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Lessons from State-Sponsored Counter-Narrative Campaigns

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Winning the ideological fight against violent extremist groups such as Daesh, requires building and developing counter-narratives capable of fighting an idea with an idea. This allows for pulling the rug from under their feet. Radical narratives usually reflect violent extremist groups' exploitation of the societal context. Hence, the task of developing and instituting counter-narratives becomes daunting as they must account for the values and principles of the given society. Counter-narratives must be developed with the aim of restoring hope and enhancing the positive worldview of the receiving audience, as opposed to reinforcing an already existing denunciation of radical narratives.

Since the task of creating counter-narratives is broad, the state often leads the efforts. Therefore, it is beneficial to examine approaches taken by different countries around the world. Below are three case studies describing state efforts in France, Malaysia, and the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that these countries—representing different contextual realities—followed different approaches to their counter-narrative strategies. For example, as a leading Southeast Asian example on counter-narratives, the Malaysian state tries to contain and pre-empt radicalisation. France and the UK, on the other hand, seem to target their marginalised Muslim and non-Muslim communities in their strategies on counter-narratives.

I.I France

France has witnessed numerous attacks since the turn of the century. In the early 2000s, they were sporadic and claimed by different groups – the causes were both political and ideological with no discernible pattern. However, after the first decade of the century, gaps between attacks began to narrow and from 2012 onwards a wave of attacks by violent extremists with affiliations to Islam increased dramatically. In 2015 and 2016 alone there were 18 incidents that were executed or claimed by lone-wolf or organised groups affiliating themselves to Islam.¹ It became apparent that there was indeed a growing plight across France as attacks took place in different cities such as Paris, Nice, and Strasbourg, amongst others.² In addition, France has a high number of foreign fighters, with estimates putting the number at 1,700 – making France the biggest exporter of terrorism in Europe.³

On a state level, a number of counter-radicalisation measures were put into place. These range from a persistent state-of-emergency (thereby governing the nation on the basis of emergency laws) to secretive counter-radicalisation units such as the “Group d’Intervention de la

¹ For example, see "A Timeline Of Terror Attacks In France And Belgium Since Charlie Hebdo", *Euronews*, 2016, available at <http://www.euronews.com/2016/07/15/a-timeline-of-terror-attacks-in-france-and-belgium-since-charlie-hebdo>.

² Ibid. See also, "Timeline: Attacks In France", *BBC News*, 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33288542>.

³ Ashley Kirk, "Iraq And Syria: How Many Foreign Fighters Are Fighting For Isil?", *The Telegraph*, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/03/29/iraq-and-syria-how-many-foreign-fighters-are-fighting-for-isil/>. For further reading, see "Foreign Fighters" *The Soufan Group* (2015), available at http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

Gendarmerie Nationale,”⁴ who have a total fighting force of approximately 400 individuals. However, the initiative that will be highlighted here, is a government-led initiative titled ‘Stop Djihadisme’ or Stop Jihadism.

The project is narrowly focused on counter-narrative presentations involving a website, a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and a series of YouTube videos. At the time of writing, all social media channels are updated on an almost daily basis. The Twitter account has 12.7 thousand followers while the Facebook page has 19.3 thousand likes – the accounts have been active since 2015. The campaign website, “aims to give French citizens the tools to spot and prevent radicalisation. The site holds a number of resources and infographics that aim to help citizens spot and prevent Jihadism.”⁵ The videos, however, present the most compelling counter-narrative strategies and are shared on multiple social media platforms as well as national TV stations such as TV5. Scenes depict the methods of recruitment, violent extremist group’s encouragement of attacks at home, and the illusion these groups present versus the reality of their actions. This campaign supports other government initiatives, namely the Green Line (Le Numero Vert), a hotline set up in 2014 for discussions, concerns, and threats of radicalisation. However, according to Koehler, this hotline is deprived of religious discussions with officials citing it is not imperative to de-radicalisation strategies.⁶

The numerous components in France’s anti-radicalisation campaign involve different avenues of communication, using soft aspects of P/CVE, while being supported by hard approaches such as travel bans (French Patriot Act), school interventions, blocking suspicious or dangerous websites (FPA), and more recently, creating de-radicalisation wings in prison.⁷ France’s approach to the risks of violent extremism and radicalisation has been heavily criticised for focusing exclusively on centralised hard security (state security) measures, which are questionable in terms of effectiveness.⁸ However, the government recently began to include civil society bodies to expand the reach and efficacy of P/CVE efforts.

I.II Malaysia

It is estimated that between 500 and 700 fighters have left Malaysia to join Daesh in Iraq and Syria.⁹ While this is a relatively and comparatively low figure, this still poses a threat to domestic ideologies and international reprimand. As such, counter-terror and counter-narrative strategies are implemented on a national level, with interventions for youth groups, particularly university student bodies.¹⁰ There have been a number of reports showing Daesh’s use of social media to

⁴ "France: Extremism And Counter-Extremism", *Counter Extremism Project*, 2016, 9-10, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/france_counterextremism.pdf.

⁵ "Stop-Djihadisme", *Stop-Djihadisme*, 2017, available at <http://www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr/>.

⁶ Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁷ "France: Extremism And Counter-Extremism", *Counter Extremism Project*, 2016, 9, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/france_counterextremism.pdf.

⁸ Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁹ Hafiza Nur Adeen Nor Ahmad, "Malaysian Foreign Fighters From Past To Present: Different Pathways To Terror", Middle East Institute, 2016, available at http://www.mei.edu/content/map/malaysian-foreign-fighters-past-present-different-pathways-terror#_ftn4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

recruit and the Malay case is no different.¹¹ It comes as no surprise, then, that the state's P/CVE efforts incorporate this element.

The authorities, under the guidance of the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), have implemented a number of counter-narrative attempts. Rather than issuing a media campaign, the primary mode of countering violent extremist narratives is through religious channels such as issuing *fatwas*.¹² Religious leaders were also tasked to clarify different concepts to the public such as that of *jihad*. JAKIM also launched the hashtag 'Muslim Students Against Violence'. Finally, a hard security approach was taken online in which the government began to shut down Daesh-related websites as of 2014. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission also launched an initiative entitled 'Click Wisely', which runs workshops in mosques and schools to raise awareness of online recruitment tactics.

While the main approach is correcting misunderstandings of religious concepts, the government has been criticised for holding Wahhabi, and potentially Salafi, beliefs which challenges the legitimacy and efficacy of the government-led initiatives.¹³

I.III United Kingdom

Several terror attacks have occurred within the United Kingdom since 2001 with a seemingly increasing trajectory,¹⁴ much like France. At times, the government reaction to this has been severe.¹⁵

On the state level, a number of measures and policies aiming to counter terrorism have been set. The British counter-terrorism strategy has four main components, known as the 'four P's': **Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare**. The Prevent strategy has proven to be the most controversial and contentious among the four components as it aims to "prevent" extremist and terrorist violence by monitoring the British Muslim community. For example, monitoring is done primarily by building relations between the police and community and faith leaders, teachers, doctors, etc., in the UK, who are required to report any suspicious individual or group to the local Prevent body.¹⁶

In response to the outcomes of Prevent, the British Muslim Community has developed a counter-strategy to counter extremism and terrorism that challenges the government's approach by focusing on community groups and making them the main actors in the delivery of the scheme. The different actors involved (community leaders, former police officers, and

¹¹ Ibid. See also Imran Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: Isis And The Power Of Social Media", *Society* 54, no. 2 (2017): 138-149, doi:10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Timeline Of British Terror Attacks", *BBC News*, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-40013040>. See also, Michael Hayden, "Terror In The UK: A Timeline Of Recent Attacks", *ABC News*, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/terror-uk-timeline-recent-attacks/story?id=47579860>.

¹⁵ "UK: Emergency Surveillance Law A Blow To Privacy", *Human Rights Watch*, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/14/uk-emergency-surveillance-law-blow-privacy>.

¹⁶ See for example, *Reality Check: What is the Prevent Strategy?*, 4 June 2017, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-2017-40151991>.

professionals from mental health services and other agencies) aim to work together to counter extremism at the grassroots level.¹⁷

State initiatives have a limited impact,¹⁸ and alternative media-based counter-narrative efforts have been used in the UK, including the Canadian campaign *Extreme Dialogue*.¹⁹ It aims to target educational and community settings in Canada, the UK, Germany and Hungary. The online platform aims to encourage constructive discussions about extremism by providing open-access educational materials and short films about the experiences of seven extremists. It includes not only Islamists, but other forms of extremism as well. The graphics and music used in the films, are aimed at building an emotional response in the viewer, bringing the individual telling his or her story closer to the public, and eliciting sympathy for the struggle they have been through to get out of their extremist experience. However, a recent report commissioned by the Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, an initiative of Research Councils UK, which was established in 2008, highlights that current strategies of countering extremism in the media are proving to be ineffective, as they continuously re-iterate the need for 'counter-narratives' but share little to no consensus on what these should focus on. The report issued by the Partnership in March 2016, *Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communication Strategies*,²⁰ underlines the need for alternative strategies to counter extremism in the media.

¹⁷ Basit, M., *The Muslim Council of Britain is starting its own counter-extremism strategy because Prevent made things much worse*, Independent, 20 October 2016, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/muslim-council-of-britain-islam-counter-extremism-strategy-mosques-terrorism-isis-young-british-a7372166.html>; See also, Dodd, V., *Muslim Council of Britain to set up alternative counter-terror scheme*, The Guardian, 19 October 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/19/muslim-council-britain-set-up-alternative-counter-terror-scheme>.

¹⁸ Ian Cobain, "UK's Prevent Counter-Radicalisation Policy 'Badly Flawed'", *The Guardian*, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/oct/19/uks-prevent-counter-radicalisation-policy-badly-flawed>.

¹⁹ *Extreme Dialogue*, 2017, available at <http://extremedialogue.org/>.

²⁰ Ferguson, K., *Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies*, Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research, 1 March 2016, at: <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>



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