

Targeting Violent Extremist Narratives: Applying Network Targeting Techniques to the Communication Functions of Terrorist Groups

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Abstract : Over the last decade, the increasing utility of extremist narratives to the operational effectiveness of terrorist organizations has been evidenced by the proliferation of inspired or affiliated attacks across the world. Famous examples such as regional al-Qaeda affiliates and the self-styled "Islamic State" demonstrate the effectiveness of leveraging communication technologies to disseminate propaganda, recruit members, and orchestrate attacks. Terrorist organizations with the capacity to harness the communicative power offered by digital communication technologies and effective political narratives have held an advantage over their targets in recent years. Terrorists have leveraged the perceived legitimacy of grass-roots actors to appeal to a global audience of potential supporters and enemies alike, and have wielded a proficiency in profile-raising which remains unmatched by counter terrorism narratives around the world. In contrast, many attempts at propagating official counter-narratives have been received by target audiences as illegitimate, top-down and impersonally bureaucratic. However, the benefits provided by widespread communication and extremist narratives have come at an operational cost. Terrorist organizations now face a significant challenge in protecting their access to communications technologies and authority over the content they create and endorse. The dissemination of effective narratives has emerged as a core function of terrorist organizations with international reach via inspired or affiliated attacks. As such, it has become a critical function which can be targeted by intelligence and security forces. This study applies network targeting principles which have been used by coalition forces against a range of non-state actors in the Middle East and South Asia to the communicative function of terrorist organizations. This illustrates both a conceptual link between functional targeting and operational disruption in the abstract and a tangible impact on the operational effectiveness of terrorists by degrading communicative ability and legitimacy. Two case studies highlight the utility of applying functional targeting against terrorist organizations. The first case is the targeted killing of Anwar al-Awlaki, an al-Qaeda propagandist who crafted a permissive narrative and effective propaganda videos to attract recruits who committed inspired terrorist attacks in the US and overseas. The second is a series of operations against Islamic State propagandists in Syria, including the capture or deaths of a cadre of high profile Islamic State members, including Junaid Hussain, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, Neil Prakash, and Rachid Kassim. The group of Islamic State propagandists were linked to a significant rise in affiliated and enabled terrorist attacks and were subsequently targeted by law enforcement and military agencies. In both cases, the disruption of communication between the terrorist organization and recruits degraded both communicative and operational functions. Effective functional targeting on member recruitment and operational tempo suggests that narratives are a critical function which can be leveraged against terrorist organizations. Further application of network targeting methods to terrorist narratives may enhance the efficacy of a range of counter terrorism techniques employed by security and intelligence agencies.

Keywords : countering violent extremism, counter terrorism, intelligence, terrorism, violent extremism

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