**Media Strategy for Deradicalization and Counter-Terrorism**

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**Abstract:** The proliferation of extreme ideologies such as jihadism has become a major concern to governments and societies around the globe. Understanding the radicalization process is a crucial step toward developing tools for deradicalization. Both radicalization and deradicalization are complex and multifaceted processes in which media, particularly social media platforms and digital marketing techniques, play a substantial role. This article presents an analysis of ISIS’s skillful use of media strategies to successfully carry out mass radicalization. Based on the insights derived from this analysis, I propose a conceptual framework for an effective deradicalization process that incorporates an innovative framing approach.

**Key words**: Deradicalization, radicalization**,** extremism, jihadism, counterterrorism, framing strategy

1. **Introduction**

The proliferation and escalation of terrorist attacks and associated violent acts in recent years, driven by the spread of extremist ideologies on a global scale via processes of radicalization, poses a serious challenge to global security[[1]](#endnote-1).

In this article, I refer to radicalization in the sense of a process of adopting an extremist belief system that justifies, motivates, and employs violence and terrorism to achieve socio-political change. Based on a soft-power approach that aims at intervention before violence occurs,[[2]](#endnote-2) and on the discourse on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE),[[3]](#endnote-3) this article examines the role of media in this process, particularly the use of framing, and offers a strategic framework for deradicalization to confront it. Understanding radicalization is critical for creating this framework, and requires exploring the underlying ideology as an inter-related system of beliefs. The underlying premise for this approach is that changing an individual’s way of thinking and viewing the world, and the prism through which they perceive and interpret reality, results in changes in their behavior.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Although radicalization can pertain to various movements and ideologies, including right-wing, ultra-nationalist, and neo-Nazi groups[[5]](#endnote-5), I focus here on the ideology of global jihad (jihadism) as a precursor to radicalization, extreme violence, and terrorism.

The topic of radicalization has been a major concern of governments and societies around the globe since the 9/11 attacks in the United States, and especially following the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). During this period, jihadist terrorist organizations and various other extremist groups have increasingly exploited the internet and social media platforms to promote radicalization, that is to say, to inspire, motivate, and recruit followers, launch attacks, and incite militant violence.

These radicalization efforts have been successful in reaching individuals from a variety of backgrounds, including those from relatively stable and well-off situations. Examples include a female physician from Malaysia who emigrated to the Islamic state[[6]](#endnote-6); an entire family of parents with four children who between them carried out three terrorist attacks in Surabaya, the second largest city in Indonesia[[7]](#endnote-7); and several highly educated individuals from affluent families in Sri Lanka who carried out lethal and devastating terrorist attacks in that country.[[8]](#endnote-8)

“Radicalization” is a highly debated term. Although “violent extremism,” “terrorism,” and “jihadism” are strongly entrenched in political and media discourse, these terms, and their relation to radicalization, are still contentious[[9]](#endnote-9). Violent extremism and terrorism are frequently described as the end result of the radicalization process, while jihadism itself is an extreme religious ideology that changes people and societies, though not always uniformly. It has often been depicted through its radical idea of jihad that demands a total war against influences of other religious or secular ideologies, values, and identities, referred to as the “war of ideas.[[10]](#endnote-10)”

In political science literature, radicalization is often used to mean a pathway or progression toward terrorism, extremism, or fundamentalism, or even more generally, toward justifying the use of violence,[[11]](#endnote-11) as in the case of the global jihad movement led by ISIS[[12]](#endnote-12) and al-Qaeda[[13]](#endnote-13). This process is highly individual and always context-related, as the pathways and motivations to engaging in violent extremism are varied and intermingled in diverse ways.

In this article, I relate to radicalization as a process in which individuals’ consciousness is changed, that is, they adopt new patterns of thinking and interpretation that can lead to new behaviors.[[14]](#endnote-14) Specifically, radicalization involves the adoption of radical belief systems that refute the legitimacy of moderate-mainstream ideas, and justify and promote violent extremism and terrorism. Conversely, *deradicalization* refers to the process of shifting individuals away from extreme beliefs, values, and positions toward moderate-mainstream belief systems. Given the variety of frameworks and perspectives through which this shifting is addressed, and the breadth of literature on “extreme ideas” in the context of the “war of ideas,” research has identified two additional and related processes alongside deradicalization:

* **Disengagement***—*the process of moving radicalized individuals away from extremist activities without necessarily deradicalizing them or changing their views.[[15]](#endnote-15)
* **Counter-radicalization**—specific measures taken to prevent moderate individuals from becoming recruited and radicalized by extremist or terrorist groups[[16]](#endnote-16).

All three of these processes share common ideas and methodologies. Their exact nature, and precisely why and how they occur, are the subject of further research and discussion. For the purposes of this article, we will refer to all three of them as *deradicalization*.

Radicalization toward violent extremism, jihadism, and terrorism has become a critical threat to governments and communities worldwide in our times of global connectivity and blurred boundaries, in which people easily communicate and share ideas via the internet and social media platforms. This connectivity makes it far more likely than in the past that an individual will be exposed to extremist values and ideologies (such as jihadism), and also facilitates the exchange of knowledge and practices with other extremists, thus reinforcing ideological positions and perceptions and leading to further radicalization.

In particular, the rise of social media has made it far simpler for global terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, to expose much larger numbers of people to extremist ideologies and ideas, and to radicalize and recruit them. Many young people who are attracted to jihadist ideas online are able to easily engage in direct communication with members of jihadist groups and digital communities. This interaction facilitates the development of closer, more intimate relations and fosters trust and identification with extreme ideas—eventually (and sometimes quickly) leading to actual recruitment into the organization and active participation in violence and in terrorist attacks. Consequently, the creation of effective and feasible deradicalization strategies has become an urgent priority in many countries.

Research shows that a key component in achieving radicalization is influencing public consciousness,[[17]](#endnote-17) which (as explained below) can be effectively achieved using the framing approach. This article aims to further understanding of the radicalization process, focusing on an analysis of ISIS’s framing approach, and to offer a new framework for confronting terrorism, violent extremism, and jihadism via social media, using framing techniques to undermine the terrorist narrative. The article incorporates new and innovative definitions of framing techniques (militant/peaceful framing, threat framing, conformist/non-conformist framing, traditional/revolutionary framing) alongside existing techniques (such as gain/loss framing), and examines their use by ISIS in four main elements of its jihadist ideology.

In the following sections, I provide an analysis of the values, objectives, and strategic messages ISIS sought to advance in order to influence public opinion and promote radicalization—in other words, to shape perceptions and generate support for its jihadist doctrine. This analysis is crucial, because properly understanding ISIS’s discourse and framing strategy, in the contexts of geopolitics and the digital media environment, greatly improves our ability to develop deradicalization strategies and programs to defeat it.

1. **The Radicalization Process and Changing Perceptions**

Radicalization is a complex and varied process that can take multiple aspects and forms, include the use of various different methods, and last for varying durations. In some cases, individuals undergo this process by themselves and in secret; in others, they undergo radicalization openly and in a group setting[[18]](#endnote-18).

An enormous variety of social, political, economic, religious, psychological, and other motivating factors and contextual circumstances have been identified as influencing the radicalization of any given individual, leading to their adoption of extremist doctrines. In particular, there is a rich literature on the precursors of radicalization which identifies and explores the socio-political and other environmental factors that can lead to violent behavior. Political and socioeconomic marginalization, poverty, and unemployment; physical and emotional neglect; exposure to violence; prior trauma; previous criminality; and feelings of alienation, rejection, and despair have all been highlighted as motivating factors that play a part in the radicalization process.[[19]](#endnote-19) Similarly, periods and situations of unrest and uncertainty present fertile conditions for radicalization—as witnessed during the recent coronavirus epidemic, during which extremist groups of all stripes have sought to exploit people’s fears and concerns to further their own radical agendas. In addition, research has examined the role played in jihadist radicalization by exposure to religious teachings, with some people being influenced by theological programs and leaders who preach violence, while others are indoctrinated at home and influenced by their community and/or peers to adopt radical values.

Furthermore, the proliferation of social media has come to play a substantial role in radicalization. Countries and regions with a high rate of internet penetration and social media use, such as Southeast Asia, offer fertile ground for radicalization efforts. For example, Indonesia has nearly 140 million Facebook users, the third highest of any country in the world, and social media are used by 81.4% of the population in Malaysia[[20]](#endnote-20). According to a report issued in June 2018 by RSIS,[[21]](#endnote-21) 75% of the recruits to ISIS from Malaysia were radicalized and recruited over social media. The Malaysian police reported that local militant extremists had set up a large virtual network of global jihad supporters and sympathizers, including both militant groups and young individuals, which provided connections to organizations throughout the region, including in Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia.

As in other parts of the world, ISIS’s digital marketing efforts with the huge Muslim population of Southeast Asia focused on disseminating its jihadist ideology; radicalizing individuals and groups and inciting them to violence; creating and nurturing virtual communities of like-minded individuals; and communicating with and grooming recruits. It also sought to garner broad public support and sympathy, raise funds, and raise its organizational profile[[22]](#endnote-22).

In the case of ISIS, of the many factors identified as potential precursors of radicalization, socio-political alienation stands out as being particularly pertinent. I examine this factor in more detail in the following section, while the religious context will be explored separately in the next chapter, which deals with ISIS’s jihadist ideology.

* 1. **Socio-Political Alienation**

One of the prominent factors in radicalization is socio-political alienation and a lack of assimilation and integration into broader society. Disenfranchisement and discrimination of a particular ethnic, religious, or national group can lead to humiliating and shameful experiences, and foster feelings of victimhood.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Sociological and psychological theories argue that humiliated individuals search for routes by which they can repair these negative states and restore their feelings of significance. This inclination makes individuals who have suffered marginalization and discrimination more vulnerable to the messages of extremist groups promoting an ideology of restoring lost pride and status and inflicting pain and suffering on their oppressors, even to the extent of legitimizing terrorism and justifying violent extremism.[[24]](#endnote-24) Moreover, individuals from such backgrounds tend to be heavily influenced by social ties and interactions, and can be particularly vulnerable when experiencing a personal crisis or life transition, or when suffering especially harsh circumstances. Thus, recruiters such as ISIS are able to exploit these vulnerabilities and provide a social experience (even if online) that fosters identification with the group and a sense of belonging to it. This sense of belonging, of being understood, accepted, and even welcomed, is a critical factor in the radicalization process[[25]](#endnote-25).

Research has found that a large proportion of ISIS’s recruits with origins in Central Asia were mired in poverty and economic uncertainty, and lived with deep feelings of social alienation and isolation. Many of them were recruited when living as labor immigrants in Russia, where their economic and social marginalization helped push them into ISIS’s welcoming embrace. According to an estimate published in the Financial Times,[[26]](#endnote-26) between 80% and 90% of ISIS recruits who originally came from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan underwent radicalization while they were looking for work in Russia.

For these recruits, joining ISIS was not motivated by devout Islamic observance or faith. Rather, it was their social and economic marginalization, and their frustration and anger, which drove them to enlist, to emigrate to Iraq and Syria, and even to carry out terrorist attacks against the West. Examples of these include the April 2017 attack in Stockholm carried out by an immigrant from Uzbekistan[[27]](#endnote-27); the June 2016 suicide attack carried out by three immigrants from Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan at the Ataturk airport in Turkey[[28]](#endnote-28); and the November 2017 terrorist attack in New York carried out by an immigrant from Uzbekistan[[29]](#endnote-29).

Studies of radical Muslim communities have shown that radicalization entails a combination of extremist ideas and beliefs with strong, close ties with a group of like-minded friends or colleagues[[30]](#endnote-30). While it is commonly believed that individuals enlist in ISIS (or other jihadist organizations) solely because they identify with its ideology and actions, and that this is sufficient to motivate them to kill and be killed on its behalf, the truth is that such ideological identification is not enough. Rather, it is an individual’s strong sense of identification with and belonging to the jihadist **community** (or a particular jihadist group) that is the decisive factor in their being willing to sacrifice their life for it. Membership and interpersonal ties, it turns out, are essential components in the radicalization process.

**3. ISIS’s Ideology**

In order to better understand and address ISIS’s radicalization successes, it is vital to examine its jihadist doctrine. For ISIS, radicalization is a process of influencing Muslim public consciousness toward an extreme system of belief that refutes the existing mainstream interpretations of Islam and justifies the use of violent extremism and terrorism. At the heart of ISIS’s jihadist ideology is the pursuit of an unwavering and uncompromising struggle to purge Islam of any foreign influences, ideologies, or values.

**3.1 The Origins of ISIS’s Jihadist Ideology**

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) burst onto the international stage in 2014, aiming to establish its religious authority across the globe under a caliphate led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Driven by its jihadist ideology, the leaders of ISIS strived to build credibility, establish legitimacy, and impose their doctrine on all Muslims. They made skillful use of social media and cyber technology in their efforts toward mass radicalization and mass recruiting, thereby achieving a huge impact on global public consciousness.

The ideology of global jihad, or jihadism, is a relatively new phenomenon founded and consolidated in the 1980s as part of al-Qaeda’s struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan[[31]](#endnote-31). It is based on an extremist religious interpretation of Islam as it existed in the seventh century, combining Salafist traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with practical concepts rooted in the political culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries[[32]](#endnote-32).

The jihadist doctrine calls for a radical revolution in Muslim consciousness to purge Islam of foreign influences and values, overthrow the existing political-religious world order, and establish an exemplary Muslim society on the ruins of today’s corrupt infidel society as part of a new world order. It demands complete adherence to and faith in its interpretation of Islam; rejects any concepts, ideas, identities, or loyalties that are non-Islamic; and justifies the use of total militant armed struggle, with no rules or limitations, to advance its system of belief[[33]](#endnote-33).

A key element in ISIS’s ideology is the *ummah*, a utopian conception of the ideal Muslim collective and society, which has itself been a core value of Islam since its inception and one that is deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of 1.8 billion Muslims. From the outset, ISIS’s declared objective was the realization of this ideal via the creation of a new, pure, collective Muslim society in a strong and authentic religious Islamic state, founded solely on its own interpretation of Sharia law.

**3.2 ISIS’s Ideology and the War of Ideas**

For ISIS, jihad serves as the organization’s core religious value, its guiding principle and essence. In its view, jihad is not simply a political, military, or national struggle for control of a particular territory or population, nor a strategic communications or public diplomacy struggle waged in the media, as often perceived and framed outside the Muslim world. Rather, it is a holistic struggle waged on several dimensions and fronts, involving both ideology and political consciousness.

First, jihad is a struggle over values and ideologies, a “war of ideas” against secular and non-Muslim principles (such as democracy and the nation-state), one fought both physically in the international arena and in the virtual arena, that is, on internet platforms, social media, and the darknet. And second, jihad is a struggle for “hearts and minds,” for perception and recognition, and for the authentic, “genuine” Muslim identity of the world's 1.8 billion Muslims[[34]](#endnote-34). Thus, it negates any “infidel” identity or loyalty that is not in accordance with its own ideology, and forbids any conceptions that contradict its harsh interpretation of Islam.

In waging this struggle, the leaders of ISIS are motivated by their adherence to jihadist ideology as their core faith and life path, and they seek to impose it on all Muslims around the globe. They call on the Muslim public to fight against foreign values, especially secularism, nationalism, and pluralism, but also the democratic values of freedom of expression and freedom of thought—all of which are designated as enemies of Islam[[35]](#endnote-35). Indeed, for ISIS, the war of ideas in its political-ideological sense is a multi-dimensional battle to achieve political power on a global scale and to influence global public consciousness. Within the context of this article, we relate to jihadism in its form as a discursive struggle, which we now present through the prism of framing.

**4. Framing as a Media Tool for Radicalization**

Despite the abundance of literature on the use of media by terrorist organizations,[[36]](#endnote-36) terrorism scholars have largely overlooked the effect of media, and particularly framing of ideologies, on the radicalization process. Given the evolution of digital media and the extent to which terrorists employ a variety of marketing strategies and media tactics, it is crucial to understand how they promote their vision and radical ideology and disseminate their values and messages in order to achieve their ideological and political goals. One of the main media tactics employed is the use of framing.[[37]](#endnote-37)

Framing is a strategic tool of great importance for influencing public opinion and is an integral part of the struggle for achieving political power for various non-state players, including militant organizations.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Frame is an “interpretive package” that supply concepts, narratives, symbols, and visual images that function as contextual cues for understanding the underlying meaning and content, while also strengthening the impact of verbal or nonverbal texts on the persuasion process [[39]](#endnote-39). These packages are used to convey to various actors a purposive interpretation of some sociopolitical issue by a particular entity (such as a terror organization) that wishes to influence beliefs and/or actions related to the issue and mobilize support.

Framing involves selecting some aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicated message by assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them, to promote a particular interpretation.[[40]](#endnote-40) Choosing and emphasizing certain elements of reality makes it possible to simplify, structure, and prioritize a particular explanation or significance of an event or phenomenon, and to focus attention on specific aspects of it while deflecting attention from others, in a way that serves to shape public sentiment and responses.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Thus, strategic actors employing the framing approach will strive to accentuate a particular viewpoint, engaging in a struggle over definitions and the construction of meaning relating to current political discourse and social realities; or in other words, they will engage in a “war of ideas.” Framing becomes a discursive process toward achieving political strength by influencing public opinion and manipulating perceptions and associated emotions, using different frames. For terrorist organizations, which are inherently invested in competition over interpretations and ideological narratives, framing is a strategic tool for promoting their vision and ideology, disseminating their radical values, and encouraging their target audiences to think, feel, behave, or act in a particular manner as derived from their worldview, including the use of violence[[42]](#endnote-42).

Terrorist organizations competing in the “marketplace of ideas”[[43]](#endnote-43) use a variety of framing techniques in their multimedia campaigns,[[44]](#endnote-44) along with persuasion strategies and manipulative methods, to shift public discourse in the direction of their own fanatic ideology and to increase public identification with and support for their doctrine. They deploy these techniques to magnify their messages so as to promote radicalization, recruit new members, justify their intentions and actions, communicate their ideology to the organization’s members, and consolidate base support for their norms, goals, and operations. Using different frames in different ways in a range of different circumstances enables them to clearly define their identity, shape and project a powerful image, and create a dichotomy that differentiates themselves and their ideas from those of their opponents.

ISIS has deployed framing in a sophisticated and skillful way, using a combination of mainstream media, innovative audio-visual media, and online platforms to disseminate its ideology and promote acts of violence in a highly effective manner, achieving maximum impact on a global scale. It has successfully radicalized millions of followers and supporters to create a global, digital jihadist community, founded on the tenets of its jihadist doctrine. ISIS has introduced a new dynamic into terrorist media and instituted a raft of innovations, thereby creating an entirely new form of media used to achieve extremist terrorist ends. In this way, it has successfully promoted its alternative system of beliefs and interpretations relative to mainstream Islam (that is, the ideology of global jihad) by means of an extensive combination of textual and visual content, including high quality illustrations, videos, and infographics, that weave together narratives and images of utopian idealism with brutal violence (for example, in its execution videos). This innovative framing approach is unprecedented for an organization like ISIS, distinguishing it from every other terrorist group in history, and is a key component in its successful global radicalization efforts.

**4.1 The Framing Approach and ISIS’s Ideology**

ISIS is waging a war of ideas based on four main ideological pillars: (1) the underlying notion of totality; (2) the utopian ideal of the *ummah*; (3) the concept of global jihad; and (4) the ethos of death.

Today, this war of ideas is mainly being conducted in the marketing arena, via large-scale social media campaigns. ISIS’s strategy of building and maintaining a massive online presence is ultimately more crucial to its long-term success than military victories or terrorist attacks. The way it brands itself, packages its vision, and above all, frames its jihadist ideology is far more important than its military operations, as they are the means to shape people’s perceptions and ideas and thus to foster further radicalization throughout the world. [[45]](#endnote-45)

**4.2 ISIS’s Unique “Black-and-White” Strategy**

ISIS offers an alternative perspective of the world to that presented by its opponents, one based on a fanatic and dichotomous ideology that divides the world into “good” and “evil” camps, and thus justifies the use of deadly violence against all those who are not part of the global jihad movement. Accordingly, it has developed a unique and innovative messaging strategy, which I refer to as its “black-and-white” framing strategy.

This strategy acts as the lens through which ISIS shapes its audience’s beliefs and perceptions, polarizes their support, and drives their radicalization. It encompasses a combination of framing techniques, two of which I identify and define here for the first time:

* **Militant/peaceful framing**—The use of metaphors, images, symbols, and phrases to portray events and situations in either a militaristic, violent way (e.g., “killing,” “injury,” or “destruction”) or a peaceful way (e.g., “trust,” “hope,” or “construction”), and thereby to either foster militant discourse and promote violent actions (for example, calling for terrorist attacks to be carried out) or alternatively, to foster peaceful discourse and actions (such as calls for restraining from violence).
* **Threat framing**—The use of visual and textual phrases to convey a sense of threat and deterrence in order to promote and achieve various goals among different target audiences. Using threat framing is designed to persuade individuals and/or collectives to alter their beliefs or positions for fear of negative consequences, and can also engender conceptual or practical support for a political-ideological agenda.

In addition, ISIS deploys another widely popular dyad of framing techniques:

* **Gain/loss framing**[[46]](#endnote-46)—The use of negative/positive phrases to portray the outcomes of certain policies or actions in negative/positive way, which can lead to biases and/or false perceptions of the “objective” reality, thus tilting public opinion in a favorable direction. Research shows that purposely framing undesirable results of actions in negative terms has greater impact than using positive terms to describe desirable outcomes.

ISIS’s framing strategy also contains several recurring political and religious narratives and themes, including the depiction of Islam as a conquering force; positing an Islamic obligation to kill infidels; references to historical events, such as the wars against the Crusaders; and psychological and emotional motifs, such as contrasting humiliation and suffering with love and security.

**4.3 The Four Components of ISIS’s War of Ideas**

***4.3.1 The Notion of Totality***

The first component in ISIS’s war of ideas, and one that underpins its black-and-white strategy, it its unshakeable belief in the totality of its cause, based on its interpretation of the Islamic principle of *tawhid*[[47]](#endnote-47), the oneness of Allah. According to this interpretation, any ideologies, values, or identities other than its own are to be eliminated, while those who join its ranks and support its ideology (jihadists) are the only true Muslims.

To advance this idea, ISIS is careful to present its jihadist ideology in simplistic terms using very basic oppositional dyads, such as love-hatred, sympathy-disgust, and security-fear. It offers individuals a binary choice of belonging either to the category of “true” Muslims or to that of “false” Muslims, or unbelievers. The former—those who accept and are committed to its jihadist worldview—form the “white” side of its world map, while the latter category, the “black” side, are framed as infidels who should be killed as a religious obligation.

ISIS has combined its notion of totality with *threat framing* and *militant framing* in its visual marketing campaign. It has not hesitated to show the most extreme, shocking, and horrifying images (such as burning alive a Jordanian pilot), with no filters or limitations, as a means of stimulating the strongest possible emotional response—whether fear and horror, or bloodlust and delight in violence, among its followers and opponents alike.

With the notion of totality at its foundation, ISIS has communicated absolutist concepts and strong, unequivocal messages to project strength, gain credibility and visibility, and assert its religious authority and legitimacy, thus fostering radicalization. By means of this strategy, ISIS has sought to assert its right to interpret Islam on behalf the global Muslim community and promote jihad, while positioning all other interpretations and understandings as corrupt deviations from “true” Islam.

***4.3.2 The Utopian Ideal of the* Ummah**

While the idea of the *ummah* has been part of the very DNA of Islam and Islamic consciousness since the seventh century, as a utopian ideal of the Muslim collective, ISIS has striven to impose a radical interpretation of the idea, claiming that the *ummah* is to be instituted in the here and now as an authentic Islamic caliphate[[48]](#endnote-48). The Islamic caliphate was to be a real-life embodiment of the *ummah* as a “community of true believers,” a united collective with a “pure” Islamic identity governed solely by Sharia law.

In line with its utopian vision and the “white” side of its framing strategy, ISIS used a combination of *gain framing* and *peaceful framing* to emphasize the utopian ideal of the *ummah*. It embedded the utopian narrative in its videos by showing workers in the caliphate paving roads, providing medical care, and even running a five-star hotel in Mosul, with the aim of inspiring its followers and giving them a sense of belonging, solidarity and participating in a meaningful real-world project.

In a similar vein, ISIS chose to portray daily life in the Islamic state using vivid colors, bright lighting effects, and uplifting music, in order to reinforce its presentation of the caliphate as a smoothly functioning society with effective government and policing, a happy place far removed from the images of war and brutality projected by its enemies. In doing so, it sought to foster a positive impression of its utopian Islamic state and to promote radicalization, project strength, and gain confidence and legitimacy for its doctrine.

As a contrast with this positive portrayal of the caliphate as a victorious and successful entity, ISIS used *loss framing* to delegitimize Arab leaders and regimes, and portrayed in “black” hues the negative aspects of life in the secular Arab nation-states, the very existence of which it considered heresy. It deliberately used negative lighting effects and gloomy colors to depict the lives of Muslims in these countries, and made repeated use of loaded terms such as the “oppression,” “neglect,” and “disenfranchisement” of Muslim peoples, while highlighting the corruption and corrupting influence of their political leaders.

ISIS also used a combination of *gain framing* and *peaceful framing*, in various ways, to highlight the social-communal aspect of the Islamic caliphate, portraying it as a unifying force that brought together true Muslims believers from diverse countries and cultures, and in which “ISIS Islam” acted as the glue that bound them together. Indeed, this focus on the unifying character of the caliphate enabled ISIS to create an in-group identity and portray it as a “home” (albeit virtual) for its members and followers around the world, one providing a sense of meaning, belonging, and solidarity and in which they felt accepted, loved, and protected.

This was sharply contrasted with the “black” side, in which ISIS used a combination of *loss framing* and *threat framing* to highlight divisions within the Muslim world and to present a dystopian portrayal of the lives of Muslims in Arab and Western countries, enduring alienation and oppression and living as “strangers in their own land.” These scenes were of course shown in dark colors, with gloomy lighting and downbeat music, reinforcing the message that these poor unfortunate souls were helpless and victims of their circumstances—in stark contrast to the strong, active heroes of the caliphate.

***4.3.3 The Concept of Global Jihad***

Jihad is viewed by ISIS as a total, long-term, and uncompromising global military struggle fought simultaneously on various fronts (both in the real world and online) in order to destroy the existing political and religious world order and establish a global Islamic state. In its view, Islam’s strength and status can only be restored by pursuing a radical change in Muslim public consciousness, a total negation and rejection of all foreign influences, ideologies, and perceptions, and total adherence to its “authentic” interpretation of Sharia law.

In line with its black-and white strategy, ISIS frequently uses *gain framing* along with emotive Islamic symbols and metaphors to explain that jihad is not an imperialistic struggle aimed at conquering territories and exploiting material resources, or at achieving national, organizational, or personal objectives, but rather a defensive struggle for Islamic principles and ideas and against foreign values and ideologies that are contrary to its jihadist interpretation. In this light, it presents itself in “white” as the sole protector of Islam and the true bearer of the most genuine form of Sunni Islam, contrasting with the “black” side of the moderate Muslims and all other groups.

ISIS deliberately uses a combination of *loss framin*g and *militant framing* to emphasize the scope of killings and injuries inflicted by its enemies, especially on innocent children. It employs stark images and inflammatory negative language (such as “devastation” and “genocide”) in order not only to condemn its enemies and undermine their legitimacy, but also to strengthen its followers’ identification and solidarity with ISIS and to legitimize its operations.

Indeed, ISIS’s black-and-white messages have been carefully tailored to justify its call to global jihad and present this as an obligation, while simultaneously framing its martyrdom operations and terrorist attacks as acts of revenge and self-defense. It has used *threat framing* along with theological terms such as “judgment day” to describe the armed struggle in Syria as an apocalyptic confrontation between Allah and His enemies. The organization has purposefully exaggerated the threat posed by the “enemies of Islam” and presented its struggles as ultimate battles of good against evil. By implanting apocalyptic Islamic themes such as “Crusaders” and “apocalyptic struggle,” and stressing the imminent arrival of the end of days and the inevitable confrontation between the “true” Muslims and the infidels, ISIS created an apocalyptic atmosphere in order to foster a sense of anxiety, urgency, and panic.

The unique way in which ISIS positively framed the benefits derived from supporting jihad was designed to promote radicalization and encourage identification with its rigid, extremist ideology. Thus, it used *gain framing* toportray its doctrine as a means of gaining personal significance, purpose, and respect, as well as a strong sense of security. In addition, it employed *threat framing* and made sophisticated use of the most extreme, shocking, and horrifying images possible (including graphic visuals of beheadings and executions) to tap into its audiences’ deepest fears, hopes, and desires in order to serve its own jihadist ends. This strategy sought to stimulate the strongest possible emotional response—whether fear and horror among its enemies, or bloodlust and delight in violence among its supporters.

***4.3.4 The Death Ethos***

ISIS calls for a total war to the death, which it portrays as an exalted value, the ultimate way to defend eternal truth and to purge Islam of internal and external infidels. The organization offers an extremist interpretation of the Islamic principle of *takfir*[[49]](#endnote-49), the excommunication of anyone considered an infidel, insisting that anyone who is not a “true believer” (even those who consider themselves devout Muslims) can and should be put to death. Accordingly, ISIS’s “true believers” are committed to an ethos of death, as manifested in martyrdom operations, lethal terrorist attacks, and brutal killings[[50]](#endnote-50).

ISIS has skillfully deployed a combination of *gain framing* and *militant framing* to portray the willingness to kill and be killed as an expression of power and strength. Its glorification of the death ethos is used in tandem with its totality principal (and the accompanying hatred for other peoples and values) to convey its scorn and contempt for the value of human life, which it depicts as a foreign, infidel concept. As part of its black-and-white strategy, ISIS highlights the gulf between its own “true believers” and the “enemies of Islam,” and contrasts its sacred ethos of death with the sanctity accorded the value of life in the West. Thus, the love of death is depicted in “white” and positioned as being stronger than the fear of death, which characterizes the “infidels” and is depicted in “black.”

Repeatedly emphasizing the benefits of the death ethos as a source of physical and military strength, and as a sign of its followers’ strong belief in their cause and sense of significance and satisfaction, ISIS stresses the power of belief and the belief in power as manifested in them.

**5. Deradicalization From ISIS’S Ideology Using the Framing Approach**

In the previous chapter, I explained how ISIS has enjoyed huge success in its radicalization efforts by applying an extremist “black-and-white” conceptual approach and using particular framing techniques in each of the four main elements of its jihadist ideology: the notion of totality, the utopian ideal of the *ummah*, the concept of jihad, and the death ethos. Efforts at deradicalization—shifting ISIS’s target audience away from extreme values and beliefs and toward more moderate-mainstream perceptions—will therefore need to address each of these elements and apply alternative framing techniques in order to counter the appeal of ISIS’s powerful messaging.

The logic underlying this alternative framing approach is the assumption that ideology and messaging plays a primary role in drawing individuals toward violent extremism and terrorism, and that the attraction of militant messages, values, and ideas can be undermined by fostering alternative ways of thinking which are rooted in the value of diversity (as opposed to extremist orientations, which tolerate no diversity and accept no compromise)[[51]](#endnote-51). Thus, the transformation from supporting/engaging in terrorism to fighting terrorism occurs through adaption of an open-minded approach and complex thinking[[52]](#endnote-52), instead of the simple, black-and-white thinking[[53]](#endnote-53).

Presenting a strong, alternative framework of values such as community, solidarity, peace and tolerance, along with well-founded and persuasive moderate-mainstream interpretations of religious and ideological tenets, is the bases for promoting a rich discourse that can counter radical values and beliefs[[54]](#endnote-54). Such a discourse counteracts the hatred and polarization inherent in extremist narratives, and strengthens the ability of audiences to resist the attraction of extremist messages.

In this section, then, I present alternatives to ISIS’s interpretations of Islamic values and current realities, through the prism of these four main elements, and suggest framing approach that may be effective in promoting these interpretations and combatting ISIS’s jihadist message. To do so, I use a new conceptual framework that incorporates the framing techniques described above, along with two new and innovative framing techniques that I first introduce here:

* **Conformity/non-conformity framing**—The use of various textual and visual phrases, symbols, and metaphors to describe the extent to which the behavior of the individual complies with the group’s or community’s ideas, perceptions, and codes of behaviors. As such, we can categorize terms such as “solidarity,” “belonging,” and “following” under conformity framing, while terms such as “uniqueness,” “individuality,” and “rebellion” fall into the non-conformity category.
* **Traditional/revolutionary framing**—The use of a variety of images, symbols, metaphors, and phrases such as “old-fashioned,” “nostalgic,” and “continuity” to describe a traditional orientation in relation to a range of situations, perceptions, and behaviors; or alternatively, the use of terms such as “novelty,” “futuristic,” and “reform” to describe a revolutionary orientation.

**5.1 Alternative Perceptions to the Jihadist Ideology**

Islam has been split since its earliest days by an internal struggle between two main camps: Sunni Islam, to which most of the Muslim world belongs (about 85–90% of Muslims), and the minority Shi’ite camp (around 10–15%)[[55]](#endnote-55). There is also an internal Sunni conflict, between radical Islam (led by the global Salafist-jihadist movement comprising ISIS and its precursor, al-Qaeda, among others) and moderate-mainstream Islam (influenced by democratic and Western values). The absence of a structured, monolithic religious authority and the co-existence of multiple interpretations of Islam has resulted in contested ideologies and perceptions (a war of ideas) about which interpretation is correct, fostering debates and conflicts over authority, legitimacy, and the leadership of “pure” Islam[[56]](#endnote-56). Arguably, such debates—with positions ranging from moderate-mainstream perceptions to extreme-fanatic ideologies such as jihadism and “*takfirism*”—have existed since the earliest generation of Muslims[[57]](#endnote-57).

Given that this multiplicity of perceptions and interpretations of Islam is a common characteristic throughout the vast majority the Muslim world, comprising 1.8 billion Muslims, there are many moderate alternatives to ISIS’s extremist messages. For the purposes of this article, I will present one of these mainstream interpretations (the “pluralistic approach”) and demonstrate how various framing techniques can be used to promote deradicalization. As above, the focus will be on the four main elements of ISIS’s war of ideas.

**5.2 Reframing the Four Components of the War of Ideas**

***5.2.1 The Notion of Totality***

ISIS’s binary worldview, which is based on an extremist interpretation of Sharia law, delegitimizes and rejects any alternative religious interpretations, including other forms of Sunni Islam as well as secular ideologies, beliefs, values, norms, and practices, all of which it designates as “infidel.” By contrast, much of the mainstream Muslim world is characterized by a pluralist approach, in which multiple interpretations of scriptures and variations of legitimate identities, ideologies, and ideas have developed and thrived alongside one another for fourteen centuries.

**Challenging the notion of totality via framing:**

* *Traditional framing* can be used toemphasize the fact that the vast majority of Muslims over the last 1400 years have followed this pluralistic approach, which gives the individual believer much scope in choosing their source of religious inspiration, guidance and education.
* *Gain framing* can be employed to present the tolerance mainstream Islam as the giver of grace, well-being, tranquility, and happiness and emphasize the benefits of having multiple national, ethnic, and cultural identities in addition to the religious Muslim identity, complementing it and contributing to one’s ability to lead an abundant and meaningful life.
* By contrast, ISIS’s totality approach should be framed using *loss framing*, to emphasize the drawbacks of a harsh and homogeneous interpretation of Islam that negates and rejects any evolution and development of ideas and of the self.

***5.2.2 The Utopian Ideal of the* Ummah**

ISIS’s interpretation of the religious ideal of the *ummah* contradicts common Islamic beliefs according to which the foundation of the caliphate is a future utopian goal that is dependent on the will of Allah alone, and which cannot be hastened by man. In addition, there is no single legitimate authority, universal political entity, or framework to unite the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims, nor is there any consensus about the religious-political identity of the *ummah* as a real-world structure of governance[[58]](#endnote-58). This situation coexists with broad acceptance of the national and regional character of different Muslim populations around the world, which form the basis for the entities currently governed by various monarchies, republics, and dictatorships.

**Promoting an alternative interpretation of the *ummah* ideal via framing:**

* *Conformity framing* can be used to frame the *ummah* as a “universal religious community” that is part of the very DNA of Islam and Islamic consciousness, and to emphasize its communal-social aspect, as adopted by Muslims around the globe to transcend their national, cultural, and ethnic differences. In addition, *revolutionary framing* can be employed to highlight the possibilities for developing and experiencing the *ummah* as a welcoming and vibrant transnational community via social media, online platforms, and virtual communities. (This aspect has been a feature of Muslim communities’ attempts worldwide to overcome the limitations of social distancing during the recent coronavirus epidemic.) These positive portrayals of the moderate-mainstream Islamic version of *ummah*, as accepted by the vast majority of the Muslim world, can counteract ISIS’s extremist interpretation of this ideal.
* In a similar vein, *traditional framing* can be used to emphasize the fact that the idea of the *ummah* as a real-world political entity was never realized throughout Islamic history, and to stress that it has been a futuristic utopian goal of Islam since its inception some 1400 years ago, and is accepted as such by the entire Muslim world.
* By contrast, *loss framing* can be employed to present the real, actual dystopian nature of life in the Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, thus emphasizing ISIS’s lies and manipulations and debunking its interpretation and implementation of the ideal of *ummah*.
* This same technique can also be used to present the collapse of the caliphate as proof that it was not established by a divine order, but rather was a result of its leaders’ materialistic desires and their passion for political and religious authority and power. In this way, *loss framing* can be used to present ISIS’s interpretation of *ummah* as illegitimate, and to denounce the organization itself as unti-Islamic, corrupt, and overly brutal.

***5.2.3 The Concept of Global Jihad***

Over recent centuries, an enormous quantity of literature on jihad has been published, and yet no solid consensus has ever been reached regarding this multifaceted religious creed, which literally means “struggle” (for the sake of Allah)[[59]](#endnote-59). ISIS’s interpretation of this concept is strongly opposed by the vast majority of Muslims, who alternatively claim that jihad is an internal struggle to be undertaken by the individual in order to strengthen one’s own faith.

**Promoting an alternative interpretation of jihad via framing:**

* The mainstream approach in Islam explains that faith is a virtue, a precious foundation for all individuals and all aspects of life, and a key component of being a “good Muslim.” *Gain framing* can be used to emphasize the benefits derived from strong belief, namely self-fulfillment, strength, and peace of mind. *Traditional framing* can be used to emphasize the significance attributed to faith throughout the history of Islam.
* *Loss framing* can be applied to ISIS’s interpretation of the concept of jihad, to emphasize the harmful aspect of its destructive militant orientation and highlight its preference of (militant/coercive) action over faith, as the only solution to creating welfare for a society governed by Islamic law. Alongside this, *threat framing* can be used to position ISIS’s approach not only as illegitimate but as a direct threat to Islam and to Muslims everywhere.
* By deploying a combination of the above framing techniques, it is possible to explain that ISIS has not only diminished the significance of Islamic faith, but also recruited to its ranks (and given prominent roles to) novices in Islam who have no real knowledge and understanding of jihad as an Islamic value (in the personal, religious sense), and falsely portrayed them as faithful Muslims and ”true believers.”
* In contrast to ISIS’s approach, *peaceful framing* and *traditional framing* can be used to present an open-mindedness alternative which sees Islam as a peaceful religion that uses peaceful ways to achieve political and social change, using legitimate means instead of coercion and force.
* ISIS’s militant approach is framed by its leaders as a defensive struggle aimed at protecting Sharia law. This can be countered by maintaining this idea of defending Islam against external threats but presenting it in a very different light. *Peaceful framing* can be used to emphasize the importance of strong faith in Islam as the most effective way to protect and guarantee Islam’s continuity. In addition, *loss framing* can be deployed to delegitimize ISIS and emphasize the gap between how it frames the concept of jihad on a declarative level, and how it actually implements in in practice.

***5.2.4 The Death Ethos***

ISIS’s ethos of death, as part of its fanatic interpretation of jihad, is strongly opposed by the vast majority of Muslims. Not only has its radicalism posed a direct threat to all Muslims around the world, its interpretations are in stark opposition to the accepted system of belief in moderate-mainstream Islam. For the vast majority of Muslims, a true believer is one who engages in a variety of devotional and social practices in day-to-day life while respecting the value of human life—their own, and that of others. This is considered the real spirit of Islam, while ISIS’s interpretation and actions are seen as violating this spirit[[60]](#endnote-60).

**Promoting an alternative to the death ethos via framing:**

* Throughout the history of Islam, moderate-mainstream perceptions have fostered the value of life as a “good” Muslim and encouraged investing in art, science, and the humanities, as part of a flourishing Islamic civilization. For a faithful Muslim, self-fulfillment means living an abundant, meaningful religious life according to Sharia law. This approach, and its advantages, can be promoted using *gain framing* and *traditional framing*.
* By contrast, ISIS’s ethos of death should be framed using a combination of *threat framing* and *loss framing* to emphasize the tragedy of loss of life and loss of the opportunity to live the life of a “true believer.” In a similar vein, this combination can be applied to emphasize the negative impacts ISIS caused toward the Muslim world, the incalculable suffering it has inflicted on hundreds of thousands of people, the catastrophic damage its battles have caused to physical, political, and social infrastructures.

**6. Conclusion**

The spread of extreme ideologies around the globe poses a significant threat to world security. This proliferation can be attributed to multiple political, social, technological, and other contextual factors and circumstances. In particular, the rise of social media and its huge influence on social interactions and people’s exposure to ideas and information has been a significant accelerant in the process of radicalization. Thus, in the war of ideas between moderate-mainstream Islam and extreme jihadist doctrines, it is vital that we develop and apply effective deradicalization tools as a means for improving global security.

As explained, ISIS skillfully applies the tool of framing to facilitate the successful radicalization of millions of people around the globe, translating its abstract ideology into a tangible, concrete “product” consumed by masses in multiple territories and cultures. Framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communications in order to promote a particular interpretation. It acts as a “discursive lens” because “online communicative interactions constitute discursive practices that serve as a mechanism for publics to shape and construct their own opinions by sharing and discussing social media content, and even by giving meaning to experiences.”[[61]](#endnote-61) By deploying such a lens, it is possible to shape an audience’s perceptions, polarize their support, and drive their transformation and change of consciousness.

In this article, I presented a conceptual framework for using framing to counter ISIS’s jihadist messages and advance deradicalization efforts. I explained how various framing techniques can be used to highlight the appeal of mainstream Islamic ideas and to delegitimize extremist interpretations and ideologies, and thus to help shift ISIS’s jihadist ideology toward other, more moderate interpretations of Islam. These insights and techniques should be of interest not only to Muslim institutions, media outlets, and communities worldwide, but also to the governments and intelligence services of the many countries invested in fighting radicalization within their own borders.

Further research is required in order to propose tailored implementation of this conceptual framework in various geographies and cultures, and potentially to enrich it with additional components alongside the framing approach. The suitability of the framing approach described here for addressing other ideologies is also a subject for additional research, with huge potential for significant results.

Of course, it should be noted that, in the context of the overall struggle against extremism, jihadism and terrorism, the conceptual framework proposed in this article forms only one part of the overall set of responses required in various other important dimensions—such as the social, political, economic, and technological arenas—using media and marketing strategies. I plan to address these dimensions in future articles.

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