

Chapter 62

Countering Online Violent Extremism: State Action as Strategic Communication

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ABSTRACT

State action is an important form of strategic communication and therefore, significant to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiatives on and offline. While non-state actors often use state action (and sometimes inaction) to incite and legitimise violence against the state as well as its citizens, generating this sort of negative sentiment does not require instigation. This is especially the case when the action(s) of a state are deemed so unacceptable and repulsive that a public backlash automatically ensues. As many violent extremists (including lone wolves) have been radicalised as a result of such controversies, it is necessary for positive state action to be carried out as well as widely publicised at the macro and micro levels. This is envisaged to counter negative narratives as well as address real world issues that push individuals towards violent extremism.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic communication or “communication through words and deeds in pursuit of national strategic objectives” has in recent times become more prominent across the globe (Cornish, Lindley-French, & York, 2011, p. ix). Many countries have not only invested or are investing in greater ‘soft power’ initiatives to reach out to countries around and beyond their borders, but also seem to be establishing departments/ministries to handle various public communication functions such as the Government Communication Service in the United Kingdom. Some like the United States have even gone so far as to establish dedicated units to focus on niche/special areas such as counterterrorism communications (e.g., the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications).

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A key element in effective strategic communication, as underscored by Cornish, Lindley-French, and Yorke (2011), is the “potency of action” (p. 21). As “all action has a communicative value and conveys a message ... words and actions are inseparable”, therefore “efforts should be made to minimise ... disparities that might undermine the ... narrative” (p. 21). The same rationale holds true for state (‘state’, in this chapter, is defined as ‘the civil government of a country’) action especially since “governments will be judged as much on what they can deliver as on the promises they make and the vision they provide” (Cornish et al., 2011, p. 21).

Discussions about state action have traditionally been associated with international relations and diplomacy. However, its relevance and applicability to situations involving non-state actors are just as significant too. This is especially so when non-state actors exploit state action (or inaction) to incite and legitimise violence against the state as well as its nationals. In February 2015 for example, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) justified its brutal execution of a Jordanian Air Force pilot as “retribution for his crimes against Islam and the Muslims, including his active involvement in crusader airstrikes against Muslim lands” (Dabiq, 2015, p. 5).

Incitement by religious and non-religious supporters of jihadist groups to perpetrate violence is often cited as a key driver of terrorist attacks, and has therefore been criminalised in many countries. As Bibi van Ginkel writes:

These international initiatives spurred from the belief that public provocation to commit a terrorist act creates the danger that such an offence may be committed. Furthermore, it was believed that the public expression of praise, support or justification for terrorism might create an environment and psychological climate conducive to criminal activity. (van Ginkel, 2011, p. 1)

While authorities can and have moved against radical preachers and firebrands in their jurisdictions, it is extremely challenging, if not impossible, to deal with incitement that originates from a foreign source, and is disseminated through social media and other Internet channels (e.g., Anwar al-Awlaki’s video/audio messages).

Nevertheless, generating negative sentiment about a state or its nationals does not necessarily require instigation, especially when the action(s) of a state is deemed so unacceptable/repulsive that it provokes public outcry. The 2011 Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, for example, was sparked off by the death of Khaled Said, who was allegedly beaten to death in police custody (“Egypt jails police”, 2011).

Many violent extremists (including lone wolves) have been radicalised through learning about controversial state action through traditional and social media. For instance, the North Carolina teenager who was arrested for terrorist-related activities in June 2015 claimed that “he was angry about U.S. airstrikes and planned revenge that would force them to stop” (Field, 2015, para. 2). In fact, the emergence of Syrian rebel groups, ironically including ISIS, has been attributed to the Assad regime’s brutality towards opponents and civilians (Shoichet, 2013).

These and other similar examples suggest that, theoretically, it is incumbent upon a state to act in an unprovocative manner to avoid potential backlash and hostility. In reality, however, this can never be truly accomplished. State action, even with the best of intentions, and carried out with all necessary precautions, will antagonise, and in worse case scenarios, severely disadvantage a particular group or groups. Counter-terrorism operations and/or restoration of public order operations are cases in point. The use of force against suspects and/or protestors while lawful, can nevertheless antagonise such individuals and their supporters, for a variety of reasons (the most common being the excessive use of force).

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