



U.S. EMBASSY
Tirana, Albania



Self-Training Manual

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM THROUGH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS



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Countering Violent Extremism Through Strategic Communications


SELF-TRAINING MANUAL

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Disclaimer

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Abbreviations

AAR	After Action Review
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
VE	Violent Extremism
CSDG	Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance
FTF	Foreign Terrorist Fighters
NSCVE	National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
ToC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations

Introduction

Violent extremism is a complex phenomenon and well trained practitioners are invaluable in the effort of preventing and countering it. This manual aims to provide practitioners at the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism, line ministries and subordinate institutions with information and tools in order to improve their knowledge in developing and deploying strategic communication for preventing and countering violent extremisms propaganda.

The manual can be used as a valuable source of information for the onboarding of new practitioners, a reference for existing practitioners, and as an improvement tool. Through it new practitioners can quickly acquire knowledge to better understand and engage in strategic communication against violent extremism.

Targeted audience

This manual can be used by practitioners at the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism, as well as by employees at the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Ministry of Interior and their subordinate institutions. Furthermore, it can be valuable to the contact points in the education, social care, community policing, and penitentiary system, and also the PR & media departments of line ministries which are responsible for public communication.

Structure of the manual

The content is divided in two modules (theoretical overview and tools and activities), each of them containing two sections. The first part provides a theoretical overview of the concepts of violent extremism and strategic communication. The second, provides valuable tools to be used in order to enhance the interventions impact. Section 1, (module 1) defines violent extremism and radicalization and outlines the role of counter-narratives to tackling violent extremism and its propaganda. Section 2 explain the “linkage-based” approach on preventing/countering violent extremism through strategic communications. Section 1 (module 2) provides an overview of the theory of change and some modalities of implementing it. Section 2 focuses on tabletop exercises and After Action Review as means to enhance knowledge and improve implementation.

This structure allows the practitioner go through the manual independently, so you can personalize your learning experience. If you are a skilled practitioner or already familiar with the theoretic concepts, you can jump directly on the second module. Meanwhile, new practitioners can use the manual as a whole.

Module 1: Theoretical Overview



1.1 Violent Extremism and Radicalization

In this section key concepts such as extremism and radicalization are defined and discussed. The first subsection focuses on the definition of violent extremism. The following subsection elaborates the definition of radicalization and its drivers. The last subsection explores the practices of countering VE and its propaganda.

1.1.1 Defining Violent Extremism

There is no international consensus on a definition of VE or terrorism, nor is there consensus on the differences between terrorism and VE. The most useful frames for discussing extremism is known as social identity theory. Social identity theory stipulates that people categorize themselves and others as members of competing social groups.

The **in-group** is a group of people who share an identity, such as religious, racial or national. It is the group to which one belongs – the “us” in “us versus them.”

The **out-group** is a group of people who are excluded from a specific in-group. They are part of “them”

Haroro Ingram explains that violent extremist propaganda is designed to provide its audiences with a “competitive system of meaning”, which serves as a framework through which supporters perceive and judge the world. typically, at the heart of this “system of meaning” there is a single overarching statement or “pitch”:

“We are the champions and protectors of (appropriately aligned) Muslims (the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow in-group identity are enemies (i.e., out-group identities or others) who are responsible for the ummah’s (Muslim community’s) crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e., the militant Islamist politico-military agenda).”

Violent extremist groups, movements and parties tend to have many of the following elements:

- Anti-constitutional, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist, authoritarian;

- Fanatical, intolerant, non-compromising, single-minded black-or-white thinkers;
- Rejecting the rule of law while adhering to ends-justify-means philosophy;
- Aiming to realize their goals by any means, including, when the opportunity offers itself, the use of massive political violence against opponents.

The above mentioned elements together with a strong emphasis on ideology are the main characteristics of extremists. Extremists on the political left and right, those of a religious-fundamentalist orientation as well as those of ethno-nationalist political nature show a propensity to prefer, on their paths to realize their political programs:

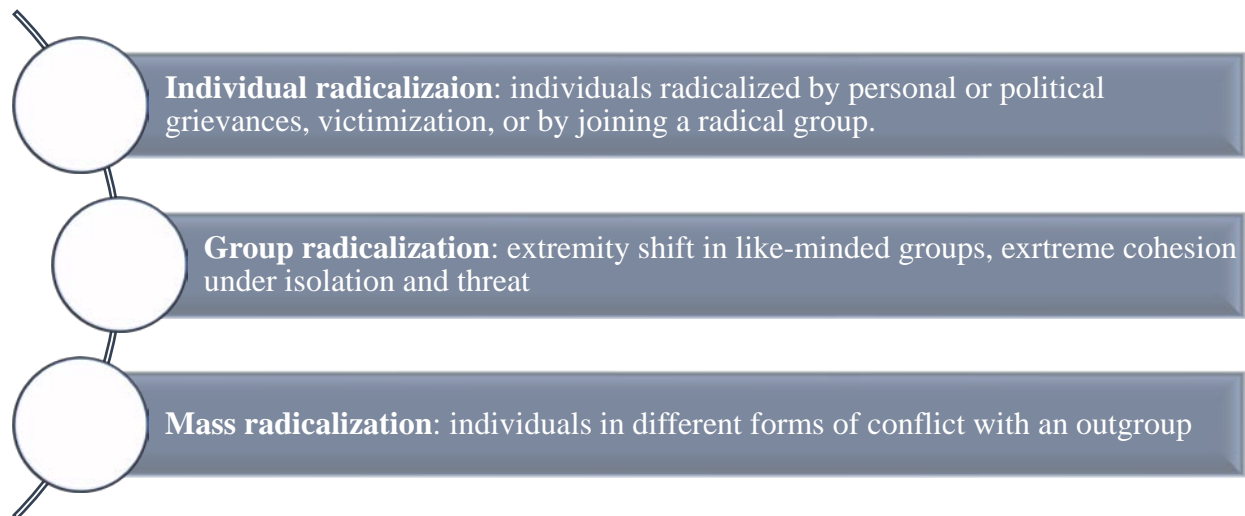
- Use of force/violence over persuasion;
- Uniformity over diversity;
- Collective goals over individual freedom;
- Giving orders over dialogue.

1.1.2 Defining Radicalization

Experts have identified a number of recurring factors and dynamics leading to radicalization as follow:

Grievances:	all forms of radicalization are based on societal tensions, which may cause thwarted expectations, conflicts of identity, feelings of injustice, marginalization, isolation or exclusion.
Needs:	being part of an extremist group satisfies followers' emotional needs such as the need to belong, feeling part of a community, glory, adventure, power, significance, and in some cases it involves taking advantage of psychological vulnerabilities.
Ideas:	it requires ideas that make sense to turn discontent into a political project, therefore, they identify a scapegoat and offer solutions - when those ideas amount to a coherent worldview they are called ideology.
People:	in most cases radicalization is a process in which charismatic leaders, authority figures or closed peer groups are key to generating trust, loyalty, pressure and commitment
Violence:	being exposed to violence results in becoming involved in violence - in this way individuals seek revenge or become brutalized.

On the other hand, radicalization can occur at different levels.



As regards to paths that lead to radicalization, they may differ from person to person as the radicalization process is highly complex. Different factors on the individual, group and macro-level push and pull a person to or from a violent extremist group. The United Nations (UN) Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism distinguishes between two categories of drivers: conditions and structural context conducive to VE (push factors) and individual experiences and motivators that strengthen radicalization processes, ultimately leading to violent extremism (pull factors).

<i>Push factors</i>	<i>Pull factors</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Lack of economic opportunity: poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption</i>• <i>Marginalization and discrimination: restricted political, social and economic mobility</i>• <i>Poor governance, violation of human rights, and rule of law issues: repressive policies, surveillance</i>• <i>Prolonged and unresolved conflicts: security vacuum, instability, deep-rooted grievances</i>• <i>Radicalization in prisons: harsh treatment, prison conditions, gang activity, lack of security, drug use</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual background and motivation: negative experiences with state institutions• Collective grievances and victimization: oppression, subjugation, foreign intervention• Distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies, and ethnic and cultural differences• Leadership and social networks: charismatic leaders, informal family, and social networks

Table 1: Radicalization’s pull and push factors

However, it is argued that radicalized people are not per se violent and while they might share certain characteristics with (violent) extremists, there are also important differences. Radicalization in itself is not necessarily a threat to society if it is not connected to violence or other unlawful acts, such as incitement to hatred. Radicalization becomes a threat to society if an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate course of action.

1.1.3 Countering Violent Extremism and its Propaganda

The term Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has been used to describe the approaches that aim to create resilience among populations that are seen vulnerable (preventing) or assist individuals who are conducive to turning away from extremism (de-radicalization).

The focus of P/CVE is closely linked to discrediting and delegitimizing the ideology that drives VE and mobilizes a stream of recruits to extremist causes. P/CVE policies aim to address the root causes of radicalization, such as feelings of estrangement from society, economic deprivation, perceived injustices, xenophobia and human rights abuses.

The rise of ISIS and their prolific use of online propaganda have increased awareness of terrorist propaganda in the public consciousness. It is now recognized that violent extremists have made effective use of the internet and social media to advance their aims, whether through engagement, propaganda, radicalization or recruitment. On the other hand, winning the communication war is a vital part of P/CVE. Today, much of the emphasis has been placed on restrictive measures content removal on the internet, or proscription of illegal speech through takedowns and filtering. An effective response is countering the narratives of terrorist organizations, rather than purely restricting them. This response, attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly, through a range of online and offline means.

The term “**counter-narrative**” refers to a range of activities such as government led initiatives, de-radicalization strategies, or grassroots and civil society movements and can be speaking to a number of different audiences – such as extremist, those vulnerable to extremism, member of communities that include extremist, or general population at a large. It can also include a number of different messages, such as those trying to discredit or make fun of extremists, or those trying to empower communities by promoting different stories.

However, to develop an integrated P/CVE communication strategy is imperative to deconstruct first the VE propaganda and understand the targeted audiences. Violent extremist propaganda is designed to provide its audiences with a competitive system of meaning, which acts as the lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive

and judge the world. The correct way to challenge extremist “system of meaning” is to attach the linkages that promulgate their self-reinforcing cycle using a two-tiered strategy, which will be explained in the following session.

1.2 Strategic Communication on Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism

This section focuses on the “linkage-based” approach on preventing/countering violent extremism through strategic communications. It defines the violent extremism “system of meaning” and how to dismantle it using the two-tiered framework. Furthermore, it explores the steps of developing strategic communication campaign. The last subsections focus on the message design further explaining the 5As and the 5Ds of messaging.

1.2.1 Violent Extremism “System of Meaning”

Haroro Ingram explains that violent extremism propaganda is designed to provide its audiences with a “competitive system of meaning” which acts as the lens through which supporters are compelled to perceive and judge the world. At the heart of this “system of meaning” is typically a single overarching statement or “pitch”: “we are champions and protectors of (appropriately-aligned) Muslims (the in-group identity), everyone outside of this narrow in-group identity are enemies (i.e. out-group identities or Others) who are responsible for the *ummah*’s (Muslim community’s) crises, so support us and our solutions (i.e. the militant Islamist politico-military agenda).” Graphically represented in Figure 1, militant Islamist propaganda uses a combination of narratives and imagery to connect these powerful in-group and out-group identity constructs with crisis and solution constructs.

Crisis constructs in extremist propaganda tend to be characterized by three factors:

1. The presence and influence of others: in and out group identity construction often occurs relationally. In other words, one comes to know what one is because of what one is not (and vice versa). Moreover, awareness of out-groups often triggers comparisons of values that can have deep implications for relative status and meaning.
2. Uncertainty: characterized by complicity, ambiguity, deficit knowledge and unpredictability.
3. The breakdown of tradition: this refers to the perception that historically rooted norms of belief and practice associated with the in-group identity are changing due to the influence of others.

Extremist propaganda leverages the other, uncertainty and the breakdown of tradition in its narratives to fuel perceptions of crisis in its audiences.

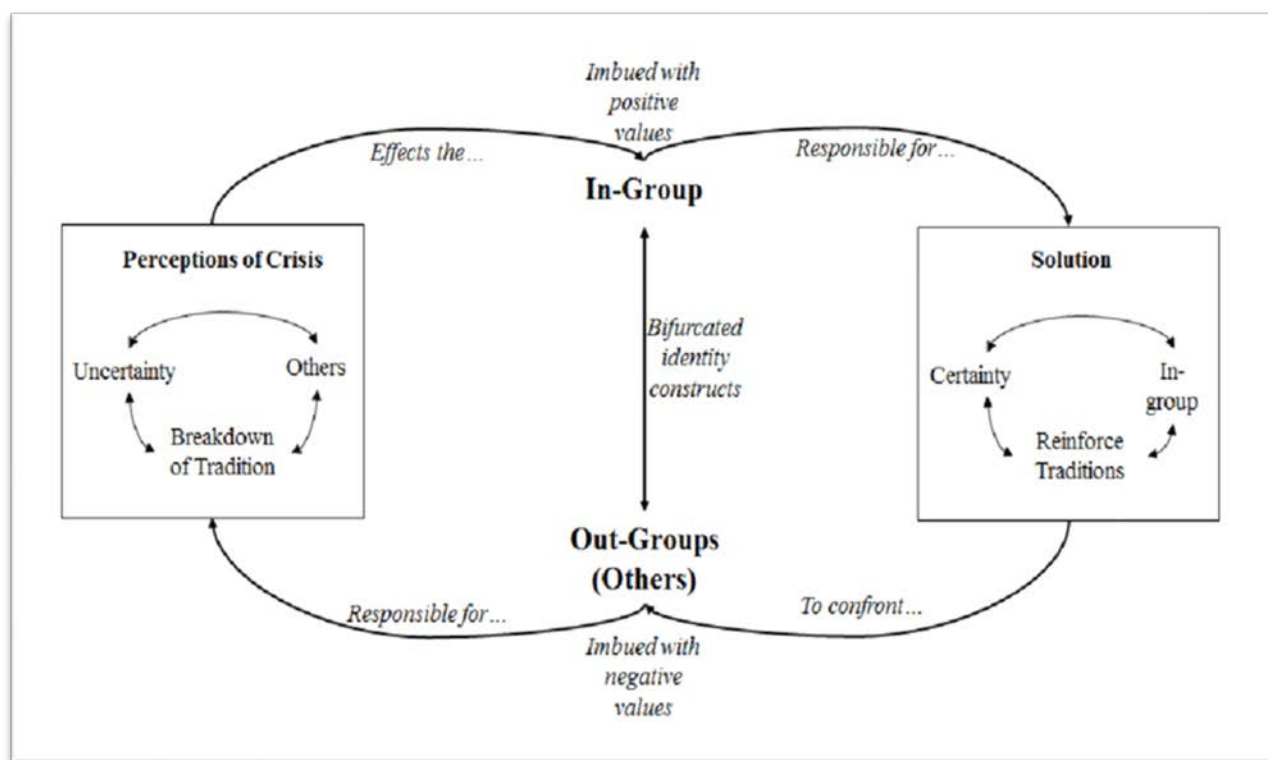


Figure 1. Violent extremist “system of meaning” and its self-reinforcing dynamics

Propaganda plays a central role in shaping and solidifying this network of “mental models” that constitutes the “system of meaning” for violent extremists and their supporters. Militant Islamist propaganda deploys a diverse range of messages designed to reinforce different aspects of their system of meaning. For example, some messages focus on showing how enemies are causing crises (i.e. Other-crisis linkages) while others will show how their particular group is providing solutions to crisis (i.e. in-group-solution linkages). This diversity of messaging is reflective of the cyclically reinforcing nature of militant Islamist propaganda (see, Figure 1). The more the perceptions of crisis increase and out groups (i.e. the enemies of violent extremists) are framed as responsible, the more urgent the need for solutions and the more the in-group (i.e. violent extremists) will be seen as best equipped to implement it. These dynamics may shape the way an individual perceives not only broader socio-political issues but also how personal issues are understood such may be the pervasive influence of the violent extremist “system of meaning” to that person.

As perceptions of crisis intensify, a need to alleviate that sense of crisis emerges in individuals and groups. Thus, the solution construct in extremist propaganda both contributes to in- and out-group identity construction processes and acts as the corollary “pulling” force to the “pushing” effect of crisis towards adoption of extremism and legitimization of violence. It follows that what characterizes the solution construct is exactly the opposite to the crisis construct:

1. Commitment to the in group identity: typically imbued with positive and empowering attributes, fidelity to the in group identity’s values and support of tis members is often framed as crucial to overcome the crisis.
2. Certainty: simplicity, stability, understanding and predictability are the defining characteristics of certainty.
3. Reinforcement of traditions: reflecting the inherently antagonistic relationship between crisis and solution constructs, the protection and championing of threatened traditions is a crucial feature of extremist propaganda.

1.2.2 Dismantling the violent extremist “system of meaning”

As its name suggests, the “linkage-based” approach uses tailored messaging to target those crucial linkages that violent extremist propaganda forges between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis (Figure 2).

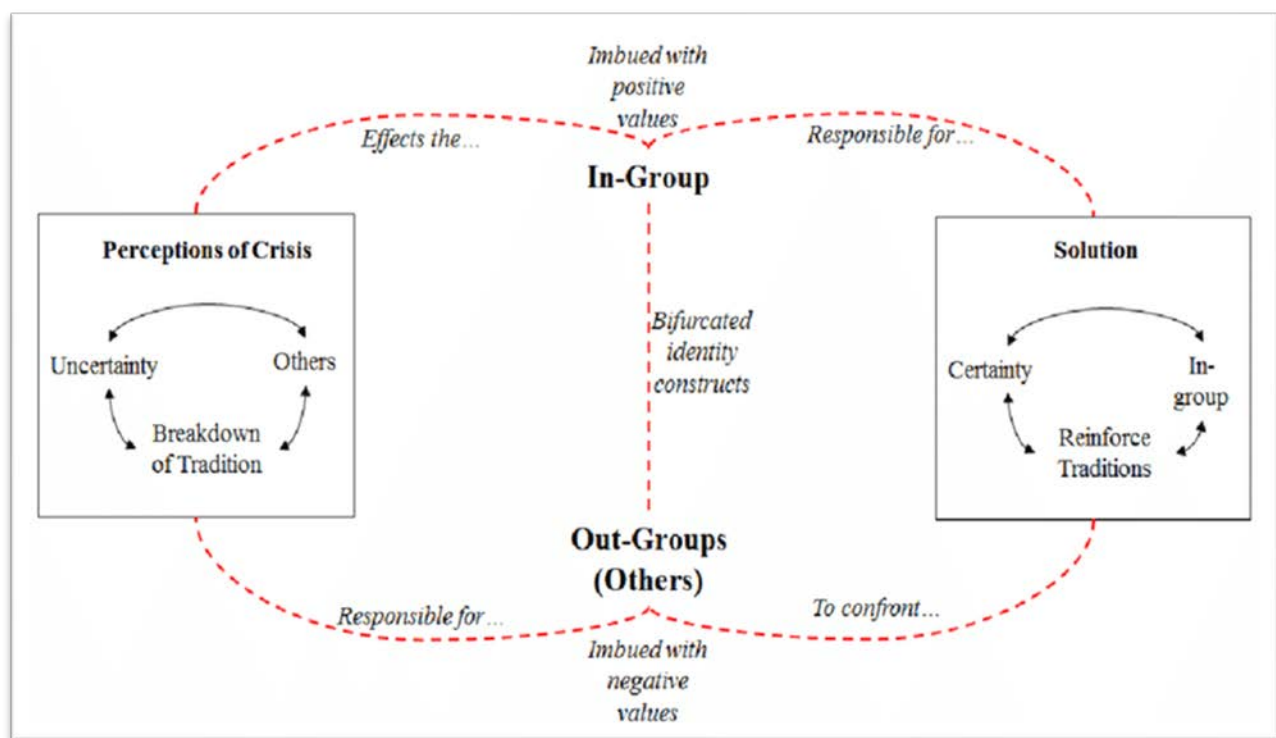


Figure 2: Dismantling the violent extremist “system of meaning”

The first tier deploys messaging designed to discredit the violent extremist's "system of meaning" and offers alternative narratives. Its primary targets are those who have yet to adopt the violent extremist "system of meaning". This is achieved by using *negative messaging* that attacks the linkages violent extremists attach between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crisis. *Negative messaging* emphasizes the harm of certain choices and seeks to diminish the appeal of violent extremists (i.e. proscribed terrorist groups and their supporters) by attaching them to crises. This is augmented by *positive messaging* that is geared towards emphasizing the benefits of certain choices and boosting the appeal of oneself and/or allies by linking their actions to solutions. The second tier uses disengagement (i.e. *negative*) messaging and network disruption strategies targeting those who are already inside, i.e. who already adhere to, the violent extremist's "system of meaning". Using tailored messaging to break down key linkages in violent extremist propaganda is designed to have multilayered effect on target audiences. This two-tiered framework is based on the need to devise counter-terrorism strategic communication efforts which:

1. Addresses the full spectrum of target audiences that may be vulnerable to violent extremist propaganda or who may be useful to counter it. As illustrated below, the two tiers of the "linkage-based" strategy target a broad spectrum of target audience motivations: antis, curious, engaged, tacit supporters and active supporters.

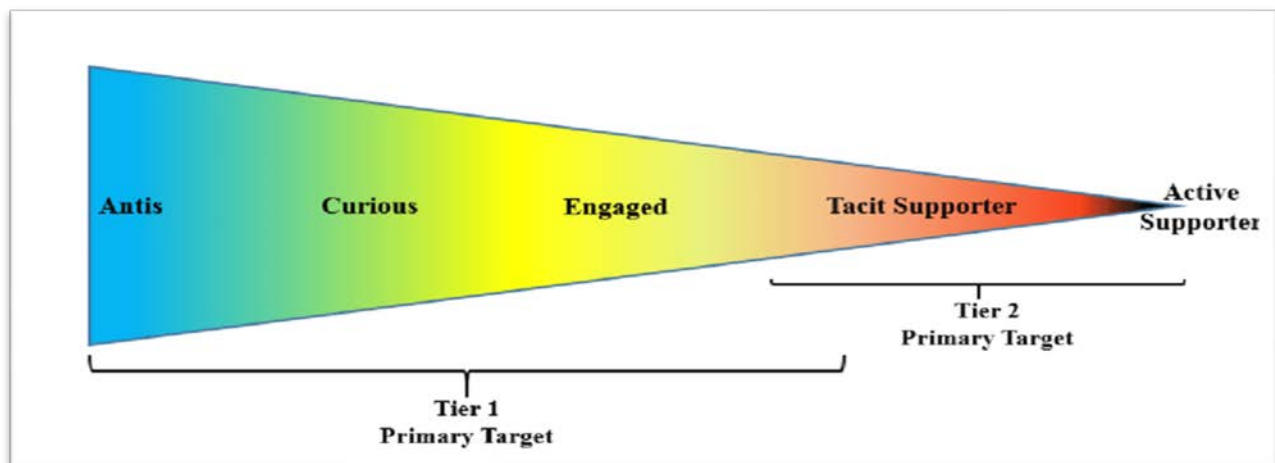


Figure 3: Target audience spectrum and two-tier targeting

2. Focus on countering and offering to the propaganda produced by proscribed terrorist organizations (i.e. violent extremists) and their supporters rather than opaque and subjective notions of "extremism".
3. Ensure that overall campaign strategy and message design are synchronized. This is achieved by interlocking the two tiers of the strategy and establishing message categories within which are sets of *positive* and *negative* messaging themes.

4. Provide a framework for practitioners to collect metrics to gauge the efficacy of the overall campaign, message categories and message themes. This architecture connects campaign planning to message design to assist with assessing efficacy and better informing decisions about future campaign and message design.

1.2.3 Ingram's "Linkage-Based Approach"

As shown in Figure 4, the "linkage-based" approach to counter-terrorism strategic communications is characterized by two tiers or lines of effort.

Campaign Planning

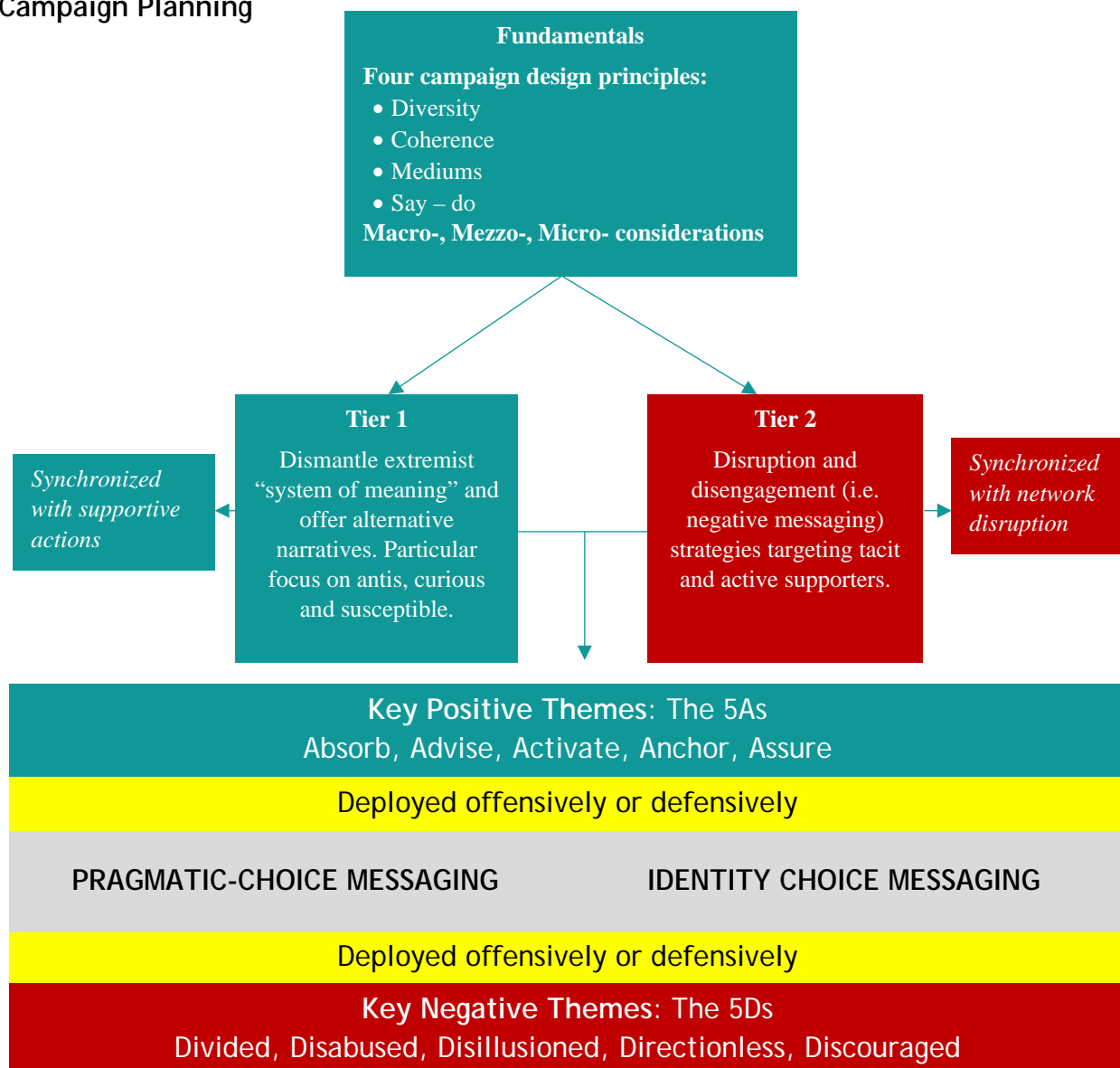


Figure 4: The "linkage-based" approach

As explained in table below each of the tiers have dual purposes.

Tier 1	<p><i>The first purpose:</i> Dismantle the “system of meaning” advocated by violent extremists. It achieves this by deploying messages that variously attach the linkages violent extremists attach between themselves and solutions and their enemies and crises. This is known as negative messaging because it emphasizes the harm of targeted audiences making certain choices and seeks to diminish the appeal of violent extremists.</p> <p><i>The second purpose:</i> Use positive messaging that emphasize the benefits of certain choices and seeks to boost the appeal of oneself (e.g., government) and/or allies (e.g., community groups).</p>
Tier 2	<p><i>The first purpose:</i> Use disruption strategies against online and offline violent extremism networks. In an online context this involves the targeted shutting down of violent extremist accounts. Offline, this requires officials to target violent extremist networks and their supporters using appropriate arms of the state.</p> <p><i>The second purpose:</i> Use disengagement narratives via negative messaging targeting tacit and active supporter of VE to trigger behavioral changes away from support.</p>

Table 2: The two-tiered strategy

Tier 1 efforts address a broad target audience spectrum from “antis” to “engaged”. This messaging should, as much as possible, be synchronized with supportive actions in the field (e.g., CVE initiatives). Without messaging being coordinated with actions and vice versa (i.e., reducing the say-do gap), the credibility of both can be significantly undermined.

The two tiers are complementary. As Tier 2 efforts disrupt violent extremist networks, this slows the dissemination and even production of their propaganda thus creating opportunities for Tier 1 efforts to fill the void. As Tier 2 deploys *negative messaging* against violent extremist networks, this further augments the *positive* and *negative messaging* deployed as part of Tire 1 (and vice versa).

1.2.4 Target Audience

Overall, the two-tiered strategy targets the full spectrum of target audience motivations as detailed in table below.

Target audience	Aims
Antis: those against the violent extremist groups.	<p>Limit inadvertently undermining their counter-extremis efforts.</p> <p>Provide support, particularly via supply of raw materials (e.g. footage, technical support).</p> <p>Effective messaging may be supported or disseminated by antis.</p>
Curious: those consuming violent extremist propaganda.	Undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of <i>negative</i> and <i>positive messaging</i> to address varied audience motivations.
Engaged: those who adhere to the violent extremist group's "system of meaning" and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks.	<p>Undermine violent extremist messaging and offer alternative narratives with a combination of <i>negative</i> and <i>positive messaging</i> to address varied audience motivations. Disengagement narrative strategies (i.e. <i>negative messaging</i> should increasingly be prioritized.</p> <p>Disrupt violent extremist network.</p>
Tacit supporters: those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks.	<p>Focus on <i>negative messaging</i> as a disengagement strategy form violent extremist networks.</p> <p>Disrupt violent extremist networks.</p>
Active supporters: those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.	<p><i>Negative messaging</i> as a means to drive disengagement.</p> <p>Aggressive targeted disruption of violent extremist networks.</p>

Table 3: Audience motivational spectrum

Recognizing this range of target audience motivations is crucial for three reasons:

1. It is a means by which to identify the target priorities of communication campaign. For example, if one's target audience is dominated by those who are "curious" or "engaged" to violent extremism then messaging should be prioritized accordingly. It is also important to recognize that the majority of people sit between antis and curious with little risk of radicalization/attraction to violent extremism.
2. It is also a means by which to select people to "focus group" messaging prior to public release.
3. Is a basic means to consider who is consuming one's messaging and whether targeting strategies need to shift. For example, if messaging is largely being consumed by "antis" who are already against violent extremism when the target audience should be those who are "engaged", then the metric being collected will be misleading.

1.2.5 Campaign Design

Four campaign design principles are crucial to the success of counter-terrorism strategic communication efforts.

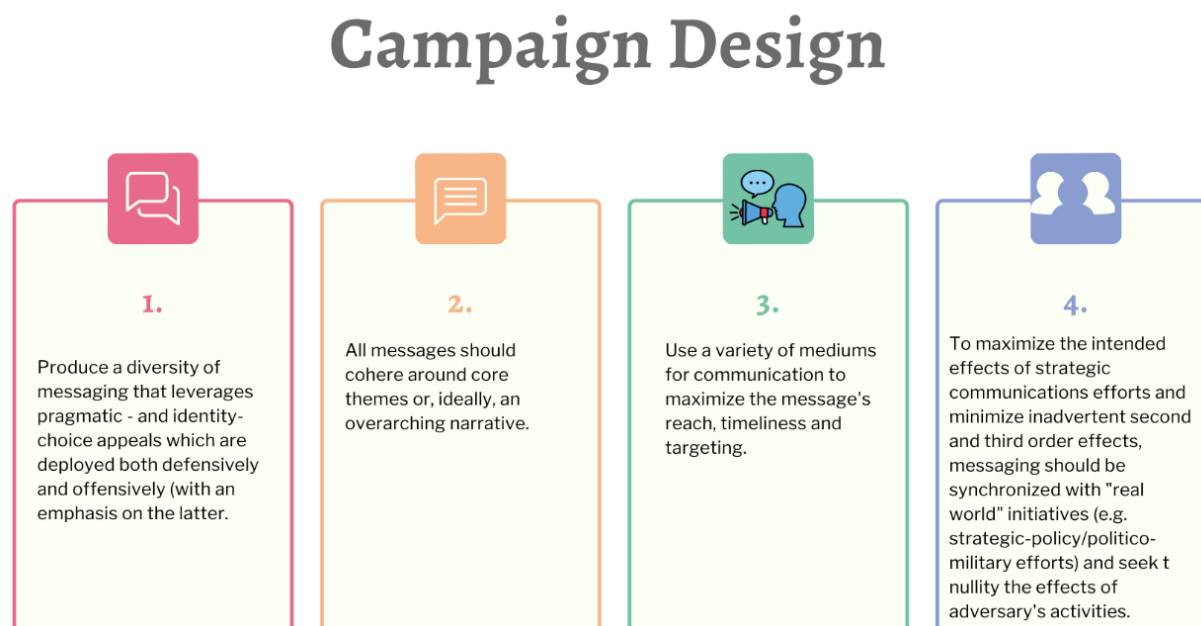


Figure 5. Campaign Design

1.2.6 Message Design

All messaging should be designed and deployed with persuasive intent. It is for this reason that the “linkage-based” approach fuses three strategies into its message design thinking:

- pragmatic - and identity-choice messaging;
- offensive and defensive messaging;
- leveraging the say-do gap.

As illustrated in Table.4, below, these considerations are captured in an interlocking message design plan.

Key Positive Themes: The 5As Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, Assure	
Deployed offensively or defensively	
PRAGMATIC-CHOICE MESSAGING	IDENTITY CHOICE MESSAGING
Deployed offensively or defensively	
Key Negative Themes: The 5Ds Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, Discouraged	

Table 4. messaging categories, sub-categories and themes

At the heart of the “linkage-based” approach are two key categories of messaging designed to drive pragmatic-choice (based on a “rational” cost-benefit consideration of options) and identity-choice (based on identity considerations) decision-making processes in its audiences (see Table 4). This ensures that all messaging is geared towards leveraging one or even both of these powerful motivational drivers in its target audience. Depending on that target audience, practitioners also need to consider whether the message will be deployed offensively (i.e. to control the narrative and/or elicit a response from one’s enemy) or defensively (i.e. to counter an adversary’s messaging). Another consideration is whether the message will be *positive* - i.e. it emphasizes the benefits of certain choices and boosts the appeal of oneself and/or allies - or *negative* - i.e. it emphasizes the harm of certain choices and diminishes the appeal of violent extremists. Framing all messaging within such an architecture helps to broadly organize and synchronize a messaging campaign. It is within these broad guidelines that decisions regarding specific messaging themes can be deliberated.

1.2.7 The 5As of Positive Messaging

The 5As represent important messaging themes for *positive messaging* and can be used for both pragmatic-choice and identity-choice purposes. Deployed effectively and across a coherent campaign plan, the 5As may have a self-reinforcing effect that can deliver compounding beneficial returns.

Five As	Purpose of theme	Pragmatic-choice sample	Identity-choice sample
Absorb	Target audience is part of a positive and worthwhile community (emphasis on collective identity).	Promote target audience's involvement in activities that benefit their community (e.g. charity, sport).	Inclusive messaging that focuses on community/national identity.
Advise	Clarity about how pertinent issues/events affect target audiences.	Clear messaging about the impact of counter-terrorism laws (e.g. response to blowback against community).	Demonstrate how counter-terrorism efforts do not focus on a single community.
Activate	Promote how participation in collective/community has benefits for individual and collective.	Support of government/community groups has practical benefits to target audience members.	Support of government/community groups fosters shared individual and collective identities.
Anchor	Target audiences are characterized by a range of individual identities and behaviors that are positive and worthwhile (emphasis on individual identity).	Emphasize the range of positive and empowering activities in which members of the target audience are engaged (e.g. opposite to "persecuted victim").	Emphasize the range of identities that define an individual (opposite to the "black and white" worldview of violent extremists).
Assure	The facts support the positive claims/activities of the messenger (e.g. government).	Promote efforts of the messenger and allies to address target audience problems.	Highlight how law enforcement and government agencies are working to support target audiences as equal citizens.

Table 5: The 5 As of Positive Messaging

1.2.8 The 5Ds of Negative Messaging

The 5Ds encapsulate important messaging themes for *negative messaging* and can be used for both pragmatic – and identity-choice purposes. Similarly, the 5Ds can be mutually reinforcing resulting in compounding returns.

Five Ds	Purpose of theme	Pragmatic-choice sample	Identity-choice sample
<i>Divided</i>	Violent extremists disagree on key elements of movement.	Violent extremists spend more time fighting each other.	Violent extremists say they support Muslims but condemn and kill them.
<i>Disabused</i>	The facts undermine our view of the violent extremists.	Highlighting the number of Muslims violent extremists kill.	Hypocritical rhetoric of “purity” when engaged in drug-taking and rape.
<i>Disillusioned</i>	Participation in violent extremism does not deliver on promises.	Violent extremist actions did not achieve the results promised.	Violent extremists present a fabricated image of “purity” inconsistent with practices like rape, drug trafficking and torture.
<i>Directionless</i>	Violent extremists do not have a clear and tangible agenda	Violent extremists do not have clear strategy to succeed (e.g. military losses) or shifting messaging about goals.	Violent extremist claims are inconsistent, misleading and do not have and executable vision.
<i>Discouraged</i>	Violent extremist ultimately cannot win.	Violent extremists consistently fail politico-militarily.	Violent extremists make the plight of Muslims worse.

Table 6: The 5Ds of Negative Messaging

1.2.9 Additional Theme Selection and Message Design Suggestions

- To maximize the relevance and resonance of a message, use real examples. *For negative messaging*, use disgruntled former members of violent extremist networks to maximize credibility. *Positive messaging* should also use real examples that are carefully selected for that specific messaging purpose. For example, presenting “success stories” from a range of fields - e.g. sport, academic, business, art or music- to champion community “role models”.
- Engage in dialogue with target audiences for valuable insights into their needs and tailor messaging accordingly. As often as possible, ensure “focus groups” are comprised of target audience members. For example, online this would involve the establishment of virtual focus groups using engagement metrics.
- Messaging needs to be synchronized with “real world” events and activities. This may require counter-terrorism strategic communications and CVE practitioners to engage with government and non-government agencies to shape initiatives (and vice versa) to maximize the effects of both message and action.
- While both non-violent and violent groups tend to describe their enemies using similar language, violent groups tend to describe themselves as pure, infallible and uniquely responsible for fixing the crisis. This highlights the importance of *positive messaging* as a buffer for target audiences who may perceive crises but have not radicalized to the point of wanting to support violent extremism or engage in violence themselves. Effective *positive messaging* needs to take advantage of opportunities that emerge as a consequence of events (e.g. highlighting the beneficial impact of community efforts), actions (e.g. highlighting the beneficial impact of offensive and defensive *negative messaging* against tacit and active supporters to counter in-group constructs of purity and infallibility).
- Simple messaging should dominate a communication campaign. More complex messaging that requires target audiences to engage in deliberated and considered thinking should be (a.) carefully timed to take into account contextual factors and (b.) preceded by series of simpler messages that “prime” the target audience.
- A target audience under stress is unlikely to be able to process complex messaging and will respond intuitively thus with a greater susceptibility to cognitive biases. During such periods of acute crisis, simple messaging should dominate the campaign.
- One of the greatest appeals of militant Islamist propaganda is the simple “black and white”, “us versus them” worldview it offers audiences. “Black and white” cannot be defeated with more “black and white”. Instead, anti-violent extremism efforts must focus on re-framing the discourse by highlighting the variety of identities (e.g. gender, student, sportsperson) that constitute an

individual or collective and the diversity of their engagements. Put another way, only color can defeat “black and white”.

- Collecting data on the efficacy of a particular message, a category of messaging (e.g. *positive* or *negative messaging*), and the overall campaign is essential for shaping future campaign and message design decisions.
- Priority should be given to the production of offensive messaging. While defensive messaging is important to counter violent extremist propaganda, an important indicator of success in the “information battle” is reflected in who is producing more offensive messaging and eliciting the most defensive messaging from their adversary.

This module provided practitioners with the necessary knowledge and the framework through which to synchronize campaign planning and message design in order to confront violent extremist propaganda. There is no gold rule to effective strategic communications and practitioners should liaise closely with the target audiences to identify the elements that are most likely to resonate. However, this framework can help them to shape how that message is designed and its role within the context of other messages and the campaign more broadly. The Annex 1 contains the practitioner’s checklist to assist with the application of the “linkage-based” approach in practice.

Module 2: Tools and Activities



2.1 Theory of Change

This section explain what is a Theory of Change, and why to use a Theory of Change in preventing and countering violent extremism. The subsection provides guidance on how to develop a Theory of Change for a CVE program and write a Theory of Change statement.

2.1.1 What is the Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change (ToC) is a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, is expected to lead to specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence. A theory of change helps to identify solutions to effectively address the causes of the problems that hinder progress and to guide decision on which approach should be taken. Moreover, a ToC can help you articulate the purpose of your interventions and its relation to P/CVE goals. This means that the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes should all connect to the goal or objective of the program through a specific correlation logic.

A theory of change is an explanation of how and why an action is believed to be capable of bringing about its planned objectives, i.e. the change it hopes to create through its activities, thereby revealing underlying assumptions. A clear theory of change helps to articulate the logical flow from the starting point (analysis) to the action (objective) to the change the organization wants to achieve.

A ToC explains how the program activities and results are connected to each other. It offers testable hypothesis for determining the impact of the CVE program, project or intervention. The ToC incorporates three types of projected results that should be articulated based on this correlational logic:

Outputs: are measurable product (usually quantitative) of a program's activities or intervention. Often outputs are recorded measures in terms of units completed. For example, number of participants with an increased understanding of CVE after the program/intervention.

Outputs example:

Inmates with a prior involvement in VE are provided with forums to expose them to / deepen their understanding of narratives that are contrary to VE.

Outcomes: are the results of the program activities or interventions (usually qualitative). Often outcomes are expressed in terms of change in behavior or attitudes. For example, the enhanced understanding of CVE good practice might be a program outcome amongst the recipients.

Outcomes example:

Inmates with a prior involvement in VE reduce their desire to partake in subsequent acts of VE.

Impact: refers to the ultimate goal or objective of the program, affiliated with both the recipients and target population. Often impact is the most difficult component to measure. However, outputs and outcomes should support the measurement of impact through the ToC derived from the outset. This means that although impact might not be visible or measurable immediately, it is still possible to reasonably consider its projection, through the ToC.

Impact example:

Inmates with a prior involvement in VE do not perpetrate VE on release.

A carefully structured ToC should help you to:

1. clarify which dynamics and drivers are leading to radicalization and recruitment of within the local system you are addressing, and your entry points within that system;
2. state clearly the goals of the project, related to preventing and/or countering violent extremism;
3. fully articulate how and why the project will address the dynamics and drivers of violent extremism to achieve its goals.

Theories of change are often expressed as “if/then” statements; “If we do X (action), then we will produce Y (change/shift towards peace, stability, security).” To ensure conflict sensitivity it is also recommended to add the underlying assumptions and logic of why we think X will produce Y, by adding Z - “because.” This “because” statement serves to highlight our assumptions - and related risks-and how we will address them through intervention/programming.

2.2.2 Theory of Change Statement

As part of developing a ToC program, as explained above, a concise statement that maps the logical flow of the inputs, activities, outcomes and project/intervention

impact should be articulated. Again, in its simplest form, a ToC statement can be expressed though an “if”, “then”, “because” statement. The ToC statement can help articulate the broader ToC program in a succinct and useful way.

Example: Teacher Training Program on VE	
If	Teachers increase their knowledge and teaching skills on building empathy in the classroom setting.
And	Teachers apply their knowledge and skills with their students in the classroom consistently.
Then	Students will be more resilient against negative effects of violent extremist propaganda targeting their identity
Because	Students will learn how to be empathetic towards others, listen to diverse opinions, feel respected, and feel part of a community of learner.

In order to develop an effective ToC three key principles should be followed:

1. It should be developed **consultatively** to reflect the understanding of all relevant stakeholders;
2. It should be grounded in, tested with, and revised based on robust **evidence** at all stages;
3. It should support **continuous learning** and improvement from intervention/programme design to closure.


2.2.3 Steps to Construct a Theory of Change

1. Conduct a VE or conflict analysis to better understand the context.
2. Identify the conflict dynamics, drivers, and mitigating factors to be addressed.
3. Identify the intervention/activity purpose. Identify what and who.
 - What type of change is desired (change in attitudes, behaviors, or institutions)?
 - Who is the target of change (key leaders, specific groups of people, or communities)?
 - Who are the key actors able to make this change (and have available resources to mobilize others)?

- At what level is the change taking place (individual, community, or national level)?
- 4. Develop the approach. Once the purpose is defined (what and who), the focus moves to how the change will happen.

Before you move to programming principles and strategies, here are some initial questions to help you design your P/CVE approach:

- What is likely to have the most significant impact on the purpose (why/how)?
 - Given the context, VE drivers, culture, geography, and target groups, what approaches could be used, and which activities are most suitable?
 - What is your organization's capacity to implement these activities?
- How will the purpose of the intervention/activity be achieved?
 - How are key stakeholders engaged?
 - Where is the work to take place, and with whom?
 - How will target populations be included? Are they easily reached?
 - How can the approach address negative perceptions and possible backlash?
 - How can the intervention contribute to building governmental capacity and commitment to effectively prevent and counter VE?
- How might assumptions impact the activity?
 - What assumptions are being made about the context and the activity?
 - What factors are outside of your organization's control that may impact the work?
 - What assumptions were made in the design?
 - How might these assumptions affect the desired change in the conflict and VE dynamics?
- Articulate the Theory of Change. Show how the change will happen with a carefully articulated "if/then" statement.
 - Specify the type of change and the target of change.
- Add a "because" statement to explain the assumptions and logic of why and how that change will take place.
- Assess the Theory of Change.
 - Are there any gaps in the logic?
 - How realistic are the assumptions?
 - Is the Theory of Change clear and understandable?

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- Does it demonstrate logic and common sense, reflecting existing research?
 - Monitor and Evaluate Outcomes and Impacts. Develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for the ToC and a plan to monitor your assumptions.

2.3 Tabletop exercises

This section presents some tools and activities to be used by practitioners. The first section explain what is a tabletop exercise and how to conduct it. Meanwhile, the next section explores the concept of after action review/improvement plan.

2.3.1 Conducting a tabletop exercise

Tabletop exercise are discussion-based sessions where team members meet in an informal setting to discuss their roles during an emergency and their response to a particular emergency situation. Tabletop exercise can be used both as an evaluation tool and also as a continuous learning opportunity. Tabletop exercises are a low-cost yet highly impactful part of emergency preparedness. Tabletop exercises are designed to openly exchange ideas in order to evaluate and further expand the knowledge of existing policies and procedures of P/CVE. A tabletop exercise is not a procedure test, but draws on the importance of coordination between institutions regarding violent extremism, integration of resources and the identification of the problem and decision-making.

A facilitator guides participants through a discussion of one or more scenarios, testing their emergency plan in an informal, low-stress environment. Tabletop exercises are used to clarify roles and responsibilities and to identify additional mitigation and preparedness needs. Participants are encouraged to discuss the action they should take in a specific situation, testing their emergency plan. Tabletop exercises can be used by practitioners to explore communication mechanisms and the inter-institutional cooperation regarding strategic communication for P/CVE. Furthermore, to explore the policies, plans and protocols of reacting against violent extremism acts in order to identify possible gaps and improvement plans.

The duration of a tabletop exercise depends on the audience, the topic being exercised and the exercise objectives. Many tabletop exercises can be conducted in a few hours, so they are cost-effective tools to validate plans and capabilities.

2.3.2 After Action Review and Improvement Plan

Another effective evaluation tool is After Action Review. An After Action Review (AAR) is a simple process used by a team to capture the lessons learned from past successes and failures, with the goal of improving future performance. It is an opportunity for a team to reflect on a project, activity, event, or task so that they can do better the next


time. It can also be employed in the course of a project to learn while doing. AARs should be carried out with an open spirit and no intention to blame. AARs can be the next step after a tabletop exercise.

Why use it?

- The AAR is the basis for learning from project, activity, event or task success or failure. It is the starting point for improvements in the future.
- Team members can identify strengths and weaknesses and determine how to improve performance in the future by focusing on the desired outcome and describing specific observations.
- The project team can document the lessons learned and make it available to the rest of the organization to improve decision-making.

How to apply it?

1. Hold the AAR immediately whilst all the participants are still available, and their memories are fresh. Learning can then be applied right away, even on the next day.
2. Create the right climate. The ideal climate for an AAR to be successful is one of openness and commitment to learning. Everyone should participate in an atmosphere free from the concept of seniority or rank. AARs are learning events rather than critiques. They certainly should not be treated as personal performance evaluations.
3. Appoint a facilitator. The facilitator of an AAR is not there to “have” answers, but to help the team “learn” answers. People must be drawn out, both for their own learning and the group’s learning.
4. Ask “what was supposed to happen? The facilitator should start by dividing the event into discrete activities, each of which had (or should have had) an identifiable objective and plan of action. The discussion begins with the first activity: “What was supposed to happen?”
5. Ask “what actually happened?” This means the team must understand and agree on facts about what happened. Remember, though, that the aim is to identify a problem, not a culprit.
6. Now compare the plan with reality. The real learning begins as the team compares the plan to what actually happened in reality to determine “Why were there differences?” and “What did we learn?” Identify and discuss successes and shortfalls. Put in place action plans to sustain the success and to improve upon the shortfalls.

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7. Record the key points. Recording the key elements of an AAR clarifies what happened and compares it to what was supposed to happen. It facilitates sharing of learning experiences within the team and provides the basis for a broader learning programme in the organization.

Annexes



Annex 1: Practitioners Checklist

Campaign planning - The Fundamentals

The Four Principles	What this means for practitioners
Produce a diversity of messaging that leverages pragmatic and identity choice appeals which are deployed both defensively and offensively (with an emphasis on the later).	Prepare strategies that take into consideration the following message design suggestions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pragmatic and identity-choice• Offensive and defensive• <i>Positive messaging</i> and 5As• <i>Negative messaging</i> and the 5Ds
All messages should be covered by core themes or, ideally, an overarching narrative	<p>This simple overarching narrative, mirroring that of violent extremists, may help to cohere a messaging campaign: <i>violent extremists and their supporters are responsible for crises, “we” (oneself/allies) strive to and have done more to offer solutions.</i></p> <p>Practitioners should always consider how their messaging support this overarching narrative/pitch.</p>
Use a variety of mediums for communication to maximize the message’s reach, timeliness and targeting.	Identify what mediums of communication will most effectively reach the target audience, identify the limitations of those mediums and incorporate other mediums that make up for those limitations.
To maximize the intended effects of strategic communications efforts and minimize inadvertent second and third order effects, messaging should be synchronized with “real world” initiatives (e.g. strategic-policy/politico-military efforts) and seek to nullify the effects of the adversary’s activities.	Synchronize messaging with events and initiatives that affect the target audience. Regularly engage with target audiences to ensure messaging maximizes the real world “effects” of, for example, CVE actions (and vice versa).

Target Audience

Target audience	What this means for practitioners
<p><i>Antis: those against the violent extremist groups.</i></p> <p><i>Curious: those consuming violent extremist propaganda.</i></p> <p><i>Engaged: those who adhere to the violent extremist group's "system of meaning" and/or are engaged with violent extremist networks.</i></p> <p><i>Tacit supporters: those who express support for violent extremist groups, disseminate their messaging, and regularly engage with these networks.</i></p> <p><i>Active supporters: those who are planning or who have engaged in actions, including violence, to support the violent extremist group.</i></p>	<p>What should be prioritized and how this campaign and its messaging addressing this target audience and others?</p>

Message Design

Based on target audience assessment, what messaging should be given highest (i.e. higher rate of production) to the lowest (i.e. lower rate of production) priority, taking into account the full spectrum of messaging options?

<p>Key Positive Themes: The 5As Absorb, Advise, Activate, Anchor, Assure</p>	
<p>Deployed offensively or defensively</p>	
<p>PRAGMATIC-CHOICE MESSAGING</p>	<p>IDENTITY CHOICE MESSAGING</p>
<p>Deployed offensively or defensively</p>	
<p>Key Negative Themes: The 5Ds Divided, Disabused, Disillusioned, Directionless, Discouraged</p>	

Annex 2: After Action Review

Title of the action or plan
Object
Description of experience
What went well?
What went wrong?
Which lessons can be learned?

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