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The ISIS Phantasmagoria and its Implications for India : Building Capacities to Prevent and Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Ms Navroz Singh & C D Sahay



Vivekananda International Foundation

About the Authors



Shri C D Sahay is Dean, Centre for Neighbourhood Studies and Internal Security Studies at VIF. He is Former Secretary (R), Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India.



Ms Navroz Singh is a honours graduate in Political Science and a post-graduate diploma in Conflict Transformation and Peace Building from Delhi University. Presently she is a Research Intern with the VIF, dealing with Radicalisation and Islamic Issues.

The ISIS¹ Phantasmagoria and its Implications for India²: Building Capacities to Prevent and Counter Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Rise of a Demonic Force: Daesh

Daesh as a tangible entity was in the making for several decades prior to the supposed cut-off date which recognises its meteoric rise in the region, and eventually beyond the borders of the self-proclaimed caliphate. But it is only recently that conducive external and internal circumstances catapulted the terrorist group into the position of privilege it occupies in the common psyche owing to its capability of cultivating numbing fear through acts of inexplicable brutality and violence.

It is common knowledge that Daesh emerged from the fragmented remnants of 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI) founded by Abu Musab al Zarqawi in 2004. In the years following the proclaimed creation of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2006, the group receded into relative anonymity owing to coercive counter military action(among other reasons), operating a disintegrated network of local leaders with limited capabilities and resources, until 2011 when the Syrian uprising gathered heat. A crucible of sorts was created with optimum conditions for the rise and expansion of ISIS, and at lightning speed the terrorist group began making crucial advances in the region, territorially and ideologically, thereby controlling significant swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria by mid-2015. Dark humour but, its Unique Selling Proposition (USP) lay in its capabilities to attract common attention through blood-curdling acts of terror and sophisticated propaganda machinery which worked behind the scenes with clock-work precision to broadcast the message.

Daesh's tactical manoeuvres far outpaced those of agencies which sought to contradict and contain it, and the success it achieved in conducting group-based and inspiring lone-wolf attacks particularly in Western heartlands augmented their resolve. With this background, the consolidated image which thus emerges is that of an extremist entity, with control over territory, its own (albeit illicit) funding mechanisms (through oil trade, extortion, racketeering, exploitation), managing a decentralised apparatus of terror with tentacles spread across the globe, being fuelled by an ideology which is dangerous and devastating, to say the least.

However, since the last two quarters of 2016, the territorial hold of Daesh seems to be dwindling. With successes in counter-offensive operations, consensus seems to be

¹ The use of the term ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) does not seek to grant legitimacy to ISIS' proclamation of being a self-governed, sovereign political community. It has been used since it is the most commonly invoked acronym to refer to the terrorist organisation, in academia and media. Alternatively, the Arabic acronym for ISIS, i.e. 'Daesh', has also been preferred through this paper.

² This paper is primarily based on the deliberations and suggestions which emerged out of the two sessions of Round Table Discussion held on the theme of 'ISIS Proofing India' at the Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) in collaboration with the Policy Perspective Foundation (PPF), the report for which can be accessed [here](#). The paper also includes VIF assessment.

widening around the claim that the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) is haemorrhaging. Recent estimates suggest that by the end of December 2016, Daesh lost almost a quarter of the territory which had previously been under its control over the past years. The rate at which it has been losing ground in its regional heartland is also relatively rapid, compared to a loss of about 14% over 2015. Experts believe that they saw this coming since the expansion of Daesh in 2014 and 2015, where it occurred at an exponential, therefore unsustainable rate. And as it retreats territorially, there are other factors - rising economic fragility owing to financial misappropriation, forced slash in the wages of its fighters leading to an increasing rate of desertion, significant loss in oil finances, declining recruitment rates of foreign fighters, the capture or death of several high ranking leaders, a visible tone of desperation in its online propaganda, bureaucratic infighting within the ranks of the group – which are hardly signs that the group is on the march, but suggest towards its impending collapse. However, despite these trends, there is an existence of significant majority of those who believe that loss of territorial and financial assets may not be a reason adequate enough to pen down obituaries of the terrorist group. Rather they allude to previous references wherein the so-called Islamic State had utilised the rhetoric of its defeat to its advantage: positing itself as the mythological phoenix which rises from the ashes of perceived setbacks.

The Islamic State is not a phenomenon of recent occurrence. At no point in history has there been felt a dearth of forces which sought to establish, and successfully so, the supremacy of an ideology inherently flawed, violent, exclusionary and brutal. And, nor has it emerged out of thin ether. A long stretched period of geo-political churning preceded its diabolic rise to power, which, it is argued, was conveniently ignored owing to vested interests. Additionally, the narrative surrounding the declining power of the Islamic State cannot be accepted at face value when coterminous developments across the globe suggest otherwise; home-grown terrorism, enabled or remote-controlled terror plots and the rising spate of lone wolf attacks may just be the tip of the metaphorical iceberg. Evidentially, Daesh, for the time being, may have lost the battle, but the looming question is whether the group and those of its like have lost the war – which is primarily being fought on the ideological battleground skilfully using the artillery of hearts and minds. And, as the terrorist group is squeezed in its '*Khilafa*', its desperation to mount directed, motivated and inspired attacks beyond its borders through, e.g. effective cyber planning, is only set to increase. The following image taken from an article published in the New York Times substantiates this claim.

What adds fuel to the fire of suspicion is the sense of secrecy which the terrorist group has effectively maintained on its 'future plans'. A few stray propaganda statements every now and then are no conclusive give-away to a possible grand strategy of sorts, and it would be fool-hardy to assume that there is no such master-plan. Keeping its intentions under wraps is a lesson its strategists may have learnt from the trajectory of its predecessors. Taking instructive advice from past examples, analysts have carefully delineated possible paths which may be undertaken by Daesh to maintain its stronghold as a force to reckon with in, at least, the coming few decades. One possibility is that, as its territorial and economic

power dwindles, Daesh may focus on fighting tooth and nail to maintain and consolidate control over its core region in West Asia. While this may be its interim strategy, since hold over tangible territory is crucial to its claim of leading an Islamic caliphate, in the long term it would be wise to assume that this plan may disintegrate. The argument which leans towards the idea that Daesh is 'retreating strategically' may therefore find more favour.

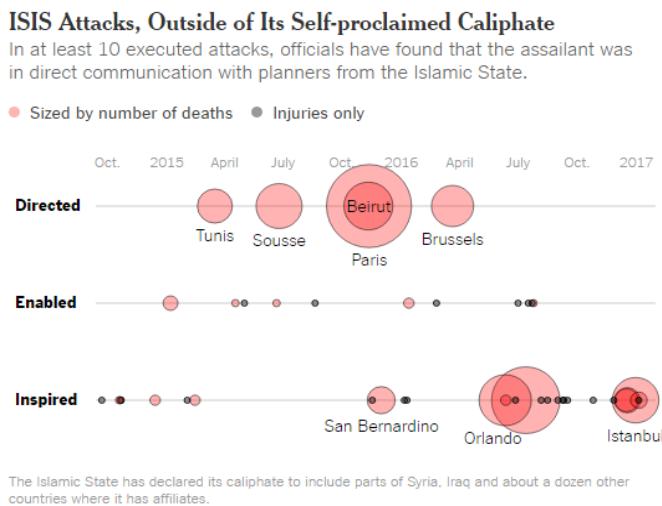


Figure 1: Statistics of attacks conducted or claimed by ISIS outside of its self-proclaimed caliphate.
Source: The New York Times

Confronted with what may best be perceived as a losing situation, Daesh may choose to sacrifice temporary victory in view of a long term goal, while it aggregates its power base by expanding its operations beyond the borders of its self-declared 'caliphate' closer towards the heartlands of its enemies - the West - and in Central, South and East Asia. Better management of its online activity to inspire a virtual army of self-radicalised terrorists, often acting alone or in small packs, to undertake catastrophic attacks in localised areas of operation, is a natural extension of this argument. The underlying assumption in this case however is that as the group is suffocated in its mainland, it may choose to turn its focus, primarily, at building operational links beyond its borders. The problem thus morphs into a much deadlier and dynamic consequence, an ugly hydra whose tentacles spread their grasp from one end of the globe to the other. Charlie Winter and Colin P. Clarke cite the case of al Qaeda and the manner in which, post 9/11 and the US' bold claim to exterminate al Qaeda's existence, its ideological narrative found support in niche groups and organisations which pledged to the meta-cause the group championed. Thus, instead of dealing with a largely homogenous and localised entity, what now emerged was a decentralised and dispersed apparatus of terror. Some of these 'franchises' or 'affiliates' continued to maintain strong ties to the core, while in the case of others, loyalty dwindled over time.

Therefore, counter efforts need to focus on defeating the ideological underpinnings of Daesh, instead of exhausting precious fuel to battle the territorial entity. Particularly in the South Asian context, its banal rhetoric on consolidating the '*Wilayat Khorasan*' is common knowledge; importantly, it seeks to exploit a condition of '*tawahhush*' (fear and chaos) by

riding on the back of “existing local mujahidin” familiar in and to the region. But the implementation of this plan seems unendurable in the absence of motivated and equipped local actors, driven by the group’s fundamental ideology. Thus, even if Daesh is defeated militarily, it would have succeeded in enhancing the footprint of its radical ideology by germinating ideas which possess the potential to give rise to violent and destabilising undercurrents in due course.

Daesh seems to be leading the narrative of an ‘everywhere war’. Its categorising of ‘non-believers’ against whom it legitimises the use of indiscriminate violence is vast and nefariously encompassing. Its inimical and ‘revengeful’ attitude towards the West is a no brainer. Its rabble-rousing statements seeking to inspire the disgruntled and ideologically vulnerable are successful, and adequate enough to give rise to an equally vitriolic and misplaced narrative from across the table. The threat of Daesh’s operations in East Asia is expanding. At the 2015 Shangri-La dialogue, the Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong identified Southeast Asia as a “key recruitment center for ISIS.” According to the 19th report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on ISIS, which was recently submitted to the United Nations Sanctions Committee, the terror group continues to actively recruit from the restive Af-Pak border areas despite struggling financially in the region. “...the lack of funds does not appear to hamper its ambition, (sic)...” the report states. Bangladesh is a fertile target, where radicalisation is on an upward trajectory and is gradually taking over the secular space. Where does India fit into this picture?

Despite varying estimates, the total number of individuals arrested so far in India on suspicion of links, or sympathies with Daesh is relatively minuscule. This, however, is no guard against the potentiality of such links being strengthened in future, and therefore must not be a reason for complacency. It would be suicidal to take cover in the shadow of these statistics and remain either in a state of denial, or brush the concerns under the carpet. Forces which propagate violent extremism metamorphose at the speed of light to advance and fulfil their interests, and forces which aim at countering them shall need to shed their snail-paced approach if they were to halt their designs in the tracks.

This demands a carefully calibrated shift in policies and agendas from a ‘business-as-usual’ approach to one that is designed with reference to the dynamism and uniqueness of the threat. De-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation approaches are often hyphenated within the broad spectrum of counter terrorism. While each has its importance in immunising societies against the threat of violent radicalism, experts have preferred to accord lesser importance to the concept of de-radicalisation. This is partly because empirical evidence which measures the success of such programmes is scarce, and is largely based on rates of recidivism based on data intercepted by intelligence agencies. It is assumed that not all those de-radicalised individuals, who had been re-integrated into the social mainstream and then gone back again to their radicalised ways, could be brought into the net. Also, since radicalisation is a process which occurs ‘between the ears of an individual’ there can be no sure shot way of ascertaining whether the individual has been completely ‘counter-brainwashed’. Biological sciences swear by the effectiveness of the principle ‘prevention is better than cure’, and a public-health approach to radicalisation

therefore prioritises measures which prevent extremist ideologies from taking root in societies in the first instance.

Creation of an effective firewall against the insidious and hateful propaganda put out by extremist forces requires sustained, integrated and proactive efforts which are built on the foundation of an extensive, holistic and unbiased study of the core theme, and its allied manifestations. A good starting point would be an attempt to create an intellectual consortium to address key questions pertaining to the push and pull factors which delineate an individual's journey into the abyss of violent radicalisation, factors which enhance the attractiveness of such ideologies, especially for the seemingly educated and rational youth, and the role of multiple stakeholders in bettering systemic immunity against the disease of radicalisation and violent extremism. Terrorism may well be an 'essentially contested concept', but there can be no divergent opinions on its goal - creation of morbid fear in the collective psyche. The asymmetry of its warfare gains from the tactical advantages in the psychological and ideological realms and effective 'counter-terror' approaches must extend and entrench their expertise in these domains.

Building the Substructure

Mention of the word 'terrorism', floods one's mind with grotesque images of incidents of unfathomable violence - bomb attacks, limbless bodies, ghastly pools of blood, screaming children, women and men. This imagination owes itself to a sustained process of psychological conditioning which has occurred over a period of time. And, while there may be nothing wrong in this almost automatic mental reflex, the problem arises when such 'incidents' of terrorist violence come to be treated as the ultimate manifestation and, by extension, the sole focus area by the institutionalised machinery which has been put into place to respond to the threat. 'Fire-fighting' measures are not adequate to respond to the challenge in the longer course. Incidents of violence are merely the symptoms and not the disease and in the process, one may end up missing the woods for the trees. Today, more than ever before, it is essential to revisit and reevaluate the processes and systemic indicators of radicalisation and translate what has till now remained an esoteric discourse, into actual practice.

Much ink has been spilt to underscore the criticality of undertaking a detailed study into the phenomenon of radicalisation: understanding its causes in totality before attempting to dole out the laundry list of solutions. Pertinently, efforts to understand the causes of terrorism, and by deduction, radicalisation do not imply nonchalant acceptance of, worse passive accommodation to their prevalence. On the contrary, it is reflective of an earnest desire to unsheathe the undercurrents which supply sustenance fuel to the propagators of such violent ideologies, in an attempt to exterminate the root causes of trouble. Experts have drawn parallels between the phenomenon of terrorism and biological diseases, and amongst other things conveyed by such comparisons, of salience is the core idea that the course of treatment must be based on an accurate and detailed, fact-based diagnosis, failing which, all efforts at medication, despite best intentions, will end up complicating the case to a point of no recovery.

And, indeed, the causes of radicalisation shall be many - political, social, cultural, psychological, ethnic, sectarian, religious, geographical, historical, perceptual, ideological, et al - spread over a vast spectrum, and covering a wide range of macro and micro narratives. Individuals who are radicalised find themselves caught in a vortex of emotions and various push and pull factors. While at an apparent level their mental mould may seem impervious to the storm caused by a mishmash of surrounding factors, upon closer inspection it may not be hard at all to connect the dots. And in the midst of all this, leading the war from the front seems to be an almost pervasive, unguarded prevalence of virtual *jihadis* whose suave recruitment techniques have catalysed the radicalisation of many poised on the metaphorical fence into the grave and grievous territory of violent extremism.

Decoding the Writing on the Wall: Radicalisation in Virtual Space

In the aftermath of the attacks in San Bernardino, the assistant director of the FBI's Los Angeles office David Bowdich remarked, "...the question for us is how and by whom and where were they radicalised? Maybe, there's not a 'by whom.' Remember, often times it's on the Internet. We just don't know."

The unearthing of terror plots, including in India, where prospective jihadists never stepped beyond the territory of their homelands, yet received detailed instruction manuals and tactical support to conduct attacks indicates the existence of deep networks which connect individuals radicalised into violent extremism with operators based in the so-called caliphate. Shielded by the anonymity of the internet, the cyber planners communicate through encrypted chat software and applications, 'remote controlling' attacks in North America, Europe and elsewhere. For many, this actually may be the "future of the Islamic State" as it loses ground and fighters in West Asia.

For Daesh, arguably, their online presence and propaganda production and dissemination processes are deemed even more important than 'military jihad'. The carefully edited and produced high-tech videos put out by the media wing of the organisation, complete with background 'music' in the form of *nasheeds* sung as a cappella chants by men, drenched in echo, has bolstered the image of the 'jihadi cool' phenomenon which Daesh seems keen on popularising. Its intention to appeal to young, disenchanted, disgruntled, but possibly 'modern' and educated individuals seeking some form of social approval or identity stabilisation finds resonance in its social media presence, creating the illusion of what has been termed by some as the 'badass way to paradise'.

Daesh thrives on the oxygen of popularity – good or bad is of little concern to them. The aim of such media projectiles is to create fear in the minds of their adversaries (as seen through numerous propaganda videos which challenge the power of the United States and its allies to militarily defeat ISIS fighters on ground), and to create a sense of appeal in the hearts and minds of those who may be drawn towards or are sympathetic to their agenda. Their expanding social media presence is directly aimed at capitalising on the grievances and vulnerabilities of the young and misguided, trapped in their social media echo chambers and lacking positive reinforcement through the family, community or society.

The beats to which such videos are produced, and the antics which seem to be taken out of a heavy-budget Hollywood flick are also directed at capturing the streak of adventurism in the lives of such individuals, in addition to their desire to gain fame overnight. To their minds, ‘any publicity is good publicity’ as long as it keeps them in the public eye and memory. Within social-psychological theories, ‘the narcissistic-rage hypothesis’ explains these trends. Little wonder that the age group of those getting attracted to join the ranks of the so-called Islamic State is declining, with girls and boys as young as fifteen, armed with no knowledge of religion except for what is gained through such slick propaganda productions, and through a copy of 'Islam for Dummies' or 'Koran for Dummies', seek to venture out on what they believe is their ‘holy struggle’. Take the example of Twitter user "*Bint Emergent*": an ISIS fan-girl, she writes on her blog *Bint Chaos* that “Jihadis, like Ninjas, look cool – like ninjas or video game warriors – gangster and thuggish even – the opposition doesn’t.” For jihadist poster-girls, (while ruing the lack of many examples), she writes that some of them “tastefully accessorise” with an “AK 47 or a bomb belt.”

The virtual space is awash with a multiplicity of extremist narratives deviously designed by placing the psyche of the target audience and at the centre - be it for the youth in the form of fast-paced almost movie-like trailers, or the hypocritical misinformation often spread through memes or insufficiently worded in 140 characters. At a larger level, the internet assumes the critical function of a coordinator, facilitating tactical and operational support through the spiral of the dark net. But just as road accidents on highways do not call for all highways to be declared out of bounds for vehicular traffic, the existence of extremist propaganda which facilitates the process of radicalisation in virtual space must not become the rationale for an Orwellian crackdown on online communication. The current ratio of counter-messaging to extremist narratives online is a dismal 1:50. To put it simply, this must change.

Countering the Narrative

A ‘narrative’ can be simplistically conceptualised as a “coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organised stories.” Shaped by the cultures of their origin, these anecdotes are crucial to the conceptualisation of people’s identities in a particular setting. Additionally, as with all stories, there is also an element of dynamic fluidity to such narratives; they shape and are in turn shaped by forces of progression and evolution in existent cultures.

While this definition affirms the chassis within which narratives of extremism and violence can be understood, over-simplification is fraught with dangers of derailing the discourse. Narratives, in the least being stories, are also careful “primers” which shape the perceptions of cultures and peoples towards the world, and therefore serve as predictors of action. Consequently, in the face of extremists’ meta-narratives, it is the collective responsibility of societies to work at building and disseminating counter-narratives upon which individuals and communities can rely to safeguard their intrinsic values and virtues. The development of such counter-narratives can best proceed from an approach which shifts its lens of focus from concentrating on “causes of terrorism” to evaluating in totality the “background contributing factors...that lead to and catalyse the radicalisation... (sic).”

While the essentiality of ‘counter-narratives’ to push back the hate and violence generated through extremist propaganda has been established in recent times, there exists a vast chasm between the ‘volume and quality’ of counter-narrative messaging campaigns and the propaganda churned out by groups like Daesh. There is a lack of strategic insight into designing counter-narrative frameworks which fit the requirements of specific socio-political and cultural-historical contexts; stray and inconsistent talk which is built on banal platitudes fails in its assigned purpose. The challenge therefore is to align counter-narratives in a manner which suits local realities, while fitting into the broader geo-political contexts of the modern world. What might work for India may not be the best suited strategy for, say, Indonesia or Sudan, because the dominant discourse in each region has been shaped, over time, by markedly different historical and social forces. Hyper-localists’ favour the idea that even within, for instance India, suggestions which may be recommended for Punjab or Kerala will not be the same for Uttar Pradesh or Rajasthan. The language employed in designing these counter-narratives must therefore be sensitive to the unique cultural and political motifs of each context under consideration in order to enhance their effectiveness.

Initiating the discussion with some empirical analysis would be useful. According to a study on ‘Evaluating Jihadist Narratives’ by David Webber, University of Maryland (refer to figure 2), extremist propaganda assigns maximum (30%) weight to ‘establishing speaker validity’ while communicating its ideology. In the order of importance accorded, this is followed by attempts to dehumanise and therefore lend legitimacy to the elimination of the inimical ‘out-group’. Once the desired sentiment is created through affective appeals invoking emotions of anger and hatred (figure 3), other objectives tend to take care of themselves.

While creating and delivering counter-narratives within the social mould, legitimacy can be ensured by conveying the message in the language and voice of those who are capable of establishing connect with the target group. To create a ‘cognitive opening’ which is receptive to the intended message, it is essential for the message to be delivered by potentially credible messengers. Therefore, it is often asserted that over-involvement of governments, despite their resources and reach, in counter-narrative campaigns may be counterintuitive – the proverbial kiss of death.

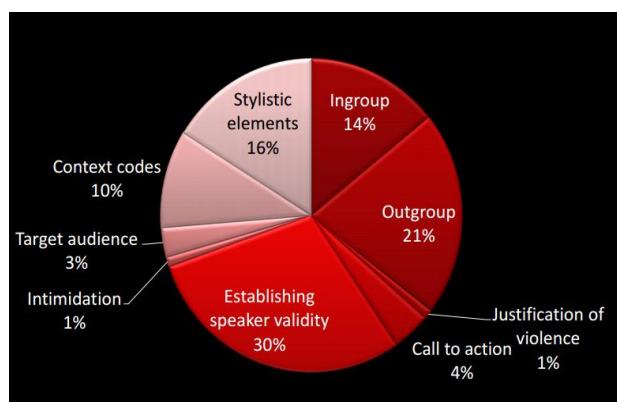


Figure 2: Results of the Content Analysis of Jihadist Narratives
(Source hyperlinked)

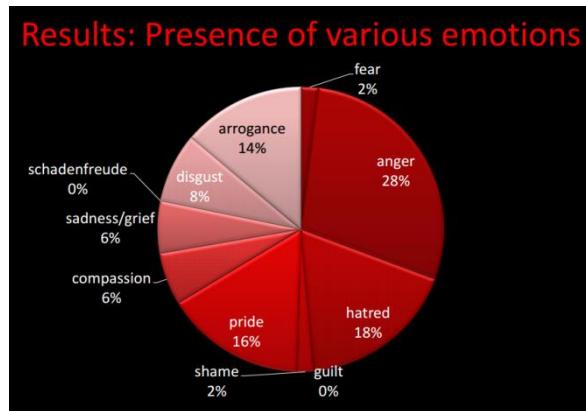


Figure 3: Deconstructing the emotive appeal of Jihadist Narratives
(Source hyperlinked)

At the core of a successful counter-narrative is the primacy given to the uniqueness of the target audience under consideration. To ensure full impact, counter-narratives must resonate with those at which the message is directed. Essentially, successful campaigns cannot stray too far from the social and cultural identities of the target populations. It would be interesting to note that this is the cardinal strategy employed by those defining extremist narratives; the language and content is tweaked depending upon the characteristics of the perceived audience – their age groups, geographical locations, political sensitivities, cultural peculiarities, economic grievances, social contexts and historical legacies. Counter-narrative ideas which are too generalised in their approach may fail miserably in trying to create a lasting cognitive imprint, leaving a psychic crater which may too soon be occupied by the metaphorical meteor of extremist ideologies.

The design and implementation of strategic counter-messaging campaigns can take two forms. First, Top-Down models which rely on imposing rigid, platitudinous, and, too often, an alien discourse on populations who may struggle in adapting to the content being conveyed. Second, Bottom-Up models, which rely on a grassroots approach to involve individuals and communities in building and sustaining a discourse which is sensitive to peculiarities of individuals, families, and communities and involves them to lead the discourse from the front. Empirically, it has been proven that the latter is more effective and better suited for democratic societies, where the aim is to systematically defeat the propaganda and ideology such that it is weeded out from the roots, instead of fighting overt symptoms.

Also, while creating such counter-narratives, it would be useful to address the underlying intentions which dictate the ethos of such campaigns. Content which is co-created with individuals in the target audience bears the most impact. Therefore, the intention should be more to engage the audience in dialogue which is open-ended and aims at deconstructing myths through debate and substantive argumentation instead of imposing a pre-ordained diktat which, in the longer course, might be organically rejected by the community owing to its conspicuously extraneous characteristics.

Counter-narrative campaigns must be timely. It is vital to develop ‘rapid response capabilities’ to respond to extremist propaganda, or else the opportunity to capitalise on

the ‘window period’ may be lost. Continuous engagement with target audiences is crucial, instead of sporadic, patchy interventions which may eventually be consigned to oblivion. The content of campaigns must seek to capitalise on emotional strains to establish mass connect. Emotive campaigns are better at building rapport with the target groups; the din of facts and figures drowns the core message in a pool of statistics, especially when dealing with the common collective. As with psychological-operations, the most successful campaigns are those which are designed with the objective of unveiling the hypocritical ideologies of those who claim to be ‘guardians of religion, faith or belief’, and often lace the message in a language of satire and humour to enrapture and captivate the audiences. Importantly, online counter-narrative campaigns must be supplemented with offline initiatives. Links must be established between the two in a bid to maximise the impact. Only approximately 35% of the Indian population is connected on the internet today, and the offline medium continues to remain significant.

Radicalisation, being a process of socialisation into violent extremism, must be countered through an ideological narrative emerging organically from within social networks. The resulting discourse will possibly be better equipped at building an institutionalised, long-term immunity to the perceived disease. It would perhaps be valuable to draw from the ‘best practices’ already in the domain in different countries, of course by pruning the content to suit contextual requirements.

While much talk has taken place on building counter-narratives, perhaps as a closing thought, it may be valuable to ponder over a lurking but pertinent question: have we been successful in defining the ‘narrative’ in the first place? Words and phrases such as *‘international coalition against terrorism’, ‘global consortium against extremism’* etc. are commonly invoked without a thought given to the reality of this supposedly united front. Is everyone on board fighting a common enemy? Or are definitions of the enemy designed to suit conveniences of time and space and vested political, sectarian or economic interests as perceived by different actors. Have we been successful in unmasking the phantoms we are keen on fighting, or do we continue to be entangled in thread-balls of apparent perceptions – *‘searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots’*? Unless these questions are addressed, successful attainment of well-intentioned goals may unfortunately remain an elusive dream.

Radicalisation, in addition to being a systematic malaise is also a deeply personal problem. Like terrorism, it is also an ‘essentially contested concept’; the only thing that subject experts agree upon is that ‘radicalisation is a process’. Within this presumption is also a tacit understanding that there is no single path to radicalisation, and that different individuals may go down diametrically divergent radicalised pathways. There can, therefore, be no one-size-fits-all solution. A multi-pronged approach, aligning with a ‘whole of government’ and ‘whole of society’ perspective, is required to address the problem of radicalisation. Straitjacketed solutions limit the field view and oversimplify the threat scenario. As tempted one may be to pack the sources of threat into neat, watertight compartments, the porosity and dynamism of the many constituents of the problem cannot be ignored. The need, therefore, is to involve multiple stakeholders – government, civil

society, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, international actors, religious groups and leaders, educational institutions, think-tanks, work-place networks, private sector practitioners, community grapevine networks, media (print and electronic), information and communication technology specialists, academicians, victims of terrorism, reformed radicals, and families – to design comprehensive strategies united in a common, if not homogenous vision. A unified macro-narrative maybe of interest, but within its fold the importance of micro-narratives which involve the concerns of each stakeholder and are addressed to their unique positions mustn't be underestimated.

The table shown, taken from a [report](#) published by the *Radicalisation Awareness Network*, puts on the table the different types of counter-narratives which can be considered by the various actors involved in a multi-stakeholder model: Each actor and stakeholder has a significant role to play, for each possesses a part of the puzzle which completes the picture. But also, each is faced with a unique set of challenges which may impede the success of their ventures when pursued in silos. Taken together, the weaknesses of one may balance against the strengths of the other, reinforcing the overall partnership.

What	Why	How	Who
Alternative Narratives	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society or government
Counter Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge of ideologies through emotion, theology, humour, exposure of hypocrisy, lies and untruths	Civil society
Government strategic communications	Undercut extremist narratives by explaining government policy and rationale	refuting misinformation, and developing relationships with key constituencies and audiences	Government

Figure 4: Types of counter and alternative narratives
(Source hyperlinked)

As previously mentioned, the role that can be played by government, at least in the case of non-Islamic-majority countries, is limited, for they may not always be perceived as the most credible and effective messengers. Also, given limits of structural formalism and characteristically risk-aversive messaging, government-led counter narrative campaigns may not always resonate to the maximum with target groups. However, their support in deed and spirit is essential to launch and give direction to such programmes, for it is also indicative of the intent of the government to acknowledge and respond to threats which seek to destabilise the peace of their states' societies. Private sector initiatives are also apprehended of being piecemeal and sporadic; sustainability can be ensured by government intervention, by providing the required funds to expand the scope of operations. Additionally, exchange of information on 'best-practices' models at bilateral and multilateral intergovernmental platforms is crucial towards evolving a common discourse.

Civil society practitioners at the micro and macro levels, enjoy the ease of adaptability and flexibility, and can overcome the challenges faced by governments. Their role must also

draw from a systematic body of research which delves into intricacies (from the standpoint of academic neutrality) to design interventions free of complications often associated with malignant diagnoses. Involving communities, particularly the youth, to create and broadcast narratives is one of the more effective models of engagement. Initiatives at the grassroots can play a powerful role in amplifying and empowering locally credible voices that can change perceptions and ideologies perpetuated by violent extremist groups among key demographic segments.

As stated earlier, there are factors far more complex than religion which motivate the radicalisation of individuals into violent extremism. However, when religious rhetoric is the most exploited by extremists in seeking validation for their actions and ends, religious leaders assume immense importance in countering violent extremism because of their unique positions of credibility, authority, and ties with local communities. In some instances, orthodoxy may prove to be the most viable counter-narrative when it speaks vociferously against the distortion, perversion and hypocrisy in extremist propaganda, and attempts at educating the masses - among whom it enjoys a position of acceptability - in a discourse which is tolerant and encompassing.

Technological experts and social media agencies, amongst others things, must up the ante in improving the quantity and quality of counter-narrative messaging which is pumped into the virtual space. Cooperation with research bodies and local communities to vet the nature of content which is circulated for public consumption in the guise of counter-propaganda is vital to enhance its credibility. Virtual reality, unfortunately, is also deeply stratified; individuals prefer operating within echo-systems which agree with their belief systems and are typically averse to being confronted with view-points different from their own. Consequently, there is a lack of linear affinity between the points of origin of extremist content and the spheres for which counter messages are designed; a concern to be addressed with urgency. It is suggested that one of the effective ways of challenging extremist propaganda is by making inroads into their own domains. Dearth of statistical data impedes empirical evaluation of this claim, but the approach may essentially be effective to divert influential psychic energies, particularly among the youth, into a state of positive dissonance, which can then be directed, albeit quickly, away from radical agendas.

Families constitute a key but often underutilised resource in preventing and countering violent extremism for they represent the first socio-cultural systems that individuals find themselves as a part of. From identifying early warning signs of radicalisation to violence, to creating perceptions which are appreciative of non-violence and tolerance, families are a crucial link in building credible Common Vulnerabilities and Exposures (CVE) partnerships. Family-based social networks, as conduits of beliefs and cultures, must therefore be empowered and strengthened to build organic resilience to violent extremism. Filial commitments play a significant role in raising the costs of participation in violent extremism as 'pull factors' which can influence individuals in disengaging from violence. Within families, the humanising role played by women as chief protagonists to identify, predict and respond to emerging vulnerabilities to radicalisation must be amplified.

Therefore, approaches which have established their comfort zones within linear courses of action need to be replaced with programmes which involve a multiplicity of perspectives, creatively and continuously, to build resistance against and counter the forces of radicalisation. For sceptics, some of these interventions may represent softer strands within the broad spectrum of strategies and interventions to prevent and counter radicalisation. However it is recognised that these approaches are also the most difficult and nuanced to design and implement. And, while the legitimate use of coercive action in contexts as appropriately determined may be essential, long term success in defeating a threat which is primarily the result of a sustained process of cognitive churning can be ensured through holistic techniques which place individuals and communities at the centre of problem, and the solution.

Daesh, Geo-politics and the Spread of Radical Ideology

The world continues to be dominated by realist forces of *statism*, despite attempts at building some semblance of a globalist international order. States continue to be the most powerful actors in the arena of international affairs, and rules of geopolitics dictate much of the dynamics in the region. It is an uphill task to condense, even in sketchy details, much of what has or is happening in the region, and would perhaps be appropriate to devote an exhaustive article dealing exclusively with this theme. On concluding a discussion on radicalisation without a perfunctory mention of these forces would be completely out of order for the fundamental role states have come to acquire in birthing and sustaining the phenomenon and its allied manifestations.

The phrase may be overused, but it wouldn't be incorrect to state that a new 'great game' is playing out on the West Asian turf. A number of forces contributed towards the rise of Daesh in the region. Apart from a twisted interpretation of Islam which found fodder among the disenfranchised youth in the region, tactical and operational support funnelled by external powers into their allies in the region ended up in the hands of the ISIS for reasons well known. The withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq left behind a broken army equipped with weaponry they were far ill-prepared to manage. The money and arms supplied by states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar into the abyss of the Syrian civil war swelled the stocks of Daesh, who eventually acquired the acumen and tact of putting together some fairly well-developed and sophisticated weapon systems themselves. No wonder, for the Islamic state, more than the recruitment of foot-soldiers and pea-brained suicide bombers, it was crucial to attract technicians, engineers and other professionals to sustain its long-term agendas. If the talk is about the Middle East, oil has to be in the picture. Though excluded from the international markets, Daesh was able to find markets to sell 'its' oil, and through this illicit oil trade flowed in millions of dollars which supported the group's survival and expansion.

The situation became murkier by the day, and the costs higher. A *common* enemy forced itself upon the region, but the involvement of each state and non-state actor is based on the careful cost-profit analysis of their strategic interests in the region, and globally. For Iraq, defeating Daesh is a matter of national security and survival since the terrorist group held

control over substantial tracts of the country's territory. And from what is now evident, the state is in for a protracted and bloody battle. Daesh's contempt for Iran (and likewise), a nuke-armed Shia power in the region, is well known. Turkey, for a long time, chose to sit out on the war against Daesh, owing to its own vested interests and fundamental opposition to Assad's rule in Syria. But with its neighbourhood burning, and the Turkish-Syrian borders being used as the most favoured routes to channel foreign fighters into ISIS-held territory, not to mention the increasing instance of ISIS claimed attacks on Turkish soil, maintaining a position of convenience will not be easy. Syria faces trouble from not just Daesh, but also hostile neighbours in the region, who are fundamentally opposed to the rule of Bashar al-Assad, and have in the past accorded primacy to his rout over the expanding threat of the so-called 'caliphate'.

The historical and contemporary roles of the United States and Russia in West Asia are well established; for some, their destinies are intertwined with that of the Middle East. With each state ascertaining coalition partners based on its geopolitical calculations, supporting a diverse range of sub-groups which have emerged across the region in recent decades, the conflict has acquired proportions from which there seems no easy or immediate respite. It would be interesting to quote from one of David Ignatius's works for *The Atlantic*, 'How ISIS Spread in Syria and Iraq – and How to Stop It', where he recounts a conversation with a Syrian businessman, Raja Sidawi, in June 2003, "I am sorry for America," Sidawi said, "You are stuck. You have become a country of the Middle East. *America will never change Iraq, but Iraq will change America...*" (emphasis added). Perhaps, this sounds truer today than ever before.

Saudi Arabia, which is the custodian of the holy sites of Islam and has aligned itself with the US-led military coalition against ISIS, sees the group as a direct threat to its religious credibility as Daesh presents itself as the 'authentic Islamic caliphate'. Its role in the problem, however, is much more complicated and as some would say, treacherous, than what is made out to be. The roots of ISIS are not mired in the distant past for it draws direct inspiration from *Wahabbism*, a form of Islam patronised by states such as Saudi Arabia, and which developed through the 18th century. 'Takfeer' calls for all Muslims with whom there exists a fundamental theological disagreement - including Sufis, Shias, Alawites, Yazidis and others - to be excommunicated as 'kafir' or apostates, fit for death. And ISIS has furthered this ideological and political agenda to the hilt of extremist brutality.

Sectarian conflicts in the region have acquired greater ideological manifestations given that the core resource reserves of the dominant players are drying up. Survival and legitimacy greatly depends on their abilities to entrench ideological roots in regions across the globe through well-connected arterial networks of charities, religious schools, hospitals, educational institutions, etc. They function, in ancillary capacity, to further the core beliefs of their ideological masters, garnering a support base which is crucial to make space for the acceptance of the master-narratives. The hardliner Salafi-Wahabbi (used in generalisation, while not discounting the internal variations within this theme) narratives, championed and exported by the Saudi regime and preached through the webs thus created, work towards creating a broad framework within which *jihadi* ideas find potential to flourish

since the ground work in shaping perceptions is done. While the state and supporting agencies in question may not be exporting fighting forces per se, their contribution towards building an attitude sympathetic to such interpretations among gullible populations is vast.

Weighing our Options

The idea of a 'global war on terror' (beyond the rhetoric promulgated by a single state) needs to be deconstructed. The theoretical suggestion behind a 'global war' rests on the assumption that the threat to all countries is *uniform* in nature. While terrorism does present itself as a challenge which must be taken on by all relevant stakeholders in earnest, working on the conjecture that the threat perception, particularly with respect to state actors, is uniform and homogenous is dangerous. The debate is far graded and complex than what is defined by simplistic packages, influenced as much by historical and cultural narratives as demands of geopolitics and state interest.

In the Indian context, a question which is consistently asked in debates on the issue of 'fighting' the so-called Islamic State is whether this is 'India's war'? The answer may tilt in either direction, but what cannot be ignored is that India has been one of the worst victims of terrorism, particularly of terrorist designs emanating from the soil of its immediate western neighbour. In the light of its traditions of universalism, syncretism and tolerance, has always pitched its voice at the loudest tenor in condemning acts of terrorist violence directed against its own citizens, or elsewhere in the world. Foreign Secretary Jaishankar, speaking at a counter-terror conference in Jaipur in 2016 mentioned that, "encouraging a 'whole of the world' approach in countering terrorism is one of the major goals of Indian diplomacy. The problem that the world faces is that while the bad guys think global, the good guys still think national, sometimes still departmental."

Evaluating India's role in the fight against Daesh therefore requires a nuanced approach. It would be naive to not believe that the extremist ideology has caught on with a minuscule, but impactful section of the Indian population. While the figures for Indians joining the IS are statistically negligible (less than 0.00004 percent) when compared with the rest of the world, the ideological challenge is potent. The growing influence of radical ideas which take inspiration from ISIS propaganda, is a cause for concern which has long been flagged by security experts. In the age of non-stop social media and intercontinental communication technologies which travel faster than the speed of light, the processes of radicalisation today are different and far quicker than what they were for, say, the 9/11 bombers a decade ago. And counter-terror approaches must therefore acknowledge and adapt to this reality.

In terms of the options before us, one certainly cannot allow the situation to deteriorate further by pursuing the hands-off approach of a concerned but helpless spectator. Engagement is crucial. Though the government, with its reach and resources may be best equipped to undertake these efforts, to enhance the credibility of its message, it has to be supported by the civil society, media, think-tanks and religious practitioners - the latter undertaking a major chunk of the responsibility - in defining and disseminating the narrative. Importantly, strategic counter-messaging must begin by putting into perspective

the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of its agenda. This effort can best be led by intellectuals and thinkers from within the religious community who understand the layered fine print of the debate, and can therefore communicate in a language which imbibes and amplifies the intent and ethos of the message.

Interestingly, counter narratives are afflicted with a curious dilemma. Following their nomenclature, greater emphasis is laid on deconstructing what is presumed as the master narrative put out by radicals and extremists. Consequently, positive efforts are focussed at defensively taking down extremist propaganda, and the scope of operations remains narrow and parochial. These shortcomings can be overcome through a supplementary approach which attempts at building or popularising a ‘positive’ narrative which doesn’t need to seek inspiration from (or conflict with) the existing negative and violent rhetoric, but is self-sufficient such that it builds upon the true essence of beliefs and practices as agreed upon by the mainstream majority minus the fringe extremists. Caveat being that ‘multiplicities of truths’ need to be acknowledged (read in the light of schisms within Islam, sectarian conflict within sub-groups and the essentiality of intra-faith dialogue). It would therefore be necessary for a common strand of thought (cognizant of contemporary global realities) to emerge from within the religious community, at least in the sub-continental context, which can define the path for other initiatives to be undertaken by the society at large. In light of these practices, the role of the government, enforcement, and intelligence agencies to monitor aberrations which seek to cause harm to the peaceful, tolerant fabric of society can be strengthened.

The existence and techniques of Daesh seem elusive for it attempts at aggregating multiple roles, functions, and identities into a single deal – social media connectivity and outreach, gang like discipline and organisational capacity, theological meta-narratives, and state-like resources. But at the core lies its desire to present itself as a sweeping anti-colonial movement, attempting to erase the “lines in the sand” drawn by colonial powers after the collapse of the Ottoman order, and take Islamic society to the heights of its pre-colonial power in the form of a “caliphate”. Fortunately, in its foolishly bold ambitions and ferocious expansion lie the seeds of its destruction. Signs are beginning to emerge that by flaming too hot, the entity may have begun to burn out. - at least, territorially.

But this is no call for blithe jubilations, for similar processes in the past have taught us better. And, those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. Daesh may or may not collapse, but the ugly headed hydra will give rise to another of its kind so long as the root causes are ignored. Pursuing the goal of hunting and gunning down the last terrorist, given the changing nature of this phenomenon, is akin to chasing phantoms. Addressing ideological mis-constructs and the various other push and pull factors which draw an individual into the vortex of violent radicalisation is seemingly productive.

The world is in for a long drawn battle which defines its own rules as it progresses. An exclusive focus on killing “our way out of this mess” may be controversial and counter-productive, to say the least. The more fundamental fight is against extremism, and all

stakeholders must endeavour to draft a sane strategy which is able to hold the pendulum in our favour until lasting solutions emerge organically.

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VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: info@vifindia.org, Website: <http://www.vifindia.org>

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