



Ideological Encounter and Technical Initiatives Ways of Addressing the Root Causes of Extremism

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Notwithstanding the substantial financial expenditure associated with the war on terrorism, with the United States alone having invested a staggering \$6 trillion, the events of 2017, including the dismantling of Daesh's strongholds in Syria and Iraq and the elimination of a significant number of its top leadership, have not culminated in the cessation of the ongoing war on terrorism. Instead, this war necessitates a significant paradigm shift and a reevaluation of its strategies and anticipated outcomes.

Comprehensive Approaches

It is well known that terrorist groups are not formal military structures like national armies that can be defeated through traditional wars. They are decentralized with numerous arms and heads. Their human assets are usually frustrated, hopeless young people, who believe violence is the only way to get their voices heard and to make a change. This explains why terrorist Al-Qaeda has resurfaced following the US invasion of Iraq and why Daesh expanded on the ruins of the Arab Spring with the rise of terrorist groups from the womb of civil wars that have played havoc with growth and stood in the way of progress and development.

Apparently, military victories on terrorist organizations do not last long, considering how such organizations market themselves as an actor of change aiming for a perfect society and exerting extensive efforts in recruitment, finding alternatives and missing elements for leadership. When a terrorist is captured or killed, another fills his place, which allows for the relative survival and persistence of terrorist groups .

In the light of the foregoing premise, the war on terrorism needs a comprehensive approach that can address the root causes of extremism. Such an approach comprises military, security, economic, political, social, and cultural aspects; for example, supporting frustrated, hopeless young people, empowering them to participate in the

political and social scene through peaceful means, providing them with good education and job opportunities, making socio-economic improvements, promoting dialogue and understanding, ensuring justice, protecting human rights, countering corruption, promoting democracy and good governance, and reinforcing international efforts towards conflict resolution .

Ideological Encounter

The ideological encounter is a major means of countering extremist strategies. Extremist discourse must be deconstructed, and its target audience must be understood in order to create a counter-discourse with the same credentials, targeting the same audience, and using the same tools .

Richard Barrett, former director of Global Counter-terrorism at MI6, says that “terrorism will not be defeated by security measures alone; its appeal must be understood and reduced by targeted measures that make other options more attractive”. It is imperative to move beyond subjective assumptions that often fail to grasp the intricacies of the terrorist mindset. A report issued by the MI5 Behavioural Science Unit demonstrated that most of those involved in terrorist crimes are nowhere near religious intolerance, but rather practice religion regularly. Many even lack cultural and religious knowledge, but can be considered religious novices. Consequently, it becomes less likely for an enlightened and devoutly religious individual to gravitate toward violent extremism; instead, they may serve as a safeguard against such deviations. Recognizing this aspect underscores the crucial role of the media in conveying a message of moderation, tolerance, and understanding of diverse communities. Supporting this mission is vital to counter the appeal of extremism and promote a more harmonious and inclusive society.

To expose the falsity of the alleged legitimization of terrorist discourse, the mechanisms of the ideological encounter are two-tiered: a macro and a micro level, as well as initiatives supporting the processes of delegitimizing such a discourse.

Ideological Encounter Mechanisms

First: Macro Level

- Extremist media must be addressed as an essentially political issue with a media aspect, not vice versa. The cessation of violence and chaos in some countries means the end of the drivers of extremist movements. It is important to recognize

that the strategies outlined in Management of Savagery primarily revolve around inciting conflicts, instigating warfare, causing significant casualties, and fostering a state of chaos characterized by lawlessness and the absence of governance. These conditions, in turn, facilitate the proliferation of extremism by fostering polarization and recruitment.

- Feelings associated with the emotional turmoil rooted inside frustrated young people's minds should be recognized. Disregarding those feelings and dismissing them as inconsequential leads to violence and extremism, given how they often harbor unrealistic perceptions of reshaping the world and reinstating equilibrium. Daesh presented an extremist discourse based on triggering emotions and religious sentiment and recalling historical precedents as persuasive tools.

Second: Micro Level

Ideologically, there must be a careful consideration to delegitimization efforts, which is a strategy aiming at ending the justifications of violent behavior and clarifying views opposing such justifications. Such a strategy aims at convincing those who consider joining extremist groups or engaging in any violent behavior to change their behavior, which requires analyzing these views and exposing their falsity and wrongfulness. Undoubtedly, this requires sustained efforts under the mission of spreading awareness and reinforcing the values of tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among different cultures and religions, as well as promoting education and culture.

Centre of Gravity

The center of gravity of terrorist/extremist groups includes multiple levels of support, such as defending moral values and direct engagement. The deeper this center is, the more legitimate it becomes for the target segment. Thus, the delegitimization process must undermine the low levels of support before dealing with the levels that keep the organization intact. Convincing sympathizers, passive supporters, active supporters, and potential recruits that the organization is a liar unworthy of support or joining, shall be the way to impair the legitimacy of the opponent. When this is achieved, the terrorist organization's centre of gravity starts shrinking and disappearing .

Among the rich experiences in this domain is the Assakina Campaign for Dialogue launched by the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance. The campaign aims at the ongoing personal, friendly presence on websites, forums, and online groups, engaging in dialogue with extremists and sympathizers who hide behind

aliases, through an integrated team with various specialties, to achieve the campaign objectives using appropriate and influential means and methods. It works to correct misconceptions and discussing deviant ideologies publicly, via private messages or chat programs, focusing on true Islamic values, being polite and respectable, and taking into account the different cultures of the addressees .

The campaign managed to de-radicalize hundreds of young people.

Media Outlets

There are about 1.2 billion young people around the world aged between 15 and 24, 25% of whom are influenced by violence and armed conflicts. The internet is a vast space for interaction and the exchange of ideas among youths, which increases the responsibility of counter-terrorism and extremism efforts to provide a counter media discourse. Extremist messages can be refuted, deconstructed, and rendered meaningless by the following means:

Using media outlets popular among young people, that have soft power and great presence on social media and spreading indirect messages countering terrorism without the crudeness of news channels and talk shows, alongside emotional influence and simple logic that instills ideologies in young people's minds.

Refuting media discourse that claims the oppression of those groups, primarily al-Qaeda and Daesh, by broadcasting the testimonies of the victims of those groups and the cruelty and grievances they experienced, such as the mass captivity of Yazidi women as sex slaves.

Third: Supporting Technical Initiatives

A range of studies confirmed how artists are less vulnerable to terrorist calls. Notably, Daesh closed all fine arts colleges in the areas it controlled, and destroyed paintings, sculptures, and museum artefacts .

A frustrated mind that shapes lone wolves can be problematic due to distraction and tension resulting from the incapacity to deal with the surrounding stressful political, economic, social, or other circumstances. People need social constraints to maintain mental balance. Society shapes the values, ethics, principles, and proper behavior of individuals, creating in them a feeling for "reality" that is necessary for the prevention of self-harm .

A feeling for “reality” is what creates a desire to hold onto life rather than suicide. Suicidals suffer from mental confusion that makes life intolerable. This explains why extremists lose their sense of reality and see life as profane and unworthy of living, thus aspiring to self-sacrifice and breaking free from this life.

One of the means that helps to connect man to reality is the development of his artistic and aesthetic side, as there is a close relationship between art and beauty; art is considered one of the manifestations of beauty, and the goal of art is to “produce something beautiful”. Socially and culturally, the sense of beauty is a source of positive, constructive, and sublime thoughts. An article by journalist Helen Dancer, published in The Guardian, addresses the ability of some marginalized Tunisian youths to defeat Daesh through art, as they managed to organize streets meetings and events, in which international singers and artists participated. They also organized workshops and training courses to teach young people the art of graffiti to enhance their identity, develop their emotions, foster a sense of reality and self-esteem, and prevent them from wasting their lives and killing themselves by joining extremist movements. More than 5,500 young Tunisians between the ages of 18 and 35 have joined extremist movements. Experts pointed out that one of the most important ways for Tunisian youths to be attracted to extremist movements is a sense of purpose and belongingness. Under this strategy, civil society partners should support artistic and aesthetic initiatives for self-expression, identity promotion, and speaking out on key issues.

The pathways of the ideological encounter and artistic initiatives are one of the most powerful and effective means of curbing extremism and promoting peace and stability in societies, refuting and responding to false ideologies, and enabling individuals to learn better and have a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. This strategy is meant to reduce the possibilities of deviant thinking and its subsequent tensions, and to promote mutual respect and peaceful coexistence .

Ministries of Education can play an important role in promoting these pathways by highlighting the values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, encouraging meaningful debate, focusing on awareness and critical thinking, and motivating individuals to make informed decisions .

Artistic initiatives play a vital role in creating communication, understanding and harmony between individuals, due to their ability to sublimate emotions, refined senses, and harmony among people. Through plastic arts, literature, music, cinema and

theatre, people can express themselves and share their opinions and knowledge in a creative and inspiring way. The attention of governments to these paths contributes to building a secure and peaceful society.