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EX POST PAPERS

RAN POL and RAN C&N — Current and future narratives and strategies of far-right and islamist extremism
Stockholm, Sweden

Current and future narratives and strategies of far-right and islamist extremism

On 4 and 5 April in Stockholm, the RAN Police and law enforcement (POL) and RAN Communication and Narratives (C&N) working groups meeting kicked off with a simple yet pertinent question: *'Why aren't all individuals exposed to propaganda equally susceptible?'* This question prompted a vigorous discussion on the factors and contexts that are definitive for individuals becoming radicalised, the elements that make certain extremist narratives particularly effective, and how these narratives are disseminated and transmitted. The discussion then took a more speculative turn, considering what extremist narratives are likely to be observed in the future, and the means of countering such narratives.

Introduction

This ex post paper has been written with first-line practitioners in mind. The objective is to offer a concise overview of five prevailing Islamist extremist (IE) narratives and five prevailing far-right extremist (FRE) narratives, while considering why these narratives are so difficult to counter. The paper identifies 'pitfalls' and/or situational developments that may be exploited by extremist groups seeking a channel for the development of future narratives. Finally, it highlights the elements that must be addressed in possible alternative narratives or counter-narratives.

SUSCEPTIBILITY TO PROPAGANDA

Propaganda can be defined as the strategic communication of ideas, aimed at manipulating specific target audiences for an extremist cause ⁽¹⁾. Propaganda often features allusions to some sort of threat posed against individuals: targets are made to feel that they are not alone in facing this threat, but rather that this threat exists for a whole group of people who resemble them. In this way, propaganda shapes a strong sense of identity, based on an in/out group distinction. This can be exploited to radicalise individuals and can be employed to justify the use of violence. Of course, many people across the globe who are unhappy with the status quo and hold extreme views do not resort to strategic violence in an attempt to change the existing state of affairs. While it is necessary to understand why certain individuals become radicalised and opt for violence while others do not, such discussion is beyond the scope of this ex post paper.

The focus is on present-day, common far-right extremist (FRE) and Islamist extremist (IE) narratives deemed particularly effective in radicalising individuals, how the narratives are transmitted and disseminated, how the narratives can be expected to change in the (near) future, and the elements that alternative narratives should feature.

NARRATIVES OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS

In previous years, the physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria was used to attract individuals to join Daesh in the global jihad against the West and against regimes in Muslim countries. Following Daesh's loss of territory, a new narrative was formulated, dominated by the idea that 'the war is not over' and that they should 'remain steadfast' ⁽²⁾. There is, however, a certain discrepancy in their message. On the one hand, it is implied that the physical caliphate per se is not necessary to achieve the given goals; instead, they must now commit to a long guerrilla war in Syria and Iraq — in addition, there is a continued call for terror attacks in the West ³. At the same time, however, Daesh highlights the success of their branches in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Yemen, and West Africa, and encourages individuals to travel (make 'hijrah' (hegira)) there. This discrepancy serves to illustrate how different narratives are used to target different audiences, so as to recruit as many individuals as possible.

Practitioners identified what they believe to be the most effective IE narratives currently being employed. Some of these are overarching and/or cross-cutting, but overall, five clear messages or narratives are predominantly used in attracting individuals to IE groups and convincing them to join (see Table 1).

¹ Ritzmann, A. (2018, March 22). A Tribal Call to Arms: Propaganda and What PVE Can Learn from Anthropology, Psychology and Neuroscience, *European Eye on Radicalization*. Retrieved from <https://eeradicalization.com/a-tribal-call-to-arms-propaganda-and-what-pve-can-learn-from-anthropology-psychology-and-neuroscience/>

² Munoz, M. (2019). Selling the Long War. *CTC Sentinel*, 11(10), 31-36. Retrieved from <https://ctc.usma.edu/selling-long-war-islamic-state-propaganda-caliphate/>

³ Ibid., 31.

Table 1 Currently prevalent IE narratives

Currently prevalent IE narratives		
Narrative	Meaning and implications	Why is it effective?
Double salvation/Hope for everlasting life	'Join us, the only real community of believers, and you will be "saved". Moreover, if you become a martyr, you will enter paradise before all other believers'. This includes family members. The narrative in brief: 'This offers a means of gaining fame and salvation'.	The promise of everlasting life is hard to surpass. The inherent promise of utopia and of being cleansed of all sins form part of a religious ideological narrative that cannot easily be countered.
Victimhood/Sense of exclusion ('You will never be accepted')	This narrative addresses emotional needs more than it reflects ideological views. All the hardships and obstacles that individuals face can be framed in a broader narrative: 'Because you are Muslim, you are threatened and denounced'. The 'suppression' of one aspect of religious practice is framed as the suppression of all Muslims. The narrative offers one solution to all these problems: to join/create an umma.	This resonates particularly in Western and European societies owing to certain political and societal developments. A factual element is exploited and used to prove that Muslims are not (fully) accepted. The narrative is supported by a concept of belonging and of the freedom to practice one's religion. The solution, to create a place of safety for all Muslims, is a simplistic remedy for complex grievances.
Empowerment/Taking control ('You are the chosen one')	Empowering narrative that encourages individuals to take control, i.e. the men to become soldiers of Allah or martyrs, and the women to become wives and mothers (or martyrs as well).	This narrative draws on a number of (perceived) grievances: a lack of agency/control, feeling treated like a second-class citizen, feeling rejected. Simultaneously, it offers a proactive solution with a direct end result (i.e. to become a martyr by attacking the West or to become a soldier of Allah).
Sense of injustice/group grievance	This plays on the injustice felt as a result of foreign policy more than individual victimhood. This narrative refers to the 'hypocrisy of the state'; 'it suppresses violence within national borders, but commits atrocities around the world'.	Historical facts and events are used to construct this type of narrative. It owes its effectiveness to the fact that it contains elements of truth and factual statements. This feeds into earlier (perceived) feelings of injustice and validates them.
'The caliphate'	'The loss of the caliphate does not mean we have failed. It is only a setback, a way for God to test us. He has given us the fruit, but is taking it away from us. The application of Sharia as the model of governance is more important than the physical caliphate itself.'	Effective because 'the caliphate' is propounded as the solution to all problems; it's a mythical utopian construct of an ideal Muslim society.

Transmission and dissemination tactics of IE narratives

The fall of Daesh has been accompanied by a parallel reduction in official online propaganda. But recent years have also seen a surge of new social media outlets not necessarily operated by official Daesh leadership. In fact, between 2015 and 2018, there was an 85 % increase in social media platforms containing IE content ⁽⁴⁾. Increasingly, smaller platforms are becoming the preferred choice for posting propaganda. According to Europol, 55 % of IE content is available on platforms that are accessible, and 45 % of the content is becoming harder to locate ⁽⁵⁾. This makes it difficult to constantly monitor the flurry of smaller platforms used by IE groups, especially when these feature podcasts/lectures. In addition, some IE groups are reacting to the rise in the online monitoring and removal of extremist content by returning to offline dissemination, i.e. through books and films.

What makes IE propaganda effective and compelling for its target audience is the speed of its dissemination: the swift response to events and their immediate recasting to further the IE narrative. In this way, the messages are

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

shaped to appeal to many (young) people who identify with the emotions expressed therein, without necessarily also identifying the IE provenance.

Potential IE narratives — and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Narratives are a fluid construction, likely to fluctuate in response to (geo)political, social or other situational developments. Table 2 provides an overview of possible future narratives and identifies some of the elements that an alternative narrative or counter-narrative should consider.

Table 2 Current and potential IE narratives, and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Current and potential IE narratives, and alternative narratives or counter-narratives		
Current narrative	Possible future narrative	Potential alternative narratives or counter-narratives
Double salvation/Hope for everlasting life	The 'double salvation' narrative will continue to appeal to a limited target audience. Men and women seeking salvation or atonement for former misdeeds (criminal past included) might view this as a unique opportunity to make amends through heroic acts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advance alternative, peaceful means for individuals to reform, make amends and gain agency. - Address and resolve individuals' underlying feelings of shame or inferiority over past misdeeds. - Devise positive ways for individuals to achieve fame (this is a very individual trajectory).
Victimhood/Sense of exclusion ('You will never be accepted')	This narrative of rejection and ostracism will continue to be used in the future. How government and the public deal with factual or perceived discrimination, marginalisation or FRE in a given national/local context will influence how this narrative is formulated by IE.	Demonstrate that the contrary narrative is true: make individuals feel that they are accepted and can invest in a sense of belonging, e.g. through audiovisual material reflecting that opportunities are available for all citizens (including Muslims), and reflecting positive or 'regular' situations/developments in society.
Empowerment/Taking control ('You are the chosen one')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This narrative might be more widely disseminated via video games, borrowing from the FRE tactics of normalising violence through such games in order to reach a wider audience. - The IE narrative will continue to exploit international conflicts as a means of encouraging individuals to act against injustice or to help 'save their brothers and sisters'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop positive online content (as well as video games). - Since many issues are related to ongoing conflicts, enable (young) people to discuss such subjects and form their own opinions (i.e. develop critical thinking skills). Provide them with the opportunity to express these opinions, ask questions and engage with local politicians/experts on these issues (i.e. nurture agency). If needed, provide first-line practitioners and local authorities with supplementary information about these conflicts.
Sense of injustice/group grievance	<p>Narrative versions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - manipulating and/or misrepresenting historical facts, by comparing the fall of the caliphate to the fall of Ottoman Empire; - focusing on foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Israel/Palestine conflict; - propagating the idea of Europe as a super state, with an EU army intent on destroying the Arab world; - using the discourse of shared norms/values employed by countries pushing back against IE, and framing this as an attempt to attack Islam and socially engineer Muslims to become submissive and pliable; - focusing on the rising FRE threat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage communities and hold open and frank conversations (where individuals do not feel like suspects or that the state is trying to manipulate them). - Show an understanding that Muslims do not constitute a homogeneous bloc. - Shift away from the use of words such as tolerance and respect, and towards the acceptance of differences and an emphasis on shared values. - Ensure parity in the measures and strategies of dealing with FRE and IE.

Current and potential IE narratives, and alternative narratives or counter-narratives		
Current narrative	Possible future narrative	Potential alternative narratives or counter-narratives
	All narratives support the call to act against these perceived injustices.	
'The caliphate'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A call for a more determined, driven and unified group to spur the next caliphate. - A call to dispel self-doubt and misgivings — the caliphate is presented as a certainty. - Interpreting the fall of the caliphate as a fall caused by Jews, Americans or British — this can be used as fresh proof of conspiracy theories. 	Invest in resilience-building and critical thinking for individuals, e.g. through projects to foster empowerment and agency.

NARRATIVES FAR-RIGHT EXTERMISTS

Having considered several FRE narratives, practitioners posed the following questions: Why do these narratives resonate? Why are they hard to counter? How might they evolve in the near future? And how can an effective alternative narrative be formulated?

As with the IE narratives, practitioners broadly identified five FRE narratives being used effectively today: the struggle for identity narrative, the masculinity narrative, the victimhood narrative, the loss of self-government narrative and the eco-fascist narrative. Each narrative is further analysed below, and a possible future and alternative/counter narrative is put forward for each.

The struggle for identity

Table 3 Current and potential FRE narratives (the struggle for identity), and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Current narrative	Possible future narrative	Alternative narrative
Struggle for identity: national identities are under threat	Failure of FRE parties, decline in belief in political solutions.	Focus on justified grievances or understandable fears, and highlight the consequences of pursuing a violent path.

FRE political parties are gaining ground following election campaigns based on topics like immigration and perceived 'Islamisation', as well as by defining 'the elite' as a homogeneous corrupt identity that should be replaced. In future, FRE parties are likely to lay the blame for their political failures on this 'elite', which is perceived as favouring judicial checks and balances over the safety of the general public. This could lead to a decline of trust in political solutions, and strengthen the belief of FRE supporters that conventional politics does not work and that violence is the way forward.

Therefore, it is vital that the alternative narratives clearly communicate that terrorism and political violence have never been effective in reaching strategic goals.

Masculinity

Table 4 Current and potential FRE narratives (masculinity), and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Most effective narrative	Possible future narrative	Alternative narrative
Masculinity: societies are under threat because men cannot live 'according to their nature'	Feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists are considered traitors, because their activism allegedly influences birth rates.	Create a new, inclusive definition of masculinity, in which feminists and LGBTI activists have empowered rather than emasculated society overall.

Ethnic nationalism and white supremacy promote a natural order in which men command a large family. This ideal promotes a sense of male entitlement, but it also reflects a concern for declining birth rates of the white race. In the future, this could also be expressed through hostility towards feminists and LGBTI activists, who are held accountable by supporters of this narrative for contributing to low birth rates.

Creating an alternative narrative means constructing an inclusive definition of masculinity to replace the current definition. Incidentally, this may also serve as a counter-narrative to the idea of white male victimhood, discussed below.

Victimhood

Table 5 Current and potential FRE narratives (victimhood), and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Current narrative	Possible future narrative	Alternative narrative
Governments favour ethnic and religious minorities over the majority white population	Rising immigration results in increasing disadvantages for the majority white population.	Acknowledge the existence of grievances, without repeating the narrative. Educate citizens regarding what they can and cannot expect from their governments.

Under the victimhood narrative, FRE claims that governments favour ethnic and religious minorities (as well as immigrants) over the majority white population. In the near future, this narrative could be recast as a perceived given: immigration equals disadvantages. FRE converts anger over people's grievances into distrust. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of these grievances, without either repeating the narrative or strongly countering it.

When drawing up an alternative narrative, awareness of the importance of language is key: words like 'fair', 'should', 'right' and 'wrong' imply a certain obligation or sense of entitlement, which raises the expectation that governments are obliged to satisfy them.

The loss of self-government

Table 6 Current and potential FRE narratives (the loss of self-government), and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Current narrative	Possible future narrative	Alternative narrative
Governments, the EU, NATO and the UN have too much power over us	Fostering a distrust of governments and institutions, whose role is ostensibly to keep 'the people' down.	Governments govern with the people, not over them, supporting local engagement via NGOs and civil society initiatives.

Another central FRE topic is the perceived loss of self-governance resulting from excessively powerful institutions (the EU, NATO and the UN) and governments taking draconian measures, with negative consequences for civilians. In the future, this narrative could be recast as a distrust of governments and institutions, supported by the claim that their self-interest merely extends to maintaining their own position of power.

Countering this is challenging, because this narrative is a direct result of frustration with the status quo. It is crucial to demonstrate that governments govern with the people and appreciate bottom-up initiatives and engagement. Moreover, critical thinking via education should be encouraged.

Eco-fascism

Table 7 Current and potential FRE narratives (eco-fascism), and alternative narratives or counter-narratives

Current narrative	Possible future narrative	Alternative narrative
The earth is running out of resources: they aren't adequate to meet everyone's needs.	Overcrowding is a tangible threat. Not everyone will be able to hold out and we must ensure that 'our people' survive.	Demonstrate your commitment to saving the planet (i.e. you want the same result), without discussing birth rates.

Ideological convergence between FRE and environmentalists is not new ⁽⁶⁾. The New Zealand Christchurch mosque shooter self-identified as an 'eco-fascist'. Under this FRE narrative, environmental and sustainability issues are highlighted, but they are undercut by a perceived struggle for the survival of one race alone. If there is a threat of insufficient resources to go around, then there is a need to make preparations for survival in these circumstances — this may include, for instance, training for violent combat in case of a confrontation over scarce resources.

Demonstrating that concerns for the environment are shared could prevent FRE from hijacking this issue. But again, any mention of reducing birth rates should be avoided, since this is another part of the FRE narrative.

Transmission and dissemination tactics of FRE narratives

A recent study has shown how the increased use of Facebook at local level fuelled anti-refugee attacks ⁽⁷⁾. Whereas general right-wing sentiment spurs local demonstrations, social media can act as a propagating mechanism for the flare-up of hateful sentiments and motivate real-life action.

When broadcasting FRE narratives through social media, extremists tend to play cat and mouse with social media companies and online platforms: it's a game of constant pursuit, near captures and many comebacks. Websites, forums, social media and message boards offer ample opportunity for recruiters to contact and chat with unsuspecting individuals as well as angry citizens. Not all accounts contain clear-cut hate speech, racist content and fake news; some accounts appear more moderate or not factually untrue. But owing to the biased and one-sided choice of topic (e.g. migrant backgrounds of perpetrators), these platforms remain hubs for recruitment and inciting insurgency. Sometimes, the platforms or accounts are initially set up to discuss issues that attract popular support (e.g. animal cruelty or child abuse), and after some time has elapsed, more openly xenophobic messages are spread ⁽⁸⁾.

When disseminating counter-narratives or alternative narratives, it is essential to use the same platforms as those used by radical groups, e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram. Moreover, it might be wise to use different messages (also viral memes of animals and other clickbait) in order to recruit a large audience — just as radical and extremist groups tend to do. On the other hand, counter-narratives or alternative narratives can have the edge over other narratives when they are disseminated among a young audience. Making them part of the school curriculum is an option that might also be considered.

⁶ Uekoetter, F. (2006). *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conversation in Nazi Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Müller, K. & Schwarz, C. (2018). *Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime*. Warwick University: Working Paper Series. Retrieved from https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/cage/manage/publications/373-2018_schwarz.pdf

⁸ Smith, M. & Colliver, C. (2016). *The impact of Brexit on far-right groups in the UK*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Retrieved from <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Impact-of-Brexit.pdf>