

THE EFFECT OF CREDIBLE VOICES ON RADICALIZATION PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

In the years since September 11, 2001, there has been a surge of research inquiries into nearly every aspect of terrorism. This exploration focuses on the prevention aspect, analyzing the medium of credible voices, defined as: a religious official, based in a geographical location where extremism is prevalent, who is actively preaching against the thoughts and behaviors of extremist or terrorist organizations. Very little research on their efficacy has been conducted and this inquiry seeks to bridge the gap between academia and application. This inquiry will be studying credible voices against violent extremism under the paradigm of social movement theory and positing a research outline for future investigations. Using these theories to identify specific tactics undertaken by extremist organizations allows credible voices better and more targeted opportunities to counter the narrative, veering susceptible individuals away from the radicalization process. The target population consists of those in an extremism-prevalent geophysical location who are exposed to both extremist and counter-extremist material. Intensive interviewing techniques permit the research staff to identify particular tactics employed by the extremist movements, permitting more accurate counter-narrative targeting by credible voices. Benefits of this inquiry have long-lasting and far-reaching applications in the United States overall objective to disrupt, dismantle and defeat foreign terrorist organizations. Once credible voices have been verified to prevent radicalization, they can be established in any geographic region where a type of extremism can be identified (through replication studies). They can be used to prevent many varieties of extremist messaging, can collaborate with anyone from local organizations to the Federal Government and even have the potential to develop a global network of credible voices.

INTRODUCTION & RESEARCH INQUIRY

Counter terrorism is a growing field of research with nearly endless facets of study and one of the most important areas of specialization for criminal justice research. Following the September 11 attacks, academic research surged, inquiring into nearly every aspect of terrorism, asking questions such as: Why do Muslim extremists specifically target the west? Why do they choose their tactics? How do these organizations maintain themselves? How can we stop attacks from happening? The types of explorations are nearly endless and vast in terms of their scope of interest. The precise question guiding this inquiry is: How can we stop radicalization from occurring in the first place?

I propose that the presence of a credible voice in an environment where terrorism is widespread can prevent the radicalization of susceptible individuals. Credible voices are familiar figures in local communities who exert influence through the internet, video camera messages (and other means) who may have a mass appeal to younger audiences and can serve as vehicles to counter extremist messages (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2014). Like the definition of terrorism itself, the conceptualization for credible voices varies among U.S. government agencies. For the purposes of this review, a credible voice is operationalized as: a religious official, based in a geographical location where extremism is prevalent, such as the Middle East, who is actively preaching against the thoughts and behaviors of radical movements. These individuals, groups, or organizations are at the forefront of extremism and terrorism and they are likely to have contact with individuals who have the greatest potential to become radicalized.

Within the government, the use of credible voices falls under the classification of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) measures. While military actions should be high priority objectives, CVE efforts must attempt to “stem the tide of new extremists” (Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I*, 2011). Therefore, the unique position of credible voices in a select community allows them a tremendous opportunity to counter an extremist narrative and present other pathways. The key inquiry is to determine whether these figures prevent radicalization in at-risk individuals.

Radicalization is a socialization process by which individuals come to believe that their engagement in or facilitation of non-state violence to achieve social and political change is necessary and justified. This process, called radicalization into violent extremism (RVE), is defined as: the process by which people come to adopt beliefs that justify and compel violence, and how they progress from thinking to action (Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I*, 2011). Radicalization is one of the first steps towards extremism and terrorism, followed by mobilization, or, taking action. On a related note, many people who become radicalized never mobilize, but those who mobilize are radicalized extremists. The focus of this research is to target those susceptible to radicalization and, therefore, not already mobilized. However, there is potential for credible voices to influence those who are actively engaged; if a radicalized individual is planning to carry out an attack, credible voices may undermine the justification of their violent behaviors. Discrediting the violent ideology may have a prevention effect on those who adhere or sympathize with it.

Credible voices are applicable to any variety of extremist thought, including the more domestic and prominent right and left wing extremism. This research will focus on extremist movements claiming to be of Islamic origin. Al Qaeda, Boko Haram and the Islamic State, some of the most extreme and well known organizations claim to be based in Islamic script and ideology. Furthermore, scholars distinguish between Islam and Islamism (or Jihadism), explaining that Islam is a

religion that in modern practice does not encourage the hatred of non-Muslims and neither mandates nor justifies the killing of civilian non-combatants. Islamism/Jihadism refers not to a religion, but to a totalitarian political ideology driven by strong anti-Western and anti-democratic sentiment. The goal is conquest of the world by all means (Mozaffari, 2007). Militant leaders have been able to use the religion as an effective platform to deliver extremist propaganda. Evidence of this distinction rests in the fact that the vast majority of practicing Muslims do not adhere to violence and proponents of the militant ideology are not religious.

By investigating the presence of credible voices in communities, researchers can measure the potential effect on radicalization prevention. This research outline proposal serves as a basis for counter-terrorism and CVE campaigns: identifying powerful voices in presenting counter extremism narratives, it may not just prevent mobilization, but it could avert the radicalization process entirely for some individuals. Subsequently, similar programs can be implemented in various geographical regions due to the flexible nature of credible voices. Future inquiries can further provide greater validity, generalizability and falsifiability through replication studies.

RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION

The research defense for this hypothesis is: credible voices have the extraordinary potential to serve as an inhibitor to extremist activities. Terrorism expert James Forest argues that the United States and its allies must discredit and delegitimize efforts to justify terrorist violence and empower credible voices within the Muslim world. Doing this will publicly identify the contradictions and narrative weaknesses in groups, such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, ultimately disrupting the greater Jihadist movement (Forest, 2009).

The most effective credible voices appeal to a broad range of Muslim audiences because of their religious credentials, charisma, use of modern media, perceived independence from foreign government institutions, and lack of association with the US Government. It could be interpreted that some terrorist organizations are formed in response to foreign policy and incursion, therefore, any counter-extremist messages that are perceived to stem from the United States may not be viewed as legitimate, called a discredited messenger (Forest, 2009) However, if there is a local presence providing this counter narrative, validity may remain intact (no perceived connection with an outside entity). This is not to imply that the United States is not effective in CVE measures. To appear legitimate to the target individual's, potential US involvement would have to be concealed to high level security officials. Attractive alternative narratives can contribute to the prevention of radicalization and recruitment if they are delivered to the target audience by trusted sources (ICCT, 2014).

Previously, many religious leaders have publicly criticized Al Qaeda and associates on their employment of violence. Islamic scholar Maulana Hassan Jan

declared the practice of suicide bombing “un-Islamic;” Saudi Arabia’s top cleric Grand Mufti Sheik Abdul Aziz Al-Asheik delivered a speech to deter Saudis from participating in Jihadist activities in Iraq, and Mufti Zainul Abidin issued a fatwa to declare the Taliban “out of Islam” as a result of their failure to follow Islamic teachings (Forest, 2009). Statements and fatwas such as these undermine an extremist group’s perceived legitimacy within the Muslim world and credible voices can amplify the message to a larger audience.

RELEVANCE TO COUNTER-TERRORISM

Following September 11, the ongoing “war on terrorism” seeks to prevent these tragedies from recurring and has since drastically expanded its scope of targets. There are many individuals and extremist organizations that perceive U.S. foreign incursion as illegitimate because it represents an “outsider” coming in to control and exert their own beliefs. Narratives are much more powerful when coming from a source that is a perceived “insider.” Counterterrorism officials and scholars must acknowledge the value of credible voices because they can have a greater influence over a specific area and may be able to prevent radicalization more effectively. The US can work with these individuals or organizations to develop counter-extremism strategies and reduce the number of radicalized individuals, potentially diminishing the prevalence of terrorist groups.

Furthermore, this is applicable on the domestic front. (The general public tends to focus on Jihadi extremism; international threats overshadow domestic ones in the public eye. Because credible voices are flexible from one ideology to another, they can easily be applied to (homegrown American extremism, ranging from right wing to left wing to single issue organizations. It is a precarious challenge because being a member of domestic groups is not illegal and intervening in legal, yet potentially dangerous acts, is infringing on an individual’s rights. Credible voices can still be utilized to divert radicalization into violent extremism, and potentially defect from the ideology. Additionally, this can be implemented in online forums to prevent self-radicalization. Further research must need to be conducted to determine the reliability of this application.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Very little research is publicly available when researching credible voices and their prevention effects in current literature. Numerous academics mentioned that local sources are the most powerful form of counter-terror and radicalization prevention, but no in-depth research on that effect was conducted. American University Assistant Professor and Terrorism Expert Dr. Tricia Bacon recently stated that much research on credible voices is classified and therefore, not available to the general academic population (T. Bacon, personal communication, December 13, 2016). The available professional literature is concerned with the question of why

someone adopts these beliefs and potential behaviors through different levels of analysis.

Most of what has been written about radicalization is conceptual rather than empirical (Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I*, 2011) and recognizing this gap in research provides the opportunity to close it. In addition to examining radicalization as a social movement, this article also posits a flexible research blueprint to be used in future inquiries. Before delineating the outline, a brief review of previous research will assist in comprehending the phenomenon. Radicalization is a complex social process and a basic understanding of that process is necessary when theorizing about its prevention. Without a comprehension of the radicalization process and how credible voices are related to it, the effect of credible voices does not have a medium in which to be understood.

An operational definition of “radicalization” poses a challenge itself; numerous different law enforcement agencies and CVE efforts create a definition molded by their own organizational goals and the sociological or psychological aspects they choose to base it on. There are working definitions that focus on violent radicalization, group dynamics while others adhere to an individual learning process. Radicalism can be viewed as set of diverse processes and reviews potential theories best suited for further study of these processes (Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I*, 2011).

Outside the academic realm, government officials recognize the significance of creating indigenous rejection of extremist ideology. Because credible voices are community-based, their rebuffs and criticisms of terrorist ideologies are viewed as more genuine and can have long term effects on the overall deradicalization process in certain populations. Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Sarah Sewell argued for the use of more enduring CVE tactics:

CVE helps build resilience within individuals and communities. CVE is proactive – programs, institutions, and actors working to undermine the attraction of, and recruitment by, violent extremist movements and ideologies that promote violence. ... Tools such as messaging and amplifying credible voices are used to expose the dead-end lies of violent extremism and build positive alternatives such as what a future without violence looks like (Sewell, 2015).

For example, Al-Qaeda seeks to win the “hearts and minds” of the people, like the action the Islamic State is attempting to undertake. Counter-ideology messages promoted by credible voices should highlight the disconnect between fact and ideology and enlist allies within the Muslim world, the credible voices who can “help us achieve our strategic influence objectives” (Forest, 2009).

Credible voices are one of various strategic methods that can be advantageous in diverting the radicalization progression. They are an exceptional resource that need to be utilized more to have a greater effective in combatting extremism. Cohen argues that the United States needs to “drain the swamp” of potential recruits by overwhelming the target populations with alternatives,

opportunities, and choices that are driven and disseminated by local messengers (Cohen, 2009). Not only do the U.S. government and NGO's (Non-Government Organizations) need to network these local entities to divert radicalization away from extremist ideology, but involve these voices and figures in strategic communications efforts.

More recently, the former Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken remarked on the importance of empowering local credible voices to combat violent extremism. The former Deputy Secretary reviews the current policies employed by the United States in the war against extremism and terrorism: training, equipping, and advising local partners; stabilizing and rebuilding liberated areas; stopping the flow of foreign fighters into and out of Iraq and Syria; providing life-saving humanitarian assistance, and more. He stated that winning this war on terror will need to include more than blunt military force. Blinken developed a strategy to prevent and counter violent extremism, governed by five core priorities. The most relevant is that engaging and amplifying local credible voices can expose the true nature of violent extremism. Counter-terrorism officials must empower those who are indigenous, including disillusioned returnees, religious leaders, women, and young people, to successfully dispel extremism and avoid radicalization (Blinken, 2016).

In sum, government officials recognize the utility of credible voices in the fight against extremism and terrorism. However, this sentiment hasn't garnered scholarship on the topic. Even considering the classified nature of credible voices, it doesn't fully explain why there is little academic interest. Using publicly available sources, this inquiry seeks to bridge that gap by establishing the initial link between application and academia and proposing a flexible research outline.

THEORETICAL BASIS

For the purposes of this research inquiry, I establish my theoretical basis in Social Movement Theory (SMT), one of the most promising theoretical frameworks to understand radicalization processes and violent extremism. A social movement is defined as:

“A set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

Terrorism is a form of political violence and insurgency, analyzable with the social movement approach of mobilizing resources, replenishing those lost in the movement, and framing. Applying the social movement definition to the Islamic State (IS), their opinions and beliefs include their false sense of superiority, willingness and encouragement to engage in violence in the name of Allah represents. It desires to govern territory, transforming it into an Islamic State and modeling its social structure after Shari'a law, meaning that IS has to change the

entire social structure of governed territory. The primary task of any organization or movement is to maintain its own survival; this requires maintaining a body of supporters and replenishing those individuals who are lost in the process (McCarthy & Zald, 1977), most commonly through death or defection. New members must be added for the movement to grow and expand its influence.

An applicable subset of SMT is Framing Theory, which focuses on how movements and social collectives construct, produce and disseminate meaning. This is a recursive process in which the movement's leadership attempts to frame messages in ways that will best resonate with the interests, attitudes, and beliefs of its potential constituency. Essentially, this is a process by which the organizational leaders shape messages in ways that will best appeal to the feelings and religious values of its potential recruits. Thus, recruitment, networking and growth is necessary for the movement's survival. As people accept the movement's frame of reference, they increasingly come to identify themselves with the inclusive organization (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008). Extremist organizations utilize these principles to spread their messages in hopes of radicalization and recruitment.

In the case of terrorist movements such as the Islamic State (IS), framing is an incredibly powerful tool. Put simply, framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning. If IS disseminates an image of the organization that depicts violence, brutality, and hatred for other religions, it may only reach out to a small population. However, if that message crafts to promote itself as freedom fighters, defending the region from foreign invaders and infidels, it will resonate with a broader audience favorably and appeal to a wider range of consumers. Identifying the specific frames of reference that come with each IS message provides credible voices with a clear target and can utilize this information to design their own counter-narrative.

Application of SMT and Framing to terrorism and CVE research is recent and still very sparse. Donatella Dell Porta is among the first to connect SMT concepts to violent extremism in her research on Italian and German militants (Della Porta, 2006). Additionally, Wiktorowicz conducted an in-depth study of how people came to join the militant Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun and developed a multi-component developmental model for radicalization. Those who became radicalized first revealed an openness to new worldviews (cognitive opening), then came to view religion as a path to find meaning (religious seeking), eventually found the extremist groups' narratives to make sense (frame alignment) and through socialization, ultimately became fully indoctrinated into the movement (Wiktorowicz, 2005). This application of SMT to terrorism research allows CVE organizations and initiatives to identify which component to target and employ credible voices to disrupt the delivery of the extremist message.

An additional concept gleaned from SMT and applied to radicalization is biographical availability. This notion focuses on the individual level of analysis inference to group participation and membership. Biographical availability is defined as: the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation (McCauley, 2016). Individuals with personal constraints such as having a spouse, children, a full-time job, etc., are generally less available to the time-consuming commitments of political activism. Using this information, credible voices can identify those are less susceptible to radicalization, permitting them to hone in on those with a high risk (fewer personal constraints).

Viewing violent extremism within a social movement lens allows a different conceptualization of the problem with several potential insights for understanding the radicalization process (Hanson, 2007). First, it provides the framework of “mobilization potential” to consider the process by which a movement’s members are developed. Second, it offers the notion of “recruitment networks” for navigating the processes by which those networks are molded. Third, it offers the concept of “frame alignment” to explain how the networks shape members’ beliefs and sentiments to align with the interests of the group. Fourth, it points out the importance in understanding radicalization of not only analyzing incentives and grievances, but also how groups identify and remove barriers to participation (Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism I*, 2011). By using SMT to identify these tactics employed by extremist movements, it provides credible voices with a window of opportunity to disrupt the identification process and prevent radicalization more effectively.

SMT can contribute a necessary conceptual paradigm for understanding terrorism and developing specific applications. Cultural perspectives call attention to issues of collective identity that allow for sustained militancy, and movement research recommends alternative conceptions of terrorist networks. Research on movement outcomes suggests broader ways of considering the effectiveness of political violence. In sum, a social movement approach to terrorism has much to contribute, and research on terrorism could have important extensions and implications for social movement theory (Beck, 2008).

Utilizing SMT and Framing Theory to identify terrorist organizational strategies provides a way for the credible voices to counter the violent messages more successfully. Recruitment, networking and growth are critical to the sustainability of terrorist organizations; targeting these pillars of sustainability will upset the survival of the group, ultimately weakening them. Credible voices disturb the movement’s frames of reference and prevent people from identifying with the collective group. Terrorist organizations must be incredibly savvy at disseminating their violent messages to recruit individuals and further obtain their own organizational goals. Disrupting the identification process with the movement renders the messages defunct.

SAMPLING, DATA & METHODS

BASIC HYPOTHESES

Future exploration of credible voices and radicalization prevention will need to delineate research hypotheses, curtailed to the specifications of the study. Modifiable hypotheses about the conclusions are below:

H_0 : The credible voices do not have an effect on radicalization prevention.

H_A : The credible voices do have an effect on radicalization prevention.

If this research fails to reject the null hypothesis, it may call into question the validity of credible voices and could potentially discourage additional academic inquiry. However, if the null hypothesis is rejected, there is a demonstrable effect of the credible voices, providing a foundational basis on which to build similar prevention programs. This calls for further academic replication and reliability measures.

SAMPLING & DATA

The target population of this research inquiry are those in a geographic region where extremist ideology is present, and who are either neutral or quietly sympathize with local extremists. For this type of research, there will be a focus on the communities that relevant actors identify as vulnerable to violent extremism. These are the individuals perceived to be the most at-risk for radicalization. Attempting to find this at-risk population can be both challenging and dangerous. To collect an adequate sample of individuals, the research team should first contact a local credible voice in a predesignated geographical area. Most commonly, in the context of Jihadism, this is as a religious official and/or organization who rebuffs terrorism and other violent means.

This person or congregation of people would then put the research staff in contact with adolescents and young adults they distinguish to be at risk for radicalization. This process of requires spending time within the local community to earn the trust of the people and be viewed as “legitimate.” This endeavor alone is extremely time-consuming and may take months, if not longer, but is critical to have the community cooperate in this undertaking. After the credibility of the research staff is established, snowball sampling would be employed until an adequate sample is obtained. Unfortunately, reaching a representative sample in this inquiry is highly unlikely. The realistic sample size should include at least 50 individuals permitting the use of z-scores in quantitative analysis. To encourage involvement, financial incentives should be offered to both those who recommend others and those who complete full interviews with the staff.

Snowball sampling is the most appropriate method of nonprobability sampling because our target population is incredibly difficult to reach (Bachman

et. al, 2017). The research team would need assistance from the credible voice just to find the initial “snowball.” While recognizing that the first contact may shape the entire sample, there simply is not any other viable recruitment option when attempting to find the target population and reach out to them could mean stumbling across members of extremist group. The potential ramifications could result in harm to the research staff, the participants and the credible voice assisting with the research.

METHODS

Due to the nature of this inquiry, it would be classified as qualitative rather than quantitative. Because it would take place in a geographical location where extremism is prevalent, there would be a population of sampling units who have experienced the messaging tactics of both the extremists and the credible voices. The research team would attempt to reach out to those individuals who have not been radicalized, presumably those who the credible voices have veered away from the extremist ideology. This may produce a biased result, as the inquiry does not include those already radicalized, but that is due to the nature of this research. Radicalization prevention is the focus, requiring non-radicalized individuals. These individuals are qualified to speak about this subject matter because it is persistent in their everyday lives and it may have negatively affected them directly, their family members and/or their peers. Because they experienced the brunt of extremism and rebuffed it, they are qualified to speak to the effectiveness of the credible voices countering the radicalization messages.

Once the participants are located, intensive interviewing methods such as semi-structured questions would be employed, safeguarding the subjects with the opportunity to interject information that may not be directly questioned by the researchers. Staff members who have become familiar faces within the community would be conducting the interviews to make the participants more comfortable. Information would be collected until the saturation point is reached, for gaining insight and providing of reliability to the participants’ accounts, thereby lending validity to the overall research study.

When gathering the data from the participants, we would request that the interviews be recorded to easily be reviewed at a later time. If the subjects decline, one member of the staff would conduct the interview and another to take notes. This could have implications on how candid the participants are, even if they agree to the recording, but the relationship with the interviewer should negate this effect. Recording permits the interviewer to engage in active listening, to focus on and ask questions without being distracted by note-taking. Also, because of this qualitative nature, the staff would inquire about the specific details of some activities, rather than the frequency in which those activities occur. Records and jottings will be maintained to demonstrate similar themes throughout the accounts, but will specifically be focused on how the credible voices more significantly influenced the

participants than the extremist messaging.

Additionally, the role of the research staff would be that of a complete observer. I selected this method to reduce the danger to both the research team and the participants involved. When conducting this study in a region with widespread extremism and terrorism, maintaining the safety of everyone involved is the top priority. Taking on any other role (such as participant/observer or covert participant) places the staff in extreme danger because most often, in these regions, the local credible voices are inherent targets to the radical extremists. An advantage of this is that if any danger occurs, we can cancel the study immediately and remove the staff from the area. Furthermore, by remaining a complete observer, the staff does not run the risk of asking suspicious questions and “blowing cover,” the team is able to inquire about any activities without rousing distrust among those being examined.

CONCEPTUALIZATION & MEASUREMENT

Concept	Variable	Indicator	Responses
Preventing Radicalization	Visiting extremist or terrorist websites	How often in the past six months have you visited a website featuring extreme religious views? Other possible indicators: How often do you attend events that feature extreme religious views? How often do you engage in activities (such as rallies) that promote extreme religious views?	1. Never 2. Rarely (Once every few months) 3. Occasionally (Once a month) 4. Often (A few times a month) 5. Regularly (once a week) 6. Very frequently (multiple times a week) 7. Daily

Although there are a multitude of indicators that can be posited for measuring radicalization (see above examples), I recommend using extremist websites because it can be regarded as a thorough exposure to radical ideology. A curious individual may become aware of an extremist group through family, peers or local propaganda, and may explore that group’s ideology through their website. Another reason for choosing this medium is because extremist movements will often provide their own justification and source of legitimacy on their website, providing a frame of reference for the audience. Validating the cause allows the spectator to understand and sympathize with their plight (one of the first steps in the radicalization process). The selected indicators do have potential to produce biased results. Indicators may be modified to measure the dependent variable according to the specific nature of future application. To make this more covert, the word “extreme” could be replaced

with something softer, such as “unconventional” as not to condemn the participant.

The responses can be coded on both a nominal and an ordinal scale. On a nominal scale, we can create different categories and record the number of responses for each category (how many participants answer with “Never” or “Regularly” or “Daily”) to record which frequency level is most common. Additionally, on the ordinal scale, we can identify that someone who selects “Very Frequently” is consuming extremist material more often than someone who selects “Rarely;” however, any absolute mathematical distinctions cannot be made between the categories. Classifying responses on both scales provides a greater comprehension of our collected data.

Summed up, the based proposal is: measure the frequency with which the participants view the extremist websites based on participant feedback in conjunction with recording their attitudes toward extremist ideology, followed up with having the credible voice interact with the participants attempting to counter the violent message. Then, after a period of six months, the researchers would then again measure the frequency that the subjects are viewing the extremist material and record their attitudes. If there is a significant decrease in viewing the online material and a change in opinion toward extremism, then the credible voices demonstrate an effect, rejecting the null hypothesis. If there is no change in frequency or opinions then they have no (significant) effect, failing to reject the null hypothesis,

TYPE OF NARRATIVES

When determining alternatives to violent extremism, there are multiple pathways that can be presented. Below is a baseline of six different types of counter-narratives relevant to terrorist organizations.

- *Strategic Counter-Narratives*: Valuable for governments wishing to condemn violent extremists and their efforts. While strategic counter-narratives are often a necessary response to a crisis or an attack, these are not necessarily intended on reaching the individuals that are already supporting extremist organizations.
- *Tactical Counter-Narratives*: Emphasize that violence in the long run is often less effective when compared to more peaceful methods, and not useful to an organizations’ overall reputation and objectives. A variety of messengers can utilize this, including governments and community-based organizations.
- *Positive & Alternative Narratives*: Focuses on creating proactive, positive messages, rather than reacting to extremist messaging. Creating alternative narratives provide the audience with an opportunity to adhere to a positive ideology before being exposed to a radicalized version of one.
- *Ethical Counter-Narratives*: Points out that violent action is not a moral

way of achieving aims. They may be useful if the messenger has ethical or moral influence over the target audience. These arguments may not be religious in nature, but rather point out the commonalities between all humans, and call for a better cooperation between all nations and peoples.

- *Ideological & Religious Counter-Narratives*: Beneficial if the messenger has religious authority in the target community (such as Islamic scholars, imams and community-based religious leaders). Governments making religious arguments, especially Western governments, can be counter-productive, and the (credibility of the) messenger is particularly significant in this context.
- *Humor and Sarcasm*: Humor and sarcasm may be useful in delegitimizing the narrative of violent extremists in certain instances. A downfall to consider is that using humor may not reach the intended target audience, and only reinforce the absurdity of terrorism to the general public that already does not support terrorist organizations (ICCT, 2014).

For this research, an amalgamation of Positive & Alternative and Ideological & Religious counter narratives will be employed. The research team should identify credible voices in the region, then select those organizations with this type of message. An example of this type of combination would be a respected, well known religious official who not only argues against a terrorist ideology, but provides positive messages about Islam as a peaceful religion. Someone of this nature would provide opportunities to express grievances and encourage those to become activists rather than terrorists. This is the ideal messenger we would like to examine; however, given the regional parameters, the availability of messengers will shape the research. This leads to the possibility that we may end up examining a credible voice that promotes one of the other types of narratives. Alternatively, the research team could examine which narrative has a greater effect on radicalization prevention, transforming a limitation into an opportunity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The effect of credible voices on the prevention of radicalization is classified as applied research because it will have a substantial impact on counter-terrorism policy decisions (Bachman et. al., 2017). Over \$16 billion annually is spent on counter-terrorism efforts (Desilver, 2013); if this research demonstrates that credible voices are effective then funds can be allocated to implement this program to a greater region.

This also has potential implications for military and foreign policy. If the influence of credible voices is an effective preventive measure, then over time, the pool of potential recruits could be drained, leading to reduction in military aid.

Additionally, establishing a global network of credible voices is far more diplomatic than foreign incursions. Global coalitions foster a sense of comradery; amicable worldwide cooperation has enormous benefits for nearly every country affected by extremism. This may not be universally applicable due to state-sponsored terrorism (generally defined as terrorist activities or movements that are actively supported by a country or governing state), but credible voices are designed to be most influential at the micro-level of analysis. State sponsored terrorism, while still a treacherous international threat, cannot be diminished by local religious authorities, as they target the individuals comprised of the group the state supports.

Terrorism prevention and credible voice research has implications on the economic front as well. Short-term impressions of terrorist attacks (committed in other countries) are often minimal in the United States and other developed nations. Market resilience, however, does not necessarily apply to countries that see repeated violence, such as in Egypt, and where much of a national economy depends upon tourism revenue. The decision by the UK and Russia to halt flights to Egypt immediately after the downing of a Russian passenger plane over the Sinai resulted in a high number of hotel and restaurant cancellations in Egypt. These short term losses have had a profound impact on Egypt's struggling economy and could cost the country \$280 million per month due to flight cancellations (Moreau, 2015). More prominently, the wars in Iraq and Syria have devastated these countries' indigenous economies, causing inflation, high unemployment, labor migration, and overwhelming amount of damage to key infrastructure. This trend is likely to continue in both countries until stability is achieved. With the assistance of credible voices in extremism reduction, this economic stability can be achieved.

The implications of this research are more long-term oriented than traditional counter-terrorism or CVE measures, which may not be appealing to policy makers. However, if the research on the prevention tactics of credible voices can be validated and proven reliable, there are significant implications on both domestic and international fronts, including United States National Security Policy, Foreign Policy, international relations and the local economies.

LIMITATIONS & ETHICS

Engaging in primary data collection from human subjects for such a delicate and controversial matter can produce extraordinarily useful information, but does not come without risk. To conduct this research, everyone from the staff to the participants could be placing themselves in a position of being considered a target. To extremists, a credible voice is a threat. Respected community officials not only question the strong belief that violence is necessary and justifiable, strongly held by terrorist organizations, but actively rally against it and offer alternative narratives. Because of the target population, the team would be in close proximity with those credible voices, theoretically making everyone involved an enemy by association.

Since this research seeks to study if credible voices can prevent radicalization

among those sympathetic to a particular extremist cause, there is the possibility that those sympathizers may not desire to participate due to fear or retaliation from the extremist groups. One way to combat this is to provide both confidentiality and anonymity to those participants, thereby shielding them from potential harm. With those safeguards provided, individuals may feel safe and comfortable, generating more accurate and valid research results.

The inherent nature of qualitative exploration presents systemic limitations as well. Because of the relatively small sample size, generalizability is questionable. However, taking into consideration that the population of radicalized individuals is intrinsically small, sample generalizability may be greater than anticipated. Findings can also be transferred to another setting for replication (such as other geographical locations or an online environment). Furthermore, the sheer volume of data makes analysis and interpretation time consuming for the research staff, naturally making this undertaking long-term.

However, the strengths of qualitative inquiries are much more powerful than the hindrances. Obtained data based on human experience is influential and dramatically more captivating than quantitative data. Subtleties and complexities associated with the research subjects and topic may be unnoticed or disregarded when collecting purely quantitative data. In-depth analysis of the intricacies of credible voices permit a comprehensive understanding and how their message is delivered to susceptible individuals, how those individuals interpret it, and whether it is more dominant than extremist messages or has no effect.

Furthermore, in terms of the content validity of conceptualization and measurement, this type of study makes various assumptions about the subjects involved. It assumes that the participants are not being exposed to extremist messaging in any other form (since we'll be studying in an area where extremism is prevalent, this is highly unlikely); that viewing the extremism material online means that a subject is at a greater risk of becoming radicalized (which is a generalization) and; that the particular credible voice working with us will use tactics to appeal to our subjects (maintaining their interest). These assumptions may interact with the participants in such a way that it has the potential to invalidate any effects the study may find.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The benefits of researching the effectiveness of credible voices have long-lasting and far-reaching applications. Once credible voices have been verified to prevent radicalization, they can be established in any geographic region where a type of extremism can be identified. They can collaborate with anyone from local organizations to the U.S. Federal Government, the United Nations, and even have the potential to develop a global network of credible voices. This has important implications for policy as well; government representatives may create their own programs to aid and empower credible voices combatting extremism and terrorism

locally and globally. By targeting the first step toward radical extremism, this initiative takes a proactive approach rather than a reactive one (such as the “war on terror”). Preventative measures, as a whole, are far more effective and focusing resources on this stage of the radicalization process may be able to prevent potential terrorists from engaging in the movement to begin with.

In the words of former Secretary of State John Kerry, “eliminating the terrorists of today with force will not guarantee protection from the terrorists of tomorrow.” No matter how many terrorists are brought to justice, killed in airstrikes, or defect, those organizations will continue to replenish their movements. He states we need to do more to prevent young people from turning to terror in the first place (Blinken, 2016). Credible voices are the resources designed to be effective on this micro-level of analysis. They reach out to people who are susceptible to stop the radicalization process before it begins. Individuals who turn to extremism are family members, peers and acquaintances. National security strategists need to reach out on an individual level to understand this process, identify vulnerable targets, take prevention efforts and divert the radicalization process entirely.

In a recent policy briefing, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue proposed increasing counter-messaging, counter-narrative and alternative narrative activity as well as building the capacity of credible messengers. Four recommendations were made:

- Governments should make significant investments in building the skills and expertise of the most effective counter-messengers, such as credible voices, to build their capacity in technology, production, communications, and local campaigning.
- Governments should use their convening power to bring the private tech sector to the table as their expertise can help the voices of credible messengers.
- Governments should fund centralized information gathering to provide economies of scale and ensure that effective counter-messengers have the information they need to work, such as analytics, audience profiling, and the sharing of good practice in alternative and counter-narratives.
- Government must work multilaterally to pool resources in this area, taking an active role in streamlining the cross-border exchange of expertise and lessons learned in capacity building (Briggs & Feve, 2013).

Countering the narrative of extremist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and IS, is just as imperative as controlling and diminishing its violence, since both movement’s narratives brings new recruits into its ranks. Interrupting the flow of their network will have damaging effects on the ability of their target audience to identify with the movement. This process of disruption leaves sympathizers unable to associate themselves with the activities of the movement, leading people to shun

extremism.

Working on the community level is key. Community leaders that are informed of potential radicalization and recruitment to violent extremism in their own communities are better partners in efforts to counter violent extremism in those communities. Micro-level analysis and implementation can identify and cater specific needs on an individual basis. Governments can provide the tools and resources for monitoring and countering extremism, assist communities in creating a space for counter-narratives, be open and transparent in their efforts to stand up to terrorist organizations, and address genuine and realistic grievances that may contribute to radicalization and recruitment (ICCT, 2014).

The most powerful aspect of these credible voices is their proactive approach. As long as counter-terrorism measures solely focus on reactive efforts, the problem of radicalization and extremism will never be tackled head on. Reactive methods specialize in the after-effects once radicalization and mobilization have already occurred. Credible voices, however, directly target those processes to prevent them from happening. Government officials from around the world recognize the overwhelming significance of these voices and advocate for establishing them as a network or an NGO. Prevention is as vital as eradication. Long-term strategic planning to counter terrorism must account for, if not emphasize, terrorist radicalization and recruitment (Borum, *Radicalization into Violent Extremism II*, 2011). Despite this, research on the effect of credible voices (proactive measures in general) is incredibly scarce. Academics have only just begun theoretical applications to extremism and this inquiry seeks to fill that gap with SMT and inspire others to do the same.

Credible voices are a very flexible topic, applicable to all types of extremist ideology. I have applied the principles of SMT and Framing theory to Jihadi extremism, utilizing their concepts to identify specialized tactics undertaken by extremist organizations. By doing so, credible voices and similar messengers can refine their own tactics to counter them more effectively. By incorporating the credible voices into a long-term counter-terrorism approach and utilizing them as resources in terrorism-prone regions, we have a greater chance at preventing radicalization and subsequent terrorist attacks.

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