

Learn from France's counter-extremism push

The United States must strengthen its anti-Islamic State messaging

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France is trying to fight fire with fire. On the heels of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, French officials are dedicating resources and marshaling instruments intended to pack a powerful counterterrorism punch. Among these is a [website](#) designed to blunt the appeal of violent Islamist ideology and thwart the Islamic State recruitment efforts that accompany it.

Keeping in mind the graphic images and messages that the adversary is propagating to the alienated and adventure-seeking, France is hitting back hard with [stomach-churning video](#) of executions and crucifixions; and [social media taglines that blare](#): “You will die alone” and “In reality you will raise your children in war and terror.”

Will it work, or at least throw some sand in the gears of the adversary’s momentum? The jury is still out. Skeptics of the French approach may argue that pushback is best left to the grassroots, especially the disaffected who have seen battle in Syria and Iraq and defected from the movement. These voices are arguably the most authentic, credible and persuasive to the young men who form the key target pool of IS and its ilk. But it’s certainly worth a try, even for governments, to throw their hats in the ring and contribute to the groundswell that is needed to expose and undermine the narrative that is being used to rally foreign fighters to the side of the Islamist extremists.

The United States has a similar campaign run through the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), which is called “[Think Again, Turn Away.](#)” Though comparatively under-resourced relative to other components of the official U.S. counterterrorism effort, CSCC has punched above its weight.

Compared to the social media efforts of IS, however, CSCC is both outmanned and outgunned in the cyber domain. What is needed, in part, are many more adjuncts to the CSCC effort, hailing from all sectors of society and all corners of the globe: public and private, individuals and groups, in languages and dialects that prevail from Australia to Zanzibar.

Without multidimensional pushback of this sort, IS will have the opportunity to grow further, and unobstructed. And the scale of the problem appears to be increasing by the day. Consider the [latest reports](#) concerning the numbers of foreign fighters joining IS. Just since last October, IS has ramped up its forces by 5,000 fighters, for a total of 20,000.

With these figures in mind, perhaps it's time to revisit one of the principal objections to countering IS propaganda, namely that such counter-messaging could backfire and blow back, thereby serving the adversary's goals rather than those of the U.S. and its allies.

Staying mum clearly hasn't worked. It's time to hit back and to do so hard. Just as uncontested physical terrain may allow our adversaries time to plan, plot, train and recruit, so too uncontested space in the cyber domain is effectively a gift to those who wish to do us harm. Bullets and bombs alone are definitely insufficient.

A more comprehensive strategy that integrates all instruments of statecraft, from bits and bytes to diplomacy and economic measures, is required to take down this thinking predator that adjusts its actions in accordance with our perceived weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Tragic events in France seem to have galvanized focus there and in the European Union. While there is no silver bullet solution to the complex transnational challenge that is violent Islamist extremism, France has made a good start by sharpening its pen, focusing its GoPro and taking to the Net with <http://www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr/>.

But a truly global effort is needed — one that leverages the regional strengths, experience and expertise that specific countries can bring to bear. After all, IS has demonstrated significant skill and sophistication in its use of social media, relying upon it to fuel and further their full spectrum of activities, up to and including operations. To succeed, the counter-initiative must be multilateral, but not monolithic.

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