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Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge

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This Research Paper seeks to map efforts to counter the attraction of al-Qaeda's ideology. The aim is to bring together and synthesise current insights in an effort to make existing knowledge more cumulative. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to test existing counter-narratives on their impact and effectiveness or elaborate in detail a new model that could improve present efforts. However, it provides some promising conceptual elements for a new road map on how to move forward, based on a broad review and analysis of open source literature.

About the Author

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1. Introduction

Al Qaeda's use of indiscriminate violence is supported by a compelling narrative that authorises its strategy, justifies its violent tactics, propagates its ideology and wins new recruits. In the last decade, the question "What could be an effective counter-narrative to win the 'battle of ideas' and reach the 'hearts and minds' of those vulnerable to al Qaeda's narrative?" has often been asked as military efforts to defeat al Qaeda have been largely unsuccessful. Counter-narratives are, in the words of a recent study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), "attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly through a range of online and offline means".[1] The authors admit that "[t]his term has come to be a catch-all term for a wide range of activities with different aims and tactics and understanding about what works is still poor".[2] Therefore, there is a clear need for greater precision and focus. Yet, first of all, the narrative of al Qaeda needs to be understood more clearly.

For too long, terrorism has been understood primarily in terms of (political) violence. Gradually, it has been realised that it should be understood more in terms of communication and propaganda. Violence and propaganda have much in common. Violence aims at behaviour modification by coercion. Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion. Terrorism is a combination of the two, using demonstrative public violence as an instrument of psychological warfare, "advertising", as it were, an armed non-state group's capabilities to do harm and to destroy.[3] Propaganda is a special form of manipulative information with a sometimes subliminal "spin", mixing (half-) truths and falsehood in an effort to influence attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences so that these are inclined to reach certain conclusions and are encouraged to engage in certain actions. Propaganda reduces complex phenomena to simple clichés, creating dichotomies of black and white, "us" and "them", good and evil, often linked to incitements to disapprove of an opponent or hate an enemy.[4] In the case of Islamist jihadists, this is expressed in the formula *al-Wala wa'l-Bara*, which refers to the division of humanity into those one has "to love, support, help, follow, defend" (*al-Wala*) and those one has "to despise, desert, denounce" (*al-Bara*), the latter being "infidels" like Jews, Christians, polytheists, pagans or, in short, the West in general and the United States (US) and Israel in particular.

2. From Propaganda to Strategic Communication

In common Western understanding, propaganda is (mainly due to its strong association with Nazism and Communism) a discredited activity – something attributed to totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Democracies do generally not (like to) engage in direct propaganda, except in wartime when reaching out to the enemy's population in an effort to weaken a regime's control over its subjects makes it necessary. Democratic governments therefore use terms like "public affairs", "public diplomacy", "psychological operations" and "strategic communications" to describe their information-based influence operations meant to affect the attitudes and behaviours of specific audiences. Yet, whether and to what extent these idioms mark real

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[1] Rachel Briggs, Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, July 2013), p. 6. Later in this study, the authors add (p. 49), "Counter-narratives are aimed at individuals, groups and networks further along the path to radicalisation, whether they be sympathisers, passive supporters or those more active within extremist movements. These more targeted programmes explicitly deconstruct, delegitimise and de-mystify extremist propaganda in order to achieve a number of aims, from de-radicalisation of those already radicalised to sowing the seeds of doubt among 'at risk' audiences potentially being exposed to or seeking out extremist content".

[2] Ibid. p. 6.

[3] A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage, 1982), p. 14; Alex P. Schmid, "Terrorism as Psychological Warfare", *Democracy and Security* 1, No. 2 (2005), pp. 127-136.

[4] Based on lemma, "propaganda" in Alex P. Schmid (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 676-677.

differences to the loaded term of "propaganda" remains debatable. What G. S. Jowett and V. O'Donnell describe as the aim of propaganda is not really different from what commercial and political public relations agencies try to achieve, namely "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist".[5] Propaganda is usually linked to war (including the Cold War) and is often disguised as information, but also reaches us in peacetimes and takes many forms, including sometimes even entertainment.[6]

In peacetime, we are bombarded with all sorts of propaganda-type publicity – marketing campaigns from commercial advertising to electoral campaigning and other forms of public relations – where unproven or exaggerated claims and the use of "hidden persuaders" are the order of the day. Our perceptions are constantly under assault – so much that we often do not know what and whom to believe. Reality and truth are complex and hard to understand fully at the best of times. In times of crisis, we all long for simple truths and clear directions to bring meaning, order and structure into our lives. It is here that ideology as a kind of "felt thought" (like religion) comes in, explaining to seeking souls the world not by means of hard scientific evidence, but by recycling comforting old myths, utilising familiar symbols and seductive rhetoric, promising us rewards if we follow the right party or the right leader with whom we are told to identify and in whose hands we are supposed to lay our own destiny.[7]

Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, in his book *Politics and Propaganda* (2004), has noted that effective propaganda is the synthesis and manipulation of symbolism, rhetoric and myth:

> Rhetoric, symbolism and myth are the interwoven trinity that has underpinned most propaganda through history. […] To work effectively, rhetoric must 'resonate' with attitudes and feelings within the target; great rhetoric is substantially a co-production between sender and receiver. […] [A] symbol can be defined as condensed meaning and as such is an economical form of propaganda, for symbols are universally understood in ways that language can never be; a symbol eludes precise scrutiny and can be "read" in many ways, endowed with multiple meanings. Old symbols can also be re-used, for symbols have inherent plasticity. The power of myth is the power of narrative. Propaganda rejects intellectual challenge, and it seeks refuge in the structure of myths. Old myths can be re-created, but new myths can also be invented – that is to say, myth entrepreneurship. Myths are a culture's self-explanation, and they are a key part of propaganda (stereotype, for example, is a kind of myth).[8]

That *culture,* which O' Shaughnessy refers to, can also be a religious or sectarian sub-culture, or a rebellious youth counter-culture – cultures that have their own narratives to assert and propagate themselves and provide meaning and significance to the lives of those who are part of it, whether they are members of a religious sect, esoteric cult, criminal gang, secret brotherhood or terrorist organisation like al Qaeda.

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[5] G.S. Jowett and V. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), p. 7; Diana Rieger, Lena Frischlich and Gary Bente, in cooperation with the Terrorism/Extremism Research Unit (FTE) of the German Federal Criminal Police Office, *Propaganda 2.0 Psychological Effects of Right-Wing and Islamic Extremist Internet Videos* (Köln: Luchterland Verlag, 2013), p. 7.

[6] Propaganda techniques include, as already detailed by the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in 1937, tactics like: (i) Name calling; (ii) Glittering generalities; (iii) Euphemisms; (iv) Transfer; (v) Testimonial; (vi) Plain Folks; (vii) Bandwagoning; (viii) Fear; (ix) Logical Fallacy and (x) Unwarranted extrapolation in H. L. Goodall Jr., *Counter-Narrative, How Progressive Academics Can Challenge Extremists and Promote Social Justice* (Walnut Creek: Left West Coast Press, 2010), p. 58.

[7] Andrew Delbanco put it this way, "Human beings need to organize the inchoate sensations amid which we pass our days – pain, desire, pleasure, fear – into a story. When that story leads somewhere and helps us navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope. And if such a sustaining narrative establishes itself over time in the minds of a substantial number of people, we call it culture", in A. Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1999, p. 1; Amy Zalman, "Strategic Communications in Irregular Wars", in A. Aykut Ömcü, Troy Bucher and Osman Aytac (Eds.), *Strategic Communications for Combating Terrorism (*Ankara: Centre for Excellence Defence against Terrorism, 2010), p. 95.

[8] Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester: University Press, 2004), pp. 4 and 65.

3. The Power of Narratives

Before taking a closer look at the narrative of al Qaeda, it is necessary to be more precise about the concept of "narrative". Steven R. Corman observed in 2012 that, "for all this interest in narrative, there is little consensus about what it is and how it is used".[9] The term is often used loosely, such as, for instance, in "the greatest story ever told" when referring to a holy text like the bible. In fact, a narrative is more a collection of stories that illustrate a common theme like "good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people" – something we all would like to believe to be true and something that we tell our children when we read fairy tales to them in an effort to develop their moral principles. Even though most of us know deep down in our hearts that life is not that fair, that crime too often pays and that "nice guys" frequently finish last.

Corman defines narrative as "a system of stories that share themes, forms, and archetypes".[10] He and his colleagues in the Consortium for Strategic Communication distinguish between story, narrative and master-(meta-) narrative, which they define as follows:

- A story is a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical/ideological purposes;
- A narrative is a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organised stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form;
- A master narrative is a trans-historical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture.[11]

Military theorist David Kilcullen in turn defines "narrative" as "[a] simple unifying, easily-expressed story or explanation that organises people's experience and provides a framework for understanding events".[12] George Dimitriu has noted that "[n]arratives are a resource for political actors to construct a shared meaning to shape perceptions, beliefs and behaviour of the public", they offer a structure through which "[a] shared sense is achieved, representing a past, present and future, an obstacle and a desired end-point".[13]

To illustrate this idea with an example familiar to many Western readers: the "American myth", for instance, contains some of these elements:

> The Pilgrim Fathers, the Puritans, the Pioneers, the push westward, the taming of the frontier, the Constitution: Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness, President Wilson's Rights of Man; the Land of Opportunity: "Give us your poor, your weak, your hungry"; the Melting Pot: anyone can be president; the peaceable nation that seeks to trade not to conquer, the Little Man standing up to adversity or to

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[9] Steven R. Corman, "Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication", in Laurie Fenstermacher and Todd Leventhal (Eds.), *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies* (Washington, DC: NSI Inc., September 2011), p. 36.

[10] Ibid., p. 37.

[11] Jeffry R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall Jr., and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 13-14.

[12] Mark Laity, "Strategic Communications", in A. Aykut Ömcü, Troy Bucher and Osman Aytac, *Strategic Communications for Combating Terrorism* (2010), p. 14. Another definition of "narrative" has been offered by Steve Tatham, "A thematic and sequenced account that conveys meaning from authors to participants about specific events", Steve Tatham, "Understanding Strategic communication: Toward a Definition", in A. Aykt Ömcü et al, *Strategic Communications for Combating Terrorism* (2010), p. 27.

[13] G. Dimitriu, *Strategic Narratives, Counternarratives and Public Support for War: The Dutch government's explanation of the Uruzgan mission and its influence on the Dutch Public* (Leiden University: Master Thesis, Campus The Hague, 2 February 2013), p. 13. Dimitriu bases himself on the work of A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin and L. Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Working paper (Centre for European Studies, 2012), http://newpolcom.rhul.ac.uk/storage/Forging%20the%20World%20Working%20Paper%202012.pdf.

the Big Bad Guys, the right to carry arms, the American Woman: liberated, wholesome, strong-minded and equal; absence of class, no embarrassment about money, philanthropy, democracy, the rule of law, free speech, excellence and technology, Silicon Valley and NASA – and Goodness. To be American is to be Good.[14]

Every nation, as an imagined community, has created its own patriotic myths – heroic, and romanticised versions of its glorious origins or past that are often at considerable variance with how serious historians understand it and how events really unfolded in the course of time. The same is also true for imagined nations that are no longer or not yet reality (and might never be). One such imagined community is the *Ummah*, the global nation of Muslim people in the world that al Qaeda claims to speak for.[15] It stands to reason that the world's 1.5 billion Muslims are probably as divided as the 2.1 billion Christians.[16] Yet the desire to bring them together and make them one people under one caliphate exists in many Muslim minds, not just those who turn to al Qaeda for pursuing this dream.[17]

As Corman has pointed out, "[n]arratives are powerful resources for influencing target audiences"; they offer an alternative form of rationality deeply rooted in culture, which can be used to interpret and frame local events and to strategically encourage particular kinds of personal action".[18] Their narrative power is derived from the fact that the story "hangs together" well and "rings true" for the targeted audience.[19] Al Qaeda builds its political narrative on the religious tradition of Islam, appropriating and transforming key elements from the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, from Mohammed's life story and from the early history of Islam for its own ideological purposes.[20] Embedding salafist and jihadist Islamism in the Islamic tradition gives al Qaeda's narrative an apparent justification and unique appeal. At the same time, it gives it a degree of invulnerability: any attack on it can be portrayed as an attack on Islam itself, rather than as an effort of debunking an eclectic patchwork of cherry-picked elements from sources considered sacred.[21]

There is another instrument aside from the myths and religious symbolism that al Qaeda uses – the ancient art of rhetoric.[22] According to Aristotle, rhetoric uses three intertwined techniques of persuasion: (a) *Logos*: using rational argumentation; (b) *Ethos*: creating a trustworthy, authentic image, and (c) *Pathos*: manipulating the emotions of the addressed audience.

Rhetoric is also one instrument of what Joseph Nye has termed "soft power". Rather than brute violence and forceful coercion ("hard power"), soft power uses inducements and persuasion. In the words of Nye, "[s]oft

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[14] Ahdaf Soueif, "The Function of Narrative in the 'War on Terror'", in Chris Miller (Ed.), *War on Terror* (The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 2006), p. 29.

[15] Strangely enough, neither "nation" nor "people" are entities with a clear international legal definition, contrary to the concept of "state" which is defined precisely. That lacuna has made the principle of self-determination such a contested issue.

[16] In this regard, Allison Pargeter has rightly noted: "The Western media and countless commentators have taken to referring to Muslims as if they are one single block with the same aspirations and preoccupations, who can simply be conveniently divided into 'moderates' and 'extremists'. […] Likewise trying to boil down Islam to develop one accepted version of 'moderate' Islam – something that some European policymakers and analysts have suggested as a means of nipping extremism in the bud – is clearly absurd and belies the struggles that have been going on for generations in the Islamic world over what represents 'true' Islam". Alison Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad: Radical Islam in Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p. 204.

[17] Cf. Reza Pankhurst, *The Inevitable Caliphate? A History of the Struggle for Global Islamic Union, 1924 to the Present* (London: Hurst, 2013).

[18] Steven R. Corman, "Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication" (2011), p. 42.

[19] H.L. Goodall Jr., *Counter Narrative* (2010), p.131.

[20] "Islamist" as used here refers to "groups that advocate […] the use of Islam (and Sharia, or Islamic law) as the only basis for the legal and political system that governs the economic, social, and judicial mechanisms of the nation-state", in Zeyno Baran, "Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism in Europe: Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir – Allies or Enemies?", *Connections* 5, No. 3 (Winter 2006), p. 10.

[21] David Cook, "The Role of Islam as a Motivating Factor in Usama bin Ladin's Appeal within the Muslim World", in David G. Kamien, *The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook* (New York: McGraw-Hill 2006), pp. 37-51; Sudhanshu Sarangi and David Canter, "The Rhetorical Foundations of Militant Jihad", in David Canter (Ed.), *The Faces of Terrorism: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2009), p. 35.

[22] Bouchra Oualla, "Strategies of Argumentation in the Propaganda of Jihad: The Analysis of a Jihadi YouTube Video", pp. 121-140, in Rüdiger Lohlker (Ed.), *Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representation* (Vienna: University Press, 2013), pp. 123-124.

power rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others".[23] In his seminal book on the subject, Nye quotes former House of Representatives speaker Newt Gingrich's observation about the Bush administration's approach in Iraq, "[t]he real key is not how many enemy do I kill. The real key is how many allies do I grow. And that is a very important metric that they just don't get".[24] In September 2013, in a leader to its title story "The New Face of Terror", *The Economist* noted that, "[f]or all the West's supposedly huge soft power, it has been feeble in its efforts to win over moderate Muslims in the most important battle of all, the battle of ideas".[25]

To win allies, you need an attractive product. In al Qaeda's case it is not its firepower but its narrative that attracts young people. This led Frank Ciluffo, a former White House Homeland Security official to confess, "[w]e've been fighting the wrong battle. The real center of gravity of the enemy is their narrative".[26] What, then, is al Qaeda's narrative?

4. Al Qaeda's Single Narrative

Al Qaeda's ideology is expressed in its "single narrative", a unifying framework of explanations that provides its followers with an emotionally satisfying portrayal of the world in which they live and their role in it, offering them a sense of identity and giving meaning to their lives.[27] To gain an understanding of al Qaeda's narrative, it is necessary to consult the ideological writings and propaganda statements of al Qaeda, as contained in, for instance, the documentary collections edited by Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli or the ones of Raymond Ibrahim, Bruce Lawrence and Robert Marlin.[28] In the introduction to his collection of the writings of Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri, Raymond Ibrahim noted that:

> [M]ost of their writings and speeches neatly fit into two genres – religious exegesis, meant to motivate and instruct Muslims, and propagandist speeches, aimed at demoralising the West and inciting Muslims to action. […] In certain respects, these two genres agree over certain grievances: that the West is oppressive and unjust toward Islam, heedlessly or out of malice spilling the blood of innocent Muslims all around the world; that the West supports ruthless and dictatorial regimes in the Islamic

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[23] Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), p. 9; Brigitte Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (3rd Ed.) (New York: Penguin Academics, 2010), p. 184.

[24] Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. ix.

[25] "The New Face of Terror", *The Economist,* 26 September 2013, http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21586832-west-thought-it-was-winning-battle-against-jihadist-terrorism-it-should-think-again.

[26] A. Ripley, "Reverse Radicalism", *TIME*, 13 March 2008, http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1720049_1720050_1722062,00.html.

[27] A.P. Schmid, "The Importance of Countering al Qaeda's 'Single Narrative'", in E.J.A.M. Kessels (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (The Hague: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2010), p. 47. "The 'single' in 'single narrative' refers to the fact that al Qaeda has merged a number of grievances existing in the Arab and Muslim world into a consolidated body and attributed the causes for diverse woes that affect Islam to outside actors, namely 'Crusaders and Jews' and local rulers allegedly serving their purposes". Paul Thomas argues that "The 'single narrative' has its roots in the political reaction to the failure of secular, socialist-tingled nationalism in the Muslim and Arab worlds, and to the energetic propagation internationally of a very literal and conservative, even reactionary, form of Islam by oil-rich dictatorships keep to protect their privileged positions". Paul Thomas, *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism: Failing to Prevent* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), p. 136.

[28] Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (Eds.), *Al-Qaida Texte des Terrors* (München: Piper, 2006); Raymond Ibrahim, *The al Qaeda Reader,* (New York: Doubleday 2007); Bruce Lawrence (Ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005); Lorry M. Fenner, Mark E. Stout and Jessica L. Goldings (Eds.), *Ten Years Later: Insights on al Qaeda's Past and Future through Captured Records* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2011); Robert O. Marlin (Ed.), *What Does al Qaeda Want? Unedited Communiques* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004); see also, Jim Lacey (Ed.), *The Canons of Jihad. Annapolis* (Naval Institute Press, 2008); Karen J. Greenberg (Ed.), *Al Qaeda Now: Understanding Today's Terrorists* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005). Al Qaeda uses a variety of media to spread its message, e.g. the glossy magazine *Inspire*, issued by al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. It makes also ample use of social media such as YouTube and Twitter, either directly or through supporters that are media-savvy and relay its communiques.

world; that the West is responsible for the Israeli occupation of Palestine; that the West has killed one million Iraqi children; and so on.[29]

Al Qaeda, in its reiterations of its chief message "the West is at war with Islam", has used elements of Islamic myths and symbolism in its rhetoric to create a narrative that builds on the notion that Muslims have been humiliated, that it is partly their own fault because they have listened to leaders who have colluded with, or have taken their orders from, the West and that there is one way of redemption through faith and sacrifice.[30] Lost dignity, respect, honour and glory can be regained by following the course proposed by al Qaeda, the self-appointed defender of Islam, which it claims is under systematic attack from "Zionist Christian Crusaders". The structural elements of al Qaeda's narrative to inspire believers to join its global *jihad* are these:

1. There is a *basic grievance* – the Muslim world is in chaos and a Zionist-Christian alliance is held responsible for most, if not all, that is wrong in Muslim countries and the way Muslims are humiliated, discriminated and/or (mis-) treated in the world. The collusion of corrupt Muslim rulers with the West keeps Muslims impotent; these rulers and those who follow them have turned away from True Islam by allowing Western ways in Muslim lands.
2. There is a *vision of the good society*: a single political entity – the Caliphate – that replaces corrupt, apostate rulers under Western influence, by rule under *sharia* (Islamic Law) wherever there are Muslims so that Allah's will be done and order is restored; and
3. There is a *path from the grievance to the realisation of the vision*: the eradication, in a violent jihad , led by a heroic vanguard (al Qaeda) to get rid of Western influence in the Muslim world.[31] However, great sacrifices are needed to turn the tables. Every true Muslim has to engage in a holy jihad against the invading Crusaders to defend the faith and the Muslim lands from enemies near and far in order to achieve victory and humiliate the oppressors.[32]

The single narrative of al Qaeda draws in part support from traditional Arab and Muslim cultural narratives and ideas but gives them a spin that is new and not sanctioned by common interpretations of Islam which, for instance, disapprove of suicide or attacks against women and children. Additional elements of al Qaeda's narrative are:

- Suicide/martyrdom (*shahid*) operations as an asymmetric tactic of warfare against enemies are legitimate;
- No distinction is made between civilian and military targets in the fight against enemies;

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[29] Raymond Ibrahim, *The al Qaeda Reader* (2007), pp. xii, 2 and 5-6; R. Briggs and S. Feve characterise the messaging embedded in extremist products as "a mix of ideological, political, moral, religious and social narratives, based on a range of real or imagined grievances. Mixing historical and political facts with half-truths, lies and conspiracy theories, these messages often convey simplistic argumentation which promotes thought-processes that include black-and-white thinking, de-sensitisation, dehumanisation, distancing of the other, victimisation and calls to activism and militancy", R. Briggs and S. Feve *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), p. 9.

[30] M. Hafez, "Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, p. 99.; Frazer Egerton, *Jihad in the West: The Rise of Militant Salafism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), pp. 132-134; Melissa Finn, *Al Qaeda and Sacrifice: Martyrdom, War and Politics (*London: Pluto Press, 2012).

[31] Al Qaeda's understanding of jihad is maximalist. In the words of one of its propagandists, the late Anwar al-Awlaki, "jihad here, is not just picking up a gun and fight. Jihad is broader than that. What is meant by jihad in this context is a total effort by the *ummah* to fight and defeat its enemy. Rasulullah [Mohammed] says: Fight the disbelievers with yourself, your wealth and your tongues. It is what Clausewitz would refer to as 'total war' but with the Islamic rules of engagement. It is a battle in the battlefield and a battle for the hearts and minds of the people". Anwar al-Awlaki, "A Question About the Method to Establishing Khilafah"; 29 August 2008, www.anwar-alawlaki.com; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "The Development of al Qaeda's Media Strategy and its Role in Mobilizing Western Muslims"*,* in Lorry M. Fenner, Mark E. Stout and Jessica L. Goldings (Eds.), *Ten Years Later: Insights on al Qaeda's Past and Future Through Captured Records* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2011), p. 175

[32] Alex P. Schmid, "Importance of Countering al Qaeda's 'Single Narrative'", in E.J.A.M. Kessels (Ed.), 2010, p. 47; Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Transnational Violence in the Persian Gulf,* Workshop Summary Report, 20-21 April 2006 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2006), p. 8; H. L. Goodall Jr., *Counter-Narrative* (2010), p. 8.

- The killing of other Muslims is justified for their complicity with the West or with "apostate" Muslim governments which stand in the way of introducing strict sharia law and an Islamic state;
- *Takfir,* or the excommunication of Muslims for failure to apply sharia law or failure to accept the beliefs and practices deemed right by jihadists;
- The pursuit of jihad (in the sense of holy war) as an *individual* obligation for every true Muslims;
- A clash of civilisations between the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world (*Dar-al-Harp*) exists until sharia rule is established everywhere; and
- Establishment of a government ruled by sharia as a stepping stone to a sharia-based world government.[33]

The strength of al Qaeda's single narrative is that much of it is grounded in grievances and perceptions that many Muslims – perhaps even a majority in some countries – actually believe to be true.[34] In that sense, it is a successful application of what Harold Lasswell calls the "management of collective attitudes by manipulation of significant symbols".[35] The narrative incorporates pre-existing elements of twentieth century anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism, which have been nurtured by official educational materials prepared by some Arab governments, Soviet Cold War propaganda, anti-Western sermons by Muslim clerics as well as other elements – including the Israeli governments' intransigence in its dealings with Palestinians.

Al Qaeda's narrative has reached out beyond the Arab world and even found a resonant mass among many Muslims who, for political, economic or educational reasons, emigrated to the West where they, like many other immigrants, encountered varying degrees of non-acceptance and discrimination.[36] While the majority of Muslims in Western diasporas integrated well and even assimilated Western values, a minority of young Muslims of the second and third generations in Western countries, falling between two cultures, reject the host culture and became vulnerable to al Qaeda's propaganda, with some of them embracing the extreme salafi jihadist narrative. Often, they are radicalised by veterans from the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets and inspired by martyr videos of Muslim sacrifice in theatres of war from Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan, which are found on the internet.

While the single narrative is a fantastic black-and-white simplification of a complex historical and contemporary situation, it cannot be dismissed as unrealistic. "If men define situations as real they are real in their consequences", the Thomas theorem in sociology postulated more than eighty years ago and it has, by and large, stood the test of time, especially in the variation proposed by Paul Watzlawick: "What is real is what people treat as real".[37]

It is a fact that the single narrative plays an important role in preparing the path for vulnerable young Muslims towards terrorism, by:

1. Identifying a problem as not just a misfortune, but an injustice;
2. Constructing a moral justification for violence (religious, ideological, political);
3. Blaming the victims ("it is their own fault");
4. Dehumanising the victims through symbols and language ("pigs and apes");
5. Displacing responsibility (God or other authorities ordered the individual to commit the act of violence) or diffusing responsibility (the group, not the individual, is responsible); and

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[33] Alex P. Schmid, "Countering Al-Qaeda's 'Single Narrative'" (2010), pp. 47-48.

[34] Ayman al-Zawahiri, the main ideologue and current leader of al Qaeda listed this in late 2001 as one of the organisation's achievements: "A clear thought and ideology. The Islamic movement has largely succeeded in clarifying the main elements of its ideology, relying on strong evidence from the Koran, the prophet's tradition, and the respected scholars. This provided it with a solid base on which it hoisted its banner, which everyday attracts new advocates, God willing", in Foreign Broadcasting Information Service (FBIS)-NESD-2002-0108.

[35] Harold. D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927), p. 627; Diana Rieger et. al. (2013), p. 6.

[36] Frazer Egerton, *Jihad in the West* (2011), p. 135.

[37] W. I. Thomas, *The Child in America: Behaviour Problems and Programs* (2nd ed) (New York: Knopf, 1928), pp. 571-572; H L. Goodall Jr., *Counter-Narrative* (2010), p. 75.

6. Misconstruing or minimising harmful effects (by using euphemisms or by contrasting one's own atrocities with other acts by the enemy which are said to be much worse).[38]

Against this background, the "battle of ideas" with the myth-making single narrative of jihadists needs to be taken seriously.

The pen and the sword, *da'wa* and jihad, go hand in hand in al Qaeda's thinking. Yet, the main emphasis is on the ideological component. Bin Laden, in a communication to the leader of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, wrote: "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90 percent of the total preparation for the battles".[39] In a similar way, Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, wrote to Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's (former) leader in Iraq, "I say to you: that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah".[40] In the information and influence warfare, al Qaeda and its affiliates make full use of the possibilities offered by the internet (ironically, the beginnings of which were developed for the Pentagon), with jihadist websites and social media outlets provided in many languages. These are professionally maintained, constantly updated and have become a hallmark of the organisation and, in particular, some of its most prominent affiliates like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.[41]

Al Qaeda had propagated its single narrative for more than two decades by the time the Arab Spring arrived in early 2011. The mass-based, initially non-violent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya at first seemed to make al Qaeda's narrative that violent jihad is the only solution to the desolate situation of many Muslims obsolete. Like almost everyone else, the leaders of al Qaeda were taken by surprise by this "Arab Awakening".[42] Subsequently, as the going was getting tougher and violence became more dominant, al Qaeda tried to claim the uprisings for itself and used the breakdown of law and order to push for its own revolution, first in Libya and Yemen and later in Syria and Egypt. There, the overthrow of the democratically elected president Mohammed Mursi seemed to re-confirm al Qaeda's claim that democracy is no alternative for jihad to deal with the problems that were facing Muslim societies. Today, al Qaeda's narrative is, by and large, back on track and while the al Qaeda core in Waziristan has been decimated by drone strikes and its figurehead Bin Laden killed by a US commando operation, its ideology and propaganda narrative are alive and influence the perceptions and behaviour of thousands of young Muslims in an arc spanning from the Philippines in the East to Mali in the West and reaching also into Western Muslim diasporas in the global North.

Many rebellious young Muslims – not just drifters, misfits and losers but also men and women with an advanced education and a middle class background – appear to be susceptible to al Qaeda's diagnosis of the source of problems in the Muslim world. They subscribe to al Qaeda's call that there is a need to act and they accept the notion that violence in the form of jihad is the only feasible solution since the "near" and "far" enemies are thought to understand only the language of blood, that is, terrorist violence.[43] Largely due to the

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[38]Adapted from A. Dalgaard-Nielson, *Studying violent radicalisation in Europe II: The potential contribution of socio-psychological and psychological approaches,* Danish Institute for International Studies, Working Paper, No. 2008/03 (2008), p. 10.

[39] Document AFGP-2002-600321 in Harmony Database, US Department of Defense; Donald Holbrook, "Al Qaeda Communiqués by Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri: A Chronology", in Alex P. Schmid, The Routledge Handbook (2011), p. 280.

[40] Ayman al Zawahiri, *Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi*, Federation of American Scientists (Globalsecurity.com, 2005), http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm.

[41] Daniel Byman, *The Five Front War: The Better Way to Fight Global Jihad. Hoboken* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2008), pp. 160-169; Nico Prucha, "Die Stimme des Dschihad (The Voice of Jihad) Sawat al-gihad: al-Qaidas erstes", Online-Magazin (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovak, 2010); David Kilcullen, author of *The Accidental Guerrilla* (2009), noted that, "[t]he information side of al Qaeda's operation is primary; the physical is merely a tool to achieve a propaganda result [...]. Contrast this with our approach: we typically design physical operations first, then craft supporting information operations to explain or justify our actions". Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media: The post-al Qaeda generation* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 103-104.

[42] Donald Holbrook, "Al Qaeda's Response to the Arab Spring", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, No. 6 (2012), pp. 4-20.

[43] T. K. Samuel, *Reaching the Youth: Countering the Terrorist Narrative* (Kuala Lumpur, Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2012) pp. 38-51. For the "blood" metaphor, see Edgar O' Balance, *Language of Violence: The Blood Politics of Terrorism San Rafael* (Calif.: Presidio Press, 1979).

apparent persuasiveness of its narrative, al Qaeda now has sympathisers, supporters or operatives in dozens of countries, with no turn of the tide in sight. In an October 2013 title story on al Qaeda, *The Economist* concluded: "Al Qaeda itself may be divided and in some places depleted. It may be shunned by some with similar ideologies, and its affiliates may increasingly ignore its aging leadership. But the Salafi jihadist view of the world that al Qaeda promotes and fights for has never had greater traction".[44]

5. US and UK Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives

Until now, most well-publicised governmental and government-sponsored efforts to develop counter-narratives have been undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK) and the US.[45] Hence, this section will concentrate on describing efforts in these two countries.[46]

After the attacks of 11 September 2001, the American government sought to develop its own narrative to counter the appeal of al Qaeda's narrative in the Muslim world. The Bush administration first tried, among other approaches, to do so by promoting a democratic narrative for the Arab world. The idea was that democratisation would put the jihadists on the defensive and separate the minority of militant salafists and extremist jihadists from the majority of moderate, mainstream Muslims.[47] The problems this approach encountered became obvious rather soon: on the one hand, Arab autocrats – whether military or royal – showed little inclination to voluntarily transfer their power to the people. On the other hand, democratic elections could bring to power extremist political movements that would put an end to an emerging democracy ("one man, one vote, one time") – movements whose leaders would take positions contrary to American interests in the region, as happened with the landslide victory of Hamas in Gaza in January 2006.[48] In addition to these stark facts, there is the well-known phenomenon that democracies, especially fragile ones transitioning from authoritarian systems of government, are rather more vulnerable to terrorist subversion due to the abuse of newly found freedoms by those bent to strive for a revolutionary or theocratic state.[49] Furthermore, there was the growing problem of counter-productive counter-terrorism measures: the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and their media-coverage (specifically in relation to the detention facilities Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib) produced blowback effects that increased the credibility gap between the American ideological strategic communication messages and the perception of American actions by affected populations on the ground.

During the Cold War, the West could credibly "sell" its more successful economic system, its democratic institutions and its relatively superior human rights observance record via platforms such as *Radio Free Europe* and *Radio Liberty* to captive audiences behind the Iron Curtain. This situation had changed by the beginning of the 21st century also due to the fact that control over mass communications got lost with the rise of multiple non-Western TV stations and the ungoverned space of the internet. At the same time, the economic crisis, which hit much of the Western world in 2008, did much to destroy the appeal of the so-called "Washington consensus"

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[44] "The Unquenchable Fire", *The Economist* (28 Sept. 2013), http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21586834-adaptable-and-resilient-al-qaeda-and-its-allies-keep-bouncing-back-unquenchable-fire.
[45] R. Briggs, and S. Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), p. 7.
[46] The counter-narrative efforts of other countries, e.g. China and Russia, have received little or no attention among (Western) researchers. Michael Boyle (LaSalle University), in a forthcoming edited volume on non-Western responses to terrorism, is likely to address this.
[47] Promoting democracy was only one, and not the most important, element in the Bush strategy. The main tactics involved demonstrating the futility of al Qaeda's campaign through using force, showing resolve, demonstrating capability, intimidating state sponsors, visibly hardening defences and showing success. Joshua Alexander Geltzer, *US Counter-Terrorism Strategy and al Qaeda: Signalling and the terrorist world-view* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 31. Geltzer (p. 62) concluded that "Democracy-promotion [...] was aimed at countering the grievances expressed in al Qaeda's narrative, even as the Bush team's rhetoric refused to acknowledge those grievances themselves".
[48] Daniel Byman, *The Five Front War* (2008), pp. 160-69.
[49] Alex P. Schmid, "Terrorism and Democracy", in Alex P. Schmid and Ronald D. Crelinsten (Eds.), *Western Responses to Terrorism* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), pp. 14-25.

development model. At the same time the authoritarian Chinese economic development model gained in persuasiveness in the non-Western world.

One of al Qaeda goals of the "Manhattan raid" of 9/11 had been, in Jessica Stern's words, "to turn America's response to the September 11 attack into a war between Islam and the West".[50] To counter al Qaeda's claim that Islam was under attack and that the US was hostile to Muslims, the Bush administration hired, one month after 11 September 2001, Charlotte Beer from a Madison Avenue public relations firm and made her Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. In line with her marketing approach to win Muslim "hearts and minds", a series of advertisements under the heading "Shared Values Initiative" was launched in Pakistan and other Muslim-dominated countries. As one analyst described three of its products, "[t]he initiative showed images of an American Muslim and his family living comfortably at home, praying openly, and otherwise enjoying America while practicing their religion freely. Other advertisements featured [...] a schoolteacher in Ohio who openly wears the hijab (a head covering worn to denote modesty); and Farooq Mohammad, a fire-fighter in New York City."[51]

However, such Madison Avenue type of impression management campaigns showing moderate Muslims at peace in and with America proved to have little traction in the Middle East and South-East Asia compared to the images that would soon be broadcast from the war in Iraq. Ostensibly originating from the "Council of American Muslims for Understanding", it was easy also to guess that some of this type of messaging was in reality coming from the US government.

In 2005, the US Office of the Secretary of Defense sponsored a major international project entitled "Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism: Synthesizing Strategies Worldwide (CIST)". It brought together experts from governments and academia from many countries. The result was summarised in a volume on "The Ideological War on Terror", which offers eight policy considerations:

1. The first CIST policy consideration involves the need to accentuate ideological alternatives to extremist ideologies;
2. A second policy consideration involves focusing not just on the ideology but on the cultural aspects of the relationship between the actions of political extremists and the ways in which they use ideology to justify their efforts;
3. A third policy consideration involves actions taken to undercut the integrity of the extremist message;
4. A fourth policy consideration is for governments to eliminate the worst excesses of negative government, corruption, abuses and ill-advised policies which only serve to generate grievances, strengthen extremist critiques of government behaviour, polarize attitudes and enhance terrorists' legitimacy amongst a given population;
5. [A] fifth policy consideration is to focus on packaging and presentation matters associated with CIST activities;
6. A sixth policy consideration is to place CIST activities at the heart of broader counter-terrorism strategy;
7. A seventh and related policy consideration is to place intelligence and information at the heart of the CIST strategy;
8. An eight and last policy consideration is to increase international CIST cooperation by stressing that cooperation between governments is based on shared interests.[52]

These are reasonable propositions – but how many of them have been successfully implemented in the eight years since 2005? The elimination of "the worst excesses of negative government, corruption, abuses of

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[50] Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill (*New York: Ecco, 2003); J.A. Geltzer, *US Counter-Terrorism Strategy and al Qaeda* (2010), p. 82.
[51] Daniel Byman, *The Five Front War* (2008), p. 174.
[52] Graeme P. Herd and Anne Aldis, "Synthesizing Worldwide Experiences in Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism (CIST)", in Anne Aldis and Graeme P. Herd (Eds.), *The Ideological War on Terror: Worldwide Strategies for Counter-terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 245-49.

power and ill-advised policies" (point 4), for instance, has not made much headway in Afghanistan, Iraq or many other countries.

The British used a different public relations approach but encountered similar credibility problems. Frank Furedi noted: "British public diplomacy relies on loyal moderate Muslim leaders to curb the extremists. According to the former British Foreign Minister Lord Triesman: 'International Islamic scholars are undertaking a series of roadshows to towns and cities with important Muslim communities to counter the extremist message'".[53]

The UK Home Office created a special unit, the Research, Information and Communication Unit (RICU), to counter the al Qaeda narrative, which an internal RICU document described as a combination of "fact, fiction, emotion and religion" that "manipulates discontent about local and international issues".[54] Tasked with challenging the "simple, flexible, and infinitely accommodating" al Qaeda narrative, the RICU report noted that "[t]he objective is not to dismiss 'grievances' but to undermine al Qaeda's position as their champion and violent extremism as their solution".[55]

How successful was the British approach? A study of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) concluded with regard to the UK's strategic communication efforts that, "[d]espite its elevated position in the most recent version of the UK's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST), online material [of al Qaeda] remains largely unchallenged operationally and ideologically. CONTEST continues to be nebulous and imprecise when it comes to countering online material, stating only that the government will 'endorse and facilitate the development of international online media hubs for the distribution of material that counters terrorist propaganda'".[56]

The efforts of the US, UK and other states in developing counter-narratives to al Qaeda's ideology have increased greatly in recent years. However, relatively few details about these are in the public domain. For instance, the Pentagon had a budget of no less than one billion dollars for fiscal year 2012 for "strategic communication".[57] But what exactly is meant by "strategic communication"? While no standardised definition of the term exists, here is a definition proposed by a British military practitioner of the art of trying to reach and change "hearts and minds" by often non-attributed messages: "A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables the understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour".[58]

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[53] Frank Furedi. *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (London: Continuum, 2007) p. 87.

[54] Alan Travis."Battle against al Qaeda Brand Highlighted in Secret Paper", *The Guardian*, 26 August 2008.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Benedict Wilkinson and Jack Barclay, *The Language of Jihad* (London: RUSI, 2011), p. 46.

[57] Philipp Holtmann. "Countering al Qaeda's 'Single Narrative'", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 141-44.

[58] Steve Tatham, "Understanding Strategic Communication" (2010), p. 19. Tatham added (p. 36): "Strategic communication is widely misunderstood. At best it is seen by the military as a developing term for media and information operations. At worst it is seen as spin and propaganda. The inarticulacy of both ignore what it is – an extremely powerful tool that may hold the key to the dilemma of 21st century conflict, the power of information and opinion and its ability to enable behavioral change". As to the aims of this "tool", we can turn to Fred T. Krawchuk who described the objectives of strategic communication as
  - Address underlying causes of the insurgency;
  - Dissuade the local populace from supporting the insurgency;
  - Create new attractors that will draw support away from the insurgency;
  - Discourage insurgents;
  - Tarnish the insurgents' image;
  - Disrupt recruitment;
  - Counter propaganda;
  - Build rapport with the local populace;
  - Help defeat threatening ideologies;
  - Reduce tensions and negative attitudes towards the US and its allies; Communicate themes of freedom, tolerance, justice, dignity, and opportunity, and match them with actions;
  - Develop and sustain the host nation's strategic communication and independent media capacities, so that a country or region with an insurgent threat can conduct these tasks successfully (ultimately, we want to communicate shared interests and concerns, not appear unilateral, and not force messages that make our allies and partners look like puppets of the U.S.);
  - Develop a responsive network of key communicators and subject matter experts (U.S. and foreign) to help develop, communicate, clarify, and amplify appropriate messages rapidly and effectively;

On a much more modest scale than the Pentagon, the US Department of State engages in "public diplomacy" to counter al Qaeda's narrative. It does so by playing with open cards, that is, not hiding the origin of its messaging efforts and not engaging in operational counter-terrorism programmes. Its Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) was established in 2010 under the Bureau for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs to coordinate government-wide foreign communication activities targeting the propaganda of al Qaeda, its affiliates and adherents.[59] As Michael Kraft and Edward Marks explain:

> A major theme of this effort focuses not only on the violent actions and human costs of terrorism, but also on positive narratives that can help dissuade those who may be susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment by terrorist organisations. One emphasis of the CSCC's work has been reorienting the Digital Outreach Team to place greater emphasis on challenging the purveyors of extremist messages online, in Arabic and Urdu. This has included producing original video content. The CSCC is intended to be a small, collaborative, interagency resource with a daily mission of providing the intellectual leadership necessary for countering terrorist ideology and extremist propaganda through coordinated messages. The mission and functions of CSCC were developed in response to needs identified by the defense, foreign policy, and intelligence communities. The effectiveness of the CSCC is dependent on its interagency staffing as well as drawing on expertise from across the entire government.[60]

How successful these efforts are is difficult to establish since, like other preventive efforts, if successful, the result is a non-event. Michael Scheuer, the former chief of the Central Intelligence Agency's Bin Laden unit from 1996 to 1999, who quit the US government services in 2004, has been cynical (but not too far off the mark) in his comments:

> Americans frankly have no hearts-and-minds product to sell that will get us a hearing or the benefit of the doubt in Islam's public square. […] Because bin Laden has successfully made U.S. foreign policy the center of the war of ideas, any Muslim who publicly argues that America should be given the benefit of the doubt is implicitly acquiescing in U.S. support for Israel, manipulation of oil prices, and support for Russia in Chechnya. This is the reason why Americans hear so few "moderate Muslim voices" opposing bin Laden and the Islamists; the moderates are out there and often do not approve of the Islamists' military actions, but they hate U.S. policies with just as much venom and passion as the Islamist, per polls by Pew, Gallup, BBC, and Zogby.[61]

While Scheuer has at times been dismissed as a disgruntled former government employee, there are many other voices that express similar sentiments in more guarded language.[62] To quote Robert Gates, the former US Secretary of Defence, it "is just plain embarrassing that al Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America. As one foreign diplomat asked a couple of years ago, 'How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?'".[63] In a similar vein, Hillary R.

-    Actively engage with journalists, writers, students, grass root leaders, NGOs, religious leaders, academics, opinion leaders, and think-tanks (U.S. and foreign).

See Fred T. Krawchuk, "Strategic Communication: An Integral Component of Counterinsurgency Operations", in *Connections* V, No. 3 (Winter 2006), pp. 39-40.

[59] See US Department of State, *Countering Violent Extremism*, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/programs/index.htm#CVE.

[60] Michael B. Kraft and Edward Marks, *U.S. Government Counterterrorism: A Guide to Who Does What* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2012), pp. 59-60.

[61] Michael Scheuer, *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2008), pp. 206-7.

[62] Michael Scheuer's [earlier] views were, ironically, endorsed by Bin Laden himself who said in 2007, "if you would like to know some of the reasons for your loss of your war against us, then read the book of Michael Scheuer in this regard", see J.A. Geltzer, *US Counter-Terrorism Strategy and al Qaeda* (2010), p. 71.

[63] Philip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media* (2011), p. 111; Brigitte L. Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (2010) p. 200. The diplomat in question was Kishore Mahbubani. Corman's answer to Mahbubani's question was "effective use of narrative"; see S.R. Corman, "Understanding the Role of Narrative" (2011), p. 43.

Clinton, then American Foreign Secretary, conceded in 2011 in a Senate Testimony, "[w]e are in an information war, and we are losing".[64]

On the British side, Sir David Omand, the former director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) and architect of the CONTEST (2003) British counter-terrorism strategy,[65] had noted already in 2005 that "[we] badly need a counter-narrative that will help groups exposed to the terrorist message make sense of what they are seeing around them".[66] The UK's revised Prevent strategy, made public in June 2011, included as one of its new objectives the task to "respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it", emphasising the "connection between extremist and terrorist ideologies".[67]

While the British "winning-hearts-and-minds" efforts were mainly directed at Pakistani and other Muslim diaspora populations in the UK, the American efforts target primarily Muslims in Muslim-dominated countries in the Middle East and South Asia. Especially after the ill-considered and non UN-sanctioned intervention in Iraq, this became an uphill battle and, at least until the start of the Obama presidency in 2009, a mission impossible.

With his speech at the Al-Azhar university in Cairo on 4 June 2009, the new American President, Barack Obama (whose father came from a Kenyan family that included generations of Muslims), hoped to initiate what he called in his speech "a new beginning between the US and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect". He reminded his audience of his earlier statement in Ankara, "that America is not – and never will be – at war with Islam", but promised to:

> [R]elentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security. Because we reject the same thing that people of all faiths reject: the killing of innocent men, women, and children. […] Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism – it is an important part of promoting peace. […] Indeed, faith should bring us together. That is why we are forging service projects in America that bring together Christians, Muslims, and Jews. That is why we welcome efforts like Saudi Arabian King Abdullah's Interfaith dialogue and Turkey's leadership in the Alliance of Civilizations.[68]

Public approval for President Obama soared in the first four months after his Cairo speech, with the percentage of Egyptians who were highly confident that the American President would do the right thing in international politics rising from 8 to 39 percent.[69] However, disappointments followed and opinions changed. By the summer of 2013, after the military coup in Egypt, the American President, who had tried to befriend the unpopular Mursi government, lost all the ground that was gained and the new Egyptian government turned to Russia instead.[70] Siding with the Muslim Brotherhood had been a bad idea for the Obama administration. However, the end of what looked first like a democratic experiment in Egypt and the return to only thinly veiled military rule appears to offer a renewed confirmation to al Qaeda's claim that political power in the Middle East can only be won by the sword.[71]

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[64] Michael Pizutto, *Alter-Messaging: The Credible, Sustainable Counterterrorism Strategy* (Goshen, Indiana: Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, May 2013),
http://www.globalct.org/publications/alter-messaging-the-credible-sustainable-counterterrorism-strategy/.

[65] Paul Thomas, *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism* (2012), p. 118.

[66] Frank Furedi, *Invitation to Terror* (2007), p. 90.

[67] Paul Thomas, *Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism* (2012), pp. 72-4.

[68] For the full text of president Obama's speech in Cairo, see *The New York Times*, 4 June 2009,
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all.

[69] P. Krause and S. Van Evera. *Public Diplomacy: Ideas for the War of Ideas,* Discussion Paper No. 09-10 (Belfer Center Paper Series, Harvard Kennedy School, September 2009); Bob de Graaff, "Defining 'Them' and 'Us'", in E.J.A.M. Kessels, (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (2010), p. 40.

[70] According to a Pew opinion poll, by June 2012 the American president's public opinion rating in Muslim majority countries, had dropped from 34 percent after the Cairo speech to 15 percent. Jerome Gygax and Nancy Snow, "9/11 and the Advent of Total Diplomacy: Strategic Communication as a Primary Weapon of War", *Journal of 9/11 Studies* 38 (July 2013), p. 28.

[71] The al Qaeda Manual, found in 2000 in the Manchester house of Anas al-Liby. FBI translation, p. BM-8; reproduced at
www.fas.org/irp/world/para/manualpart1_1.pdf.

American public diplomacy and its not-so-public strategic communication campaigns have been unable to significantly diminish the appeal of al Qaeda's singe narrative or, for that matter, improve the image of the US with significant sectors of Muslim public opinion in Muslim-majority countries. The idea that one can shape and manipulate public opinion abroad by mere messaging without changing unpopular aspects of actual foreign policies (e.g. in the Middle East) is no longer tenable in an age of multiple, and increasingly interactive, public and social media channels. The pictures and stories of American treatment of al Qaeda prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and Iraqi terrorist suspects in Abu Ghraib have undermined the American narrative of moral superiority. The seemingly unconditional US commitment to Israel's right-wing regime, its continued, though diminishing, dependence on Arab oil and gas, its close ties to the autocratic Saudi rulers whose Wahhabi strand of Islam shows uncomfortable similarities to militant salafism and America's long record of past policy mistakes in the Middle East – from the regime overthrows in Iran in 1953 and Iraq in 2003 to its imperial attitude during much of its post-World War II history – makes the winning of "hearts and minds" of Muslims in the Middle East incredibly difficult.

To this day, no credible, positive counter-narrative has been found to endear the US and some of its closest allies to Muslims in the Middle East. At the same time, the US-led Western military efforts to deal with Middle Eastern and South Asian terrorism have, on the strategic level, been no success. There are grave doubts whether Afghanistan will be stable after the withdrawal of ISAF troops in 2014 and not fall into the hands of the Taliban and its Pakistani military sponsors. The situation in Iraq has, after the American withdrawal, gotten almost as bad as in 2007 before the surge led by General Petraeus temporarily helped to turn the tables. While it is true that al Qaeda and its affiliates have not managed to take control of a single country for a prolonged period of time in the 25 years of their existence, they have extended their influence across the Maghreb and into Saharan Africa. Twelve years after 9/11, and after the US alone spent more than a trillion dollars in its "Global War on Terror" the situation is still fluid, with neither side winning and quite possibly both losing.[72] Much will depend on the outcome of the civil war in Syria, where, ironically, al Qaeda and the US oppose the same enemy, the secular Baathist regime of President Assad.

Against this background, the basic problem that the US continues to face beyond the Bush administration and into the second Obama administration is one of credibility with key target audiences.[73] Credibility, legitimacy and relevance are, however, key ingredients of narratives, as Richard Barrett, the former Co-ordinator of the United Nations (UN) al Qaeda/Taliban Monitoring Team, has reminded us.[74] Credibility is the result of an alignment between words and deeds: it comes into existence when politicians and soldiers say what they do and do what they say and are perceived to be honest.[75] Credibility gaps between declaratory policies and actual

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[72] Cf. Alex P. Schmid and Rashmi Singh, "Measuring Success and Failure in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: US Government Metrics of the Global War on Terror", pp. 33-61 in Alex P. Schmid and Garry F. Hindle (Eds.), *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (London: RUSI, 2009). This sombre conclusion is shared by other observers. Gilles Kepel, writing in 2009, concluded that "[t]he war between George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden has brought defeat to both protagonists and both of the great narratives which they proclaimed have been unmasked as fantasms […]. The neo-conservative program has failed just like the jihadist project"; see G. Kepel, *Die Spirale des Terrors. Der Weg des Islamismus vom 11. September bis in unsere Vorstädte* (München: Piper, 2009), p. 313 and 315 [translated from German, APS].

[73] The US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Michael G. Mullen, admitted in August 2009: "We hurt ourselves when our words don't align with our actions […]. In fact, I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems. Each time we fail to live up to our values or don't follow up on a promise, we look more and more like the arrogant Americans the enemy claims we are. Because what we are after in the end – or should be after – are actions that speak for themselves, that speak for us. What we need more than anything else is credibility"; see. M.G. Mullen, "From the Chairman, Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics", *Joint Force Quarterly* 55, 2009, p. 4; Bob de Graaff, "Defining 'Them' and 'Us'", in E.J.A.M. Kessels (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (2010), p. 44.

[74] "Terrorists depend for success on an ability to persuade their audience that their cause is legitimate, their threats are credible and that they are relevant to the political process they hope to influence. Legitimacy, credibility and relevance are also essential elements of successful counter-terrorism measures"; see Richard Barrett, "Legitimacy, Credibility and Relevance: The Tools of Terrorists and Counter-Terrorists", in Alex P. Schmid and Garry F. Hindle (Eds.), *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (London: RUSI, 2009), p. 8.

[75] Steven R. Corman and his colleagues have broken down "credibility", into three dimensions:
    (i)   Trustworthiness or sincerity: The extent to which the source is seen to truly believe what s/he is saying and to be reliable in only saying things s/he truly believes;

policies can only be reduced but not eliminated as long as there is not real transparency and accountability. This applies to both sides in a conflict and here the vulnerability of al Qaeda is at least as great, certainly after the death of Bin Laden.[76]

6. Non-Governmental Perspectives on Counter-Narratives

What ideas for counter-narratives have universities, think tanks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from civil society and local communities developed? The first observation that has to be made here is this: more often than not, funding of the research and activities as well as direction is, directly or indirectly, provided by governments. In a number of cases, non-governmental entities are also staffed by people who move between government and non-governmental entities. Their ideas and policy recommendations may or may not be picked up by governments and international organisations. On the whole, NGOs tend to enjoy a greater degree of independence and they are generally less burdened by exigencies of political correctness and party politics – but most of them are still dependent on government funding which in some cases might impact negatively on their credibility and authenticity.

In the following, some examples of their suggestions regarding counter-narratives are briefly sketched; a more exhaustive search would probably provide more.

6.1 Georgetown University

Few universities are linked closer to government (and the intelligence community) than Georgetown University in Washington, DC, with some of the top American experts on terrorism working there. One of them, Daniel Byman, argued in his book *The Five Front War: The Better Way to Fight Global Jihad* that rather than trying to sell the US to the Muslim world, the focus should be on destroying public sympathy, especially among Muslim youth, towards al Qaeda and related jihadist groups. He suggested that "[o]ur goal is not to be loved; it is to make the jihadists hated".[77]

He therefore proposed "going negative" about al Qaeda – an approach that has the advantage of gaining the backing of nearly all governments in the Middle East and North Africa since these are all threatened by al Qaeda and its affiliates. To some extent, this approach is already implemented. The former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, put it this way: "If they put up a video which talks about how terrible Americans are, we put up a video, you know, how terrible they are".[78]

Exposing the inherent weaknesses of al Qaeda's violent actions on the ground makes eminent sense. While al Qaeda can rely on a certain degree of invulnerability on the ideological level due to the fact that its narrative is based on familiar Islamic themes, the actual record of behaviour of Islamist jihadists in practice is very vulnerable when their lofty professions are measured against their actual performance. While, for instance, professing to fight Jews and the Crusaders, there is convincing empirical evidence that more than 80 percent of

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(ii)   Competence or expertise: The extent to which the source is seen as qualified or knowledgeable to make the arguments being made;

(iii)   Goodwill: The extent to which the source is seen as having the best interests of the audience at heart.

They add: "Judgments about credibility are affected by characteristics of the source, message, audience, and medium, and efforts that ignore one or more of these are unlikely to be effective" see Steven R. Corman, Aaron Hess and Z.S. Justus, *Credibility in the Global War on Terrorism: Strategic Principles and Research Agenda* (Phoenix: Arizona State University, Consortium for Strategic Communication, Report No. 0603, 9 June 2006), pp. 7-8, http://csc.asu.edu/2006/06/09/credibility-in-the-global-war-on-terrorism/.

[76] Bin Laden's personal credibility was, as Dipak Gupta has pointed out, based on the fact that, "[c]oming from the son of one of the wealthiest families, living an ascetic life, waging war against injustice, bin Laden cut a God-like image in the minds of many in the Arab/Muslim world. These images, often carefully chosen by al Qaeda, gave his messages an immense and immediate credibility"; see Dipak Gupta, "Tracking the Spread of Violent Extremism", in Laurie Fenstermacher and Todd Leventhal (Eds.), (2011), p. 48.

[77] Daniel Byman, *The Five Front War (2008)*, p. 190.

[78] Ibid.

the thousands of victims of al Qaeda have, in fact, been Muslims – a realisation that is only slowly beginning to sink in with many people in Arab and Muslim countries.[79]

Wherever al Qaeda-linked jihadists have exercised temporary local control (as did the Taliban in most of Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001), the human suffering record has been disastrous. The ideology of jihadist movements predetermines to some extent abuses of non-believers and heretic civilians – not mentioning the subjugation of women in general.[80] The record of "achievements" of al Qaeda and its affiliates includes many both arbitrary and wanton individual killings, summary executions sometimes preceded by kangaroo trials, draconic punishments, including torture and amputations, the use of brain-washed and misled children as involuntary suicide bombers, poisoning and shooting of girls seeking education, as well as denial of access to health care and Western food aid. Such gross human rights violations have been reported in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Mali, Somalia and Syria. Practices like the flogging and stoning of civilians for drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes or listening to music on a cell phone have made jihadists loathed by common people from the Swat valley in Pakistan to the deserts of Mali. They are rejected by the very Muslims the jihadists claim to free from injustices and suppression.[81] If deeds would always speak louder than words, the misdeeds and crimes of al Qaeda-inspired international jihadists who attempt to impose their theocratic agenda on local populations alone would form the strongest counter-narrative – in line with Byman's argument to go negative on al Qaeda.

Yet such a counter-narrative has to be told by credible voices, especially surviving innocent Muslim victims and religious authorities, to be believed and accepted as truth by relevant audiences. Victim and survivor voices need not only be heard, but ought to be amplified.[82] The gap between al Qaeda's self-styled propaganda image of fearless fighters in defence of Islam and the reality as experienced by surviving victims is an area where much more can be done in terms of information campaigns and influence warfare.

The underlying idea is that if the terrorists lose the support of those they claim to fight for, they will no longer be able to find new recruits. With no new supply of would-be terrorists from radical milieus around them their morale is bound to falter. This approach is based on the insight that the key target audience for counter-narratives cannot be the radicalised terrorists themselves – their fanaticism and closed minds make most of them unreachable for reasoned argument and persuasion before they end up in prison where they have finally time to reflect. The target audiences have to be those who sympathise or already actively support them – either by acts of omission or commission. This includes "moderate" Muslims who do not speak up against the extremists, either out of cowardice, justified fear of reprisals or tacit support for the goals if not the methods of jihadi terrorists.

6.2 Consortium for Strategic Communication (CSC)

In academia, the Arizona State University-based Consortium for Strategic Communication (CSC) has been one of the foremost institutions to identify and counter extremist narratives, working on the topic since 2005 with the help of very substantial grants from the US defence establishment. Its researchers have adopted a sophisticated understanding as to what communication means in an interconnected but culturally diverse world:

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[79] Robin Wright, *The Islamists are Coming. The Middle East: They've Arrived* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 23 August 2012), http://www.wilsoncenter.org/islamists/home?utm_source=newsletterandutm_medium=emailandutm_campaign=ww_08_23_12.

[80] An analysis of important jihadist writings by Sudhanshu Sarangi and David Canter clearly established that al Qaeda has little to offer for women, non-Muslims, and democrats – together the vast majority of mankind. The religious convictions of militant jihadists contain, inter alia, elements like these:
- Rule by "sharia" in the entire world;
- A break with all existing or past forms of man-made systems;
- Conversion of non-believers or asking them to accept an inferior citizen status (if they agree to neither, killing them would be justified on the grounds of faith alone);
- Women are inherently less favoured by God and are fundamentally seductive, so they must be segregated and limitations imposed on the interaction between sexes to maintain society's moral fabric.

See S. Sarangi and D. Canter, "The Rhetorical Foundations of Militant Jihad" (2009), p. 35.

[81] Aaron Y. Zelin, "Al Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS (Part II)", *Policy Watch* 2138, 11 September 2013, http://washin.st/14LTvkC.

[82] For an example, see ICCT's Victims' Voices project at http://icct.nl/activities/projects/victims-voices.

"Communication is a complex process of interpreting one-another's actions and making attributions about thoughts, motivations, and intentions".[83]

One of the CSC's products is the book *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (2011), with which Jeffry R. Halverson, H.L. Goodall Jr. and Steven R. Corman provided, among other things, greater conceptual clarity. They have also taken a fresh look at ideology and discovered four functions of it. These are:

1. Turning socially constructed, politically-motivated, and fluid ideas into taken for granted assumptions, beliefs and meanings that make them seem fixed, objective, and "naturally occurring" – which they label "*naturalising*";
2. Denying or hiding contradictions in on-going systems of meaning, making them seem to be seamless, coherent, and unified worldviews – which they term "*obscuring*";
3. Presenting the interests and concerns of those in power as the interests of all group members – which they term "*universalising*"; and
4. Creating rules and resources in a social system that preserves the ideology – which they term "*structuring*". [84]

Based on this, they came up with illuminating insights:

> We advocate a different view of ideology, as a system of ideas about how things are, or ought to be, that circulates in social discourse. This is a more practical view because it treats ideology not as an idea stuck in someone's head, but as something that is subject to influence through strategic communication. To be effective in these efforts we must understand culture and narrative, and have a clear grasp of what ideology does […] we can see that the way to resist ideology is to interfere with its functions. To undermine *naturalizing* we can focus on challenging assumptions, beliefs, and meanings behind an ideology. To fight *obscuring* we can target contradictions, pushing them into the open. To target *universalizing* we can engage subgroups and their leaders, politicizing the differences in interests that ideology tries to smooth over. And to resist *structuring* we can place stress on the structures and/or promote alternatives that might replace, undermine, or circumvent them.[85]

These are original insights that have practical implications for the construction of counter-narratives.

While CSC's earlier research utilised social science and humanities approaches, its most recent work investigates the neurobiology of narrative comprehension and explores the connection between narrative and persuasion, employing neuro-imaging of the human brain to discover the neural networks involved in narrative persuasion.[86] This is certainly a different way of looking at the problem. However, its practical application in the short-term is unlikely and, in the long term, might open the door to brain influencing techniques that are scary to say the least.

There are other ways academic thinking can be helpful to counter al Qaeda's narrative. Bin Laden has portrayed the US as a "paper tiger",[87] using as examples the fast US military retreats from Lebanon and Somalia in 1984 and 1993 respectively, after having met local resistance and incurred casualties. Al Qaeda also takes past guerrilla campaigns as examples of how superior forces can be defeated by apparently weaker, but more determined forces. However, the evidence for guerrilla insurgencies (much of it derived from de-colonisation struggles) does not apply to groups that employ only, or mainly, terrorist tactics (which are not permitted under

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[83] Halverson, Goodall Jr. and Corman, *Master Narratives* (2011); Steven R. Corman, Angela Trethewey and Bud Goodall, *A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas: From Simplistic Influence to Pragmatic Complexity* (Phoenix: Arizona State University: Consortium for Strategic Communication, 3 April 2007, Report No. 0701), p. 9.

[84] Angela Trethewey, Steven R. Corman and Bud Goodall, *Out of their Heads and Into Their Conversation: Countering Extermist Ideology* (Phoenix: Arizona State University: Consortium for Strategic Communication, 14 September 2009, Report No. 0902), quoted from Executive Summary.

[85] Ibid; emphasis added by author.

[86] See CSC's website at http://csc.asu.edu/projects/.

[87] Michael Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden* (Oxford: University Press, 2011), p. 90.

international humanitarian law). Max Abrahms looked at 125 violent sub-state campaigns – roughly half of them guerrilla and the other half terrorist in nature – and found that "terrorist campaigns against civilian targets are significantly less effective than guerrilla campaigns against military targets at inducing government concessions".[88] While terrorist coercion can achieve tactical process successes (e.g. obtain ransom money or the release of prisoners), these are largely ineffective tactics for achieving strategic outcome goals.[89] This is a lesson worth remembering both for al Qaeda and its opponents.

6.3 Research and Development Corporation (RAND)

While the Bush administration enhanced the fear of al Qaeda by its over-reaction, Brian M. Jenkins, who started research on terrorism with the Santa Monica-based RAND organisation as early as 1972 and created the first database on terrorism, proposed a very different angle for America's counter-narrative. Jenkins argues that America's narrative should be one of:

> [A] nation of self-reliant, tough folks […] it is a basically tough country with a lot of resolve, a tradition of self-reliance – and so you build a narrative on that, a narrative that is aimed at reducing the terror, altering people's perceptions, and mobilizing and maintaining popular will […]. That kind of a message would be effective to the American public and would be effective abroad.[90]

Jenkins elaborated on this theme of resilience-building in his book *Unconquerable Nation*,[91] in which he pleaded for a different approach:

> Homeland security should move beyond gates and guards [….]. We need to adopt a realistic approach to acceptable risk and to get a lot smarter about security. Instead of stoking fear, we need to build upon American traditions of determination and self-reliance and begin firing up citizen participation in preparedness and response. Above all, we need to preserve our commitment to American values. […] Whatever we do must be consistent with our fundamental values. This is no mere matter of morality, it is a strategic calculation, and here we have at time miscalculated.[92]

Rather than a counter-narrative, Jenkins thereby proposes an "alternative narrative" meant to strengthen the home front. However, it can also affect the jihadist adversary indirectly and thereby develop a certain deterrent potential.

6.4 Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

In the UK, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), which describes itself as a "think and action tank", has developed a number of initiatives involving education, community leadership development and cross-border networks. One of its most recent products is a *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?*. The study was commissioned by Public Safety

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[88] Max Abrahms, "The Political Effectiveness of Terrorism Revisited", *Comparative Political Studies* 45, No. 3 (2012), pp. 366-93.

[89] Max Abrahms (ibid., p. 382) explains the results he reached in these terms: "To understand why terrorism is a suboptimal instrument of coercion, it is useful to review how this violent tactic is supposed to work in the first place. In theory, terrorism operates as a communication strategy that signals to the target country the costs of noncompliance; terrorism allegedly coerces government accommodation when the expected cost of the violence against civilians exceeds the expected cost of making the concession […]. This bargaining logic lacks external validity, however; in fact, the literature on terrorism suggests that it is a flawed coercive tactic precisely because it is a flawed communication strategy".

[90] J.A. Geltzer, *US Counter-Terrorism Strategy and al Qaeda (2010)*, p. 148.

[91] Brian M. Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation, Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (St. Monica: RAND, 2006), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG454.pdf.

[92] Ibid, p. 19.

Canada, and "aims to review the state of knowledge about efforts to counter narratives of violent extremism".[93] The ISD study notes that:

> Counter-narratives cover a broad range of strategies with different aims and messages, including picking apart violent extremist ideologies through eroding their intellectual framework, attempting to mock, ridicule, or undermine the credibility/legitimacy of violent extremist messengers; highlighting how extremist activities negatively impact on the constituencies they claim to represent, demonstrating how the means they adopt are inconsistent with their own beliefs; or questioning their overall effectiveness in achieving their stated goals.[94]

ISD's review contains a number of useful recommendations, including these:

- Governments should devise a government strategic communications policy relating specifically to the challenge of countering extremist messages on the internet and social media. They should also consider setting up a centralised unit to oversee and coordinate this work, able to draw on the full range of necessary expertise;
- Governments should continue to invest in this work [narratives], but ensure there is greater consistency between what they say and what they do; avoid the "say-do" gap;
- Governments should proceed with caution with regard to their direct role in counter-narrative efforts;
- Governments should establish or help to seed training and development programmes at national and local levels to roll out these programmes, involving private sector companies able to offer in-kind support;
- Governments should work together to have key items translated on scale to all the relevant languages and share these systematically between one another to avoid duplication of very limited resources;
- Governments should be cautious about creating yet more web platforms to house such documents and materials, instead prioritising dissemination activities to get these products to where the intended audiences are to be found already;
- Governments should work collaboratively with the private sector and search bodies to formulate a standardised monitoring and evaluation framework so results from even small-scale counter-narrative campaigns can be compared;
- Governments should fund the creation of centralised resource packages, such as 'how to' guides on the use of new technologies and social media platforms;
- Governments must invest in this kind of research, and where possible work collectively to pool resources and results.[95]

ISD's review of counter-narratives, useful as it is, makes clear that – as the authors are the first to admit – "counter-narratives work as an area of public policy is in its infancy".[96] The ISD report focuses mainly on organisational (who should best do what) aspects of counter-narratives and is largely devoid of a substantive discussion of either the jihadist narratives or the possible substance and form of governmental and non-governmental counter-narratives. In that, it is not alone.

6.5 Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS)

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[93] Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), p. 2.
[94] Ibid, p. 23.
[95] Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), pp. 3-5 and 34-7 [Summarised by author, using original text passages].
[96] Ibid. p. 2.

In the Middle East, the Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS) released in September 2013 the findings of a study that focused on the importance of counter-narratives in fighting violent extremism. The QIASS report *Countering Violent Extremism: The Counter Narrative Study* noted that, despite the fact that "violent extremist philosophies offer no positives […] it all too often fills the void of weak governance and chronic lack of opportunity".[97] Another of its finding was that "[e]ach region, country, and community requires a unique approach to countering the call to terrorism because violent extremism is a fundamentally local issue, one commonly sparked by local grievances".[98] Regretting that there is no apparent panacea for combatting terrorism, the researchers of the Qatari-commissioned study nevertheless claimed in their findings (see below) to have "uncover[ed] certain tactics that are effective in promoting counter-narratives".[99] The conclusions of this year-long research project conducted by a dozen former law enforcement, intelligence, and counter-terrorism officials who travelled on fact-finding missions around the world, are of a general nature:

> Our central message of choosing the right medium, message, and messenger calls for a global strategy. Such a strategy must include providing vulnerable communities with the proper tools and support to effectively withstand the narratives of violence. A counter-narrative program involves not only military and intelligence aid but also targeted educational tools. Furthermore, we will need to provide political and economic support that is tailored to counter the power vacuums that terrorists and extremists exploit. Once Counter Violent Extremism is included alongside military, intelligence, and law enforcement operations and other counterterrorism programs, then, and only then, will terrorists and extremists be put firmly on the back foot.[100]

Among the main findings of the QIASS report are these:

- There is no cookie-cutter approach to countering the narratives of extremism;
- Tactics and methods need to vary not only from country to country but even within countries, and within different groups and communities;
- Extremists use local grievances as initial motivators to recruit. Dealing with local and regional issues is the starting point for countering the narratives of violence;
- Both traditional media and new media play an important role in recruitment and in countering the narratives;
- Education is the enemy of extremists;
- One of the most powerful tactics is the involvement of former terrorists, although it often gives rise to contention;
- Religious leaders and groups can play an important role in both countering extremist narratives and rehabilitating extremists;
- Community resilience groups are a very effective tool;
- Ownership of CVE programs is important.[101]

The QIASS study forecasts for the near future that "[t]he potent influence of al-Qaeda's narrative of violence (as the only answer to address grievances) will continue"; in the longer term, the QIASS study suggested that "[u]ntil we start combating the narratives that allow extremist and terrorist groups to recruit and retain

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[97] The Soufan Group, "The Importance of Counter-Narratives in Fighting Violent Extremism", *TSG IntelBrief*, 10 September 2013, http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-3/.
[98] QIASS, "New Report on Combatting Violent Extremism", 9 September 2013, http://www.qiass.org/news/details/?NewsId=56.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Qatar International Academy for Security Studies, *Countering Violent Extremism: The Counter Narrative Study* (September, 2013), p. 192.
[101] Ibid., pp. 10-16.

members, the battle is likely to continue for generations".[102] This clear recognition of the centrality of narratives in motivating terrorists is a welcome finding of the QIASS study.

6.6 Center for Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC)

In another study, authored by the Center for Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC), Naureen Chowdhurry Fink and Jack Barclay focus on the role of the UN. The two authors arrived at ten major recommendations, after concluding that "[d]eveloping and refining a master narrative on terrorism, one that resonates globally but can be applied locally, is essential for the United Nations".[103] Their practical recommendations are:

1. Get the message right;
2. Know the audience;
3. Get strategic about strategic communication;
4. Keep it local, keep it relevant;
5. Integrate communication at the outset of program design and policy development;
6. Close the 'say-do' gap;
7. Improve message dissemination;
8. Increase training and sensitisation for UN staff at headquarters and in the field;
9. Provide communication guidelines for staff to use at headquarters and in the field; and
10. Develop existing communication.[104]

Interestingly, there is less overlap with the recommendations of the Qatari study than one would expect. This would seem to indicate that there is not yet much consolidated common ground of solid knowledge. Yet, both the QIASS report and the CGCC report agree on one crucial dimension, namely the importance of closing the "say-do gap" – the credibility deficit arising from the difference between the declaratory policy and the actual policy. However, with an international organisation that represents 193 states that are rarely speaking with one voice and have different interests and are often major producers of "say-do gaps", both in their domestic and foreign policies, the implementation of such a recommendation for the UN is improbable if not impossible. That, of course, also applies for the other side – al Qaeda and its affiliates that no longer speak with one voice.[105]

Like the reports discussed above, and reflective of the infancy of this field, the CGCC study is characterised by a certain lack of specificity. "Get the message right" – the CGCC's first recommendation – for instance, leaves open what the "right" message of a counter-narrative should be and how we can know when it is doing "right" with the intended audience.

6.7 Netherlands National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism & Leiden University

In June 2009, the Netherlands National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, together with Leiden University's Centre for Terrorism and Counterterrorism (CTC), convened an expert meeting with academic experts as well as NGOs and grassroots organisations. It identified four terrorist narratives and proposed that:

1. In the case of countering the *political narrative*, it must for instance be made clear that there is no such thing as a Western conspiracy to dominate the world and to oppress Islam, whilst pointing towards the values of the Western political process and the many investments made in the developing world.

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[102] The Soufan Group, "The Importance of Counter Narratives" (2013).
[103] Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay, *Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism Strategic Communications and the United Nations* (Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013),
http://www.globalct.org/publications/mastering-the-narrative-counterterrorism-strategic-communication-and-the-united-nations/.
[104] Ibid., pp. iv-v [summarised here by author, based on the original wording].
[105] William McCants, "How Zawahiri lost al Qaeda: Global Jihad turns on itself", *Foreign Affairs* (19 November 2013).

2. A *moral counter-narrative* should stress the immorality of killing and the use of violence. Furthermore, it should take issue with, but recognise the narrative that the West is in moral decay.

3. In response to the *religious narrative* of violent jihadists, the fact that (mass) murder is against Islam and contradictory to the faith must be highlighted. It is important to create public dialogue on the issue of jihad and its many implications. To further undermine the extremists' religious narrative, it is advisable to point out the many civilian Muslim casualties that are caused by jihadist suicide bombers and other forms of attack.

4. This should also be stressed in the case of a *social counter-narrative*, since there is nothing heroic nor glamorous about killing innocent civilians and sleeping in caves. One could even go a step further and effectively ridicule these romantic and heroic notions openly, in order to undermine the extremist social, heroic narrative.[106]

This breakdown of a possible counter-narrative into four thematic dimensions was a novel suggestion. However, it has not been fleshed out in more detail in the last four years. The expert meeting in The Hague also recommended what governments could do:

- Via various carefully chosen partners, promote multiple narratives;
- Facilitate these partners financially, logistically or content-wise;
- Be open and frank about inconsistencies;
- Support dialogue and peaceful discussion;
- Stimulate the Muslim community to take ownership of certain areas of the issue;
- Acknowledge grievances; and
- Appreciate that in a democratic society there will and should always be a pluralism of narratives and discourses.[107]

The promotion of "multiple narratives" suggested here – while reflecting the plurality of views existing in open democracies – might, however, not be as forceful in countering al Qaeda's single narrative than a well-crafted "single" counter- or alternative narrative (more on this below). Despite pluralism and multiculturalism, there should be a firm common ground, a basic framework indicating what holds a democratic open society together, based on principles to which all – native citizens and immigrants – must agree.[108]

6.8 Against Violent Extremism Network (AVE)

A more recent initiative developed by a non-governmental organisation is the *Against Violent Extremism Network* (AVE), which was launched by *Google Ideas* in Dublin in June 2011. It brought together former violent extremists as well as survivors of violent extremist attacks and also NGO, academic, think tank and private sector representatives.[109] Its more than 1,000 members include some 300 former extremists (termed 'formers'). It aims to serve as a global hub for projects against violent extremism. One of its goals is to "articulate and project effective counter-narratives to those at risk of radicalisation". It also aims to disseminate How-to-Guides to enhance the impact of counter-extremism efforts. While strongly internet-based and technology-driven, it also plans real world offline activities.[110] AVE is currently run by ISD and connects to the European Commission-funded

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[106] E.J.A.M. Kessels (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (2010), p. 8.
[107] Ibid., p. 9.
[108] Jon Elster, *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989); Alex P. Schmid, *De multiculturele samenleving: smeltkroes of kruitvat? [Multicultural society: melting pot or powder keg?]*(Driebergen: Stichting Synthesis, 1995).
[109] See www.againstviolentextremism.org.
[110] Ibid.

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Working Group on the Internet and Social Media in order to identify examples of good practice in counter-narratives and locating credible messengers.[111]

6.9 Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN)

RAN is an inter-governmental initiative of the European Union (EU) established in 2011 to bring together various stakeholders. Its Working Group on the Internet and Social Media, for instance, is meant to be a platform for the exchange of best practices in countering violent extremist messaging. The Working Group is tasked with the formulation of strategies to disseminate counter-narratives and alternative narratives.[112] Another of RAN's working groups looks at the links between internal and external factors, like the recruitment of fighters to wage jihad in Syria against the Shi'ite (Alawite) regime of Assad. It also addresses issues related to countering the jihadist narrative. This RAN INT/EXT working group, co-chaired by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), sees its main goal as contributing to the "reduction of the operating space for violent extremists through increasing the operating capacity for countervailing powers".[113] In a set of Policy Recommendations for a High Level Conference, it proposed in December 2012, *inter alia*, the following:

- Deconstruct violent extremist narratives using linguistics and knowledgeable scholars in de- and counter-radicalisation;
- Identify and engage INT/EXT de- and counter-radicalisation actors and facilitate exchange and unified platforms of religious authority figures;
- Establish definitions and reclaim extremist appropriated terminology;
- Create an EU RAN Kite Mark that identifies and recognises those NGOs whose work is of particular interest and success in the delivery of national governments' strategies on the local level;
- Create an EU-wide Public Advocacy capability which delivers daily news content for broadcast, print and online channels which vividly shows the "reconciled reality" of life in diaspora communities and community perspectives abroad.
- Media production: Work with media agencies which proactively make film and TV material for broadcast channels which reach target audiences. This TV and film initiative could identify stories which challenge the extremist version of the world […]. This material could focus on, for instance, the al Qaeda story and how it is failing to deliver on its promises to the Muslim world;
- Online channel: Create an innovative online platform designed to provide pathways away from extremism for at-risk individuals;
- Develop national public forums debating foreign policy and provide a public outlet for grievances;
- Highlight the experience of exploited and disillusioned foreign fighters and provide a public outlet for grievances; and
- Utilise the voices of former fighters to de-construct narratives.[114]

While many of these suggestions are worth considering and adopting, the implementation of such recommendations is still in its infancy. The RAN platform, which brings together experts and practitioners from across the EU, is a valuable initiative. However, its effects have, in the two years of its existence, not been noticeable yet to the outside world.

7. Community-based Initiatives

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[111] Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), p. 28.
[112] Ibid., p. 48.
[113] Radicalisation Awareness Network RAN INT/EXT. Proposed Policy Recommendations for the High Level Conference. December 2012.
[114] Ibid. [summarised by author using original quotes].

After the bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), numerous initiatives have been developed by civic organisations, both diaspora and host-society based, often with the support of (local) government. Some of these were initiated by former victims, for example ICCT's Victims' Voices project in Indonesia, the Global Survivors Network (GSN) and the Network of Associations of Victims of Terrorism (NAVT). Others are the result of initiatives by former extremists, such as the Quilliam Foundation, which describes itself as a "counter-radicalisation think tank". Yet others were established by concerned citizens either of immigrant background, for instance the Muslim-led Stockwell Green Community Services (SGCS) in London. And others were initiated by the cities of the host society, such as "Amsterdam against extremism", a municipality-led initiative.[115]

The advantages of these initiatives were pointed out by Sadik Harchaoui, the Moroccan-Dutch chair of the board of directors of the Institute for Multicultural Development FORUM:

> Having NGOs and ordinary citizens as diplomatic messengers has two major strengths. First and foremost, they can bring a level of credibility to public diplomacy efforts that a government will never attain. They are less prone to political manipulation than governmental organisations, and because of their non-hierarchical and independent character, they are more easily trusted as dialogue partners. Secondly, they are well equipped to engage in dialogue with foreign audiences because of their expertise and the common interests they share with organisations and citizens abroad. This enables them to tackle cultural barriers and penetrate various layers of a foreign society, including subcultures.[116]

While Harchaoui pleads for a "social diplomacy" that parallels public diplomacy, but is people-to-people rather than flowing from foreign government to Muslim countries' populations, the rise of homegrown terrorism in Europe has also made clear that efforts are needed in Western diasporas. These efforts should be either Muslim-led or joint ventures by people from the same community. Their counter-narratives are directed at vulnerable youth in their own ranks. As Toaha Qureshi and Sarah Marsden, who were both involved in the London Borough of Lambeth's SGCS, write:

> The ultimate goal of any grassroots organisation working in the context of violent extremism is to divert those involved, or at risk, away from maladaptive attitudes and towards positive social integration. Using educational, recreational and social programmes is an ideal way of working towards this end. The exact requirements of the project are most likely to succeed if they are developed in collaboration with the community they aim to serve. This facilitates the development of a more personal interaction and relationship between project organisers and beneficiaries, which enables the organisers to better identify their attitudes and needs.[117]

Such local initiatives linked to civil society, in combination with community-based policing, can perhaps succeed where heavy-handed, top-down governmental approaches have failed. Again, only careful comparative evaluation studies can establish relative effectiveness. *Doing the right thing* rather than *saying the right thing* produces, ideally, the stronger narrative and in that sense the interaction patterns between host community and vulnerable youth constitute a non-verbal message that might better manage to prevent extremists gaining more ground in a community.

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[115] For a description of such networks, see Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), pp. 39-56; Toaha Qureshi and Sarah Marsden, "Furthering the Counter-Narrative via Educational and Social Grassroots Projects", in E.J.A.M. Kessels. (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (2010), p. 132.

[116] Sadik Harchaoui, "Heterogeneous Counter-Narratives and the Role of Social Diplomacy", in E.J.A.M. Kessels. (Ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (2010), p. 126.

[117] T. Qureshi and S. Marsden, "Furthering the Counter-Narrative via Educational and Social Grassroots Projects" (2010), p. 134.

While there has not been a successful international effort to come up with an effective single counter-narrative, there have been multiple efforts to develop local counter-measures which arguably have had some positive effect in diminishing the appeal of al Qaeda's single narrative, especially among young Muslims in Western diasporas.[118] However, the exploration of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

This also raises the question whether there is a need for a single counter-narrative or whether it is preferable to have many, tailored to local exigencies. In the view of this author, both are needed – an over-arching one and specific ones.

8. Religious Counter-Narratives

Since al Qaeda's ideology is heavily reliant on Islam-based narratives, it is more vulnerable to intra-Islamic criticism than to outside criticism from the West. There have been a good number of attempts by "moderate", "mainstream" (for lack of better terminology) Muslims to challenge al Qaeda's interpretations. Some come from religious scholars, others come from former companions of Al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al Qaeda. While former militants tend to stress the fact that engaging in jihad is, in most situations, counter-productive, the religious scholars tend to stress that jihadists misinterpret key concepts and principles of Islam and have to be brought back to "true" Islam.

Regarding the efforts of religious scholars, a prominent example can be found on the *Fatwa on Terrorism* website,[119] where Pakistani scholar Muhamma Tahir-ul-Qadri, a university professor in Lahore, makes, since 2010, a systematic attempt to undermine the religious justifications for al Qaeda's terrorism and suicide bombings strategy. He has also done so in a 500 page *fatwa* (religious ruling).[120] Holding a degree in Islamic law (as well as other credentials), he tried to prove that "[t]errorists distort the concept of Jihad", that terrorism is not even permitted in wartime and that "[t]errorist acts expel a Muslim from Islam".[121] Originally published in Urdu, it is now disseminated in a number of languages (including English, French, German and Norwegian) and seeks to counter that organisations utilising terrorism can employ Muslim scripture with impunity to perform their atrocities against unarmed civilians, whether these are non-Muslims or Muslims.[122]

This fatwa is not unique. In 2008, the Indian Darul Uloom Deoband held an anti-terrorism conference attended by 6,000 Islamic religious leaders. At the end of the meeting, those present declared terrorism to be un-Islamic, arguing:

> Islam is the religion of mercy for all humanity. It is the fountainhead of eternal peace, tranquillity, security. Islam has given so much importance to human beings that it regards the killing of a single person the killing of the entire humanity, without differentiation based on creed and caste. Its teaching of peace encompasses all humanity. Islam has taught its followers to treat all mankind with equality, mercy, tolerance, justice. Islam sternly condemns all kinds of oppression, violence and terrorism. It has regarded oppression, mischief, rioting and murdering among the severest sins and crimes.[123]

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[118] See, for instance, Floris Vermeulen and Frank Bovenkerk, *Engaging with Violent Islamic Extremism: Local Policies in Western European Cities* (The Hague: Eleven International Publishing, 2011).
[119] See http://www.fatwaonterrorism.com/.
[120] An English version of the fatwa can be found online at: http://www.scribd.com/doc/29876438/Fatwa-on-Terrorism-by-Dr-Muhammad-Tahir-ul-Qadri.
[121] Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), p. 51.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Declaration of All India Anti-Terrorism Conference, p. 1; S. Sarangi and D. Canter, "The Rhetorical Foundation of Militant Jihad" (2009), p. 58.

Similar arguments have also been brought forward by former Islamist militants who changed their minds about the strategy of terrorism pursued by al Qaeda. Among them is the internal Islamist critique of former members of the Egyptian Islamic Group Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (IG), which al Qaeda's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and former leader of IG merged with al Qaeda in 1998, stands out. Five historical leaders of IG were among the authors of the so-called *Corrective Concept Series*, which began publication in 2002. These texts were produced while most of its authors served long prison sentences in Egypt. They offer sharia-based refutations of al Qaeda's justifications for its form of violent struggle against the near and far enemy. In these writings, the former militants engage in self-criticism regarding their previous stance on the issue of the use of indiscriminate violence. Based on their new interpretation of the orthodox Sunni jurisprudence regulating jihad (*fiqh al-jihad*), they blame al Qaeda for waging a jihad for jihad's sake, rather than for the sake of Islam, and call its jihadism an unlawful and murderous deviation as opposed to the military jihadism which is sanctioned by Islam. To quote a passage from their revisionist texts:

> [T]here is a difference in views between two visions of jihad. The vision of the Islamic Group and the vision of Al-Qa'ida. […] [They] called for a jihad that puts the logic of challenge above the principle of calculations, the preservation of interests, the availability of capabilities, and the perception of the goals.[124]

Another member of the group, Najih Ibrahim, stated that: "Bin Ladin believes in the principle of Jihad for the sake of Jihad. Attaining the results is not important". He further admonished that "Jihad was ordained to bolster religion, not to spill blood". [125]

These are but a few examples from a variety of religious initiatives under way.[126] Many Islamic scholars and imams have spoken out against al Qaeda extreme interpretation of Quranic texts regarding jihad. In Afghanistan alone, hundreds of them have paid for their courage with their lives. Terrorist extremists have a tendency to eliminate the voices in the middle so that in the end there are no moderates left and the world is polarised into black and white with no grey shades of opinion left in between.

The impact of voices of moderation from within Islam has so far hardly been evaluated – something that is difficult enough to do. Their uncertain impact stands in stark contrast to the visible impact of al Qaeda's success in mobilising grievances in Muslim societies and placing the blame for them in the court of a Crusader-Zionist alliance and their alleged friends in the Arab and Muslim world.

9. Advice from within al Qaeda

Did we, in this Research Paper and in no way exhaustive overview of some of the existing counter-narrative approaches, miss out on creative and original suggestions to counter al Qaeda's narrative? There is one intriguing suggestion coming from inside al Qaeda itself. One of al Qaeda's top leaders and strategists, Abu Yahya al-Liby, in a 90 minute long video titled *Dots of the Letter*, teased the US by pointing out how it could defeat al Qaeda. Amazingly enough, he outlined six weaknesses of al Qaeda, which its main enemy could exploit in the war for the hearts and minds of Muslims:

1. Focus on amplifying cases of ex-jihadists who have renounced armed action;

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[124] Isam Dirbalah, member of the Islamic Group's Shura Council, in Abd al-Latif al-Manawi, "Egyptian Islamic Group Leaders React to Abu-Hamzah Al-Masri's Criticism,"4 July 2003, www.opensource.gov; cit. Paul Kamolnick, "The Egyptian Islamic Group's Critique of al Qaeda's Interpretation of Jihad" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, No. 5 (October 2013), pp. 93-110.
[125] Paul Kamolnick, "The Egyptian Islamic Group's Critique of al Qaeda" (2013), p. 104.
[126] For more examples, see Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013).

2. Fabricate stories about jihadist mistakes and exaggerate mistakes when possible;

3. Prompt mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* that incriminate the jihadist movement and its actions;

4. Strengthen and back Islamic movements far removed from jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach;

5. Aggressively neutralise or discredit the guiding thinkers of the jihadist movement; and

6. Spin minor disagreements among leaders of jihadist organisations as being major doctrinal or methodological disputes.[127]

Some of these suggestions have probably already been used in the clandestine realm of "strategic communication" – but to no apparent great effect. Al-Liby, who was captured in early October 2013 in Libya, might have some more tips to offer in addition to these perceptive suggestions from somebody who is aware of the vulnerabilities of al Qaeda.

10. From Counter-Narrative to Alternative Narrative

What emerges from the discussion is that al Qaeda's narrative is vulnerable on several fronts. One of these is the ideological front. Many of its statements simply do not stand up to closer scrutiny – they run counter to the best insights from theology and history. To exploit this discrepancy, each of al Qaeda's public and internal statements (e.g. from the treasure trove of documents found on 2 May 2011 during the raid on Bin Laden's house in Abbottabad) ought to be annotated and, wherever possible, refuted, based on thorough fact-finding and comparison with authoritative sources of knowledge. To dismiss, as happened in many instances, the statements of al Qaeda simply as propaganda and do little or nothing about them has been very short-sighted as Thomas K. Samuel, the Director of Research at the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), notes:

In many cases authorities have assumed – wrongly in the opinion of the author – that in the case of terrorism, there is simply little need to debate, convince and persuade the audience on the transgressions of the terrorists and the legitimacy of their actions. Indeed, often times, the authorities in question think that it is incredible that terrorists deserve any reaction besides that of loathing and repugnance.[128]

Writing in 2012, Samuel concluded with regret that "it is sad to note that an effective challenge to the premises and assumptions of the terrorists with the intention to provide a counter-narrative for young people has not been designed, developed and disseminated".[129] Indeed, this is sad testimony to the state of the battle for the hearts and minds from the perspective of those who oppose al Qaeda and its affiliates.

When one looks back on more than a decade of counter-terrorism efforts, costing more than a trillion dollars, the result of counter-terrorist efforts has been disappointing. Fact is that al Qaeda's ideological virus is alive and still virulent, despite many overt and covert efforts to counter, silence or subdue it. The Bush administration, especially the first one, had inadvertently played into the hands of al Qaeda, as more and more observers are now prepared to admit. Joshua A. Geltzer, who interviewed many of the chief high-level players on the American government's side concluded in 2011:

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[127] J. Ciovacco, "Could al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?", *Strategic Insights* 8, No. 3 (2009), p. 2 [summarised by author].

[128] Aaron Y. Zelin, "Al Qaeda in Syria: A Closer Look at ISIS" (2013), p. 32.

[129] T. K. Samuel, *Reaching the Youth* (2012), p. 31.

> [T]he Bush administration's approach to counter-terrorist signalling proved in some aspects wasted and in many respects actually counter-productive, as it served to vindicate rather than undermine al Qaeda's campaign and strategy[… T]he very fact that America has gone to such great length to send such vigorous signals elevates al Qaeda's prominence globally in a manner essential to its cause – and without which the group's strategy would be rendered largely impotent.[130]

In a way, the over-reaction of the US to the provocation of 9/11 validated al Qaeda's claim about American imperial designs, which, in turn, forced the US government on the defensive against al Qaeda's allegations. The Obama administration, while trying to break out of the framework inherited from the Bush administration, has been unable to do so. The President of the US was, due the Republican resistance in Congress, not even capable of closing the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba.

After a dozen years of the "Global War on Terror", the idea that there must be other ways of countering al Qaeda than by military power, intelligence-led disruptions of terrorist plots, police arrests of suspects and court convictions of those found guilty, has gaining increased acceptance.[131] The necessity to shift the struggle from a primary emphasis on hard power to soft power (aimed at winning "hearts and minds") is no longer contested. There have been many calls for creating a counter-narrative to al Qaeda's single narrative. Yet, despite considerable efforts in this direction, so far no plausible general counter-narrative has emerged that has high credibility, is delivered by persuasive messengers and is perceived as honest and relevant by the intended target audiences. What is the reason for this? One Washington-based observer who has worked both in- and outside government notes:

> So many conferences on counter-narratives! Over the years I've noticed that no one has a hold on findings produced by the various conferences on these and other counter-terrorism related topics, which is one of the weaknesses in the field because of the sense that each conference starts from the same starting gate, instead of building on one another's previous work to advance the state of knowledge.[132]

Yet, such a failure to learn does not go to the heart of the problem. One of the principle challenges, in addition to formulating the right message, is identifying the right messenger. A group deserving of more attention and support in this regard are Muslim intellectuals and activists in Western diasporas. They have insights into, and linkages to, both their host countries and their countries of origin. They are situated best to devise a counter-narrative that has credibility, legitimacy and relevance among potential sympathisers and supporters of the jihadists. Modern educated Muslims in Western diasporas are arguably the best social carriers to counter al Qaeda's single narrative. They can incorporate the best elements of both worlds – Islam and the West – and create a new meaningful and credible narrative that expresses their vision of what it means to be a Muslim in the modern world and how to interact with the West and achieve aspirations within host societies and in countries of origin. They should be encouraged more than ever to take up that role as intermediaries and formulate an alternative vision to al Qaeda's claim that jihad is (as has often been proclaimed by al-Zawahiri) the "only solution" to the problems of Muslims in the world.[133]

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[130] J.A. Geltzer, *US Counter-Terrorism Strategy and al Qaeda (2010)*, pp. 136-7 and 143.

[131] Alex P. Schmid and Rashmi Singh, "Measuring Success and Failure in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: US Government Metrics of the Global War on Terror", in Alex P. Schmid and Garry F. Hindle (Eds.), *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (London: RUSI, 2009), p. 33-61.

[132] Private Communication with Washington-based terrorism analyst.

[133] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Knights under the Prophet's Banner", in G. Kepel and J.P. Milelli (Eds.), *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 194-5.

Western scholars, policymakers and concerned citizens can help modern Muslim scholars and activists, including those from the radical, but not extremist middle ground.[134] But in the end it is also in their own vital interest to work on counter-narratives. Muslims are, after all, the main victims of the actions of both terrorists and counter-terrorists. They witness how their religion is being abused for terrorist purposes. Many of them feel a need to help their brothers and sisters in Muslim majority states who have to live through the turmoil caused, or made worse by jihadi terrorists who have hijacked their faith, incorporating it in their single narrative and turned that ideological tool into an instrument for sowing death and destruction that strikes mainly fellow Muslims.

How long will al Qaeda's single narrative be effective in attracting new recruits to its ranks? A pessimistic answer has been given by the German orientalist Philipp Holtmann: "The jihadist propaganda will cease to be effective, if it finds zero acceptance among Muslims, which requires the development of freedom and human rights in Muslim countries and better integration policies in the West".[135]

A similar thought has been expressed by Will Cants and Clinton Watts – though in more operational terms and not viewing it as a distant goal only – in the following very perceptive observations:

> People sympathize with a terrorist group because they believe the cause is justified, there are no other means to achieve it, and the terrorist group does more good than harm. Change one of these perceptions and sympathy decreases […] There are several ways to change these perceptions, ranging from easy to difficult: let the terrorist group undermine itself; actively point out inconsistencies between a group's message and actions; make sure no one hears the terrorist group's messages (e.g. by shutting down radical Internet websites); provide positive information about the terrorist group's targets that contradicts the terrorist group's messages about the targets (e.g. spreading good news about America); and, most difficult, solve the underlying problems that push people to sympathize with terrorist organizations. Polls, focus groups, and sentiment tracking are ways to assess how effective your efforts are.[136]

The task then is to reduce acceptance of al Qaeda's single narrative by juxtaposing it with a discourse and with accompanying actions, which alone can give greater credibility to a counter-narrative discourse.

Any serious attempt to develop counter (and alternative) narratives should begin by asking the question: what are the ingredients of a strong narrative? It can be argued that an effective narrative has to possess five characteristics:

1. It has to articulate a clear, realistic and compelling mission purpose without getting entangled in sub-goals and details, but keeping the focus on long-term, overarching goals that have to be related to cultural norms and values as well as interests;
2. It has to have legitimacy in that it matches cultural and public norms and values and is seen by relevant publics as justified;
3. It has to hold the prospect of success and provide a feeling of progress towards its goals;
4. The narrative has to be presented in a consistent manner in order to be effective and withstand the attacks of counter-narratives that might cost it public support; and
5. The narrative must fit within an overall communication plan that reflects major themes of our own identity.[137]

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[134] One of the most creative efforts at developing counter-narratives this writer has seen are those by a British Muslim organisation called the "Radical Middle Way"; see http://www.radicalmiddleway.org/.

[135] Philipp Holtmann, "Virtual Jihad: A Real Danger", in Rüdiger Lohlker (Ed.), *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism*, pp. 9-14 (Vienna: University Press, 2012), p. 14; see also his Op-Ed: Philipp Holtmann, "Countering al Qaeda's Single Narrative (2013), pp. 141-4.

[136] Will McCants and Clinton Watts, *U.S. Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism: An Assessment* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2012), p. 2.

[137] These five categories are derived, adapted and summarised for the purpose of this paper, from the Master thesis of G. Dimitriu. *Strategic Narratives, Counternarratives and Public Support for War* (2013), pp. 14-5.

These ingredients apply – *mutatis mutandis* – to both narratives and counter-narratives. The disadvantage of a counter-narrative, however, is that it is often only perceived as being reactive and defensive. One should therefore also consider attempting to go beyond that and develop a pro-active *alternative narrative*.[138]

What could be the elements of such an "alternative narrative"? Arguably, it should be one that is able to build bridges between "us" and "them", bringing together people from all sides. In such a dialogue, there should be room for constructive but also for critical voices of all stakeholders – Muslims and non-Muslims, victims, former militants, religious leaders, activists, scholars, and other representatives from civil society. In sum, it should draw on the insights and input from all concerned citizens and people of good will who have an interest in contributing to the solution of problems underlying the rise of terrorism.

An alternative narrative can, however, not fully replace the counter-narrative. The counter-narrative necessarily has to focus on what is wrong with al Qaeda's terrorism and the ideology behind it. It has to challenge the assumptions underlying al Qaeda's ideology, expose its fallacies and dismantle its conspiracy theories. This can be done best by scholars familiar with Islam and with Islamic politics and history. Yet the dissemination (as well as some of the development) of such analyses might be left to "mainstream" and "radical" (but not so-called "non-violent extremist") Muslims, who have greater credibility with the most relevant target audiences when it comes to discrediting al Qaeda's narrative, are better messengers and are more familiar with the best channels to reach and dialogue with target audiences.

The alternative narrative should focus not primarily on "what we are against" but on "what we are for",[139] namely the values and norms cherished in the West: democracy, separation of state and religion, majority rule with safeguards for minorities, merit-based upward social mobility, rule of law, respect for human rights (including women's rights), pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, freedom (including freedom of thought and expression as well as freedom of religion), equality, education for all, the search for individual happiness in this world, human security, good governance, peace for all, openness to argument, readiness for dialogue, the search for peaceful solutions through negotiation and compromise, and the improvement of the human condition for all. These ideals – some of which have yet to be fully realised in the West itself – should be the cornerstones of the Western alternative narrative.[140]

Many if not all of these values should also be appealing to a broad spectrum of people in Muslim majority countries. Many of these values stand in direct opposition to al Qaeda's core values: instead of pluralism, salafi jihadists want unity of thought; instead of democracy, they want a theocratic caliphate; instead of peace, they

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[138] The notion of an "alternative narrative" comes from R. Briggs and S. Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), pp. 1-2. These authors described the concept in these terms (p. 18): "Alternative narratives come in a variety of forms, and have been activated by a wide range of actors. From inter-faith and inter-community networks of influential grass-roots activists, opinion and community-leaders (both religious and secular), to entrepreneurs, sports personalities and even pop artists, they have provided powerful avenues through which to engineer more moderate and inclusive discourses through social action and public outreach".

[139] R. Briggs and S. Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (2013), pp. 1-2.

[140] Many of these things are only aspirational and we have a long way to go to make them a reality for all. The present liberal democratic state might in the end not even be the right vehicle to get us all there. As Jonathan Sacks, wrote in the 1990s: "There are times when any great system of thought encounters a crisis. That is the situation of liberal democratic politics today. Crime is rising, abusiveness and violence are on the increase, schools face problems of illiteracy and absenteeism, unemployment has become endemic, poverty has not disappeared, our expectations of the state grow while our willingness to pay for them declines, cynicism about politicians is at a historic high and there is a general awareness of a breakdown of authority. These are problems for which there is a solution, and only a blind spot in our culture prevents us from seeing what it is. The historic route out of such crises has been the strengthening of social institutions, beginning with the family […]. Civil society rests on moral relationships. They are covenantal rather than contractual […]. We can change the world if we can change ourselves. Indeed that is the only way the world has changed, for politics ultimately works through people and our acceptance of responsibility. This is why morality is prior to politics, and why it remains the only secure base of freedom and dignity. Renewing society's resources of moral energy is the programme, urgent but achievable, of a new politics of hope"; see Jonathan Sacks, *The Politics of Hope* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 264 and 269.

want to wage a jihad until the whole world submits to them;[141] instead of seeking human happiness in this life, they seek death in the expectation of happiness in paradise.

An alternative narrative will only be credible if the deeds of those combating al Qaeda reflect normative values of a higher order and if these are equally applied to the improvement of the human conditions of Muslims, both in Western diasporas and in Muslim-majority countries. The West's goal should be to make the alternative narrative the dominant one so that the single narrative of al Qaeda is forced into a position of a reactive counter-narrative.

Ultimately, the "battle of ideas" is about having a more credible narrative and make it effective, or, as George Dimitriu put it, "it is the relative weight of the strategic narratives vis-à-vis the weight of the counter-narratives which influences the level of public support".[142] The counter-narrative has to aim at discrediting the exclusive narrative of al Qaeda. The alternative narrative, on the other hand, has to focus on the propagation of the West's own values. Both narratives – the counter-narrative and the alternative narrative – need to be pursued simultaneously.

The lack of sufficient attention for developing clear counter- and alternative narratives has arguably been the Achilles heel of Western counter-terrorism policymaking.[143] It is high time to challenge al Qaeda more effectively on this front with a powerful counter-narrative. There are few tasks more necessary in countering jihadist terrorism. The reason for this has been emphasised by M. Desai, who argued in 2007:

> The real challenge is not just to understand why Global Islamism appeals to so many Muslim young people, deconstructing it so that its pretensions are exposed for all to see, but eventually to defeat it and its capacity for immense violence and intolerance. It has to be defeated as much for the sake of Muslims and their ability to lead lives of their choice in the country of their choice as for the rest of us who want to do the same.[144]

While this is true, one also needs to realise that preventing jihadists from realising their goals is a reactive strategy. Western states and societies need to outline clearly what their own goals are – for themselves, the Muslim diasporas in their midst as well as for those outside Western societies. The West – both in terms of its ideals as well as in a more practical sense – has much to offer, but at the same time appears unable to imbue some of the newcomers to their societies with some of their core values. Bill Durodie asked what he himself called the "awkward question": "What is it about our society that we fail to inspire, often young, bright and energetic individuals, and provide them with rules, structures and meaning to live their lives by, such that they are left to look for these in arcane arenas?".[145] With "arcane arenas" he referred to jihadist sources of inspiration like the al Qaeda magazine *Inspire*. Durodie tried to answer the "awkward question" by noting that:

> By retreating from political ideology to process management in the West, uncertainty has effectively been allowed to drive world affairs rather than emerging from them. A concomitant sense of insecurity has encouraged politicians and people everywhere to avoid expressing firm principles and values independently of simply managing perceived, exogenous threats. But it is how we, as a society,

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[141] Al Qaeda's Charter postulates: "There will be continuing enmity until everyone believes in Allah. We will not meet [the enemy] halfway and there will be no room for dialogue with them"; see J.L. Babbin, *In the words of our enemies* (Washington, DC.: Regnery Publishing, 2007), p. 60.

[142] G. Dimitriu, *Strategic Narratives, Counternarratives and Public Support for War* (2013), p. 8.

[143] The term "Achilles heel" comes, in this context, from Ali Soufan's foreword to the report the Soufan group prepared for the Qatar International Academy for Security Studies, *Countering Violent Extremism* (2013). Soufan wrote (p. 4): "The Achilles' heel of our strategy against terrorism and violent extremism has been the failure to counter the narratives that groups use to recruit".

[144] M. Desai, *Rethinking Islamism: The Ideology of the New Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 165.

[145] Bill Durodie, "War on Terror or a Search for Meaning?", in Hriar Cabayan, Valerie Sitterle and Matt Yandura (Eds.), *Looking Back, Looking Forward: Perspectives on Terrorism and Responses to it* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense. Strategic Multi-layer Assessment Occasional White Paper, September 2013), p. 25, http://www.nsiteam.com/pubs/U_SMA%20CT%20White%20Paper%20Approved%20for%20Public%20Release%2019Sep13.pdf.

respond to acts of destruction that determines their impact. Civilisation cannot be bombed out of existence by terrorists. It can, however, be corroded from within if all we do is focus down onto technical solutions rather than expanding our horizons through a strategic vision that could project a positive sense of mission for society.[146]

This is advice well worth heeding. The West needs to offer a meaningful and persuasive alternative narrative to the violent one espoused by al Qaeda and like-minded organisations. Such a narrative as a frame of orientation ought not be a direct counter-narrative to al Qaeda's narrative. Rather, it should serve as aspirational compass that can satisfy, in a 21st century context, the intrinsic human need for significance, meaning and purpose which is inherent in being human.[147]

The search for orientation and significance in an uncertain world full of risks, but also possibilities, is driving all human beings, including terrorists.[148] Some seek it in religion, others in more or less humanistic ideologies and yet others look for solutions in a technocratic risk management approach. There should be enough common ground to build on between these poles and also incorporate a new narrative, which also values respect, dignity and honour which many in the West have lost sight of but might be in need to rediscover. The West, no less than the Muslim world, suffers from deficiencies and the say-do gap needs to be closed on all sides so that realities approach aspirations. In the end we all want a good society and look for means and ways of getting there. An alternative narrative could serve as a new roadmap for that. To conclude with another insight from Bill Durodie:

> What is most missing in the war on terror has been a vision for society beyond terror. That is the essence of real resilience – neither a focus on response and recovery, nor even the aim to prepare and prevent – but rather a sense of what we are for in the absence of all adversities; a projection of purpose. Otherwise, as is the case here, we effectively allow the challenges we confront to determine us rather than the other way round.[149]

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[146] Ibid., pp. 28-29.

[147] On this deep-rooted human need for meaning, see Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

[148] For its specific application of the human need for meaning to terrorists, see Roger Griffin, *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[149] Bill Durodie, "War on Terror or a Search for Meaning?" (2013), p. 25.

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