Introduction

> We can't kill our way out of this war.
> US Air Force Lieutenant General Robert Otto[1]
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> Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence;
> supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without
> fighting. Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*, Chapter 3-2[2]

I know what you're thinking. I can practically sense your confusion through the page. You've seen the damage that can be done when radical white nationalists, Islamic extremists, and violent political dissidents spread their messages unchallenged. You've watched as terrorist groups have lured unsuspecting recruits with promises of vengeance and glory. You've witnessed the bloody ends of terrorist propaganda, and you opened this book eager to strike back against it.

Then you saw the Table of Contents and were greeted by words you'd sooner expect to encounter on a college course syllabus than in a book on fighting violent radicalization and terrorism. Narrative theory. Communicative inoculation. Reasoned action. Discrete emotions.

This, you might be thinking, *is not what I signed up for*.

Don't panic. It's perfectly understandable if you feel caught off-guard. After all, discussions about terrorism rarely include any mention of communication or psychology theories. Although you might not yet be familiar with these theories and the principles that underpin them, they're central to the processes that sustain terrorist groups and their activities. They explain why terrorist propaganda resonates with some audiences, and most importantly, they can help guide our efforts in fighting that propaganda with strategic messages of our own.

That's why you're here. You're here to learn about how we can fight violent extremism at its ideological source and ultimately save the victims of terrorism – both those killed in potential attacks, and those that become sufficiently misguided to perform them.

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Pursuit of these goals through strategic persuasive communication is what led me to write this book. For years, the theories and perspectives you'll encounter here have explained how and why certain messages are persuasive. Research on healthcare, politics, education, business, sex, friendship, and scores of other topics has demonstrated the value of persuasion theory for predicting and influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of target audiences. Somehow, these theories and perspectives have slipped through the cracks in efforts to fight terrorist propaganda. This has been a missed opportunity.

These decades-old communication and psychology theories are loaded weapons on a shelf – weapons that we have yet to really deploy on the communicative front of the battle against violent extremism. It's time we use them. To do so, this book will show how each of these theories can be used to analyze the psychologies of our target audiences, inform which content should appear in our messages, and guide the distribution of our messages to those we mean to turn away from terrorism.

Before we get to that, it's important to understand what we are up against. After all, terrorist groups can (and do) develop persuasive messages that help them achieve strategic goals. The effectiveness of these messages can also be explained by the theories we'll discuss.

So, before we begin to talk about how to use our own "weapons," I want to tell you a story that shows how terrorist groups use communicative weapons of their own, and how those weapons can cause significant damage. Originally reported by the *New York Times*[3] in 2015, this is a story about a vulnerable young woman named "Alex."

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It all started so innocently. She was only curious.

After seeing an ISIS video showing the execution of James Foley in August of 2014, "Alex" wanted to understand how anyone could justify it. "I was looking for people who agreed with what they were doing, so that I could understand why they were doing it." As a lonely 23-year-old living with her grandmother in an isolated part of Washington state, Alex spent much of her time online. Rather than go on dates or attend parties, Alex would watch movies on Netflix or update her social media accounts. So naturally, when she looked for ISIS supporters to talk to, she turned to Twitter.

Her search didn't take long. She had no problem finding individuals who claimed to be part of ISIS – individuals that were willing, even eager, to talk to her. In virtually no time, she was part of a social community that the seclusion of rural Washington failed to provide. Within a few weeks,

Alex had built online relationships with several ISIS supporters. They politely responded to any questions she asked, all the while teaching her about Islam and its rituals. Gradually, these conversations led Alex to question whether the media's portrayal of ISIS was accurate. Despite widespread proof of the group's brutal actions, she became skeptical, even defiant.

"I knew that what people were saying about them wasn't true. I don't think that the Islamic State is as bad as everyone says; I think that their atrocities are exaggerated. I think that they brought stability to the land. I think that it might be one of the safest places to live in the Middle East."

Over time, Alex's engagement with her new "friends" on Skype and Twitter led her to question her own Presbyterian upbringing and the lessons of the church that she valued for years. One of these new friends, Hamad, assured her that she didn't need to abandon her religion – but also described Christianity as flawed in a way that could only be corrected by Islam. After some consideration (and a conversation with a dismissive pastor at her church), Alex agreed to one of the central tenets of Islam – that Jesus was a prophet of God, but not *part* of God as described in the Bible. After Alex affirmed her new belief to Hamad over Skype, he pressed her:

"So, what are you waiting for to become a Muslim?"

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Shortly after these exchanges, Hamad vanished from Skype. This was no great threat to Alex's continued interest in Islam and ISIS. By the time Hamad disappeared, Alex had made more than a dozen online friends who were sympathetic to ISIS and more than happy to tell her all about the group. Other supporters quickly filled the social void left by Hamad's absence, including a 51-year-old married man living in the UK.

"Faisal," Alex recalled. "He's my friend."

Alex spoke with Faisal almost daily, sometimes for hours. Most of the time, the two of them would talk innocently – discussing tea, gardening, and other things. Sometimes, though, Faisal would talk to Alex about more substantive topics, like Islam. He taught her the proper methods of Islamic worship, including the need for Muslims to place their foreheads on the ground during prayer, just as Jesus had done. Alex was a good student to Faisal; she complied with his instructions.

After a few weeks of Skyping with Faisal, Alex turned a corner. She asked him how one would go about converting to Islam. Faisal made the

process easy for her, saying that she could convert by testifying that
"There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger" on
Twitter. A few days after Christmas, just four months after seeing the
James Foley video, Alex logged on to make her declaration. For her
conversion to be official, she needed two Muslims to acknowledge it.
Just after 9:00 in the evening, Alex made her online testimony with Faisal
serving as one of her witnesses. Within hours, Alex's Twitter followers
had doubled in number.

   Alex made one last post before going to bed that night.

"I actually have brothers and sisters. I'm crying."

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The gifts started arriving in January.

   Cash. A prayer rug. Hijabs. Books that pushed a stricter version of
Islam. Pamphlets that laid out the duties of subservient women. And of
course, chocolate – always chocolate.

   Some Twitter users grew concerned for Alex after hearing about her
conversion and the gifts she was receiving. Some suggested that she
should stop associating with the people who have changed her in such a
short period of time. She protested, "… cutting off ties is hard, and they
gave me stuff." Despite claims that she told Faisal to stop sending gifts,
packages continued to arrive. It was shortly after Valentine's Day when
Alex found that the gifts and companionship came with some conditions.

   Her online "friends" told her to stop following *kuffar* (Islamic non-
believers) on social media. The fact that Alex still followed some of her
Christian friends led an online ISIS supporter to accuse her of being a
spy. Faisal vouched for Alex; but introduced her to another Twitter user
who spent hours interrogating her. After being questioned about her
online activities, she was cleared of being a spy. Faisal praised Alex's
"beautiful character" afterward. He then told her that getting someone to
marry her wouldn't pose much of a problem.

   Alex giggled nervously as she recalled talking about the possibility.

"Faisal found a guy that would marry me. The information he gave me was he's
45 [years old] and bald. But he's a very good Muslim."

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Faisal began to pressure Alex, telling her that it was a sin for a Muslim to
live among non-believers. Gradually, their conversations turned to her
traveling to "a Muslim land," which Alex understood to be Syria – the
home of the ISIS capital. In early 2015, Faisal offered to buy her tickets

to Austria to meet her future husband. Although Alex's 11-year-old brother would need to accompany her (as ISIS women are required to travel with a male relative), she was sure it wouldn't be a problem.

At this time, Alex started to wonder if Faisal had been speaking with other women about the possibility of traveling to Syria. After making light of the fact that he was, in fact, speaking with other women on social media, Alex Googled her "friend." She found a catalogue of terrorist incidents that Faisal was connected to.

In 1995, Faisal was arrested and imprisoned for possession of firearms, bullets, shotgun cartridges, timers, and explosives. In 2000, he was arrested again for suspicion of plotting a large-scale explosion. Police found a garbage bag outside a building where Faisal had met a Bangladeshi immigrant; the bag contained plastic gloves, a scale, and HMTD – a highly explosive compound. At that time, investigators found a file called the "Mujahedin Explosives Handbook" on Faisal's computer. Nine years later, Faisal was arrested by Bangladeshi security forces for running a bomb-making factory out of an orphanage that was operated by a charity he led. Court proceedings associated with this incident said that Faisal "had chalked out a blueprint for grooming each child as a militant." Although Alex asked Faisal about these accusations, he dismissed them as unfair persecution due to his being Muslim. Their conversations continued.

By this point, Alex's grandmother had noticed that Alex wasn't sleeping much. Often awake and on her tablet chatting at all hours, Alex's constant engagement with shadowy online figures led to several fights with her grandmother, who eventually barred her from accessing the Internet at night. After multiple conversations with Alex about what she was doing online, her grandmother confronted Faisal on Skype. She asked him about the proposed trip to Austria, the promise of marriage to a bald stranger, and her abandonment of her Christian faith. Faisal downplayed everything. He promised never to contact Alex again.

Rukmini Callimachi, a reporter with the *New York Times* and expert on issues related to radicalization and terrorism, attempted to contact Faisal on multiple occasions to comment on Alex's story. Callimachi tried to reach him through Skype; she sent him multiple e-mails; she even sent letters to the address from which he shipped Alex gifts. He never answered.

Having been exposed as a likely ISIS recruiter, Faisal seemed to vanish into the ether.

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Alex's story is all too common. ISIS has seduced countless people with its propaganda, thousands of whom have gone on to engage in violent

activity on behalf of the group.[4] As quickly as counterterrorist forces have eliminated these violent radicals, others have emerged in their place. ISIS may have lost its grasp on its physical territory in late 2017,[5] but the group's propaganda continues to inspire others to attack civilians at all corners of the globe.

Of course, peace and security sometimes require the targeted killing of active terrorist fighters. This is a natural result of confronting violent adversaries. But the continued effectiveness of terrorist propaganda shows that we can't kill our way out of our struggles against violent extremism. We need to understand the persuasive nature of terrorist propaganda. We need to challenge the ideologies that drive terrorist activity. Most of all, though, we need to fight back against terrorist messaging to turn would-be radicals away from violence.

In recent years, policymakers, government officials, and researchers have tried to accomplish these very things. Several large-scale initiatives have been implemented under the umbrella of "countering violent extremism."[6] Many of these efforts have focused on countering terrorist messaging to challenge terrorist groups' ideologies, and hopefully, convince potential recruits that supporting terrorism is not a viable form of political action. Though these efforts have been well-intentioned, their execution has left much to be desired.

For example, in late 2013, the now-defunct Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) at the US Department of State launched a counter-radicalization messaging campaign called "Think Again, Turn Away."[7] This program was designed to challenge ISIS online propaganda by sharing stories, images, and arguments that contradict the ISIS ideology. The messages shared by the CSCC on Twitter were typically taken from the media, and showed the threats posed by ISIS, as well as the hypocrisies of the group's actions. It did not go over well.

CSCC posts quickly deteriorated into "embarrassing" flamewars between CSCC personnel and ISIS supporters. Tweets were ridiculed by ISIS sympathizers. Even CSCC officials became "supremely uncomfortable" about the organization's efforts, given that the US Department of State's seal was attached to the distributed messages. The State Department has since improved its approaches to online counter-messaging, but as the "Think Again, Turn Away" initiative shows, its first efforts were largely a failure.

This begs the question: What did we miss? Where have we gone wrong in our strategic counter-messaging efforts? The answers to these questions depend on the context in which we attempt to fight terrorist propaganda. In the case of "Think Again, Turn Away," it seems that

the CSCC failed to recognize that when a message's targets (ISIS sym-
pathizers, potential ISIS recruits) do not trust the message's source (the
US Department of State), the message will simply be dismissed or
ridiculed. This issue – called source credibility – has been a subject of
persuasion research for decades.

Although this is only one example, it reveals a recurrent shortcoming
of many counter-messaging efforts intended to challenge terrorist propa-
ganda – they are not founded on proven communication theory and
practices. That's where this book comes in.

Specifically, this book will provide readers with two fundamental kinds
of knowledge related to violent radicalization and communication. First,
it's important that we understand why terrorist propaganda can be so
persuasive in some cases. So, this book will use long-standing persuasion
theory to show how certain kinds of terrorist propaganda have effectively
drawn individuals to support (or engage in) terrorism.

Second, we must use our extensive knowledge of communication and
psychology to inform our counter-messaging strategies. Stated plainly,
we must base our counterterror and counter-radicalization efforts on
theories and practices that have been proven effective. We can no longer
overlook how much the psychological effects of communication affect the
adoption (or abandonment) of terrorist ideologies. So, this book will
discuss these communicative phenomena and show how they can be
harnessed, mastered, and ultimately leveraged to dissuade support for
terrorism.

Without understanding (1) why some terrorist propaganda is persua-
sive to certain people or (2) how we can maximize the effectiveness of our
own counter-messages, we are essentially shooting at targets in a dark
room, blindly hoping that one of our shots hits its mark. We can't afford
to engage in trial-and-error when the development and implementation
of counter-messaging programs takes time, money, and resources. More
importantly, terrorist propaganda has real consequences – both for those
exposed to it, and those that are victimized by terrorists who have been
seduced by it. Preventing these consequences requires us to be painstak-
ing in how we challenge terrorist messages.

We need to be thorough. We need to be systematic. We need to be
scientific. And most of all, we need to be right.

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Before delving into how communication theory and practice can inform
efforts at counter-radicalization, it is important to understand the phe-
nomena that we mean to fight. So, the first chapter in this book explains
the process of violent radicalization, how it occurs, and how it relates to

engagement in terrorism. Specifically, Chapter 1 will describe how violent radicalization has been defined in the past, as well as how it can be thought of as a specific type of persuasion. When we consider violent radicalization to be a persuasive process (that is, a process of belief and attitude change), we can begin to think about how persuasion theories and practices can be used to address the problem.

After defining violent radicalization (and discussing how certain persuasive strategies can promote or discourage it), Chapter 2 turns to past efforts at counter-radicalization. As indicated above, these efforts have not been guided by tried-and-true communication or psychology theory. Nevertheless, it's important to review them to understand what has worked, what hasn't, and why.

Once we've covered the foundations of persuasion and violent radicalization, we can begin to think about specific theories and perspectives that (1) explain how terrorist groups try to gain support for their actions and ideologies, and (2) inform the development of future efforts to challenge terrorist propaganda. The first of these perspectives concerns the use of narratives. For decades, communication researchers have recognized the persuasive effectiveness of narratives, showing them to affect people's beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors in several domains. Health behaviors, political decisions, sexual activity, acceptance of others, environmental awareness, technology adoption, and even belief in conspiracy theories have been shown to be affected by exposure to narrative messages. Despite overwhelming evidence showing the potential for narratives to affect audience beliefs and attitudes, they have rarely been explored as tools for preventing violent radicalization. Chapter 3 addresses this gap in our knowledge – showing not only how terrorists have used narratives to achieve their strategic goals, but also how we can use narratives to thwart those goals.

In Chapter 4, we turn to one of the most reliable, time-tested theories of persuasion – inoculation theory. Most people are familiar with the concept of inoculation as a form of protection from illness; however, in the same way that a yearly shot can guard against the flu, communicative inoculation has been shown to protect against the adoption of problematic beliefs and attitudes. Much like narratives, communicative inoculation has been shown to be effective for decades across a wide range of domains. Unfortunately, inoculation has not been used to prevent the adoption of beliefs and attitudes that promote the use of terrorism. This chapter builds on new counter-radicalization research to show how analysts and policymakers can harness the persuasive power of inoculation to protect against the spread of extremist ideologies and behaviors.

Chapter 5 describes how the theory of reasoned action (TRA) – a classic model of persuasion and behavior – explains terrorist groups' attempts to radicalize potential supporters. In its simplest form, the TRA predicts that someone will intend to engage in a behavior because of their beliefs and attitudes about (1) the behavior itself, (2) what others think about the behavior, and (3) whether they can perform the behavior. Terrorist groups go to great lengths to influence audiences' beliefs and attitudes about their activities, meaning the TRA can help us investigate their persuasive efforts and how they might influence their targets. More importantly, however, we can also use the TRA to carefully design messages intended to dissuade support of a terrorist group. This chapter shows how this might be done.

When we get to Chapter 6, we shift our focus. Whereas Chapters 3–5 feature perspectives and approaches with strong emphases on cognitive processes, Chapter 6 will cover some of the most critical targets of terrorist messaging – audience emotions. Specifically, this chapter will discuss how terrorist groups' messages play on audiences' emotions to foster support for their ideologies and activities. Of course, analysts and practitioners have also tried to fight terrorist propaganda by influencing audience emotions. However, researchers have yet to scientifically examine the psychological implications of arousing different emotions in counter-radicalization messaging. Chapter 6 will fill this gap in our understanding by describing how empirical research on different emotions – happiness, sadness, guilt, shame, anger, and jealousy – can be used to construct messages that will effectively turn people away from supporting terrorist groups.

At this point in the book, we'll have covered four critical persuasion theories and perspectives. It's unlikely that terrorist groups think about applying these theories and perspectives to hone their propaganda, but the persuasive principles that underpin their messages have nevertheless driven their effectiveness in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. In addition, advances in communication technology and shifting strategic objectives in the twenty-first century have the potential to fundamentally change how terrorists try to engage with audiences. With this in mind, Chapter 7 uses information from the previous chapters to consider some impending challenges related to the persuasiveness of extremist propaganda.

Ultimately, the goal of this book is to offer ideas for challenging terrorist groups' persuasive messages to reduce audiences' risk of violent radicalization and involvement in terrorism. Although each chapter will offer specific guidelines on using the aforementioned theories and perspectives to develop specific counter-messages, the final chapter features specific suggestions on how we can pull together insights from the earlier

chapters and emerging communication technologies to fight back against terrorist groups and their propaganda.

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Despite Alex's close calls with the Islamic State, her grandmother's intervention seemed to have brought her back from the verge of joining the group.

Alex gave her grandmother access to her Twitter account and e-mail, and her grandmother immediately changed the passwords to these accounts. She took Alex on a vacation to help her to reconnect with her family and forget her time talking with Hamad and Faisal. The family returned to something resembling normalcy. Unfortunately, it was short-lived.

One day, while on vacation, Alex waited for her grandparents to go to the beach. Once she was alone, she logged into Skype – an account that her grandmother had forgotten to restrict. As soon as she logged on, Faisal sent her a message. Alex responded. The two talked.

Months later, Alex and Faisal were still communicating online.

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It doesn't need to be like this. We can persuade the Alexes of the world to reject the Hamads and Faisals – to ignore the violent ideologies they peddle. We can convince individuals who are at risk for perpetrating violence to think for themselves and pursue peaceful means of political or ideological change. We can give potential terrorist recruits the communicative and psychological tools they need to avoid being seduced by groups that would use them as expendable pawns. We have the knowledge of persuasion to fight back against terrorist propaganda – we just need to use it.

It's time we load our weapons by transforming our knowledge of persuasion and psychology into actionable strategies for fighting extremist propaganda.

Let's begin.

Notes

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