

Countering Violent Extremism in the Middle East: A Regional Perspective and Plan for Action

Munich, Wurzburg, Nice, Jeddeh, Medina, Baghdad, Paris, Orlando, San Bernardino, Brussels...by the time you read this article, the list of cities experiencing an event linked to violent extremism has probably doubled. Nations and communities are struggling to find programs, projects, and activities that prevent recruitment or radicalization to violence by interrupting those efforts, building community-level resilience, identifying the early signs of radicalization to violence, and providing appropriate interventions through civic organizations, law enforcement or other entities.

The path to radicalization is not fully understood. Various professionals, scientists, and researchers have reached different conclusions on the process. For the purpose of this paper, radicalization is the thought process that brings an individual to the point of violence for a given cause. Since radicalization is driven by an individual's thought process, it is a local phenomenon influenced by local factors. Many local factors driving radicalization are common to all radicalizations, whether they occur in a Middle East country or a Western country.

With suffering and conflict increasing daily on all levels, even well-intentioned leaders are tempted to over simplify what cannot be fully understand, focusing excessively on minor distractions of daily events and drifting toward some convenient intellectual extreme. It is a constant struggle to rebalance one's positions, resume analysis of meaningful, underlying trends, and attempt to act responsibly. At the heart of this effort is a need for honesty and humility, acknowledging failures and limitations, and accepting the inability to fully comprehend, let alone effectively correct, the course of all events.

The current trend in the region, however, has been in the opposite direction. Most initiatives are self-centered and fuel the causes of instability. Behind all of this posturing are arguments of good versus evil - typically summarized in the language of "stability versus terrorism" - whereby states attempt to reduce the daily chaos to one or two irreconcilable enemies, one or two overarching goals and however many direct or proxy wars appear necessary to suppress the former and achieve the latter. In other words, keep it simple: pick your enemy, ignore all else, and it will finally make sense.¹ The reality, of course, is precisely the opposite. In a region so chaotic and fluid, myopic policies will unfailingly make matters worse, compounding polarization when

¹ Harling, Peter and Alex Simon. The West in the Arab World, Between Ennui and Ecstasy. Retrieved from <http://arabist.net/blog/2015/12/16/the-west-in-the-arab-world-between-ennui-and-ecstasy>, December 16, 2015.

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success rests on building bridges. The result has been a dizzying spectrum of overlapping and ever-shifting alliances, rivalries, and proxy wars that regional and international players continue to escalate despite usually lacking an end game.

In this sense, this document outlines a paradigm shift of ideas. Providing a framework to address the strategic and operational causes and effects of violent extremism in the region. This paradigm shift of ideas is rooted in the societal fabric of the region and the basic fibers of human nature. Human nature impacts the beings that we are. Scientific theories of the cosmos can be predictive because the cosmos is indifferent to our theories; however, scientific theories of humanity are continuously impacted by the environments we create, because human nature is created much more than it is discovered. We design human nature by designing and creating the institutions within which people live and work. Leaders need to ask, what kind of human nature they want to design, because leaders shape the institutions within which people live, work, and comprehend. Understanding not only creates things, it creates ideas - ways of comprehending, how we think, how we act, and what we aspire to. For example, if you think that your poverty is god's will, you pray; if you think your poverty is your own inadequacies, you shrink to despair; and if you think your poverty is the result of oppression and domination, you rise up to revolt. This is the role ideas play. In the technology of things, if the science is bad, it just vanishes. But in the technology of ideas, false ideas will not go away if people believe they are true. Our challenge is to provide the truth of the ideas that form the societal fabric of the region and the basic fibers of human nature for the people living in the region.

As a fundamental truth, the Islamic faith is the dominant ideology shaping the societal fabric of the region and the basic fibers of human nature for the majority of the population of Middle East. For several decades, this region has been ravaged by wars. These wars are motivated by religious ideas. But it is not a war against Islam. It is a war within Islam that has allowed Takfari-Jihadi Islamism to fuel extremist violence.

This report provides a strategic vision for confronting Takfari-Jihadi Islamism and the resulting layers of conflict stemming from this ideological and religious struggle. The strategic vision defines the goals set forth (The Ends), the methods implemented to reach those goals (The Ways), and the resources required to support the proposed methods (The Means), and the supporting intellectual analysis that will convince various entities to support achievement of those goals. Above all, war needs a goal and a plan. The plan itself requires a proper understanding of the enemy and then a definition of what victory over the enemy looks like. Using the proven theories of Clausewitz, an enemy center of gravity analysis and subsequent mission analysis

forms the intellectual process at the core of this study. A comprehensive plan must have many components, each corresponding to a dimension or aspect of the greater war.

VISION STATEMENT FOR COUNTER-RADICALIZATION

Goal: Use multiple forms of media to prevent extremist entities from telescoping Islam into the Takfari-Jihadi Islamist way of thinking and to preserve the way of life of free and open societies, and create a global environment unsupportive of extremist organizations which use terrorism.

Method/Key Tasks: The priority task is to prevent radical Islamic organizations and networks which use terrorism to achieve their goals of telescoping Islam into the Takfari-Jihadi Islamist way of thinking. This is achieved through the simultaneous execution of the following tasks:

1. Cut funding to extremist groups;
2. Educate the populations;
3. Contain extremists through political engagement and education;
4. Isolate radical Islamic organizations from the resources needed to operate and survive (Resources: leadership, foot soldiers, safe havens, weapons, funds, comms & movement, access to targets, and ideological support);
5. Support and enable partner nations to counter radical Islamic terror organizations;
6. Secure state and non-state support to counter radical Islamic terror organizations in coordination with other agencies and partner nations;
7. Retain conditions that allow partner nations to govern their territory effectively and maintain a global anti-terrorist environment.

End State. Partners have preserved an environment of political, ideological and economic freedom across the globe. Partner nations govern their territories to prevent a resurgence of violent extremist organizations. Radical and violent Islamic ideology is discredited in the eyes of the world's Muslims. This environment is measured by the following Termination Criteria:

1. Radical Islamic organizations are incapable or unwilling to telescope Islamic thought into Takfari-Jihadi Islamist way of thinking.
2. Attacks against the coalition and partners are defeated or interdicted.
3. Partner nations possess the capability and capacity to counter radical Islamic terror organizations within their territory – particularly in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Asian Littoral.

4. Partner nations possess the capability and capacity to secure their borders and transit zones, to assist in denying enemy organizations the resources needed to operate and survive.

5. Partner nations possess a secure and stable environment to discredit violent extremist ideology in the eyes of the world's Muslims, and non-extremist models of moderation within the Muslim world have popular, vocal support.

Operational Concept: To implement the vision, an overarching narrative and process of engagement is required. During engagement, the cardinal rule must be to 'tweak' or 'fix' the perceptions and thought processes, not to destroy the thinking: trails of dead people just leads to more recruits as their relatives and friends rise up for revenge. In other words, wherever possible, engage the ideas, do not target the person. Today's enemy, with some kindness and proper Islamic scholarship, could be tomorrow's friend, and may abandon takfiri thought, and even become an ambassador against it. Equally, it is also absolutely necessary that the rest of the world does not overreact and target all Muslims as such.

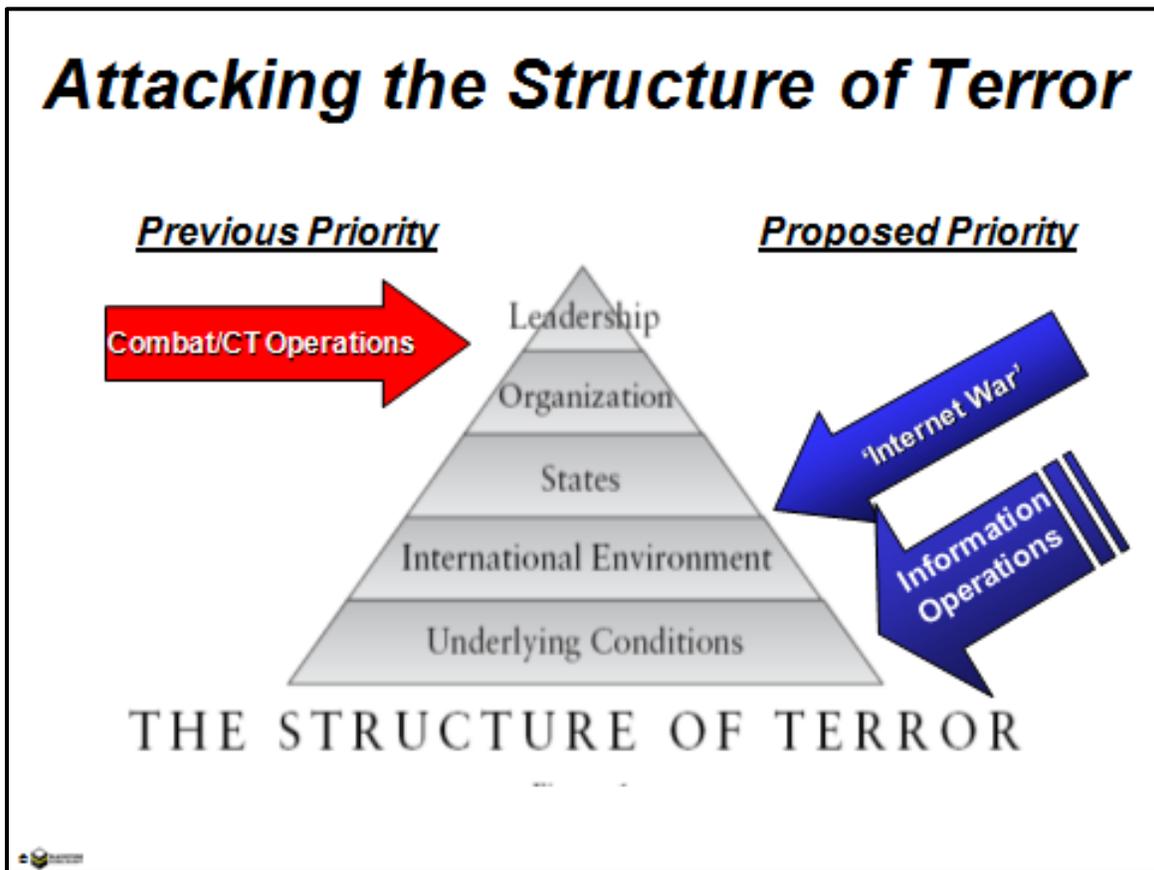


Figure 1: Attacking the Structure of Terror

Enemy Center of Gravity Analysis: Today, the principal enemy is a transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks, and individuals which exploit Islam and use terrorism for ideological ends. This transnational movement is not monolithic. Early in this conflict, the enemy was defined by the organization named Al-Qaeda. Today it is primarily defined by the organization or 'state' named DAESH (ISIS or ISIL). Fueled by a radical ideology, these enemies seek to expel Western power and influence from the Muslim world and establish regimes that rule according to a violent and intolerant distortion of Islam. The strategic center of gravity for the enemy is his extremist ideology. This ideology motivates anger and resentment and justifies, in the extremists' eyes, the use of violence to achieve strategic goals and objectives. This pushes us to define an enemy in the context of his religious tendency – specifically, the distortion of the Islamic faith through radical extremist beliefs. This is not a palatable action, as most nations and societies are not comfortable with internal religious issues, let alone defining an enemy in the context of how he implements his religious beliefs. Notwithstanding this discomfort, we only weaken our ability to address our enemy's center of gravity if we fail to define him for what he represents.

From this ideological center of gravity, the enemy derives critical capabilities which perpetuate his success. Indoctrination is a critical capability linked to his center of gravity which provides radical Islamic organizations with the ability to take advantage of the Islamic culture, religious, educational, and governmental systems around the globe to dominate and mislead the world's Muslims with a religiously based intolerance of non-Muslim cultures. Leadership is a critical capability because it links the extremist ideology and the Muslim people to a shared purpose, thus providing operational capability and long-term vitality. Communications is a critical capability because of its ability to shape the environment. It is the key to reinforcing the preconceptions believed by the audiences (both Muslim and non-Muslim) so as to maintain legitimacy of the cause, develop leaders, recruit followers and support, and maintain the will of the faithful. This capability also strikes at the will of the west and moderate Muslims - engendering fear, hesitation, or denial of threat. Networks are a critical capability, as they allow the enemy global reach, access and interconnectivity to strike at western and moderate Muslim's interests with strategic effect. Finally, the will of radical Islamic believers is a critical capability because it strengthens the radical Islamic struggle to continue despite the difficulty, hardship, and enormity of the endeavor to destroy the western influence in the Middle East. An enemy with this center of gravity and these critical capabilities is best defined as -- radical Islamic organizations and networks which use terrorism to achieve their goals.

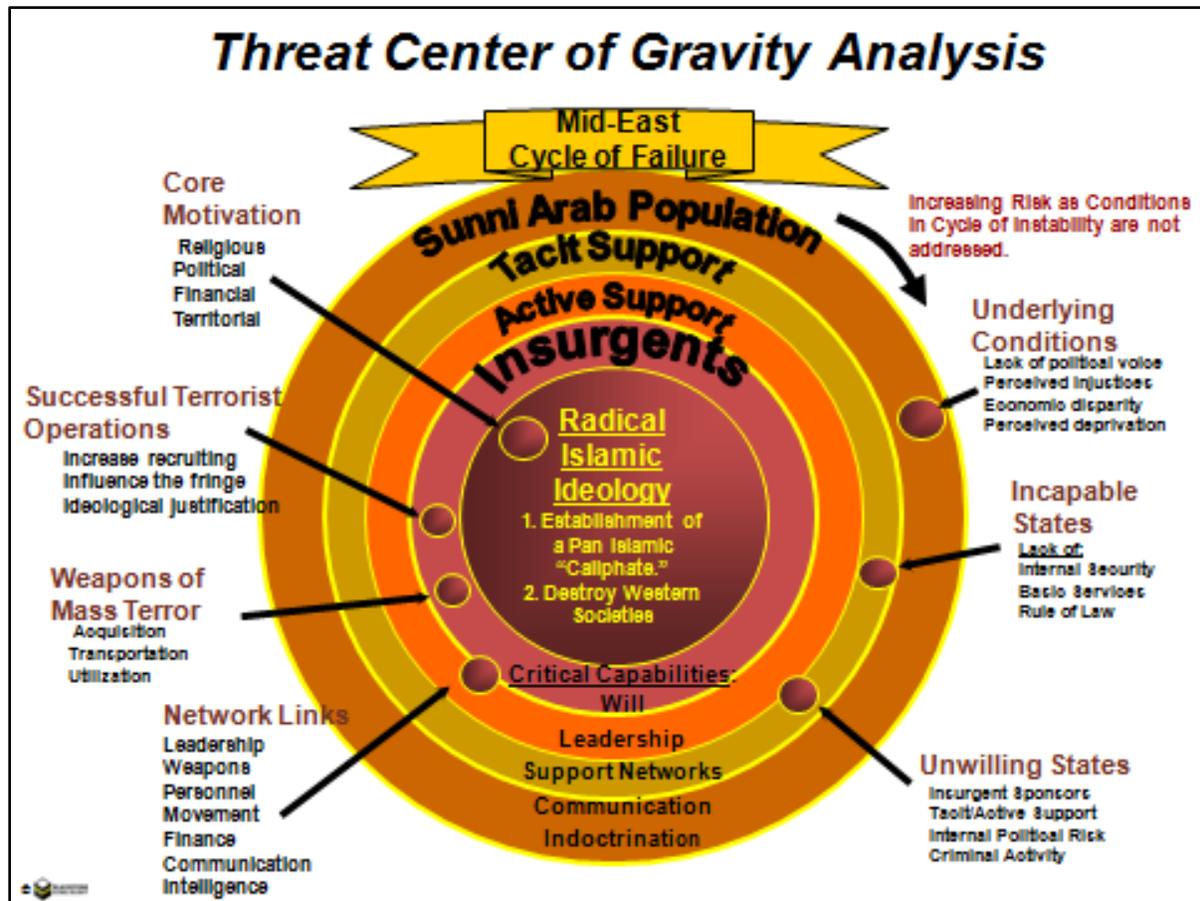


Figure 2: Threat Center of Gravity Analysis

Campaign Framework: As stated by Clausewitz, “the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” As identified earlier, the enemy center of gravity and many of his critical capabilities rest upon his ability to control the world’s Muslim population. This control allows him to achieve his end state of: The West successfully ejected (politically, militarily, economically and socially) from the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Egypt; apostate regimes removed from power; and a Sharia-based Caliphate in place. Using the fundamentals of counterinsurgency operations facilitates developing our strategic, conceptual framework. This drives development of a strategic framework to fight a Global Counterinsurgency against radical Islamic organizations and networks which use terrorism to achieve their goals.

By understanding that this conflict is a counterinsurgency, focus is directed on the decisive point for this global campaign, which is the world’s Muslim population. The world’s Muslim population becomes decisive as it is the essential audience and element of the enemy center of

gravity - radical Islamism. Of particular importance is the moderate, majority of the world's Muslim population which exists in the disputed regions of the world. We can only gain control of this decisive point by building a strategic campaign framework as a counterinsurgency fight. Also, as part of a counterinsurgency, the campaign framework requires synchronized application of military, diplomatic, economic, ideological, psychological, and civic actions. It is important to note that military efforts are only one part of many efforts executed by multiple entities prosecuting this war.

Military counterinsurgency doctrine provides a useful method for developing a strategic global campaign. This doctrine directs the use of Logical Lines of Operation (LLOs) in the design of counterinsurgency operations. A plan based on LLOs unifies the efforts of joint, interagency, multinational, and allied forces toward a common purpose. Each LLO represents a conceptual category along which all agencies and partner nations intend to attack the insurgent strategy. For the current fight, the campaign framework is composed of seven LLOs: information operations, 'internet war' operations, education, economic development, infrastructure development, combat/counter-terror operations, and intelligence/homeland security operations.

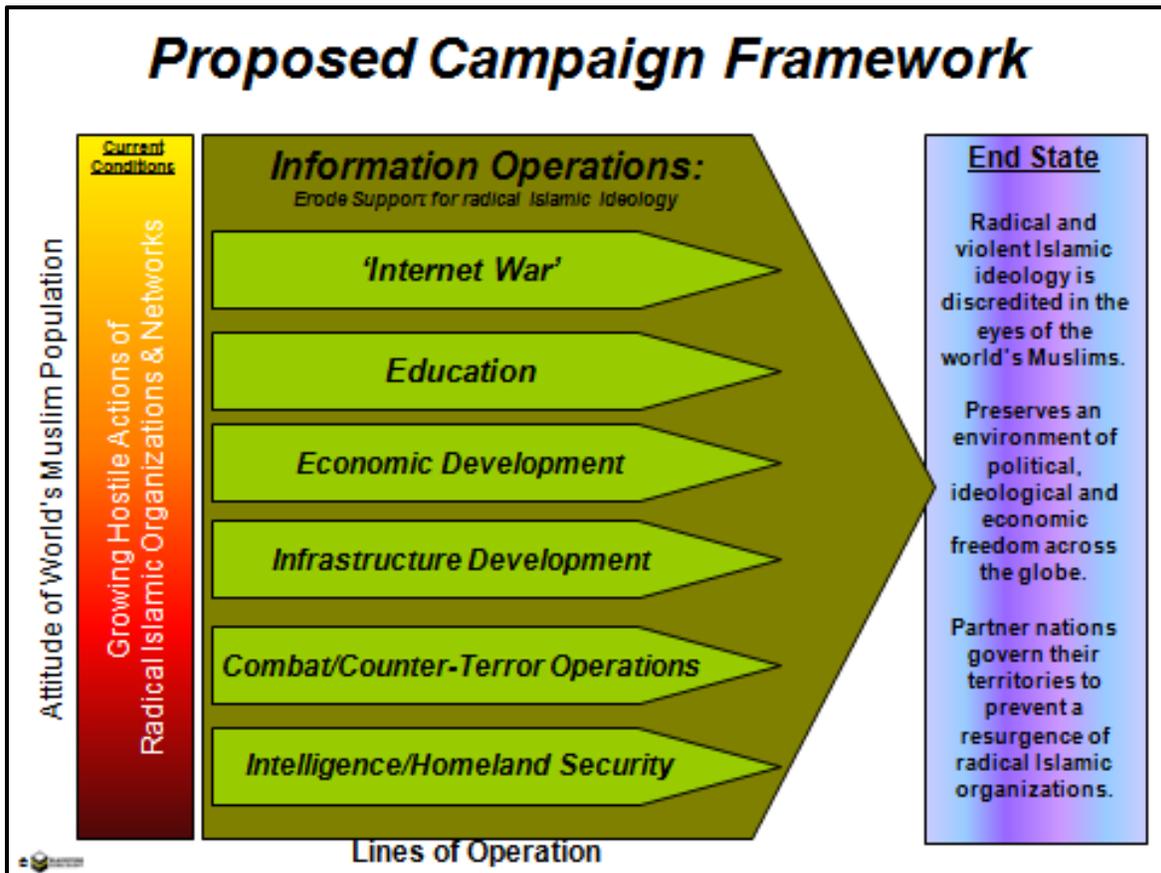


Figure 3: Proposed Campaign Framework

The Combat Operations LLO has been the international communities' main effort in the first fifteen years of the war. This line of operation consists of those actions, both offensive and defensive, designed to exploit our enemies' vulnerabilities. Actions along this line of operation will disrupt the ability of radical Islamic organizations to operate effectively over time. These actions will be focused on attacking the network infrastructure and leadership that provides the enemy global access and connectivity. These actions will attack the organizations and the resources they need to operate and survive over the long-term. Actions along this line will prevent radical Islamic organizations from obtaining the resources and access necessary to attack.

The Intelligence/Homeland Security LLO consists of those actions, both offensive and defensive, taken to deter the enemy from conducting future attacks. Actions along this line will be executed to protect and support our strategic centers of gravity – Humanity's Will to Resist Terror, International Legitimacy, and the Global Economy. Actions will deny the enemy the opportunity to strike by protecting critical government capabilities, by denying the enemy the opportunity to strike. As in the first LLO, actions along this line of operation will provide sufficient time to allow the efforts from the other lines of operation to become mature enough to provide the necessary effects to defeat the radical Islamic threats.

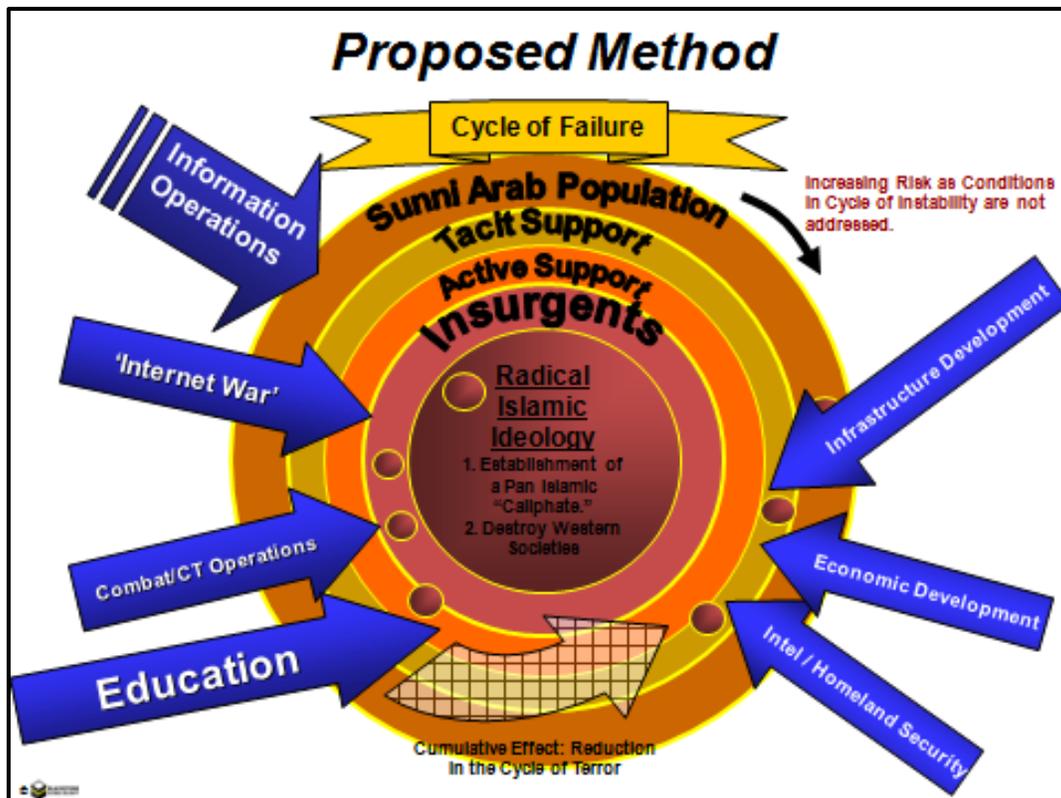


Figure 4: Proposed Lines of Operation Focused on Enemy Vulnerabilities

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The Infrastructure Development LLO consists of those actions taken to build societal capacity so that underlying conditions which breed population discontent are reduced. These efforts improve a nation's ability to govern in the framework of the rule of law. This is not an effort to model one system throughout the world. Instead it needs to be tailored to match internally assessed priorities. This effort is founded upon partner nation legitimacy. Legitimacy can only be obtained by the actions of the governments supporting these efforts.

The Economic Development line of effort consists of those actions, as a part of a larger international effort, which stimulates partner nation's economic status in the global economy. Improving the economic conditions at the campaign's decisive point – the world's Muslim population in contested areas – will make radical Islamic organizations less appealing to people who have no hope of a stable life. In this line of operation, in addition to building allied capacity, attacks will be made against financial sources of support for radical Islamic organizations. Actions taken along this line of operation must identify the sources of support, the nature of support (active or tacit) and the means to deter those sources over time.

The Education line of effort consists of those actions which provide a truthful common understanding of societal/cultural/religious issues involved in the conflict and the MENA region. It consists of an internal and an external component. Internally, education must regain control of propagating Islamic jurisprudence. Takfari-Jihadi Islamist partisans have been combing through Hadiths for 80 years and have extricated from them all the supposed 'hadiths' they need to support their world view. In these supposed 300,000+ hadiths (remembering that the Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, was a prophet for some 23 years = 8000 days approximately, over half of which were in Mecca with very few Companions around him) anyone can find whatever they like. Moreover, Takfari-Jihadi Islamists have for 50 years been publishing and spreading their own deluxe, but doctored, editions of these books that upgrade the hadiths they like and take out the ones they don't. In short, they have been cherry-picking and pruning the hadith corpus to suit their prejudices for decades. Externally, moderate Islamic leaders must show the global community that Islam is a values-based faith that reinforces the societal fabric of any cultural it is in.

The Internet War line of effort is the decisive effort in this campaign. This overarching narrative and process will be an internet war against radical Islamic thought with four elements working together: (A) A group of senior Islamic scholars from all over the world doing the research (in different languages) on takfiri thought and hadith, refuting the former and correctly explaining the latter; then simplifying it for people. (B) Groups of young people (each attached to a senior

Islamic scholar) taking the teachings to social media, and constantly arguing the points. This group brings commitment and energy, but they do not usually know what to say and so must be driven by the works of the scholars. (C) A group of internet technical advisors and specialists advising the above. (D) A Board of Directors to (a) convene all of the above once or twice a year; (b) raise, hold and distribute funds to the groups in situ in their own projects; (c) coordinate between all of them to make sure work is not redundant and to see where the gaps are; organizing the pooling of experiences, of texts, websites, films and other resources, and, (d) most importantly, to select the scholars and groups that will receive funding.

The campaign framework's overarching effort will be Information Operations, with the understanding that the overall Narrative is linked to everything that is said and not said, done and not done. These actions focus on neutralizing the ability of radical Islamic organizations to use an extremist interpretation of Islam to justify the use of terror in pursuit of their aims; isolating violent extremist organizations from the populations that provide them freedom of action and resources; and diminishing the underlying conditions in order to reduce the tacit and active support for violent extremists over time. Efforts should be focused on the ideological vulnerabilities (i.e., showing the true effects of the enemy's actions, exploiting the enemy's mistakes, and exploiting the enemy's reliance on trust within their clandestine network infrastructure).

CONCLUSION:

- 1) Countering Violent Extremism and Information Operations are inter-connected.
- 2) Radical ideology is part and parcel of the adversary's narrative.
- 3) This ideology is challenged successfully through the use of Trusted Intermediaries from the communities in question, who retain "street credibility"; the main currency with at-risk subjects.
- 4) The practitioner implications of this adversary narrative engagement should employ/deploy Subject Matter Experts whose competencies can be leveraged for narrative management during military (or civilian law enforcement) operations.
- 5) This is very much a battle of hearts and minds, thus we must employ those approaches that appeal to both, emotion as well as intellect.

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