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Kumar Ramakrishna

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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The 4M Way of Combating Violent Extremism: An Analysis*

Kumar Ramakrishna

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

This article puts forth a “4M Way” of dealing with the threat of violent Islamist extremism in Southeast Asia. It argues that our narrative must be fundamentally more attractive to the target audience than the competing vision of the violent extremists. The memes that constitute our narrative in the social media space must be “stickier” than those of the violent extremists. The personal credibility of our messenger in the eyes of the target audience should exceed that of extremist ideologues vis-à-vis that same audience. The mechanisms that we employ to impart our messages to the target audience must be more effective than those employed by the violent extremists. Finally, we must ensure that the market receptivity of the target audience is promoted—by coordinating whole-of-government policies such that activities within the counter-narrative space are supported and not inadvertently undercut by policy and military missteps in the wider operational space.

On December 29, 2017, a video surfaced on a website known to be associated with the notorious Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS, called Khayr Wilayah Media. Eight minutes long, the clip—in Arabic and English—features an interview in English with a suicide bomber about to embark on a car bomb attack and footage of ISIS attacks in France and Middle Eastern conflict zones as well as on festive celebrations in Western capitals such as Sydney and New York City. In particular, the video includes a segment in which the known Singaporean ISIS militant Megat Shahdan Abdul Samad—who first surfaced on social media in September 2017—also known by the moniker Abu Uqayl, leads two other Southeast Asian-looking ISIS fighters, most likely wanted Malaysian militants, in executing three kneeling Arab-looking prisoners by gunshot at close range. Before carrying out the cold-blooded murders, Abu Uqayl addresses the camera in English. He urges ISIS supporters to “slay the enemies of Allah wherever you can find them,” insisting that “the fighting has just begun” and “we will never stop cutting off the heads of every *kuffar* and *murtadin* until we cleanse the land of Islam from East Asia to the West of Africa.” The shocking video clip garnered massive attention on social media, prompting the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore to roundly condemn it and charging that it represents a “desperate attack” by ISIS to drive a wedge between Muslim and non-Muslim Singaporeans. As the Singaporean terrorism analyst Bilveer Singh points out, the video clip “reinforces the need to be vigilant as the Islamic State remains an existential threat.” He calls it “a daring challenge to states,” adding that “it is up to Southeast Asian governments to respond to ensure that the terrorists do not succeed even once.”¹

Kumar Ramakrishna is an associate professor, head of Policy Studies, and head of the National Security Studies Program at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

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The Five Key Challenges in the Counter-narrative Policy Space

This brings us to the five key challenges that practitioners and policymakers need to address in dealing with the ongoing and rapidly evolving threat of violent Islamist extremism of the type that animates ISIS and its ideological bedfellows in Southeast Asia and elsewhere:

- Our overall strategic objective must be to ensure that our *narrative* is fundamentally more attractive to the target audience than the competing vision of the violent extremists.
- The *memes* that constitute our narrative in the social media space or elsewhere must be “stickier” than those of the violent extremists.
- The personal credibility of our *messenger* in the eyes of the target audience should exceed that of extremist ideologues vis-à-vis that same audience.
- The *mechanisms* that we employ to impart our messages to the target audience must be more effective than those employed by the violent extremists.
- Policymakers need to ensure that the *market receptivity* of the target audience is promoted, by coordinating whole-of-government policies such that activities within the counter-narrative space are supported and not inadvertently undercut by policy and military missteps in the wider operational space.

To meet these five challenges, this article proposes the adoption of what may be called the “4M” strategy for countering violent extremism of the type that animates ISIS and its affiliates. This strategy is teased out as part of the five responses described in the sections that follow.

Response One: The Strategic Objective—The Need for Memes That Are “Stickier” Than Those of the ISIS Extremists

During the 2017 presidential hustings in Singapore, President Halimah Yacob attracted much attention with an arresting slogan for her campaign: “Do good, do together.” Responding to public criticism of the technically ungrammatical phrasing, she explained that she chose the phrase because “it’s catchy, it’s easy to understand, easy for everyone to relate.”² She was spot on and made a profound point about slogans in general that have wider implications. At one level, the advertising world has long understood the principle that the best slogans, or to use the more technical term—memes—need not be grammatically correct, just memorable. Malcolm Gladwell, author of the classic study *The Tipping Point*, recounts that in 1954, when the American tobacco company Winston introduced filter-tip cigarettes, it marketed them with the ungrammatical slogan “Winston tastes good *like* a cigarette should,” rather than “Winston tastes good *as* a cigarette should.” He notes that within months, “on the strength of that catchy phrase,” Winston outsold its major rivals and became the top cigarette brand in the country. Thus, an effective meme must be colloquial and memorable to work—not necessarily grammatical.³

This point bears further analysis. In our modern, Internet-saturated world, there is a surfeit of news—true and “fake”—competing for our attention through multiple channels: no longer just television, radio, and print but increasingly online by way of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Whatsapp, Telegram, and a myriad other social media applications on our increasingly inexpensive and permanently wired-up smartphones and laptops. Gladwell thus argues that whatever we are urged “to read and watch, we simply don’t remember.” This is why modern actors—whether advertisers, political parties, governments, and even terrorist and insurgent groups—must fight hard to achieve information dominance over a target audience. Only through

such control can the actor attain the goal of all such quests: capturing the hearts and minds of the constituency in question. Thus, the various memes that constitute a wider overall narrative must be “catchy, easy to understand, easy for everyone to relate.” It is suggested here that “Four Ms” help us grasp how an actor can employ such memes and the wider narratives they constitute to attain the information dominance needed to decisively shape the hearts and minds of a target audience: the message, the messenger, the mechanism, and market receptivity. The Four Ms are certainly relevant to the domain of countering violent extremism (CVE).

Response Two: The Message*

The first element of the 4M strategy is that the essential message encoded in the meme and wider narrative must be “sticky.” That it is, it should be simple to grasp, attention-grabbing, and memorable or, as Gladwell puts it, the “presentation and structuring of information” can “make a big difference in how much of an impact” is made.⁴ Chip and Dan Heath have identified several factors that make a message and its constituent memes sticky: First, *simplicity*—the content of the message must be simple but profound so that it can be easily recalled.⁵ Think of the Nike meme “Just Do It,” for example. Second, *unexpectedness*—the message must contain counterintuitive elements that snare attention. “Naturally sticky ideas,” the Heaths observe, are also “full of concrete images—ice-filled bathtubs, apples with razors—because our brains are wired to remember concrete data.” Fourth, *credibility*—“sticky ideas,” the authors aver, need to seem culturally authentic and believable to the target audience. Fifth, *emotions*—the message must appeal viscerally to the audience. In this respect, the Indonesian CVE activist and researcher Noor Huda Ismail’s documentaries that explore the impact of violent extremist ideology on families that have been involved in the ISIS conflict in Syria are powerful because they show the emotional cost of engagement with such extremist causes.⁶ Sixth and finally, *stories*: the Heaths argue that target audiences are better able to recall messages embedded in memorable stories.

To be sure, there are many moderate Muslim clerics in Southeast Asia who are capable of spinning sticky messages that may be capable of competing effectively against the violent ideological appeals of ISIS extremists. In village communities in West Java, for example, some preachers are popular because their sticky messages, rather than engaging with cumbersome, “broader social questions,” focus on “allegories and narrative accounts created out of daily experience.” One observer recounts in this regard the impact of an itinerant cleric, “Kiai Al-Jauhari”:

I have often seen audiences transfixed by Al-Jauhari’s allegories and narrative accounts. *He transforms Islamic messages into narrations made up of highly recognizable material, with no shortage of humour added to the mix. People are engrossed as he unfolds his creations.* I have frequently asked village and mosque officials why they engage Al-

*This section is adapted from Kumar Ramakrishna, *Islamist Terrorism and Militancy in Indonesia: The Power of the Manichean Mindset* (Singapore: Springer, 2015), 228–229. The 4M Way seeks to improve upon and refine the author’s earlier Counter-Ideological Response (CIR) Model, discussed in idem, “Towards a Comprehensive Approach to Combating Violent Extremist Ideology in the Digital Space: The Counter-Ideological Response (CIR) Model,” in *Combating Violent Extremism and Radicalization in the Digital Era*, ed. Majeed Khader, Loo Seng Neo, Gabriel Ong, Eunice Tan Mingyi, and Jeffery Chin (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2016), 260–282.

Jauhari. . . . The most common answer is that he is able to hold people's attention for long periods of time. (emphasis mine)⁷

It may be argued further that in the age of the social media sound bite, it would be important for attractive speakers like Kiai Al-Jauhari to be able to translate their entertaining homilies into forms that would become readily digestible "snackable content" for busy, "bored at work" consumers who prefer material that is "fast and fun, geared to spread via Facebook."⁸ In short, the intrinsic attractiveness of the message sticks in the minds of the audience long after the messenger leaves.

Response Three: The Messenger

The messenger that purveys the message is also important. He or she must enjoy significant personal credibility with the target audience. This commodity, the leading Allied propagandist in World War Two and future Labor government minister in the 1960s Richard H. S. Crossman observed, is all-important.⁹ Selecting credible interlocutors is very audience-specific, moreover. Some Southeast Asian counterterrorism officials, for instance, concede that globally famous progressive Muslim scholars are often dismissed by violent Islamist militants as working for the government. Thus, while such scholars may be effective in communicating with the wider community, former radicals may have relatively greater traction with the militant constituency. For instance, in Malaysia, the former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) financier Wan Min Wan Mat has proven to be an effective interlocutor in the wider counterextremism efforts of the Police Special Branch. He and Nasir Abbas, the former JI senior operational leader in Indonesia, have played similar roles.¹⁰ This is not a new idea either. During the 1950s, at the height of the British colonial counterinsurgency campaign against the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), while Government Information Services churned out publicity material to educate the public, surrendered Chinese guerrillas were often employed as well to reach out to their former comrades in the Malayan jungles to entice them to surrender, with considerable success. A good example of this approach was the use made of the former CPM leader Lam Swee. His Government Information Services booklet *My Accusation* provided an insider's account of the contradictions between CPM rhetoric and the harsh reality on the ground, causing much havoc within Communist ranks.¹¹ For current CVE efforts, therefore, it would appear that a judicious mix of moderate religious scholars and carefully selected former radicals may be needed. The messenger conveying the meme, in short, matters too.

Response Four: The Mechanism

The relative merits of CVE communication platforms such as the face-to-face, print, broadcast, and online media have received scrutiny. Many views abound. For instance, in Indonesia, Twitter has been exploited by "Net-savvy radicals" to "lobby for their causes."¹² The Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid network, implicated in terrorism-related cases in the country, has also used various "internet and social networking sites" and YouTube to put out content.¹³ More than a quarter of the Indonesia's 240 million people are on Facebook, "thanks in large part to cheap and fast Internet-capable phones," and young people are, unsurprisingly, being targeted for terrorist recruitment through social media.¹⁴ The current Indonesian police chief, General Tito Karnavian, has iterated that in his view, face-to-face contact is more important than the Internet in

socializing individuals into violent Islamist ideology and that the “final touch is the personal touch.”¹⁵ The respected terrorism analyst Sidney Jones of the Institute of Policy Analysis of Conflict in Jakarta agrees, pointing out that “although terrorists groups’ Internet use is growing, they still do most of their recruiting face-to-face at traditional places such as prayer meetings.”¹⁶ Additionally, print media such as the 137-page comic *I Found the Meaning of Jihad*, chronicling the well-known life story of Nasir Abbas,¹⁷ and well-received locally produced documentaries such as *Prison and Paradise*—about the children of the JI perpetrators of the October 2002 Bali bombings as well as their victims—have also proven to be quite impactful.¹⁸

Comparatively little attention, however, has been placed on the underlying principles that should guide their employment. Two principles from the comparatively sophisticated and successful British psychological warfare effort in World War Two stand out in this regard. First, the art of propaganda is to conceal that you are actually engaging in it.¹⁹ Thus, whether one is using online or offline communications platforms, one’s narrative must not come across to the audience so blatantly as “propaganda.” National campaigns calling on the public to stand firm against violent extremism are needed but the same memes should also be conveyed by “softer,” indirect, nongovernmental means, such as blogs, podcasts, commentary, and talk shows involving famous sports, media, and entertainment personalities. A second principle is captured in the saying “Entertainment is a valuable narcotic for dulling the sensibilities of a propaganda-conscious mind.”²⁰ The British in 1950s Malaya understood this principle when they invested in a strong Malayan Film Unit and Radio Malaya’s Community Listening Service featuring the legendary Lee Dai Soh to enthrall rural and urban audiences with anti-Communist memes integrated with music, drama, humorous sketches, and short films about the new lives of reformed guerillas.²¹ It is thus telling that modern CVE analysts such as the Dutch-Somali commentator Ayaan Hirsi Ali similarly call for the use of humor and satire to undercut violent extremist appeals today.²² The satirical and funny British film *Four Lions* is one example of the use of entertainment as a way to promote the anti-extremist meme among vulnerable but wary audiences.²³

Response Five: Market Receptivity

The effective absorption by an audience of memes and narratives is also influenced by situational context: put another way, are the “consumers” in the target market receptive to your “products”? In September 1949, British High Commissioner Henry Gurney’s amnesty for Malayan Communists failed. But by August 1957, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman’s Merdeka Amnesty succeeded spectacularly in collapsing the CPM’s morale. Why? One of the key factors was that in 1949 the public knew the government was not winning, but by Tunku’s time, it was patently obvious that the Communists were utterly on the back foot. In other words, by late 1957, the “market” in question: the demoralized, rapidly dwindling numbers of Communist guerrillas in the Malayan jungle, starved of food and medicines and severely harassed by the Security Forces, were ready to lay down arms and were actively looking for a way out.²⁴ Similarly, in today’s CVE context, as long as the objective political and socioeconomic grievances that underpin Muslim separatism in the southern Philippines continue to be relatively unaddressed, we shall likely see more sieges like the standoff between ISIS-linked militants and the Philippines military in Marawi City in Mindanao that lasted for five months from May to October 2017 and resulted in the killing of more than a thousand people.²⁵ It has long been recognized that in the Mindanao context, sheer military force is not enough to resolve the issue of violent extremist ideology. Instead, “poverty, illiteracy, bad governance, wide availability of

loose firearms, and non-enforcement of the rule of law in southern Philippines created a fertile ground for radicalization to take root.”²⁶ In this respect, there is a consensus that the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law, “which provides a regional governance system [and] addresses both major political and economic redistribution issues, and important religious and cultural identity needs and grievances of contemporary Moros,” represents an “important step in insuring” the Philippines against “the threat of ISIS.”²⁷ Failure to deal with such underlying problems would only “fuel the recruitment drives” of pro-ISIS militant groups in Mindanao.²⁸ In terms of our analysis in this article, the Marawi episode suggests that no number of counterextremist memes and narratives is likely to resolve the situation in and of themselves. Memes and the wider narratives they constitute are not magic bullets—they can work only if the “market” is receptive.

Conclusion

The Marawi example also reinforces the point that Southeast Asia, including Singapore today, is being assailed by a concerted ISIS social media onslaught seeking to split our respective multicultural social fabrics apart. This point is clearly driven home by the December 2017 Abu Uqayl video mentioned at the start of this article. Thus, preserving national unity in globalized, multicultural, multireligious Singapore in an increasingly inclement strategic environment—witness the SG Secure meme “Not if, but When”—should be a no-brainer.²⁹ Now more than ever, therefore, positive national narratives and their constituent memes—no matter how ungrammatical as long as they are sticky, remember—are very much needed to maintain social and psychological resilience. Countering the violent extremist threat posed by ISIS and its affiliates requires nothing less.

Notes

¹ Bilveer Singh, “Singapore’s Islamic State Jihadi: The Regional Security Implications of AbuUqayl’s New Islamic State Video,” *The Diplomat*, January 3, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/singapores-islamic-state-jihadi/>.

² Valerie Koh, “‘Do Good Do Together’ Catchy, Easy to Understand,” *Today*, August 31, 2017, <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/halimah-defends-ungrammatical-campaign-slogan-calls-it-catchy>.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (London: Abacus, 2004).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Take Hold And Others Come Unstuck* (London: Arrow, 2008), 14–18.

⁶ Jewel Topsfield, “Jihad Selfie: The Story of How Indonesian Teenagers Are Recruited to Islamic State,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/jihad-selfie-the-story-of-how-indonesian-teenagers-are-recruited-to-islamic-state-20160722-gqb8gy.html>.

⁷ Julian Millie, “‘Spiritual Meal’ or Ongoing Project? The Dilemma of Dakwah Oratory,” in *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 82, 91–92.

⁸ Franklin Foer, *World without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), 140.

⁹ Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds 1948–1958* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2002), 18–19.

¹⁰ Kumar Ramakrishna, “Reflections of a Reformed Jihadist: The Story of Wan Min Wan Mat,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 3 (2016): 495–522; *idem*, *Radical Pathways: Understanding Muslim Radicalization in Indonesia* (London and Westport: Praeger Security International, 2009), 172–175.

¹¹ Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda*, 115.

¹² Zubaidah Nazeer, “Indonesia Faces Rising Intolerance,” *Straits Times*, March 5, 2011.

- ¹³ International Crisis Group, *Indonesia: The Dark Side of Jama'ah Ansharut Tauhid*. Asia Briefing no. 107 (Jakarta/Brussels: Author, 2010), 5.
- ¹⁴ Niniek Karmini, "Facebook Broke Indonesia Terror Case," Associated Press, June 21, 2013, <https://newsok.com/article/feed/556547/ap-exclusive-facebook-broke-indonesia-terror-case>.
- ¹⁵ Kumar Ramakrishna, *Islamist Terrorism and Militancy in Indonesia: The Power of the Manichean Mindset* (Singapore: Springer, 2015), 231–232.
- ¹⁶ Karmini, "Facebook Broke Indonesia Terror Case."
- ¹⁷ Robin McDowell, "Captain Jihad: Ex-Terrorist Is Now Comic Book Hero," *Jakarta Post*, September 9, 2011, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/44449487/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/captain-jihad-ex-terrorist-now-comic-book-hero/#.XGSayIU3nIU.
- ¹⁸ Desy Nurhayati, "'Prison and Paradise' Gives a Voice to Terrorism Survivors," *Jakarta Post*, October 12, 2011, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/10/12/prison-and-paradise-gives-a-voice-terrorism-survivors.html>.
- ¹⁹ M. Nirmala, "Waging Propaganda War against Terrorists," *Straits Times*, December 16, 2013, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/waging-propaganda-war-against-terrorists>.
- ²⁰ Crossman cited in Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda*, 19.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 110–113.
- ²² Damian Whitworth, "We've Had Life of Brian, Now We Need Life of Muhammad," *Times* (London), April 15, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/weve-had-life-of-brian-now-we-need-life-of-muhammad-09dkqxmjm>.
- ²³ *Four Lions*, directed by Chris Morris (UK: Film4 Productions and Wild Bunch, Warp Films, 2010), DVD.
- ²⁴ Kumar Ramakrishna, "Content, Credibility and Context: Propaganda, Government Surrender Policy, and the Malayan Communist Terrorist Mass Surrenders of 1958," *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 4 (1999): 242–266.
- ²⁵ "Army Says Battle for Marawi to End Soon, 1000 Dead," AFP, October 16, 2017, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/10/16/17/army-says-battle-for-marawi-to-end-soon-1000-dead>.
- ²⁶ Center for Integrative and Development Studies, *Radicalization in East Asia: Addressing the Challenges of the Expanding ISIS Influence* (Quezon City, Philippines: Diliman, 2015), 1.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁸ Teresa Jopson, "Making Peace with the Bangsamoro Basic Law," *East Asia Forum*, May 11, 2016, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/05/11/making-peace-with-the-bangsamoro-basic-law/>.
- ²⁹ <https://www.sgsecure.sg/resources/pages/default.aspx?tabID=3&pgNo=4>.