

Combating the cult of ISIS: a social approach to CVE

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Abstract

This article argues that status quo Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs are rarely based on an empirical or even theoretically informed understanding of how extremism and radical violent mobilization occurs. Examining ISIS radicalization through cult or New Religious Movement (NRM) theory gives practitioners alternative tools for prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation that rely less on ideology and instead point towards the social processes of extremism, highlighting the importance of affective bonds. Viewing radicalization through the lens of cult-literature means that one can bracket the snares of counter-ideology and instead focus on the affective, social, and organizational ties within the movement. This means that there are potentially factors of radicalization processes that are generalizable to all sorts of extremist violent movements. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations based on these findings.

Introduction

This article argues that status quo CVE programs are rarely based on an empirical or even theoretically informed understanding of how extremism and radical violent mobilization occurs.

Section one reviews the state of CVE in the United States, showing how many current programs treat the challenge of extremism as sets of competing ideas and beliefs.

Section two argues that “belief” is an inadequate theory of how radicalization works and gives examples of how “counter-narrative,” “counter-ideology,” and ideational debates with terrorists are misplaced. We advance the notion that CVE should avoid ideology and belief, focusing on affective bonds, social practices, and friendships, rather than what people think.

Third, to explore how radicalization functions socially, we evaluate the ISIS organization through the lens of NRM literature. While beliefs are a principle way that ISIS devotees describe their mission, the cult-like deviation from mainstream Islam shows how there are other forces at work.

Review of current CVE: the ideational model

A clear majority of “CVE” programs in the US are based on combatting ideology that is perceived as violent. One of the most robust operations in the US is the Los Angeles effort, which is based on the premise that “groups and individuals are inspired by a range of religious, political, and ideological beliefs to promote and engage in violence”¹. The core element of the LA strategy is robust “community engagement” by the public sectors, aimed to prevent extremist ideology. LA coordinators conduct workshops, trainings, conferences, and forums to increase awareness and foster inclusion of new immigrants, refugees, and Muslim populations throughout the region. The core deliverable for the LA cohort is a “better informed CVE training for law enforcement, emphasizing a community-based policing approach and cultural competency” – meaning that civil society has an increased role in informing police about signs and markers of radicalization. Intervention programs are then constructed to provide individuals on a path towards violent extremism, with connections to social services. The program largely is based on two ideological biases. First, to assess which organizations should be designing social service off-ramps and

¹ DHS, 2015, p. 1.

trainings for law enforcement, the government must assess who to empower. These have been overwhelmingly about empowering moderate, liberal voices that preach inclusion and tolerance to seemingly more “extreme” mosques. In response, several groups formed a resistance to the LA CVE effort, rallying around what they claimed to be the criminalization of ideology, stating in a letter to Homeland Security Secretary, Jeh Johnson: “it is not the place of government to determine what ideologies or religious opinions are problematic”². Second, the entire program rests on the fallacy that radical beliefs can be countered by increases in cultural sensitivity and competent engagement with vulnerable populations. Actions to “expose” terrorist ideology as illegitimate and moderate ideology as mainstream are well-intentioned, but deeply rooted in a theory that violence is caused by an individual believing in certain ideas. The task becomes about raising up preferred, moderate voices, and referring potential radicals to law enforcement, mental health professionals, or counselling. It is this first component about countering ideology that we problematize here.

Many other US strategies are similar to the Los Angeles approach, seeking to identify and “deradicalize” individuals through interagency processes including mosques, schools, neighborhood groups, and law enforcement. The National Strategy for CVE under the Obama administration defines ‘violent extremists’ as ‘individuals who support or commit *ideologically* motivated violence to further political goals’³. The FBI’s online interactive CVE training program called “Don’t Be A Puppet” makes the case that “Despite what they sometimes say, violent extremists often do not believe in fundamental American values like democracy, human rights, tolerance, and inclusion. Violent extremists sometimes twist religious teachings and other beliefs to support their own goals”⁴. The US State Department has also funded hundreds of colleges and universities across the world to establish “Peer to Peer” counter-extremism programs⁵. These student-led programs create social media and web-based platforms designed to refute and combat ideology-based radicalization. The State Department also coordinates a global engagement campaign called “Think again. Turn away.” This campaign, centered around a presence on Twitter, acts as a US-funded “myth-buster,” seeking out disparaging evidence that contradicts the

² Bunnao, 2014.

³ DHS, 2016.

⁴ FBI, 2017.

⁵ Wagner, 2015.

lure of ISIS⁶. These sorts of rhetorically based programs seem to be the backbone of the US response to ISIS – the Obama Administration even created a new office to coordinate DOD, DHS, and State’s counter-ideology and counter-narrative campaigns. The Trump administration is doubling down on this approach, seeking to specifically target groups based on the content of their belief, rather than on the social networks they engage in⁷.

The central problem with focusing on beliefs is the issue of variation. Simply put, if “radical” beliefs produce terrorists, then why doesn’t every Salafist or political-Islamist mosque produce terrorists? Even more complicated, why have most of those providing material support to Islamic terrorist groups shown little understanding of theology, but instead seem to be attracted to the thrill of jihadi adventurism⁸? Lone Wolves like the Orlando shooter were not known in the local mosques but showed signs of identity confusion, anger, isolation, and other attributes shared with violent individuals of all sorts.

There is an ongoing debate whether ISIS is Islamic to begin with^{9,10}. Some believe it is something else entirely, which means that refuting ISIS ideology from a “correct” Islamic theological position does not go very far. There is little doubt at ISIS is in a high state of tension with the social-cultural institutions of Sunni Islam. While Islam has no hierarchy, there are several highly respected scholars and institutions that influence mainstream Islamic thought and society. Nearly all these thinkers and organizations refute ISIS¹¹. It is therefore difficult to argue that ISIS falls within the fold of Islam and thus countering the narrative from this perspective might prove difficult.

More importantly, evidence suggests that ideology-based CVE could be driving fence sitters *towards* radicalization. When CVE programs counter ideas, respondents may get defensive of ideas that they themselves may hold loosely. Tombs of psychological research have established the empirical problem of “belief perseverance” – “the finding that people cling to their initial beliefs more strongly than appears warranted” especially when confronted with countering evidence to

⁶ DOS, 2017.

⁷ Farivar, 2017.

⁸ Venhaus, 2010.

⁹ Dagli, 2015.

¹⁰ Wood, 2015.

¹¹ Wilson Center, 2014.

the contrary¹². Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory¹³ also shows how individuals reject new, countering facts to hold onto established bonds.

Additionally, "the backfire effect" in social-psychology argues that „corrections actually increase misperceptions among the group in question“¹⁴. In a recent study on the connection between scientific literacy and climate skepticism, the more scientific information a skeptic had, the stronger their skepticism was likely to be¹⁵. It is thus unlikely that providing alternative narratives, or re-indoctrinating would-be jihadis can counter the pull towards radicalization. It is therefore problematic to assume that "countering narratives," showing extremists the error of their ways, or debating theology would do anything other than produce hostility and even spur heightened aggression. Haidt¹⁶ has effectively shown that "intuitions" come before "reasons" when people engage in debate. Under the condition of group competition (West vs. Islam for example), it is difficult to counter ideology, simply because people are not working from ideological standpoints, but from those areas that cults actually recruit from: friendship, love, interaction, and compensation.

Belief perseverance, cognitive dissonance, and backfire effect theories all suggest that countering ideology has the risk of driving "fence sitters" away from moderation. This, in combination with the problem of variation on the ideological explanatory variable, casts significant doubt on *belief* being an effective way to identify a terrorist or "counter" flawed narratives.

Jihadist groups as new religious movements: a social view of violent radicalization

Instead of countering violent extremism from an ideological standpoint, it may make more sense to counter networks and personal ties between individuals and terrorist groups. This model maintains that since ideology fails to predict or abet terrorist violence, other social factors such as alienation, mental health, or bonds with other bad actors explain violence. As Hoffman¹⁷ noted on the subject of violent ac-

¹² Slusher & Anderson, 1989.

¹³ Festinger, 1962.

¹⁴ Nyhan & Reifler, 2010.

¹⁵ Kahan et al., 2012.

¹⁶ Haidt, 2013.

¹⁷ Hoffman, 1985, p. 7059.

tor rehabilitation: “attempts at rehabilitation of a terrorist along strict ideological or political lines may be ineffective, if not a waste of time. Instead, his reintegration into society should probably be predicated upon reducing or neutralizing his sense of alienation”. This is not to say that ideology doesn’t matter, but rather that ideological pulls exist within a social context. It is the social context that CVE should be focusing on, rather than on policing political or religious ideas. Social encapsulation, charismatic leadership, and other non-ideological factors are the principle vehicles by which the ideology moves and takes meaning. To understand this model, we borrow from academic literature on cults and new religious movements. Cult studies literature offers a unique perspective that brackets what the actors believe and instead concentrates on social processes within cults that make them similar. The central finding is that mobilization with a cult follows certain telltale practices, regardless of group beliefs:

First, cults create affective bonds around friendship, not belief. Most recruits to cults and new religious movements come from those who know one or more members of the group¹⁸. The personal connection between recruiter and recruited is far more persuasive than the content of the belief system. Inaba¹⁹ demonstrated this dynamic in his interviews with recruits to the Jesus Army and Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). As one participant explained, “The way the Jesus Army worshiped was a bit odd at first ... but I soon got used to it. What really attracted me was the sincerity of the people and the obvious love and bonding that they had with each other”. Likewise, another participant told Inaba that after his first visit to the FWBO center, “he thought members of the centre were crazy and decided not to go back. However, he thought about all the people he knew there, and he recalled what a great time he had with them. Subsequently he turned up for the rest of the course”. Such findings have also been replicated on a larger scale.

Reviewing 1976–1977 Mormon recruitment records for the state of Washington, Bainbridge and Stark²⁰ found that “When Mormon Missionaries merely go from door to door without the aid of interpersonal bonds, the success rate is only 0.1%. At the other extreme, if a Mormon friend or relative provides his home as a place where missionary contract occurs, the odds of success reach 50%.” The researchers

¹⁸ Dawson, 1996.

¹⁹ Inaba, 2004.

²⁰ Bainbridge & Stark, 1980, p. 1387.

concluded that “Mormons ratify the point made by observational studies—that interpersonal bonds come first, theology subsequently, not the reverse”.

Similarly, terror networks operate around bonds of kinship and friendship. Scott Atran found that 95 percent of foreign fighters who joined ISIS were recruited by friends or family²¹. In his study of Al Qaeda networks, Sageman²² found that friends and family ties were involved in the recruitment of 82 percent of the jihadists. A vast literature finds that terrorists are not goal-seeking or strategic, but instead motivated by a desire for friends and comradeship²³. The key indicator of whether someone joins a terror group is that they already have friends or family there, leading us to the conclusion that it is affective bonds, not ideological yokes that pull in people to violent movements. These bonds were obvious from the beginning of the War on Terror: many forget that six of the 19 September 11 hijackers were brothers²⁴. These friendship and affective bonds can be even stronger than ideology, as Social Movement scholar Porta²⁵ argues, friendship ties go deeper than radical political (or religious) propositions, and threats to these connections intensify the bonds of loyalty between members. This indicates that kinship and friendship networks should be taken much more seriously in global CVE campaigns that currently focus too heavily on combatting ideology. Combatting networks of real, meaningful constructing social bonds then becomes the task of those concerned with stopping the spread of violent extremism.

Second, these social connections are deep and meaningful. Cults create affective bonds around quality of love and attention received from nowhere else²⁶. Culture of jihad is more than ideology: a burgeoning literature has found that terrorist groups have cultures of practice that go far beyond doing terror – terrorists read poetry, weep and hug, sing, eat, and have a culture that can be observed outside of the material threat they pose^{27,28}. Hegghammer^{29,30} has appropriately described this phenomenon as the “soft power” of jihad, which pulls recruits in not with force, but with cultural appeal and interrelational ties.

²¹ Newton, 2015.

²² Sageman, 2004, pp. 111–112.

²³ Abrahms, 2008.

²⁴ Wickman et al., 2013.

²⁵ Porta, 2013.

²⁶ Dawson, 2009.

²⁷ Day, 2015.

²⁸ Hegghammer, 2015a.

²⁹ Hegghammer, 2015b.

³⁰ Hegghammer, 2017.

Third, the intensity of these social connections should not be underestimated. Cults thrive on intensive interaction between recruits and elites and forge social encapsulation. Cult research shows that this practice of social discontinuity is especially important for recruitment into communal groups and/or groups with deviant perspectives and practices³¹. Social encapsulation inoculates the recruits from outside influence, “neutralize[s] the stigma frequently associated with participation” in such groups and masks their deviant behavior³². The argument follows on from the pioneering studies of democratic effectiveness by Robert Putnam³³, who finds that the more civil connections a group has with others, the more engaged they become in the democratic process.

Cohesion and overlapping, bridging ties between communities, can prevent splintering, ideological isolation, and foster mutual respect. Carpenter³⁴ has likewise found that community flexibility, as evidenced by overlapping linkages within broader civil society, can inhibit violent extremist ideology.

This is all important to note, because a cult is not simply a quixotic fringe group with unorthodox practices: they are a *community of practice*. Brainbridge and Stark³⁵ argue that a cult is a *new* or innovative religious movement that is in high tension with the dominant social-cultural religious institution. As they explain, “a cult represents an alien (external) religion, or it may have originated in the host society – but through innovation, not fission ... a cult is something new vis-à-vis the other religious bodies of the society in question”. From this perspective, it is the new, exclusive, and isolating fissure of cult bonding practices that forge the conditions necessary for violence as described above. For instance, ISIS has radically reoriented the term “jihad.” The idea of jihad includes a demarcation between offensive and defensive types, with defensive jihad as analogous to just war doctrine in Catholicism. While jihad has long been a central ideology for groups like Al Qaeda, the distinction between offensive and defensive is important: in his 1996 fatwa, Bin Laden mentions the term “jihad” 13 times, each time referring to defending Muslims from outside aggression, such as British imperialism, or Soviet and American occupation. The call was not about individuals committing acts of terrorism,

³¹ Dawson, 2009.

³² Greil & Rudy, 1984.

³³ Putnam, 2001.

³⁴ Carpenter, 2014.

³⁵ Bainbridge & Stark, 1980, p. 125.

but people – Palestinians and Saudis mainly – to collectively resist non-Muslims ruling over them. The obligation of jihad for Al Qaeda is collective defense. On the other hand, ISIS has reformulated the jihadi call to be individualist, transnational, and obligatory for *all* Muslims, not just those facing occupation. The central task of ISIS has been to reframe jihad, breaking down distinction between defensive and greater jihad, and abandoning the limiting conditions that even Bin Laden placed upon the use of violence. Recently, ISIS called for followers to make hijrah to the Levant, and if they could not, that they are obligated to conduct operations within their home countries – a decidedly offensive jihad and ISIS has additionally urged for supporters in the UK to kill imams that oppose the organization³⁶. These are not directions for Muslims to defend their holy sites and be governed by Sharia – these are calls for mass slaughter for the sake of violence. This, more than any other phenomenon represents exactly how ISIS breaks with even mainstream jihadi groups to forge social encapsulation and isolation around the practice of jihad.

Another mode of socially encapsulating practice occurs when they condemn and kill apostates or “kafir” populations. The takfiri move breaks down the Cartesian separation of faith and works, which means that bad behavior itself is an indication of apostasy. With the rise of a formal caliphate, this is a new and important contribution. The effect is to make the action of not endorsing or pledging allegiance to the caliphate symptomatic of lack of belief in Islam. Rejection of the movement is the same as rejection of Allah and the prophet.

It is important to recognize how fiercely this doctrine sets ISIS apart within even the jihadi community. For instance, Al Qaeda has widely rejected using proclamations of takfir, insisting “we are not people of error and deviation, that we should turn our weapons against Muslims. If anyone alleges that we declare the generality of Muslims to be unbelievers and countenance killing them, we take refuge in God from this error ... We declare no one who prays toward Mecca to be an unbeliever for any sin, as long as he does not consider it to be licit.”³⁷ With this doctrinal innovation, ISIS effectively isolates their followers from the larger Ummah and positions itself as the sole determinant of whether someone deserves life or death.

The key concept here is not the doctrinal innovations of jihad and takfirism, however. Rather, the function of this ideological innova-

³⁶ Haworth, 2016.

³⁷ Wiktorowicz, 2006, p. 230.

tion serves a larger cult-like organizational purpose of fully socially encapsulating followers and severing ties to any point of competition between ISIS and the outside world.

*Fourth, cults offer direct compensation and provision of goods in exchange of allegiance*³⁸. These are material or immaterial rewards that the follower could not procure otherwise. For example, the Charles Manson cult rewarded followers with sexual benefits and guarded access to the leader. For cults and extremist groups alike, rewards can include power, material provisions like food and shelter, as well as ego and cosmically driven outcomes. People join associations to procure goods they could not otherwise get on their own. Here we think of the former Saddam Hussein Baathists joining ISIS not there for ideological reasons, but to procure power and goods they otherwise were shut out from following the US de-Baathification policy. But material procurement is far broader too. Many foreign fighters for example, don't have experience in Arabic, which indicates that ideology cannot be very well developed³⁹. Instead, they are promised wives, adventure, and alternatives to the lives they live in the West. Women are promised comfort, the ability to raise a family in a pure Muslim environment – the utopia is even complete with houses, clothes, and even blenders⁴⁰. None of these core elements of cult-recruitment and radicalization operate around ideology per se. Extremist violence is social phenomenon, though perhaps tinged with ideological window-dressing.

Towards a more social CVE

Terrorist groups, like cults, are friend and kin networks that isolate and encapsulate new members, offering various forms of compensation and affection those members could not get elsewhere. These processes suggest that policymakers should stop being so obsessed with ideology and instead focus on the bonds of affection between friends and kin.

Because ISIS acts like a cult, CVE programs should stop trying to debate the finer points of Islamic theology – at best such debates won't move the needle and, at worst, they may promote backlash from fence-sitters and confused teens. Unfortunately, few programs exist in the United States to target the affective bonds between recruiter and

³⁸ Dawson, 1996, p. 150.

³⁹ Erard, 2016.

⁴⁰ Speckhard, 2017.

the terror-cult network. But we can look across the world to see models that might be employed in the United States.

Denmark has recently employed an affective-bond-based counter-extremism program that focuses on linking up would-be jihadis with mentors, learning skills, and providing avenues of hope. Denmark's mothers have also established a peer network called "Sahan," where moms worried about a child can seek advice and counsel from others on how to intervene⁴¹. In Canada and Germany, groups have sprung up called "Hayat" – the Arabic word for life – to highlight the loving network that ISIS sympathizers actually have at home⁴². The Denmark program thus actively combats the cult-like mechanisms of friendship, love, intimacy, and compensation.

Combatting the cult-like recruitment of ISIS means that the US must offer meaningful alternatives to joining the group. Many scholars have argued that terrorism is not about a group trying to get a specific set of political goals, but about friendship networks and promoting one's group over others⁴³. Literature from this "organizational school" of thought argues that organizations recruit not on ideology or politics, but based on shared connections and ties of trust. This implies that people will stop joining terror organizations when there are meaningful alternatives. While some have mocked the State Department for it, the idea of providing jobs for disaffected populations may be a good start building moderating alternatives.

Since person-to-person relationships are the key variable for radicalization, instead of "Twitter-trolling" ISIS, policymakers should better equip moderate community leaders to build broader relationship networks. New research by Williams et al.⁴⁴ shows that those best able to recognize early signs of radicalization are an individual's friends. The study also found fear of government reprisals to be a major barrier for that friend's intervention. Community-based mosques, youth clubs, and social services, should be given more resources to gain the trust of entire friendship networks. Local basketball tournaments, food-drives, open sharia classes, and drop-in counseling sessions are civic trust-building exercises. Within these civic institutions, friends can feel safe to report warning signs because they trust that the community to carefully reprimand and rehabilitate the offender and act as

⁴¹ Temple-Raston, 2016.

⁴² Arsenaault, 2014.

⁴³ Abrahms, 2008.

⁴⁴ Williams et al., 2016.

a social bridge to law enforcement. Mosques should be celebrated for building deep community ties, because such social fabric is far more likely to prevent radicalization than debating the finer points of sharia law in chat rooms.

Three additional, broader points on CVE are also important. First, we should target and counter all types of “extremist violence.” The cult analogy points to the social factors that give ideology meaning, but all types of violence have social conditions that constitute actors in particular ways. Countering extremism should be conceptualized as engaging a social phenomenon, not just a set of beliefs and ideas.

Conceiving the mission in this manner allows for CVE professionals to truly set aside the presumptions about Islam in particular that have sewn distrust throughout the Muslim community.

Second, combating violence of all sorts is about building the capacity of vulnerable groups, not (ever) asking for groups to report “strange ideas or behaviors.” To the extent that government should be involved in counting extremism, it should be to provide resources for groups to self-help their own communities via job fairs, tutoring, recreation, and civic engagement. Since religious ideology doesn’t predict violence, but rather the social conditions of groups, governments should think of CVE as simply providing *good government*. In essence, we guard against violence by making our societies less vulnerable to cult-like groups seeking to isolate, encapsulate, and predate on weak individuals. As Putnam⁴⁵ has argued – the fabric of a healthy democracy is the relational bonds between citizens. Similarly, the fabric of countering violent extremism is to build a social network alternative to the appeal of violence. We thus need inclusive and robust refugee resettlement programs. We need to make employment a national security priority. We need to rethink “assimilation” to be less about mainstreaming cultural identity, and instead think about networks of would-be-radicals being absorbed and supported by healthcare, education, democratic representation, and respect for their beliefs. We need affective bonds that are stronger than theirs. Real CVE is about a stronger civic life, not “countering narratives.”

⁴⁵ Putnam, 2001.

Conclusion

“Belief” and ideology are inadequate explanations for how radicalization works. Further, treating CVE as a set of belief-counter-belief propositions is dangerous because it may produce a psychological “backfire effect” that pushes fence-sitters towards radicalism. The alternative is to reframe our understanding of terror groups in light of what we know about cults and new religious movements. The cult analogy points to the social factors that give ideology meaning, namely isolation, social encapsulation, deep emotional ties between members and leaders, the ties of friendship and family, and ability for groups to provide goods that individuals could otherwise not get on their own. Viewing radicalization through the lens of cult-literature means that one can bracket the snares of counter-ideology and instead focus on the affective, social, and organizational ties within the movement. Governments and communities can then work to build campaigns that target the correct avenues of extremist radicalization, namely affective social bonds, which provide tools for prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation that are relatively non-ideological in foundation.

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