

***MENA Governments' Efforts for Alternative and Counter-
Narratives: Religious and Gender Lens***

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MENA Governments' Efforts for Alternative and Counter-Narratives: Religious and Gender Lens

Introduction

Over the past decade, violent extremist groups and individuals have increasingly exploited digital communications to radicalize, recruit, and incite others. Since the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL), this trend has also spurred the foreign terrorist fighter (FTFs) phenomenon. The United Nations Security Council has passed a series of resolutions (1373, 1624, 2179 and 2396) as early as 2001 urging national governments, regional and sub-regional bodies to make countering violent extremist messages, narratives, and ideologies integral to strategic communications, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and counter-terrorism (CT) efforts. Most importantly, the United Nations document entitled “Comprehensive International Framework to Counter Terrorist Narratives” (S/2017/375) that provides “recommended guidelines and good practices to effectively counter the ways that ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities use their narratives to encourage, motivate and recruit others to commit terrorist acts”.¹

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, national governments, regional, and sub-regional bodies, as well as MENA-based international organizations, adopted different strategic communications approaches to combat this issue, such as establishing government messaging centers. These centers aim to amplify a wide range of voices in the MENA region by rolling out national- and grassroots-level alternative and counter-narrative campaigns.

According to the Global Terrorism Index (2018), between 2013 — 2018, 16,000 of the more than 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters came from the MENA region. Of the returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs) in 2018, 3,000 were in the MENA region.² In addition, three of the top five countries with the highest numbers of FTFs were MENA countries: Tunisia, Jordan and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) (Global Terrorism Index 2018). It is expected that from this number, there

¹ <https://undocs.org/S/2017/375>

² <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>

were around 3,000 returnees in 2018 in MENA alone (Global Terrorism Index 2018)³. This paper illuminates on the role of counter-messaging in CVE that must not only target individuals vulnerable to radicalization with alternative and counter-narratives but also — more critically — returnees from conflict zones.

This paper will refer to Hedayah’s Counter-Narrative Library (www.cn-library.com)⁴, to discuss government-led CVE initiatives in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In specific, the ways in which alternative and counter-narratives are being crafted and projected in the region. Bearing in mind that the CN Library only provides very specific sample of counter-narrative examples and does not represent the governments’ more comprehensive approach.

As seen in Figure 1, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have the most counter-narratives on the Counter-Narrative Library, which on the whole are released in Arabic and French, and sometimes in English. Naturally, Arabic is the most effective language as it is the official language of all the MENA countries, and therefore deeply embedded in the region’s social and cultural fabric. More importantly, Arabic is the language of the Islamic faith. Because religion constitutes a significant part of Islamic believers’ identities, counter-messaging in Arabic — particularly when supported by religious sources such as the Quran or Hadith — is more resonant among target audiences because the Arabic language is perceived as more legitimate and authoritative.

Country of Origin	Number of Items in MENA Counter-Narrative Collection
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)	39
Egypt	17
United Arab Emirates	12
Tunisia	11
Morocco	2
Total	81

Figure 1: Number of Counter-Narratives by Country in Hedayah’s Counter-Narrative Library for MENA

³ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Global-Terrorism-Index-2018-1.pdf>

⁴ Hedayah launched its Counter-Narrative Library (www.cn-library.com) in October 2016. The Library is a comprehensive portal where governments, practitioners and civil society organizations (CSOs) can access content, how-to guides, toolkits and good practices to counter the narratives of all forms of violent extremism. The Library is a username and password-protected portal that includes more than 676 items varying from videos, movies, TV shows, cartoons, books, websites, magazines, blogs, social media campaigns, articles and many others that can be found online or uploaded as files from 29 different languages.

This paper will focus on two main themes commonly found in the dataset described above. First, the ways in which religious-based arguments are leveraged to de-legitimize violent extremist groups and their propaganda. Second, the increasingly important role of gender in counter-messaging. Lastly, this paper will offer an overview of the shape alternative narratives have taken in the region.

Governments' Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism in MENA

Religious-based Counter-Narratives⁵

The dataset contains certain themes in religious-based counter-narratives. There is a legacy of extreme and/or fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and the Quran in fringe spaces in the Middle East and North Africa. However, governments in the region have dedicated substantial efforts to prevent deviation from mainstream and moderate religious discourse by actively flooding the information environment with positive religious-based narratives that advocate for peace, tolerance, and coexistence.

Refutations

In the dataset, one of the main themes for religious-based counter-narratives is refuting ideological arguments in violent extremist propaganda. Daesh's narratives, for example, often promote the idea that the West is waging a war against the 'Ummah,' or Islamic nation, and therefore Muslims, as members of the Ummah, have a moral duty to fight back.

To counter these narratives on social media and the internet, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) launched the Center for Dialogue, Peace and Understanding (CDPU) or Sawt al-Hikma (Voice of Wisdom "SAH"), a counter-messaging platform dedicated to de-legitimizing violent extremist ideological and religious discourse online.

Sawt al-Hikma is confronting the perverse "attractiveness" of violent extremist religious discourse by dismissing justifications for violence based on misinterpretations of religious scripture (OIC 2019).

As part of its efforts to disseminate legitimate and authoritative counter-interpretations of Islamic ideas and concepts, Sawt al-Hikma's website includes a section on "Quran and Sunnah" (Interpretation of Religious Texts), as well as a section on "Fatwas" (Islamic Advisory

⁵ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75459>

binding opinions) offered by the Council of Senior Scholars, KSA and Bangladesh Islamic Scholars. Sawt al-Hikma has also involved Islamic clerics and scriptures in a number of multimedia products — from animations to videos — to further discredit the justifications for violence promoted by violent extremist groups, and to increase engagement with CVE communications by Muslims beyond the Arab world.

Sawt al-Hikma’s video campaigns such as “Causes of the Spread of Terrorism in the Muslim World for the Last Three Decades”⁶ and “Terrorism and the Abuse of Sacred Text,”⁷ disabuse target audiences of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) interpretations of the tenets of Islam. The Center’s campaigns make use of credible messengers, such as experts and academics who have produced extensive research on theological issues in Islam. These messengers include Dr. Ahmed Al Abadi, Head of Rabita Al Muhammedyya of Ulama (Muslim Scholars), who appeared in a series of video campaigns such as “Four Dreams,” to argue against extremist interpretations of Islamic Concepts (i.e. unity/Ummah, dignity, purity, salvation etc.).

In an example from Egypt, under the guidance from Al Azhar Institute, the Observatory for Combating Extremism (Al Azhar Observer) has a website, Facebook, and YouTube channel projecting the counter-arguments of Islamic scholars at Al Azhar that undermine the violent extremist ideology and claims made by terrorist groups such as Daesh, al-Qaeda, and al-Shabab. In particular, discrediting justifications for religiously-motivated violence such as equating non-Muslims with “kuffar” (infidels). There are several examples of how the Observatory is countering the extremist ideology propagated by those violent extremist groups taking concrete steps against such ideologies which continue to pose major challenges not only to Egypt but to all MENA region.

The Observatory provides clear and strong arguments against specific claims made in religious-based violent extremist propaganda in digital magazines that often have a wide reach due to being produced in multiple languages. As such, the Observatory makes its website and publications available in nine languages. The Observatory also supports the translation of publications into Arabic that was made also available online such as “Inside the Jihad Mind”.

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_3aqImCtrQ

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XX2ZTGcBjHI>

Furthermore, the Observatory rolled out a counter-narrative campaign — “They Allege and We Reply” — to shed light on the misconceptions promulgated by terrorist groups whose ideology is based primarily on selectively taking Quranic verses and prophetic traditions out of context. In the campaign, the misconception is stated and followed by a response from the main sources of “Sharia” (Islamic Law). In one example, a response to a common claim made by terrorist groups — that “the caliphate is a legal requirement and Islam approves no other political system” — clarifies the linguistic and practical implications of the word ‘caliphate’ and ‘caliph.’ Such that the word ‘caliphate’ is derived from ‘Khalaf’ which as a verb means to succeed someone, or more practically, “a person appointed as the forthcoming successor by the current ruler.”

The word ‘caliph’ or ‘Khalifa’ refers to the successor, which on a practical level means “administering the affairs of people in this worldly life according to the Sharia of Allah (Muslim Law).”

Drawing on sources from the Hadith, the counter-argument continues to signify how the etymology of the words in question are situated in the historical context of the Prophet Mohammed’s rule and his successors such as Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and so on. On account of this, the caliphate to which terrorist groups aspire to ‘re-establish’ is inconsistent with Islamic teachings that claim the caliphate is in fact a political system in which titles such as ‘Khalifa’ are granted to those who achieve specific objectives of the system, rather than to those who inherit a religious regime from the “Messenger of Allah.” In other words, establishing a “Rightly Guided Caliphate” under the “classification of kingship” would be anachronistic in today’s world because such a political process occurred in, and thus belongs to, a particular historical period.

The Observatory also tackled the controversial and often flawed ideas about the concept of ‘jihad’ in a counter-narrative campaign (Jihad 2019). The campaign indicates that ‘jihad’ is not equated or synonymous with war because in the Quran the word ‘jihad’ is mentioned thirty-one times while the word ‘harb,’ or war, is mentioned four times. Such a wide gap in frequency and where the words ostensibly occur in different contexts, suggests that the meaning of ‘jihad’ in the Quran but also in the Sunnah (prophetic tradition) is much broader than the meaning of war or fighting. Fighting typically implies armed confront-

tation during war, whereas ‘jihad’ implies resistance against an enemy — whether this enemy is a transgressor, the devil, or sinful temptations that one must overcome from within.

In another example, the Observatory displays an infographic entitled “Abjadeyaata” (Alphabetical).⁸ The infographic outlines 30 basic principles in the Islamic faith that violent extremist groups exploit.

In 2003, with support from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Saudi Arabia launched a website called “Assakina” (Tranquility). The website discussed issues related to radicalization, jihad, and violent extremism. This counter-messaging effort included sparking dialogue among Islamic scholars to discuss frequently distorted Islamic quotes and concepts while providing a framework to promote positive and moderate views on the role of Islam and one’s relationship to their Islamic identity.

Assakina has assumed a leading role in counter-messaging efforts through a series of programs, activities, and its support of external initiatives. These include publications and open discussions in Arabic in person and online — such as one-on-one interactions on Twitter — to challenge, expose, and discredit extremist ideologies. Assakina’s counter-narrative efforts on Facebook also operate along a similar line; amplifying positive narratives of a religious nature that advocate for peace, tolerance, and coexistence, or deconstructing the narratives of terrorist groups such as Daesh and al-Qaeda in a Saudi context.

It goes without saying that websites are crucial sources of information, but for deep divers within the target audience, lengthier and/or versatile content is more engaging and resonant. Due to this, Assakina established an online multimedia database that provides answers to common inquiries about Islamic beliefs. The database consists of more than 40,000 digital, audio, and video materials for users primarily in Saudi Arabia.

In Morocco, the Al Rabita Al Muhammedyya of Ulama (Muslim Scholars), a public welfare council of religious scholars established by a royal decree in February 2006, also engages in counter-messaging efforts on a dedicated website. The organization’s website aims to promote religious awareness and the deconstruction of violent extremist narratives through a religious lens via its digital library and the

⁸ <http://www.azhar.eg/observer/alphabetical>

work of 15 affiliated centers. Among several of its operational units, Al Rabita has a “Deconstructing Extremist Narratives Unit” that releases publications and hosts seminars and lectures targeting various audiences within the Moroccan context.

Countering “Nasheeds” (Jihadi Songs)

The Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, “Etidal” (Moderation) was launched at the Islamic American Summit in May 2017. By expanding its presence on social media, Etidal aims to promote notions of peace, tolerance, and coexistence in Muslim societies in the Middle East and North Africa.

Etidal plays a key role in countering the narratives of violent extremist groups. The Center recently launched a campaign on violent extremists’ songs entitled “Jihadi Singers Deaths,” a one-minute video that tells the stories of “nasheeds” (jihadi songs - non-musical vocal songs as for violent extremists music is religiously forbidden) and the role they play in spreading extremist ideas and attracting new recruits (Etidal 2019). The campaign highlights the stories of three singers who chose to fight with Daesh using their “voices”, such that their songs and poetry misled people by luring them to a path of self-destruction and murder. First, Abdul Karim Al Tunisia, previously known as Mohammed Alqormi, was the infamous singer of Ansar al-Sharia between 2011-2012. He was killed in clash in Raqqa, Syria in 2017 fighting on behalf of Daesh. Second, Abu Hajar al-Hadrami, originally named Ghaleb Ahmed Baqiti, was a singer and poet for al-Qaeda and famed for his popular nashed “Salil al-Sawarim” (clashes of swords). Al-Hadrami travelled to Iraq to fight with Daesh and was later killed by a U.S. air strike in July 2015. Third, Abu al-Zubiar al-Jazrawi, formerly known as Maher Meshaal, was a “munshied” (Islamic singer/supplications performer) that appeared in Daesh’s nasheed videos and was killed during an escape attempt by a coalition airstrike in July 2015 in al-Hasakah, Syria. To engage the target audience and consequently measure the effectiveness of the campaign, the video ends with a questionnaire on the role of nasheeds in spreading extremist ideas and attracting new recruits by asking whether nasheeds have an “emotional, secondary, or completely ineffective”.

Exposing Myths and Atrocities

The UAE has launched many partnerships to focus its CVE efforts on a national and regional level. These include the Sawab Center, a joint initiative between the US and UAE governments to establish a dedi-

cated counter-messaging hub. Established in 2015, the Sawab Center collaborates with the Global Coalition Against Daesh to expose Daesh's brutality and unfulfilled promises, as well as to discredit the "Utopia" Daesh's narratives claim awaits those who join them. The Sawab Center is active on social media and targets Daesh propaganda.

The Center's campaigns — in English and Arabic — include “#DaeshLiesExposed”, “#DeludedFollowers”, and “DaeshStealsTheirChildhood”. Some of these hashtags continue to be used even after Daesh's so-called caliphate collapsed. The first campaign — #DaeshLiesExposed⁹ — featured six stories by defectors to dissuade individuals from joining violent extremist groups and to encourage others to defect. The campaign was followed by another counter-narrative effort that exposed Daesh's failure by mythologizing its promised utopia — i.e. recruits joined a dysfunctional and corrupt organization that was incapable of providing the most basic public services.

Both campaigns aimed at exposing the corruption of Daesh. The second campaign — #DeludedFollowers — was produced in Arabic¹⁰ and sought to counter Daesh's recruitment efforts by highlighting the ways in which the group deceives potential recruits.

Lastly, the third campaign — #DaeshStealsTheirChildhood — demonstrated how Daesh indoctrinates and exploits children. The central message being that Daesh destroys families and desecrates norms by using children as pawns.

Religious Tolerance

Promoting Interreligious Tolerance

Egypt recognizes the potential of religious-based counter-messaging efforts in CVE and has specifically included reforming religious discourse in its counterterrorism efforts, focusing on the role of religious authorities. Despite some criticism of their implementation, these reforms provide a basis for empowering religious-based alternative narratives, which can be effective in countering the narratives of terrorist and violent extremist groups.¹¹ This case study sheds light on the efforts made by Al Azhar Al Sharif, the highest Islamic Authority in Egypt. On February 2019, in an unprecedented move building on deca-

⁹ https://twitter.com/hashtag/حَضَفْت_شِعَارَ_بَيْتِذَاكَ?src=hash

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/hashtag/لِلضَّلَالَةِعَابِتْأ?src=hash>

¹¹ <https://egyptindependent.com/renewing-religious-discourse-fundamental-dialectics/>

des-long efforts, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayyeb and Pope Francis signed the “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” in order to promote peaceful coexistence among followers of different religions (Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019).

Promoting Peace for Muslim Societies

To entrench the values of peace, understanding, tolerance, and dialogue within Muslim communities, the UAE government, under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Foreign Minister, and led by H.E. Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, launched the Promoting Peace in Muslim Communities Forum¹² in April 2014 in Abu Dhabi (Pact of Curiosity 2014). The Forum brings together religious scholars and leaders, academics, and ministers of all faiths to lead humane dialogue between and among the people of the world’s many civilizations and religions. The Forum uses both male and female religious scholars who can have a substantial role in dispelling the misconceptions about religions. Among the Forum’s initiatives are the “Marrakesh Declaration” on the Rights of Religious Minorities in the Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities: Legal Framework and a Call to Action, 25-26 January 2016, the “Hackathon Peace Maker,” “Interfaith Peace Caravan,” and the “Peace Encyclopedia”. These initiatives use a number of voices to denounce the violence committed against religious minorities in the name of Islam.

Another example from OIC’s Sawt al-Hikma’s efforts to amplify local voices from Arabic, English and French speaking audiences to counter discrimination and hate speech and promote religious moderation is its “first international short video contest.”¹³ The contest focuses on the theme of “Tolerance in Islam” and offers a monetary reward and “umrah” (minor/the lesser Islamic pilgrimage) to the top winners.

The organization also launched an infographic counter-narrative campaign entitled “Today’s Message”¹⁴ that highlights quotes from preachers and scholars such as the famous Shaykh al-Islam (cleric of Islam) Ibn Taymiyyah. The organization’s communications products aim to convey different reflections on and interpretations of Quranic and other verses in ways that disabuse potential or current followers of violent extremism of the veracity of the claims made by violent extremist groups.

¹² https://peacems.com/?page_id=2973&lang=en

¹³ <http://www.oic-cdpu.org/en/page/?pID=90>

¹⁴ <http://www.oic-cdpu.org/en/home/>

Counter-Narratives of Gender

Female Messengers

The importance of female messengers in CVE is evident in Etidals campaign titled “Peace is overcoming injustice,” which details the life of Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman held captive by Daesh as a sex slave. Murad was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2018 for her efforts to combat sexual violence.

Targeting A Female Audience

In another example from Al Azhar Observatory, the “Anti Malikah”¹⁵ (You are a Queen) a campaign targets the woman’s perspective and role in Islam. Through a series of animated sketches, the campaign tells stories about women that debunk stereotypes about Muslim women as oppressed and constrained by patriarchal structures (Queen 2019).

Training Young Women and Men to be Religious Leaders

“Al Morchedeen” and “Al Morchedate” Program

The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Morocco recognizes the significance of religious figures in combating extremist narratives, hence it strives to provide training for religious leaders. The “Al Morchedeen” and “Al Morchedate” programs aims to promote values that foster social cohesion, specifically among youth, so they are not swayed by extremist rhetoric. This effort is complemented by making preachers in the region available in schools and the wider communities to answer questions and doubts regarding religious issues.

*Emirati Scholars Development Program*¹⁶

In 2016, 19 young Emirati men and women were selected to participate in a three-year program that trains them to become religious scholars. While the program fosters the spiritual security of the Emirati society, it also aims to spread Islamic teachings of peace and tolerance to counter extremist narratives that aim to sow intra-religious discord. Religious scholars and their views, particularly when it comes to picking apart violent extremist claims, are influential in the region due to the people’s reverence for Islamic teachings. (Jamal 2016).

¹⁵ <http://www.azhar.eg/observer/you-are-queen>

¹⁶ <https://bit.ly/2z5HzSK>

Alternative Narratives

Using Arts and Music for Alternative Messaging

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Tunisia has implemented alternative narrative initiatives such as the national program “Mubd’eon men ajl al hayah/Créateurs...Pour la vie” (Creators for Life). This program promotes performance art in music, theatre, dance, and film to prevent violent extremism. The performers are intended to serve as role models for youth by inspiring them to tap into their artistic side and express themselves in more free and imaginative ways, in hopes they discover a new dimension of their identity that they can further cultivate and take pride in (Creators for Life 2015).

Instilling Values of Peace and Diversity

The Sawab Center has been running campaigns that retell and amplify positive and alternative narratives in Arabic. The campaigns are identified by the hashtags “#DiversityisStronger” (Sawab 2019)¹⁷ and aim to that promote the values of co-existence, diversity, and global citizenship. “#NationalPride” (Sawab 2019)¹⁸ another campaign produced in Arabic¹⁹ that aims to encourage target audiences to post about what makes them proud of their country — from its history and monuments to notable figures.

Etidal’s #LifeWithoutExtremism alternative narrative campaign demonstrates how violent extremist groups promote hate speech and incitement to racial hatred on the Internet. The campaign’s videos were produced in English and Arabic, and focused on calling out the discrimination between and among different sectarian, tribal, ethnic, and religious groups by posing the question: “Have you ever asked yourself about the religion or nationality of the people that influence your daily life?”

Another video highlights the fact that human beings are all the same at their core; they have the same “brains, hearts, skin and eyes.” While the video was produced in English, it made subtitles available in multiple languages such as Bahasa Indonesian, German, French and Urdu.

¹⁷ https://twitter.com/hashtag/أيوق_عونتل?src=hash

¹⁸ <https://bit.ly/2tYsUWG>

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/hashtag/زازتَعان_نطول?src=hash

The “Human Values”²⁰ Arabic-language campaign by the Al Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism is another example of projecting an alternative narrative to advocate for appreciation of Egypt’s pluralism. The infographic was accompanied by hashtags to signify how abiding by different beliefs — religious or cultural — do not preclude us as members of a shared society from embodying the basic human values that enable us to live in harmony. This campaign’s visual content seeks to promote human values such as peace, mercy, love, honest and charity (Human Values 2019)

Among its efforts for provision of alternative narratives, Assakina, collaborate with an initiative called “Creative Minds for Social Good” which help garner voices from university students to develop content that connects with the local audiences. This campaign aims at promoting tolerance, interfaith, inter-religious dialogue, inclusiveness and identity. Specifically, this project is aimed to counter the terrorist recruitment videos that are widespread online. This is done through sharing the reflections of Saudi youth from both genders and targeting mainly cities that were mostly affected by the recruitment videos. An example of one the videos highlighted how a mother instilled her son with principles of discrimination but later on changed her views by promoting respect and tolerance.

In another example for the Al Rabita Al Muhammedyya of Ulama (Muslim Scholars), the the Rabita has launched an initiative titled “Ajyaal” (Generations for Formation and Social Prevention) in Moroccan city Tétouan, is one of 15 centers, that is dedicated to further develop the skills of empowered youth in order for them to break the stalemate and bring new ideas to stimulate a religious moderate and positive discourse in 2017 (Dasee 2017). The Rabita engages in multiple initiatives targeting youth in particular such as “Pioneers” and “Youth” electronic hubs and other programs such as “Pioneers of Ulama”, “Moderate Ulama”, “Pioneers of Children” and “Israq” program. These initiatives have two dimensions: first, the offline one through face-to-face engagement with Muslim scholars, preachers and experts and secondly, its dissemination online through the interactive online hubs. These initiatives feature a powerful alternative narrative promoting Moroccan youth from all categories of the society while keeping a religious nature. These two dimensions of alternative and counter-messaging targeting youth can provide a multiplier effect in challenging intolerance and refuting violent extremist propaganda.

²⁰ <http://www.azhar.org/observer/human-values>

Conclusion

The above research has sought to look through a religious and gender lens with which to view strategic communications within various methods of counter-messaging and alternative narratives to counter violent extremism that are governmental and regional led were highlighted in this essay. Some of these narratives adopted a religious approach, others aimed to directly refute the violent extremists' messages, while many stressed universal values, such a pluralism, tolerance, diversity and multiculturalism. Even though their effectiveness in reducing violent extremism is not yet known, these efforts do challenge extremist content that either attempt to recruit or strengthen extremist activities within the MENA region.

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