine the appeal of violent extremist propaganda via messages that are designed to attack the linkages that violent extremists draw between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis. This effort is augmented by the deployment of messages that offer target audiences alternative narratives. The second tier fuses disruption and disengagement strategies to target those who already support violent extremist groups. This two-tiered approach is designed to address the full spectrum of target audience motivations. However, the scope of the original Policy Brief did not allow for a detailed consideration of the framework’s conceptual and empirical foundations.

This Research Paper is devoted to exploring the strategic logic of the “linkage-based” approach by methodically exploring four bodies of research upon which it is founded. First, the framework’s campaign planning guidelines – macro, mezzo and micro considerations and four strategic-policy principles – draw on lessons taken from a historical analysis of successful propaganda strategies during conflict. Second, empirical research from the field of behavioural economics regarding how humans tend to interpret information and make decisions, particularly the notions of automatic and deliberative thinking, help to inform the strategy’s campaign and message design guidelines. Third, the focus of Tier 1 efforts – i.e. using specially tailored messaging to dismantle the linkages militant Islamists³ forge between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis whilst simultaneously offering alternative narratives – mimics the strengths and exploits the weaknesses of militant Islamist propaganda strategies. It is an approach based on empirical analyses of primary source propaganda materials produced by militant Islamists such as so-called Islamic State (IS) and al Qaeda. Fourth, the focus of Tier 2 efforts – i.e. the deployment of disruption and disengagement strategies – is built on some of the latest research in the field.

¹ Sun Tzu, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World*, translated by Lionel Giles, 1910, p. 45, <http://www.idph.com.br/conteudos/ebooks/suntzu10.pdf>.

² H. J. Ingram, “A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Ingram-A-Linkage-Based-Approach-Nov2016.pdf>.

³ The term “militant Islamist” refers to Islamists who advocate/engage in violence as a tool for socio-political change. As shorthand, the term “violent extremist” (reference to the actor/s) and “violent extremism” (reference to the propaganda or agenda) is also used here.

While this paper primarily focuses on how the “linkage-based” approach has drawn on preceding CTSC Project publications, it is important to position this study within the broader field of research. Literature concerned with devising strategies to counter violent extremist propaganda is growing rapidly and this paper seeks to contribute to scholarship that fuses both top-down propaganda analysis and bottom-up target audience considerations to inform counterstrategies. For example, Braddock and Horgan’s analysis offers a useful snapshot of communication and psychology literature in their development of a methodology for analysing violent extremist propaganda and devising counternarratives.⁴ Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko and McCauley similarly focus on counternarrative development but instead explore how such narratives should be tailored for specific audiences that may be susceptible to certain “mechanisms of radicalization”.⁵ In contrast, Pelletier, Lundmark, Gardner, Ligon and Kilinc cite social movement theory and examine the speeches of IS leaders to devise counternarratives based on confronting radical interpretations of Islamic law and contextual catalysts of support.⁶ Such studies are significant because they highlight the importance of bringing together top-down and bottom-up factors in strategic communications analysis. Also noteworthy are publications by think tanks and other NGOs which are playing an increasingly prominent role in shaping discourse in this field, especially related to the challenges associated with confronting violent extremist propaganda online.⁷ As is evidenced throughout this paper, the research field is growing and diversifying rapidly. This study merely seeks to contribute to that discourse in some small way.

The “Linkage-Based” Approach

No single outside influence can make a man do a thing which is at war with his training. The most it can do is to start his mind on a new track and open it to the reception of new influences....

Mark Twain, *What is Man?*⁸

It is important to begin this study by briefly outlining the key principles of the “linkage-based” approach.⁹ As illustrated in Figure 1, the strategy provides a framework of interlocking guidelines that synchronise campaign planning with message design. At the campaign planning level, the “linkage-based” approach is informed by a suite of overarching fundamentals that permeate throughout the strategies’ two tiers or lines of effort. Tier 1 primarily targets those who have yet to adopt the militant Islamist’s

.....
⁴ K. Braddock and J. Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (2016), pp. 381-414.

⁵ C. Leuprecht et al., “Winning the Battle but Losing the War: Narrative and Counter-Narrative Strategy”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009), pp. 25-35; C. Leuprecht et al., “Containing the Narrative: Strategy and Tactics in Countering the Storyline of Global Jihad”, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 5, no. 1 (2010), pp. 42-57.

⁶ I. Pelletier et al., “Why ISIS’s Message Resonates: Leveraging Islam, Socio-political Catalysts, and Adaptive Messaging”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no. 10 (2016), pp. 871-899.

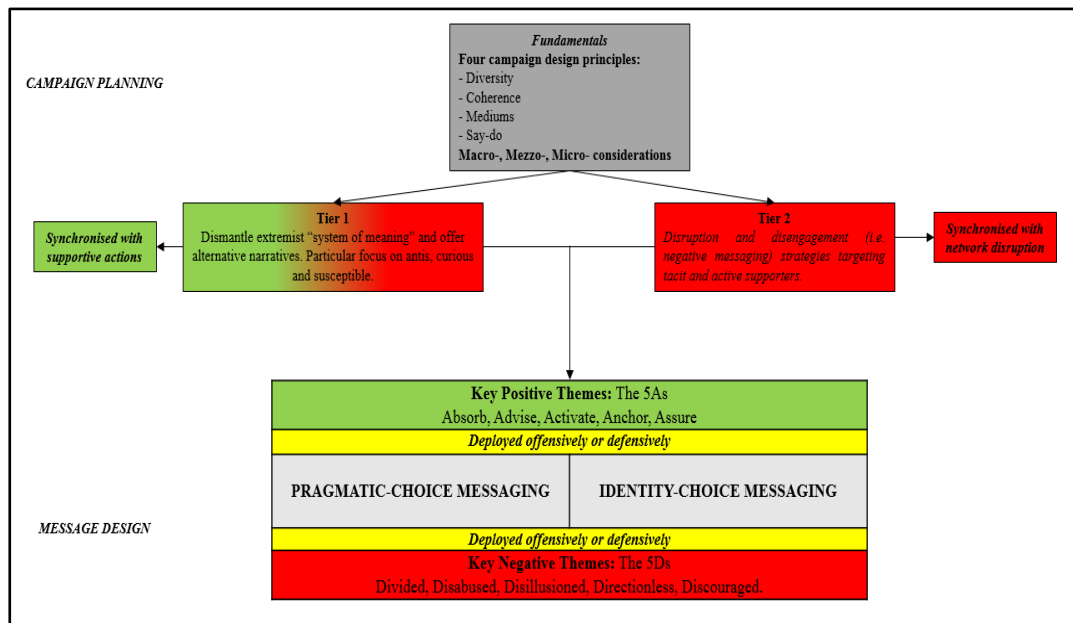
⁷ For example, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), “EU Strategic Communications With a View to Countering Propaganda”, *Directorate-General for External Policies* (2016); Radicalisation Awareness Network, “Workshop on Jihadist propaganda and how to Respond (online)”, *RAN Centre of Excellence* (2016); K. Ferguson, “Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communication Strategies”, 1 March 2016, <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies.pdf>.

⁸ M. Twain, *What is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings*, edited by P. Baender (Berkeley: University of California Press) p. 173.

⁹ H. J. Ingram, “A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Ingram-A-Linkage-Based-Approach-Nov2016.pdf>.

“system of meaning” by deploying a variety messages designed to discredit that “system of meaning” and offer alternative narratives.¹⁰ Tier 2 uses disengagement and disruption strategies targeting those who are already adherents to the violent extremist’s “system of meaning”.¹¹ The base of Figure 1 features a message design matrix which provides practitioners with interlinked message categories (i.e. pragmatic- and identity-choice messaging that may be deployed offensively or defensively) and message themes (i.e. the 5As of *positive messaging* and the 5Ds of *negative messaging*).

Figure 1: The “Linkage-Based” Approach



The message design guidelines were placed into a matrix to help facilitate a more coherent and persuasively focused approach to message development (see Table 1). For instance, the framework encourages practitioners to consider whether a particular message is designed to coax their audience into pragmatic-choice (based on a “rational” cost-benefit consideration of options) and/or identity-choice (based on identity considerations) decision-making processes. It also demands that consideration be given to whether the message will be deployed offensively (i.e. to control the narrative and/or elicit a response from one’s enemy) or defensively (i.e. to counter an adversary’s messaging). The persuasiveness of that message can be further boosted by tailoring it to have a *negative* or *positive* focus. For example, *negative messaging* attacks the linkages violent extremists attach between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis by emphasising the harm of its audiences making certain choices and thus seeks to undermine the appeal of violent extremists (i.e. proscribed terrorist groups and their supporters). On the other hand, *positive messaging* is geared towards emphasising the benefits of certain choices and boosting the appeal of one’s self and/or allies by linking their actions to solutions. Moreover, this matrix helps to direct the strategic purpose and persuasive intent of any given message. In doing so, it positions messages deployed in a strategic communications campaign into categories that then allow for metric collection and assessments of the comparative efficacy of different message

¹⁰ Tier 1 is largely based on H.J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 9 (2016).

¹¹ Tier 2 is largely based on J.M. Berger, “Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016).

types, and thus improve campaign and message design decision-making – processes that are impossible with an ad hoc approach to message development.¹²

Table 1: Messaging Categories, Sub-Categories and Themes

Key Positive Themes: The 5As Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, Assure	
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
PRAGMATIC-CHOICE MESSAGING	IDENTITY-CHOICE MESSAGING
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
Key Negative Themes: The 5Ds Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, Discouraged.	

The “linkage-based” approach is designed with the following considerations in mind:

- Synchronising campaign planning (i.e. the overarching strategic purpose and synchronicity of the strategic communications effort) and message design (i.e. the purpose and details of each communique) is essential for ensuring that the messages released by a strategic communications campaign are perceived to be coherent by target audiences. A theme-centric messaging strategy without overarching campaign guidance risks being reactive (i.e. constantly responding to contextual factors and adversary messaging), slow and ad hoc.
- A spectrum of target audience motivations must be taken into account for a counter-terrorism strategic communications campaign to be effective. As illustrated by Figure 2, the two tiers of the “linkage-based” approach caters to a spectrum of target audiences: antis,¹³ curious,¹⁴ engaged,¹⁵ tacit supporters¹⁶ and active supporters.¹⁷ Basing targeting on motivational rather than ideological criteria is designed to facilitate a more focused approach to campaign and message design.

Figure 2: Target Audience Spectrum and Two-Tier Targeting

¹² For more on this aspect of the framework, see H.J. Ingram, “A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners”, pp. 14-19.

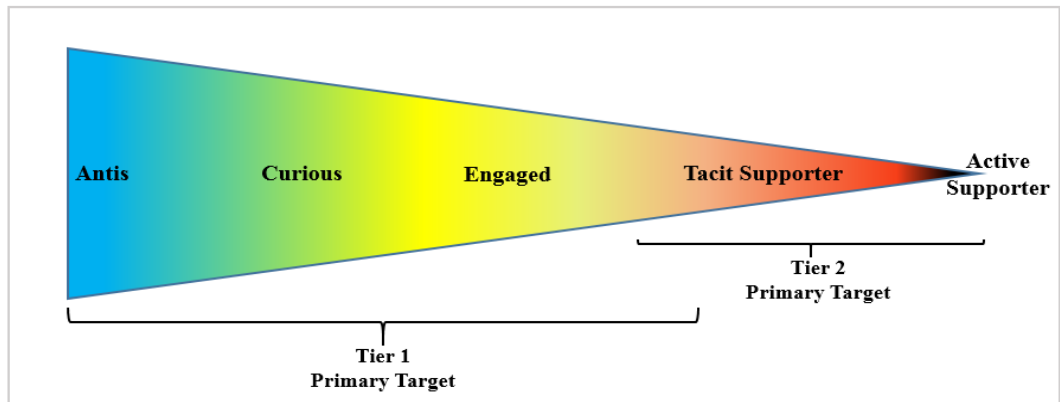
¹³ Those against the targeted violent extremist groups.

¹⁴ Those consuming violent extremist propaganda.

¹⁵ Those who adhere to the violent extremist group’s “system of meaning” and/or engage with violent extremist networks.

¹⁶ Those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks.

¹⁷ Those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.



- The “linkage-based” approach offers an alternative to ideology-centric strategies that rely on essentially counter-proselytisation to undermine the appeal of militant Islamist propaganda. Rather than problematically subjective notions of “extremism”, this strategy recommends targeting the propaganda produced by proscribed terrorist organisations and their supporters. This is particularly important in Western nations where secular governments dictating what is a “legitimate” (indeed legal) doctrinal interpretation of religious texts and limiting freedoms of speech for some citizens over others using an opaque definition of “extremism” are likely to fuel the conditions within which violent extremism flourishes.
- To maximise the impact of a message or an overall campaign requires creativity and a deep understanding of one’s adversaries and shared target audiences that only on the ground practitioners can offer. It is for this reason that the “linkage-based” approach is designed to provide practitioners with broad and adaptable guidelines *within which* creativity and nuances can be tailored. Moreover, providing practitioners with a framework of interlocking elements facilitates metric collection across message categories and themes to help improve decision-making.

The purpose of the remainder of this paper is to delve into the research underpinning the four central elements of the “linkage-based” approach by working methodically through the framework from its fundamentals of campaign planning to the message design matrix.

Fundamentals: Campaign Planning

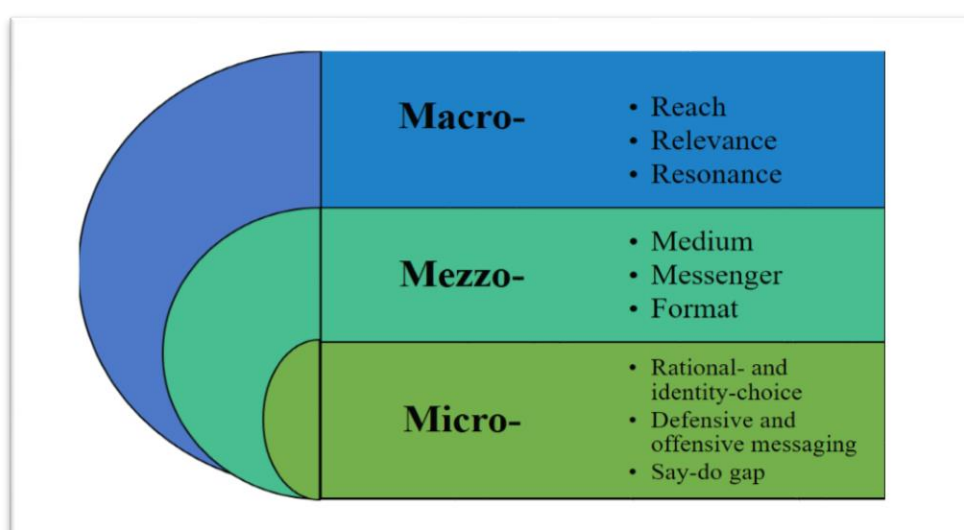
The “linkage-based” approach applies two sets of fundamentals for effective strategic communications: a suite of macro-, mezzo- and micro-level considerations and four strategic-policy/campaign design principles. ‘A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict’¹⁸ covered a vast historical, conceptual and thematic breadth with three factors emerging as crucial to the evolution of propaganda during conflict: (i.) developments in communication technologies, (ii.) advancements in military technology and strategy, and (iii.) the shifting relationship between the political elite and the populace.¹⁹ Consequently, recurring themes and trends emerged from that millennia-long history offering lessons for contemporary strategic communications efforts against violent

¹⁸ H.J. Ingram, “A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016).

¹⁹ For other historical analyses see P. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); D. Welch, *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

extremists. 'Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications'²⁰ placed these findings into a framework of micro-, mezzo- and macro-level considerations which 'Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism'²¹ also adopted. These interconnected considerations were identified as crucial for an effective strategic communications campaign. As graphically represented in Figure 3, they represent a basic checklist for campaign and message design and are central to this framework.

Figure 3: Macro-, Mezzo- and Micro- Strategic Communications Considerations



Macro-Level Considerations

In the broadest sense, the 3Rs are essential for maximising the impact of a messaging strategy:

- *Reach*: the ability of a message to access target audiences.
- *Relevance*: the timeliness of the message and its significance to target audiences within the context of immediate situational factors.
- *Resonance*: the message's influence on audience perceptions typically generated by leveraging deeper identity and socio-historical factors.

Identifying the spectrum of audiences that will consume the message – whether directly due to specific targeting or indirectly – is essential to maximising the potential of a

²⁰ H.J. Ingram and A. Reed, "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 4 (2016).

²¹ J.M. Berger, "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016).

message or overall campaign to reach its audience and be deemed relevant and resonate with them. Harnessed effectively, the 3Rs can have a compounding effect. For example, a message that is deemed relevant and resonates is more likely to be disseminated through social networks (whether online or offline) thus further boosting its reach.

Mezzo-Level Considerations

The reach, relevance and resonance of one's messaging effort can be enhanced further by these considerations:

- *Medium:* The medium of communication used to disseminate a message – whether social media, text message or billboard – must be selected to maximise its reach within the target audience. While a particular message may be better suited to a certain medium, a campaign should use a range of mediums in order to both optimise reach and compensate for the limitations of any single medium. Beyond its instrumental effects, a medium may also enhance the resonance and relevance of a message and its messenger via its symbolic qualities. For example, the instrumental benefits of online social media platforms – i.e. faster and wider dissemination of messaging across greater distances – are boosted further by the fact that individuals will often receive messages via networks of like-minded peers which can reinforce that message's perceived resonance and relevance.
- *Messenger:* The first issue when choosing a messenger is whether the message will be attributed (i.e. author truthfully identified) or unattributed (i.e. author unidentified or false). The credibility of the messenger in the eyes of the target audience may decisively impact the perceived relevance and resonance of that message and thus its impact.²² A messenger needs to be selected on the basis of their perceived credibility to deliver a particular message in the eyes of the intended target audience. The influence of both the message and the messenger may be negatively impacted if the messenger is deemed credible for reasons unrelated to the underlying persuasive intent of a message.
- *Format:* How a message is presented to an audience – e.g. spoken or written word, still or moving images – can significantly influence its impact on an audience. Indeed, the fusion of instrumental and symbolic factors in medium selection are also applicable to format selection. For instance, empirical research has shown that higher production media may be deemed more credible than lower production media for certain messages²³ and such empirical evidence should be factored into format selection decisions.

Micro-Level Considerations

Every message deployed as part of a counter-terrorism strategic communications campaign should be designed to achieve a specific effect on the target audience. That is, every message must be deployed with persuasive intent. The following

.....
²² The issue of credibility was examined in H.J. Ingram, "Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change", pp. 19-28.

²³ For more see R. Cummins and T. Chamber, "How production Value Impacts Perceived Technical Quality, Credibility, and Economic Value of Video News", *J&MC Quarterly* 88 no. 4 (2011), pp. 737-752; Lee, H et al., "Assessment of Motion Media on Believability and Credibility: An Exploratory Study". *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010), pp. 310-312.

considerations are central to the message design guidelines in the "linkage-based" approach:

- *Rational- and identity-choice messaging:* Information disseminated to target audiences assuming that the "facts will speak for themselves" is deeply flawed because it erroneously assumes a universal interpretation of those "facts". Instead, messaging should be designed to appeal to a target audience's pragmatic-choice (based on a rational cost-benefit consideration of options) and/or identity-choice (based on consideration of one's identity) decision-making processes. Of course, rational- and identity-choice messaging may be deployed *positively* or *negatively*. For instance, a *positive* identity-choice message could promote a variety of identities – from sportsperson to academic or family member – within a certain community with reference to inspiring examples as a means to counter the "black and white" bipolar worldview of violent extremists. Alternatively, a *negative* rational-choice message may highlight the harsh consequences of engaging in certain behaviours (e.g. breaking counter-terrorism laws). Across an entire campaign, a range of rational-choice and identity-choice messages should be deployed with three basic aims:
 - (i.) to appeal to the broadest spectrum of motivational drivers in target audiences;
 - (ii.) provide decision-makers with metrics for which type of messaging is most effective to shape future messaging efforts; and,
 - (iii.) trigger and align identity- and rational-choice decision-making processes in target audiences as a means to compound the influence of one's campaign.

As will be explored soon, militant Islamist propaganda strategies typically deploy a diversity of messaging seemingly driven by this strategic logic. This underscores the importance of counter-terrorism strategic communications similarly deploying a range of messaging as a means to comprehensively "compete" in the modern information theatre.

- *Defensive and offensive messaging:* While counter-narratives against violent extremist propaganda are essential, it is important to recognise that such messaging is inherently defensive. That is, it is messaging designed and deployed in response to an adversary's messaging. Historically, successful propaganda efforts have tended to prioritise offensive messaging – i.e. messaging designed to control the narrative competition and provoke defensive counter-messages from adversaries – as a mechanism to shift the balance of the "information battle". Indeed, the ratio of offensive to defensive messaging deployed, as well as the amount of defensive messaging one side can provoke from the other, may be useful metrics for gauging success. For example, in *Persuade or Perish*, Wallace Carroll, the former Deputy Director of the Office of War Information, pointed to a shift from defensive to offensive messaging in the later stages of World War II as being crucial to changing the fortunes of the Allied 'information war' against the Nazis.²⁴
- *Say-do gap:* One of the oldest messaging strategies is to highlight the disparity between the words and actions of one's enemy. This form of *negative* messaging has often been partnered by *positive* messaging that promotes how one's own actions and words are complementary. This strategy can be tremendously

²⁴ W. Carroll, *Persuade or Perish* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1948).

powerful. For one, it is extremely versatile and can be used offensively or defensively, positively or negatively, with identity- or rational-choice messaging. It also goes to the heart of concerns about legitimacy and credibility; crucial factors in any politico-military struggle. It is a strategy that has been central to messaging efforts throughout history. For example, strategic communications played a key role in the Reagan administration's transition to a more aggressive posture against the Soviets.²⁵ Reagan understood that highlighting the Soviet say-do gap and diminishing the West's would be crucial to maximising the credibility of American words and actions. It is a lesson seemingly lost during the Wars on Terror when a trumped up case for war in Iraq, extraordinary renditions and torture in Abu Ghraib were readily leveraged by militant Islamists as evidence of the chasm between the West's words and actions.

Four Campaign Principles

With these macro-, mezzo- and micro-level considerations in mind, the following four principles emerged as crucial for optimising a strategic communications campaign: diversity, coherence, mediums and say-do.

1. Produce a diversity of messaging that leverages rational- and identity-choice appeals which are deployed both defensively and offensively (with an emphasis on the latter).
2. All messages should be cohered by core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative.
3. Use a variety of mediums for communication to maximise the message's reach, timeliness and targeting.
4. To maximise the intended effects of strategic communications efforts and minimise inadvertent second and third order effects, messaging should be synchronised with strategic-policy/politico-military efforts and seek to nullify the effects of the adversary's activities.

While the fundamentals of an effective strategic communications strategy are essential, it is also important to take into consideration important human psychology factors to maximise the efficacy of campaign and message designs.

Automatic and Deliberative Thinking

"Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda"²⁶ explored how violent extremists use strategies of meaning, credibility and behavioural change to shape the perceptions, polarise the support and inspire followers to actively support their cause (e.g. engage in terrorism). It drew upon a variety of disciplinary approaches –

²⁵ National Security Decision Directive 75. "U.S. Relations with the USSR" (17 January 1983), <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-75.pdf>.

²⁶ H.J. Ingram, "Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), pp. 5-19.

particularly from the social and behavioural sciences – to understand the appeal of extremist propaganda strategies. The Nobel Prize winning research of Daniel Kahneman provided the foundation for this research because of its insights into how humans tend to interpret information and make decisions.²⁷ For Kahneman, two systems of thinking – “System 1” (also known as “Automatic” or “Fast” thinking) and “System 2” (also known as “Deliberative” or “Slow” Thinking – are in operation in the mind (see Table 2). Kahneman argues that “System 1 operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control”²⁸ while “System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.”²⁹ Despite System 1 and 2 continually operating and interacting, it is System 1 that dominates with System 2 being triggered when deeper thinking is required. This reflects how each system operates: System 1 simplifies with narrow “frames”, is efficient, reflexive and fast while System 2 is more effortful, reflective and complex. As Kahnemann argues, “[w]hen System 1 runs into difficulty, it calls on System 2 to support more detailed and specific processing that may solve the problem of the moment. System 2 is mobilised when a question arises for which System 1 does not offer an answer.”³⁰

Table 2: Automatic and Deliberative Systems of Thinking

Automatic (System 1)	Deliberative (System 2)
Considers what automatically comes to mind (<i>narrow frame</i>)	Considers a broad set of relevant factors (<i>wide frame</i>)
Effortless	Effortful
Associative	Based on reasoning
Intuitive	Reflective

Source: *World Development Report 2015*³¹

Two other factors have a significant impact on how System 1 and 2 thinking operates. The first are *mental models*. Put simply, mental models – like identity (e.g. gender, religion, race) and ideology (e.g. worldviews, causal narratives) – provide the “lenses” through which the world is perceived and understood.³² Humans tend to be characterised by a variety of mental models that are activated (i.e. used to interpret information and guide behaviour) in certain contexts. It follows that social factors, like social networks and social norms, also have a crucial impact on how humans interpret

²⁷ For more see D. Kahneman, “Maps of Bounded Rationality: Psychology for Behavioural Economics”, *The American Economic Review* 93, no. 5 (2003), pp. 1449-1474.

²⁸ D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 20.

²⁹ D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 21.

³⁰ D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 24.

³¹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2015), p. 6.

³² As Norman argues, “In interacting with the environment, with others, and with the artifacts of technology, people form internal, mental models of themselves and of the things with which they are interacting. These models provide predictive and explanatory power for understanding the interaction” in D. Norman, “Some Observations on Mental Models”, in D. Gentner and A. Stevens, eds., *Mental Models* (New York: Psychology Press, 1983), p. 7. For more on mental models see M. Baldwin, “Relational Schemas and the Processing of Social Information”, *Psychological Bulletin* 112, no. 3 (1992), pp. 461-484; A. Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies”, *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986), pp. 273-286; P. DiMaggio, “Culture and Cognition”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 23, no. 1 (1997), pp. 263-287.

information, make decisions and behave. Importantly, the social context within which an interaction occurs influences which mental models will dominate and therefore how information will be interpreted.³³

In summary, this body of research asserts that humans tend to think (i.) automatically, (ii.) socially, and (iii.) via mental models.³⁴ As the *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* asserts:

Individuals are not calculating automatons. Rather, people are malleable and emotional actors whose decision making is influenced by contextual cues, local social networks and social norms, and shared mental models. All of these play a role in determining what individuals perceive as desirable, possible, or even ‘thinkable’ for their lives.³⁵

Taking into account the roles of System 1 and 2 thinking and the impact of mental models and social factors on these processes is crucial for effective campaign and message design. So too, however, is understanding the glitches that emerge as cognitive biases when, for instance, System 2 is not triggered to mediate System 1. As Kahneman warns, “you generally believe impressions and act on your desires, and that is fine – usually.”³⁶ Certain contexts can render humans more prone to these cognitive biases. For example, certain social contexts (e.g. family, church, work) prime individuals to use certain mental models over others (e.g. gender identity, religious identity, occupation identity). Also, stress tends to render humans more reliant on System 1 thinking and less able to trigger System 2 thinking.³⁷

The interaction of System 1 and 2 thinking, the role of stress as an inhibitor of triggering System 2 thinking, and the role of mental models and social factors in these dynamics is essential for effective campaign and message design. Indeed, this body of research has significantly influenced the “linkage based” approach in five crucial ways:

First, and as highlighted earlier, deploying messages on the basis that “the facts will speak for themselves” is deeply flawed because it ignores empirical research regarding the influence of automatic thinking, cognitive biases and broader contextual factors that shape audience perceptions. It is for this reason that the “linkage-based” approach stresses that *all* messages *must* be deployed with a persuasive intent. Indeed, the entire strategy is calibrated towards facilitating that purpose. Simple messaging that leverages automatic (System 1) thinking, uses basic framing to trigger appropriate mental models and takes into account social factors should dominate a strategic communications campaign. More complex System 2 oriented messaging is also important but needs to be carefully timed based on contextual factors and synchronised with the broader messaging campaign. This leads to the next point.

Second, the deployment of messaging that requires its target audiences to engage in deliberative thinking for impact must be carefully planned. For example, to maximise the potential impact of System 2 oriented messaging may require a series of System 1 oriented messaging that is designed to “prime” the audience. After all, System 2

³³ For example, within a family context “gender” and “family” (e.g. mother or father) mental models may take primacy.

³⁴ World Bank, *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2015).

³⁵ World Bank, *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2015), p. 6.

³⁶ D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 24.

³⁷ For example, see A. Mani et al., “Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function”, *Science* 341, no. 6149 (2013), pp. 976-980.

thinking needs to be triggered and so “priming” the audience with preparatory System 1 “gateway” messaging prior to delivering the System 2 oriented message may assist with its impact. To prolong that impact, subsequent “reinforcing” messaging could use System 1 oriented messaging to variously highlight certain aspects of the preceding messages. Of course, contextual factors are also an important consideration for the effective deployment of System 2 oriented messaging. For instance, a target audience that is experiencing acute stress will find it harder to trigger the processes necessary to effectively interpret System 2 oriented messaging. During times of crisis, it may not only be futile but counterproductive to disseminate System 2 oriented messaging and such messaging should ideally be delayed. Alternatively, carefully bundling System 1 oriented messaging may be an effective short-term strategy during crisis that then can act as a “gateway” for later, more System 2 oriented, messaging.

Third, ideologies (which are essentially explanatory narratives typically tied to identity constructs) play an essential role in how individuals and groups interpret the world because they act as mental models (lenses through which the world is understood). However, the validity and resonance of any identity or ideology as a mental model will depend on broader strategic and psychosocial factors. The legitimacy of how an ideology is interpreted is almost inevitably subjective and contested because they are abstract constructs that are produced and reproduced in a socio-historical context. It follows that militant Islamist propaganda is both a product of and response to such factors.

Fourth, rather than focusing on ideology or some opaque notion of extremism to identify target audiences, the “linkage-based” approach uses targeting based on an audience’s motivational drivers (see Table 3).

Table 3: Audience Motivational Spectrum

Target Audience	Aims
Antis: those against the violent extremist groups.	<p>Limit inadvertently undermining their counter-extremism efforts.</p> <p>Provide support, particularly via supply of raw materials (e.g. footage, technical support).</p> <p>Effective messaging may be supported or disseminated by antis.</p>
Curious: those consuming violent extremist propaganda.	Undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of <i>negative</i> and <i>positive messaging</i> to address varied audience motivations.
Engaged: those who adhere to the violent extremist group’s “system of meaning” and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks.	<p>Undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of <i>negative</i> and <i>positive messaging</i> to address varied audience motivations. Disengagement narrative strategies (i.e. <i>negative messaging</i>) should increasingly be prioritised.</p> <p>Disrupt violent extremist networks.</p>

<i>Tacit supporters:</i> those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks.	Focus on <i>negative messaging</i> as a disengagement strategy from violent extremist networks. Disrupt violent extremist networks.
<i>Active supporters:</i> those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.	<i>Negative messaging</i> as a means to drive disengagement. Aggressive targeted disruption of violent extremist networks.

Finally, an in-depth analysis of primary sources indicates that militant Islamist propaganda seems to be calibrated – whether strategically or inadvertently – to manipulate automatic thinking, increase perceptions of crisis (i.e. stress), leverage powerful mental models and trigger cognitive biases in its audiences.³⁸ Furthermore, militant Islamist propaganda tends to be dominated by System 1 oriented messages and it is within this context that System 2 oriented messages (e.g. *fatwas*) are deployed. The potency of militant Islamist propaganda is generated by the cumulative effect of multiple strategies and levers of meaning, credibility and behavioural change that are designed to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of followers. The central mechanism for achieving these aims is via the violent extremist’s “competitive system of meaning”: a network of mental models that provides the lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world. It follows that using messaging to dismantle the violent extremist’s “systems of meaning” will be crucial to countering their propaganda.

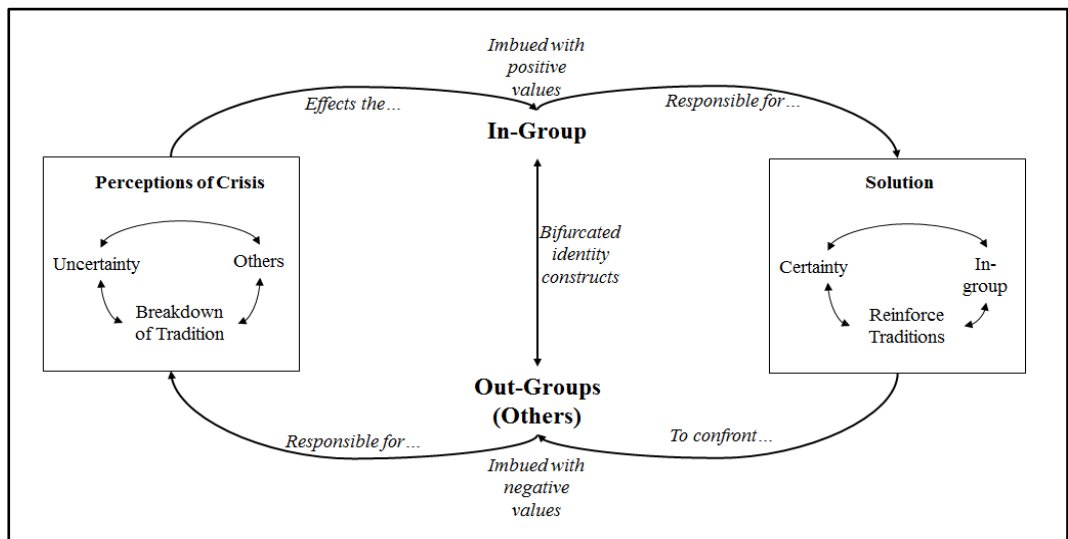
Trends in Militant Islamist Propaganda: Dismantling the Violent Extremist’s “System of Meaning”

One of the central aims of militant Islamist propaganda is to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of followers as a means to motivate (i.e. radicalise) them to actively support the violent extremist’s agenda (e.g. engage in terrorism). The “competitive system of meaning” that is central to violent extremist propaganda is graphically illustrated in Figure 3. At the heart of this system of meaning is the central pitch to target audiences at the heart of militant Islamist propaganda: “we are the champions and protectors of (appropriately aligned) Sunni Muslims (the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow in-group identity is an enemy (i.e. out-group identities or Others) who are responsible for the *ummah’s* (Muslim community’s) crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the militant Islamist politico-military agenda)”. By presenting the in-group as pure and benevolent and the out-group as filthy and evil, militant Islamist propagandists are seeking to leverage the powerful forces of identity psychology. By linking these dichotomous identity constructs to solutions and perceptions of crisis respectively, their messaging ties otherwise abstract notions of identity and ideology to “real world” psychosocial dynamics and strategic factors.

³⁸ For full analysis see H.J. Ingram, “Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), pp. 5-19.

Indeed, the notion of a "system of meaning" is a useful way to understand why ideology alone does not explain the strategic logic, let alone the appeal, of militant Islamist propaganda. Ultimately, Figure 3 illustrates that the violent extremist's "system of meaning" is actually a network of mental models that are interrelated in such a way to create mutually reinforcing cycles. Through this lens it follows that the more violent extremists can use narrative and imagery to increase their audience's perceptions of crisis and tie that to enemies, the more susceptible individuals will be to considering the violent extremists as champions of the in-group and sources of solutions (and vice versa).

Figure 3: Violent Extremist's "Competitive System of Meaning"



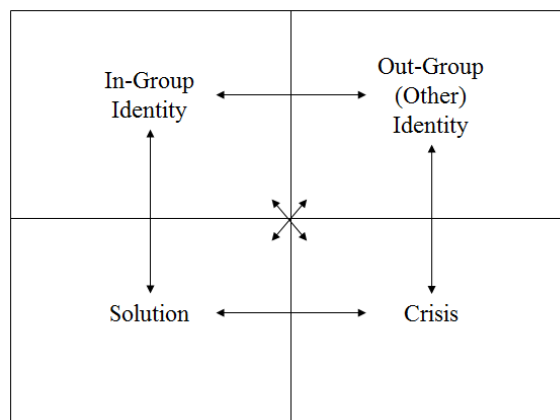
Many scholars have highlighted the variety of messaging themes and strategies deployed by militant Islamists like IS.³⁹ Deploying a range of messaging allows militant Islamists to keep audiences engaged with new content while appealing to a broad spectrum of potential supporters. From a psychosocial perspective, militant Islamists produce a diversity of content as a means to champion and reinforce their system of meaning. Content analyses of militant Islamist propaganda materials identified three types of narratives – value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing – that are designed to

³⁹ C. Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 11 (2016); C. Winter, "Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare", *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* (2016); A. Zelin, "Picture or it Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015); C. Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy", *Quilliam* (2015); A. Fernandez, "Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS propaganda Networks", *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings* (October 2015).

strengthen certain linkages between in-group, out-group, solution and crisis constructs as well as fuel the cyclically reinforcing dynamics illustrated in Figure 3. These different narratives and how they are deployed have played a central role in shaping the “linkage-based” approach.

Figure 4 graphically illustrates the value-, dichotomy- and crisis-reinforcing narratives often underpinning militant Islamist propaganda. Represented by vertical arrows in Figure 4, value-reinforcing narratives are designed to link the in-group identity with solutions and the out-group identity with crises. These types of narratives are deployed, as the name suggests, to reinforce the positive and empowering attributes of the in-group and the negative and derisive traits of the out-group. These types of narratives may be particularly significant for violent groups because, as Smith argues, “groups that view themselves as morally superior to others may be more likely to engage in violence.”⁴⁰ Dichotomy-reinforcing narratives, represented by horizontal arrows in Figure 4, seek to highlight the dualities between the in- and out-group identities and solutions and crisis. There are few better examples of this narrative type than this excerpt from Baghdadi’s Mosul address: “O ummah of Islam, indeed the world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present...”⁴¹ Thirdly, crisis-reinforcing narratives tie members of the in-group with crises as a means to condemn them as traitors. This type of messaging is indicative of a militant Islamist’s *takfirist* leanings.

Figure 4: The Value-, Dichotomy- and Crisis-Reinforcing Interplay



It is useful to consider how militant Islamist groups have not only deployed these different types of narratives but prioritised them in their messaging. What follows are the findings of content analyses of the Taliban in Khurasan’s *Azan*,⁴² Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s *Inspire* and IS’s *Dabiq* magazines.⁴³ Table 4 contains the breakdown of narrative categorisation by primary focus for *Azan* (issues 1-5). It shows that three-quarters of its contents are value-reinforcing with almost half of *Azan*’s contents linking

⁴⁰ A. Smith, “From Words to Actions”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004), p. 431.

⁴¹ A. Al-Baghdadi, “A message to the mujahidin”, June 2014, p. 4.

⁴² H. Ingram, “An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan’s *Azan* (issues 1-5)”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015), pp. 560-579, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1022093>.

⁴³ H. Ingram, “An Analysis of *Inspire* & *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 6 (2017), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551>; H. Ingram, “An analysis of Islamic State’s *Dabiq* Magazine”, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2016), pp. 458-477, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10361146.2016.1174188>.

the in-group to solutions (47.9%). The next most prevalent primary focus was Other/crisis (27.3%).

Table 4: Breakdown of Categorisations by Primary Focus, *Azan* Issues 1-5⁴⁴

<i>Azan</i> Magazine, Issues 1-5			
Categorisation	Number (%)	Primary Focus	Number (%)
Value-reinforcing	91 (75.2%)	In-group/Solution	58 (47.9%)
		Other/Perceptions of Crisis	33 (27.3%)
Dichotomy-reinforcing	19 (15.7%)	In-Group/Other	10 (8.3%)
		Solution/Perceptions of Crisis	9 (7.4%)
Crisis-reinforcing	7 (5.8%)	In-group/Perceptions of Crisis	7 (5.8%)
Other	4 (3.3%)	Combination	3 (2.5%)
		Operational	1 (0.8%)

Table 5 contains analyses of fourteen issues of *Inspire* magazine. Again, it is value-reinforcing (44.61%) and in-group/solution (29.66%) narratives that dominate *Inspire*'s contents. The next common type of content was operational advice (18.38%) that typically features in its "Open Source Jihad" section.

Table 5: Breakdown of Categorisations by Primary Focus, *Inspire* Issues 1-14⁴⁵

<i>Inspire</i> Magazine, Issues 1-14			
Categorisation	Number (%)	Primary Focus	Number (%)
Value-reinforcing	182 (44.61%)	In-group/Solution	121 (29.66%)
		Other/Perceptions of Crisis	61 (14.95%)
Dichotomy-reinforcing	124 (30.39%)	In-Group/Other	67 (16.42%)
		Solution/Perceptions of Crisis	57 (13.97%)
Crisis-reinforcing	12 (2.94%)	In-group/Perceptions of Crisis	12 (2.94%)
Other	90 (22.06%)	Combination	15 (3.68%)
		Operational	75 (18.38%)

With reference to Table 6, dichotomy-reinforcing narratives constituted almost half (49.79%) of *Dabiq*'s contents for its first thirteen issues with solution/crisis messages (32.77%) dominating. In-group/solution messaging (27.23%) was the next most common primary focus.

Table 6: Breakdown of Categorisations by Primary Focus, *Dabiq* Issues 1-13⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Source of table H. Ingram, "An Analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's *Azan* (issues 1-5)", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015), p. 569.

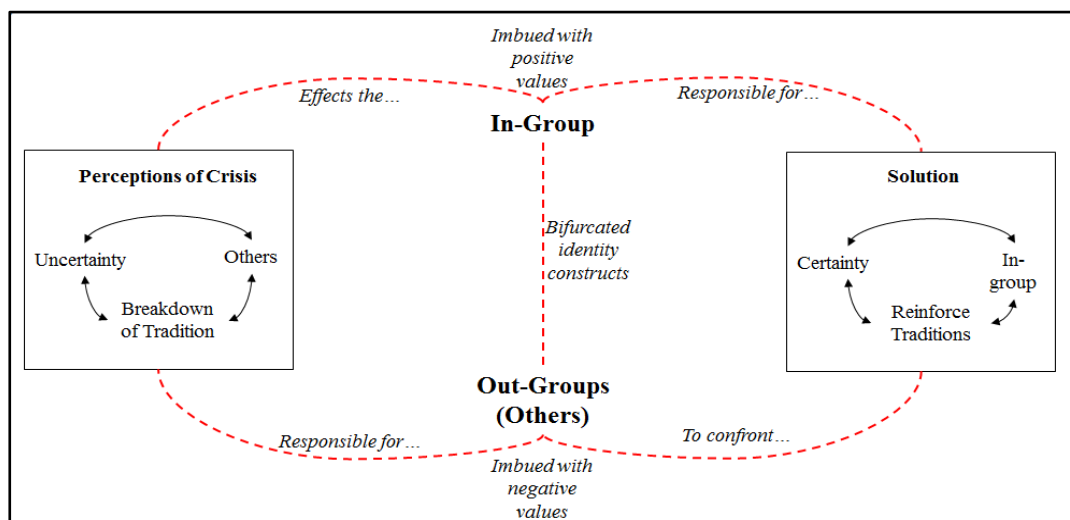
⁴⁵ Source of table H. Ingram, "An Analysis of *Inspire* & *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 6 (2017), p. 7.

⁴⁶ Source of table H. Ingram, "An Analysis of *Inspire* & *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 6 (2017), p. 8.

<i>Dabiq Magazine, Issues 1-13</i>			
Categorisation	Number (%)	Primary Focus	Number (%)
Value-reinforcing	91 (38.72%)	In-group/Solution	64 (27.23%)
		Other/Perceptions of Crisis	27 (11.49%)
Dichotomy-reinforcing	117 (49.79%)	In-Group/Other	40 (17.02%)
		Solution/Perceptions of Crisis	77 (32.77%)
Crisis-reinforcing	23 (9.79%)	In-group/Perceptions of Crisis	23 (9.79%)
Other	4 (1.70%)	Combination	4 (1.70%)
		Operational	-

The purpose of presenting these findings is to show how militant Islamist propaganda deploys a diverse array of messaging to provide an array of hooks to attract audiences characterised by varied motivations. Moreover, this diversity not only helps to reinforce certain aspects of their system of meaning but works to trigger and fuel propaganda's cyclically reinforcing forces. It should be clear that attacking the violent extremist's "system of meaning" is to focus on the *schwerpunkt* of the militant Islamist propaganda effort. The "linkage-based" approach seeks to dismantle the militant Islamist's "system of meaning" using a variety of messaging targeting the linkages violent extremist's forge between themselves and solution and their enemies and crises as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Dismantling the Violent Extremist "System of Meaning"



While the interconnectedness of militant Islamist messaging is arguably one of its key strategic strengths, the "linkage-based" approach is designed to exploit it. After all, the more that these crucial linkages can be discredited the more susceptible other linkages become to being discredited. Overall, the "linkage-based" approach mimics the strengths and exploits the weaknesses of militant Islamist propaganda. As briefly described earlier and represented again in Table 7, the strategy's message design matrix is calibrated to ensure campaign planning aligns with messaging categories and themes to attack these links. It is important to consider how the 5As of *positive messaging* and the 5Ds of *negative messaging* reflect this strategic logic.

Table 7: Messaging Categories, Sub-Categories and Themes

Key Positive Themes: The 5As Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, Assure	
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
PRAGMATIC-CHOICE MESSAGING	IDENTITY-CHOICE MESSAGING
<i>Deployed offensively or defensively</i>	
Key Negative Themes: The 5Ds Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, Discouraged.	

The 5As of Positive Messaging

Positive messaging is designed to offer alternative narratives to those espoused by violent extremists. Used primarily in the Tier 1 line of effort, this type of messaging explicitly focuses on convincing its audiences of the benefits of certain choices and boosting the appeal of one's self and/or allies by linking their actions to solutions. However, it is also an additional (if subtler and indirect) means to attack the ties militant Islamist propaganda draws between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis. Described in Table 8, the 5As are absorb, advise, activate, anchor and assure. These five themes are purposely broad and designed to facilitate offensive and defensive as well as pragmatic-choice and identity-choice messaging to guide and channel the creativity of practitioners. The themes are also designed to facilitate a variety of persuasively designed messaging that is coherent and mutually-reinforcing. It follows that the absorb and anchor themes seek to respectively link the target audience with positive collective and individual identities. Meanwhile, assure and advise positively link the messenger to "real world" benefits. Reflecting a recognition that many who are attracted to violent extremists want to address "real world" crises, the activate theme is designed to encourage individuals to positively channel their energies. The importance of *positive messaging* is reflected in the tendency for violent groups to frame themselves as pure and thus responsible for addressing crises; a point further evidenced by the prevalence of empowering in-group/solution narratives in *Azan*, *Inspire* and *Dabiq* magazines.

Table 8: The 5As of *Positive Messaging*

Five As	Purpose of Theme	Pragmatic-Choice Sample	Identity-Choice Sample
<i>Absorb</i>	Target audience is part of a positive and worthwhile community (emphasis on collective identity).	Promote target audience' involvement in activities that benefit their community (e.g. charity, sport).	Inclusive messaging that focuses on community/national identity.
<i>Advise</i>	Clarity about how pertinent issues/events effect target audiences.	Clear messaging about the impact of counter-terrorism laws (e.g. response to blowback against community).	Demonstrate how counter-terrorism efforts do not focus on a single community.

<i>Activate</i>	Promote how participation in collective/community has benefits for individual and collective.	Support of government/community groups has practical benefits to target audience members.	Support of government/community group fosters shared individual and collective identities.
<i>Anchor</i>	Target audiences are characterised by a range of individual identities and behaviours that are positive and worthwhile (emphasis on individual identity).	Emphasise the range of positive and empowering activities which members of the target audience are engaged (e.g. opposite to "persecuted victim").	Emphasise the range of identities that define an individual (opposite to "black and white" worldview of violent extremists).
<i>Assure</i>	The facts support the positive claims/activities of the messenger (e.g. government).	Promote efforts of the messenger and allies to address target audience problems.	Highlight how law enforcement and government agencies are working to support target audience as equal citizens.

The 5Ds of Negative Messaging⁴⁷

The purpose of *negative messaging* is to attack the linkages violent extremists make between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis typically by stressing the harm of certain choices as a means to diminish the appeal of violent extremist propaganda (i.e. proscribed terrorist groups and their supporters). While deployed in support of both tiers, *negative messaging* plays a particularly central role in Tier 2's disengagement strategies. Detailed in Table 9, the 5Ds are divided, disabused, disillusioned, directionless and discouraged. The 5Ds are broad themes designed to facilitate offensive and defensive as well as pragmatic-choice and identity-choice messaging. These themes are flexible enough to facilitate practitioner creativity. As with the 5As, the 5Ds can be deployed to variously attack the linkages established by violent extremist propaganda. Given the centrality of the 5Ds to disengagement strategies, the final section of this study is devoted to analysing them in greater depth.

Table 9: The 5Ds of *Negative Messaging*

Five Ds	Purpose of Theme	Pragmatic-Choice Sample	Identity-Choice Sample
<i>Divided</i>	Violent extremists disagree on key elements of movement.	Violent extremists spend more time fighting each other.	Violent extremists say they support Muslims but condemn and kill them.
<i>Disabused</i>	The facts undermine our view of the violent extremists.	Highlighting the number of Muslims violent extremists kill.	Hypocritical rhetoric of "purity" when engaged in drug-taking and rape.
<i>Disillusioned</i>	Participation in violent extremism does not deliver on promises.	Violent extremist actions did not achieve the results promised	Violent extremists present a fabricated image of "purity"

⁴⁷ J.M. Berger, "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016).

			inconsistent with practices like rape, drug trafficking and torture.
<i>Directionless</i>	Violent extremists do not have a clear and tangible agenda.	Violent extremists do not have a clear strategy to succeed (e.g. military losses) or shifting messaging about goals.	Violent extremist claims are inconsistent, misleading and do not have an executable vision.
<i>Discouraged</i>	Violent extremist ultimately cannot win.	Violent extremists consistently fail politico-militarily.	Violent extremists make the plight of Muslims worse.

The Empirical Foundations of Tier 2 Efforts

The primary target audience of Tier 2 efforts are those that already adhere to the system of meaning championed by violent extremists, i.e. tacit and active supporters. Its dual strategies of disengagement (i.e. *negative messaging*) and disruption strategies draws largely on the findings published in 'Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism'.⁴⁸ The 5Ds of *negative messaging*, as outlined above, can be applied in an extraordinarily diverse range of messages. Importantly, a premise underpinning the "linkage-based" approach is that ideology-centric de-radicalisation (now sometimes described as "intervention") strategies are not only difficult to measure but risk acting as a catalyst of radicalisation. As Berger asserts: "Disengagement is a preferable goal to 'de-radicalisation', which is frequently the focus of CVE and always the focus of PVE. Disengagement is the process by which individuals cease to be mobilised in support of a violent extremist movement. De-radicalisation is the process by which individuals cease to hold extremist beliefs."⁴⁹ Tier 2's strategy of disengagement is based on compelling empirical research. For example, in 'Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption', the findings from a variety of case studies were presented which supported the assertion that negative views of the group/movement was a powerful driver of disengagement.⁵⁰ Moreover, these case studies suggested that those negative views did not need to be replaced by positive alternatives. The key here is that negative views were sufficient for disengagement. It is for this reason that Tier 2 is designed to drive the movement of individuals from "active" to "tacit" supporters and, potentially, from "tacit" supporters to those who could then be targeted by Tier 1 efforts. This underscores the mutually reinforcing nature of the two-tiered framework. In this instance, the deployment of Tier 2 *negative messaging* works to reinforce Tier 1 efforts while Tier 1 messaging caters for individuals transitioning away from "active" support.

Network disruption strategies, deployed both online and offline, are central to Tier 2. Disruption strategies that shutdown violent extremist networks and accounts online, for example on social media platforms, should be reinforced by government agencies actively targeting members and supporters of proscribed terrorist organisations (and

⁴⁸ J.M. Berger, "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016).

⁴⁹ J.M. Berger, "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016), pp. 3-4.

⁵⁰ Radical right-wing, Syrian Opposition, South American, European and African case studies were used in Berger, "Making CVE Work: A Focussed Approach Based on Process Disruption", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, (May 2016), pp. 19-23.

vice versa). Disruption efforts extend beyond shutting-down accounts online or arresting violent extremists. It can also include, for example, deploying unattributed messaging both online and offline and cultivating human sources to erode trust within target networks. Deployed effectively, the impact of disruption strategies can reverberate through the entire target audience spectrum compounding the benefits of the entire strategy. After all, disruption is a powerful instrumental tool for diminishing the reach of militant Islamist propaganda and negating certain mediums and even messengers from the “information theatre”. It therefore also impacts on the relevance and resonance of violent extremist propaganda. Disruption strategies create opportunities for the resultant void to be filled with messaging from actors present in the “information theatre”. Consequently, a disruption strategy that is not partnered with messaging (preferably synchronised with actions) may inadvertently create opportunities for other adversaries to fill the void. It is for this reason that the “linkage-based” approach requires the simultaneous deployment of *negative messaging* with disruption efforts.

Research measuring the impact of disruption strategies on violent extremist networks online provides empirical support for its inclusion in the “linkage-based” approach. Take for example a series of publications analysing IS’s use of Twitter and the impact of shutting-down accounts upon these networks.⁵¹ Berger and Morgan monitored IS Twitter accounts from September to December 2014 estimating that IS used 46,000-90,000 accounts during this period analysing 20,000 accounts for demographic information.⁵² While the authors highlighted that Twitter had started suspending IS accounts at the time data collection started, Berger and Morgan’s study offers a vital snapshot of IS online activities in 2014. Berger and Perez’s *The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter* analysed the impact of account suspensions upon English-language IS supporters between June-October 2015.⁵³ During this period of monitoring, the authors found that suspensions not only resulted in reductions in follower counts and the amount of pro-IS content but the impact persisted beyond those periods of suspension pressure.⁵⁴ In a subsequent study, Berger explored the impact of suspension pressures versus the absence of such pressures on violent extremist social media networks in *Nazis vs ISIS on Twitter*.⁵⁵ As Berger asserts,

White nationalist accounts suffered relatively little suspension pressure. Three white nationalist accounts and four Nazi accounts were observed to be suspended during the course of data collection, and a handful of additional accounts were seen to be suspended in the days that followed. Around 1,100 ISIS

⁵¹ J. Berger & J. Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter”, *Analysis Paper – Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World* 3, no. 20 (March 2015),

https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf; J. Berger & H. Perez, “The Islamic State’s diminishing return on Twitter: How suspensions are limiting the social networks of English-speaking ISIS supporters”, *Occasional Paper GW Program on Extremism* (February 2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.

⁵² J. Berger & J. Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter”, *Analysis Paper – Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World* 3, no. 20 (March 2015), pp. 7-9.

⁵³ J. Berger & H. Perez, “The Islamic State’s diminishing return on Twitter: How suspensions are limiting the social networks of English-speaking ISIS supporters”, *Occasional Paper GW Program on Extremism* (February 2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 5-14.

⁵⁵ J. Berger, “Nazis vs. ISIS on Twitter: A Comparative Study of White Nationalist and ISIS Online Social Media Networks”, *GW Program on Extremism* (September 2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Nazis%20v.%20ISIS%20Final_0.pdf.

accounts were suspended during and immediately after collection.⁵⁶

The impact was that “white nationalist datasets examined outperformed IS in most current metrics and many historical metrics.”⁵⁷ Berger goes on to argue that “the clear advantage enjoyed by white nationalists was attributable in part to the effects of aggressive suspensions of accounts associated with ISIS networks.”⁵⁸ The US State Department report in July 2016 on Counter-Daesh Coalition efforts stated:

According to a recent Rand study, on average there are now six people opposing Daesh’s message online for every one supporting it. There has been a 45% decrease in the overall volume of pro-ISIL tweets since June 2014 and the average number of followers per pro-ISIL account has dropped from a 2014 high of 1,500 to around 300 today.⁵⁹

Overall these studies highlight that disruption strategies can have direct benefits but they also create opportunities that may be exploited by other adversaries and increase the potential for inadvertent “blowback”. This has been factored into the “linkage-based” approach with the inclusion of disengagement as a simultaneous Tier 2 strategy which are supported, more broadly, by Tier 1 efforts.

Conclusion

A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*.⁶⁰

One of the most persistent habits to emerge during the so-called Wars on Terror has been to frame the problem of violent extremism as fundamentally ideological in nature. It is a view that has underpinned counter-terrorism efforts and is a common feature of political rhetoric from Western leaders. President George W Bush’s 2005 declaration that “the murderous ideology of Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century”⁶¹ would not be out of place today. Ideology needs to be understood within the context of broader psychosocial forces and strategic factors. Focusing “hard” and “soft” counter-terrorism efforts disproportionately on ideology, particularly opaque notions of “extremism”, is more likely to be futile, if not counterproductive, especially when championed by secular governments. ‘A “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda’ was an effort to present an alternative strategy for counter-terrorism strategic communications practitioners. The purpose of this study was not to introduce new concepts or expand upon the two-tiered framework but to

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ US State Department, “Fact Sheet: The Global Coalition to Counter Daesh”, *State Department* (21 July 2016). <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/261626.htm>.

⁶⁰ T. Paine, “Common Sense”, in M. Conway, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1895), p.67.

⁶¹ G.W. Bush, “President discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for democracy”, *The White House* (6 October 2005), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

explore in greater depth its conceptual and empirical foundations. While four bodies of research have informed the strategy, there is much scope for future research with three areas being particularly important. First, further research is required to hone the framework and increase its conceptual and empirical depth. Second, how the strategy itself would be practically operationalised has not been addressed to date. Third, while the various elements of the framework indicate its potential efficacy, the ultimate test requires practical application via case studies. As the first iteration of a strategy, future research will look to expand upon the foundations laid out here.

Bibliography

Al-Baghdadi, A. "A message to the mujahidin and the Muslim ummah in the month of Ramadan". *Al-Hayat Media Center*, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf>.

Baldwin, M. "Relational schemas and the processing of social information". *Psychological Bulletin* 112, no. 3 (1992), pp.461-484.

Berger, J. and J. Morgan. "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter". *Analysis Paper – Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World 20* (March 2015), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf.

Berger, J. and H. Perez. "The Islamic State's diminishing return on Twitter: How suspensions are limiting the social networks of English-speaking ISIS supporters". *Occasional Paper- GW Program on Extremism*. (February 2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf

Berger, J. "Nazis vs. ISIS on Twitter: A Comparative Study of White Nationalist and ISIS Online Social Media Networks. *GW Program on Extremism*. (September 2016), https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Nazis%20v.%20ISIS%20Final_0.pdf.

Berger, JM. "Making CVE Work: A Focussed Approach Based on Process Disruption", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/making-cve-work-a-focused-approach-based-on-process-disruption/>.

Berger, J.M. "Promoting Disengagement from Violent Extremism", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 5 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CVE-Policy-Brief-FINAL.pdf>.

Braddock, K. and J. Horgan. "Towards a guide for constructing and disseminating counternarratives to reduce support for terrorism", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (2016), pp. 381-414, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116277>.

Bush, G.W. "President discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for democracy", *The White House*, 6 October 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

Carroll, W. *Persuade or Perish*. Boston: The Riverside Press, 1948.

Cummins, R. and T. Chamber. "How production value impacts perceived technical quality, credibility, and economic value of video news", *J&MC Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2011), pp. 737-752.

DiMaggio, P. "Culture and Cognition". *Annual Review of Sociology* 23, (1997), pp.263-287.

European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). "EU strategic communications with a view to countering propaganda", *Directorate-General for External Policies* (2016).

Ferguson, K. "Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies". *Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>.

Fernandez, A. "Here to stay and growing: Combating ISIS propaganda networks". *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, October 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda-Web-English.pdf>.

Ingram, H. "An analysis of the Taliban in Khurasan's Azan (issues 1-5)". *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38, no. 7 (2015), pp. 560-579, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1022093>.

Ingram, H.J. "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict". *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), <https://icct.nl/publication/a-brief-history-of-propaganda-during-conflict-a-lesson-for-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications/>.

Ingram, H.J. "Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change". *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 9 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ICCT-Ingram-Deciphering-the-Siren-Call-of-Militant-Islamist-Propaganda-September2016.pdf>.

Ingram, H.J. "An analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's propaganda war", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, no. 5 (2016), pp. 357-375, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1212551>.

Ingram, H. 2016. "An analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine". *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3, (2016), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10361146.2016.1174188>.

Ingram, H. J. "A "Linkage-Based" Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: A Two-Tiered Framework for Practitioners". *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 6 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Ingram-A-Linkage-Based-Approach-Nov2016.pdf>.

Kahneman, D. "Maps of bounded rationality: Psychology for behavioural economics." *The American Economic Review* 93, no. 5 (2003), pp. 1449-1474.

Kahneman, D. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Penguin: London, 2012.

Lee, H., Park, S., Lee, Y. and G. Cameron. "Assessment of motion media on believability and credibility: An exploratory study". *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010), pp. 310-312.

Leuprecht, C., Hataley, T., Moskalenko S. and C. McCauley. "Winning the battle but losing the war: Narrative and counter-narrative strategy". *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009), pp. 25-35.

Leuprecht, C., Hataley, T., Moskalenko S. and McCauley, C. "Containing the narrative: Strategy and tactics in countering the storyline of Global Jihad". *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 5, no. 1 (2010), pp. 42-57.

Mani, A., Mullainathan, S. Shafir, E. and J. Zhao. "Poverty impedes cognitive function". *Science* 341, no.6149 (2013), pp. 976-980.

National Security Decision Directive 75. "U.S. Relations with the USSR". 17 January 1983, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-75.pdf>.

Norman, D. "Some observations on mental models". In D. Gentner and A. Stevens, eds. *Mental Models*. New York: Psychology Press, 1983, pp. 7-14.

Paine, T. "Common Sense". In M. Conway, ed. *The Writings of Thomas Paine*. G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1894, pp. 67-120.

Pelletier, I., Lundmark, L., Gardner, R., Ligon, G. and R. Kilinc. "Why ISIS's message resonates: Leveraging Islam, socio-political catalysts, and adaptive messaging". *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no.10 (2016), pp. 871-899.

Radicalisation Awareness Network. "Workshop on jihadist propaganda and how to respond (online)", *RAN Centre of Excellence* (2016).

Reed, A. and H. J. Ingram. "Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications". *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 4 (2016), <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Ingram-CTSC-June-2016-3.pdf>.

Smith, A. "From words to actions". *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, no. 5 (2004), pp. 409-437.

Sun Tzu. *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World*. Translated by Lionel Giles. 1910, p. 45, <http://www.idph.com.br/conteudos/ebooks/suntzu10.pdf>.

Swidler, A. "Culture in action: Symbols and Strategies". *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986), pp. 273-286.

Taylor, P. *Munitions of the mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

Twain, M. "What is Man?", *What is man? And other philosophical writings*. Edited by P. Baender. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, p. 173.

US State Department. "Fact Sheet: The Global Coalition to Counter Daesh", *State Department* (21 July 2016), <http://www.state.gov/s/seci/261626.htm>.

Welch, D. *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

Whiteside, C. "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)". *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 11 (2016), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Whiteside-Lighting-the-Path-the-Evolution-of-the-Islamic-State-Media-Enterprise-2003-2016-Nov2016.pdf>.

Winter, C. "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy". *Quilliam* (2015), <http://www.stratcomcoe.org/charlie-winter-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy>.

Winter, C. "Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare". *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 13 February 2017, <http://icsr.info/2017/02/icsr-report-media-jihad-islamic-states-doctrine-information-warfare/>.

World Bank. *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior*. Washington, DC: World Bank (2015).

Zelin, A. "Picture or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State's official media output", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015).

The Strategic Logic of the “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations

Haroro J. Ingram
April 2017

How to cite: Ingram, H. J. “The Strategic Logic of the “Linkage-Based” Approach to Combating Militant Islamist Propaganda: Conceptual and Empirical Foundations”, *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 8, no. 6 (2017).

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Contact ICCT

ICCT
Zeestraat 100
2518 AD The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 763 0050
E info@icct.nl