# Applying Psychological Theory to Public Diplomacy: How U.S. Government Programs Counter Violent Extremism

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**Abstract**: Psychological theory offers insights into the motivations of violent extremists that can inform U.S. government efforts to counter the growth and influence of violent extremist organizations. The Three Pillars of Radicalization theory authored by Kruglanski, Belanger, and Gunaratna identifies three psychological drivers of radicalization: needs, narratives, and networks. U.S. government public diplomacy agencies are well positioned to target extremist narratives and networks through informational and relational programs. A review of recent activities by the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, and U.S. Agency for Global Media identifies programs that have the potential to interrupt the radicalization process and reduce violent extremism worldwide.

The pervasiveness of digital communications and resulting global interconnectedness have allowed extremist groups to spread narratives and recruit members with relative ease. Understanding why individuals are attracted to these groups is critically important to U.S. government efforts to effectively counter them. By applying insights from psychological theory to the U.S. government's public diplomacy practices, this paper aims to identify which techniques hold the most potential to reduce the spread of violent extremist groups worldwide.

Psychologists have proposed numerous theories to explain individual pathways to extremism, including root causes and psychological traits. This paper focuses primarily on a theory published in 2019 by researchers Arie Kruglanski, Jocelyn Belanger, and Rohan Gunaratna in their book "The Three Pillars of Radicalization." This theory (also called the 3 Ns theory) builds on previous research and provides a comprehensive view of radicalization as a

process that incorporates multiple psychological drivers: needs, narratives, and networks. The theory also provides a compelling lens by which to view ongoing public engagement efforts by the U.S. government that aim to counter violent extremism.

This paper focuses on the U.S. government's lead practitioners of public diplomacy: the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the U.S. Agency for Global Media. These agencies use public engagement techniques that are broadly categorized as informational (i.e. media messaging) and relational (i.e. community-based projects). These two approaches are well suited to target the narrative and network drivers of radicalization as described in the 3 Ns theory.

This paper uses information pulled from U.S. government public documents and fact sheets to identify current government strategies and programs that counter violent extremism. All three agencies incorporate relevant psychological theory in their strategies. The paper identifies those programs that clearly target the drivers of radicalization and sorts them into a rudimentary toolbox to provide a coherent overview of the practical ways that agencies can and do counter the psychological drivers of violent extremism.

Informational programs selected for the toolbox generally focus on creating content that counters extremist groups and supports positive, truthful narratives. These programs often feature voices from target communities and are typically done jointly with the private sector, media professionals, or civil society. Relational programs in the toolbox generally provide in-person skills training and exchanges to strengthen community resilience and peacebuilding. These programs target youth, community leaders, and professionals. All of the programs – whether informational or relational – are tailored to local populations. Further work can expand the toolbox to include programs beyond those managed by the U.S. government.

**Current Psychological Research on Violent Extremism**

"Violent extremism" is defined as the infliction of violence against people or properties to achieve political, ideological, or religious goals. Individuals may engage in violent acts themselves or may support such a group's actions by other means.[1] Psychological research on violent extremism focuses on three prominent areas: root cause explanations, psychological traits, and radicalization processes.

Root cause explanations aim to identify why individuals radicalize in response to particular social or political conditions. These theories focus on causal factors that increase the likelihood that an individuals will radicalize. Most of these factors describe circumstances that create feelings of injustice or grievance. In the political sphere, root causes include corrupt governments and loss of autonomy.[2] Members of terrorist groups such as the Shining Path in Peru and the Real Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland cited political reasons for their actions.[3] In the social and religious spheres, commonly cited root causes include ethnic or religious discrimination and rapid modernization.[4] Examples include members of Shoko Asahara in Japan and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines.[5]

Root causes are best seen as contributing – but not necessary – drivers of violent extremism. They are not typically sufficient on their own to lead to violent behavior. Many individuals and groups around the world are subject to discrimination, but it is exceedingly rare

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[1] (Kruglanski, Kopetz, & and Szumowska, 2022, p. 259)
[2] (Horgan, 2014, p. 85) (Stern, 2003, p. 107)
[3] (Cronin, 2009, pp. 18, 42)
[4] (Horgan, 2014, p. 85)
[5] (Cronin, 2009, pp. 23, 27)

that they resort to violence.  For example, poverty has often been cited as a root cause of violent extremism, but studies have shown that suicide bombers and terrorist group leaders are often from the middle or upper classes of society.[6]

Researchers have also attempted to identify psychological traits that are common to individuals who resort to violent extremism.  These theories tend to assign psychopathologies, or mental and behavioral disorders, to terrorists.  Narcissism is a commonly ascribed trait, in which an individual lacks empathy and craves recognition.[7]  Researchers have also attributed paranoia to violent extremists.[8]  A 1981 study of Italian right-wing terrorists identified a common "authoritarian-extremist personality," characterized by adherence to convention, magical thinking, and emotional detachment.[9]  Others have identified depression and suicidal thinking as traits common to terrorists.[10]

As is the case with root cause explanations, psychological profiles are most useful when viewed as contributing factors.  Psychological traits are not sufficient to predict radicalization; we cannot assume that a person who has these traits will become a terrorist.[11]  In fact, it is increasingly understood that most terrorists do not have psychopathologies but are in fact ordinary people.  As noted by Kruglanski et al, "it appears now that people attracted to terrorist organizations come from all walks of life, as well as different cultures, nationalities, ideological backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses.[12]  As such, psychological traits do not generally on their own determine whether an individual will become radicalized.

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[6] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 66)
[7] (Post, 1987) (Pearlstein, 1991)
[8] (Robins & Post, 1997)
[9] (Ferracuti & Bruno, 1981)
[10] (Lankford, 2013)
[11] (Merari & Friedland, 2009)
[12] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 71)

Researchers have more recently viewed radicalization as a psychological process in which individuals encounter risk factors that cause them to engage with and then disengage with violent extremism.  Psychologist John Horgan describes this as a pathway approach to radicalization.  He notes that individuals may be more inclined to extremism if they become emotionally vulnerable (i.e. through disenfranchisement), come to identify with the victims of a grievance, or decide that engaging in violence against the state is not inherently immoral.[13]

Separately, terror management theory says that people who are made aware of their own mortality through a traumatic experience are prone to vigorously defend their own cultural worldview, potentially through violence.[14]  Cultural worldviews are conceptions of reality that provide meaning in life.  When people experience life events that expose them to the inevitability of death, they become more prone to threaten or attack people who hold different worldviews.[15]

Arie Kruglanski, Jocelyn Belanger, and Rohan Gunaratna in "The Three Pillars of Radicalization" incorporate aspects of several of the explanations cited above in their theory of the key drivers of radicalization.  They view radicalization as a process that is driven by societal conditions and psychological factors.  Their theory, and its ramifications for U.S. government programs to counter violent extremism, is the focus of the remainder of the paper.

**The Three Pillars of Radicalization Theory (the "3 Ns")**

In their 2019 book, Kruglanski, Belanger, and Gunaratna identify three psychological drivers that motivate individuals to join extremist groups: needs, narratives, and networks.  The

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[13] (Horgan, 2014)
[14] (Miller & Landau, 2005)
[15] (Pyszczynski, Rothschild, & Abdollahi, 2008)

theory incorporates root cause explanations and psychological traits in its account of violent extremism and views them as interlinked within a radicalization process. The three drivers, when they coexist, significantly increases the likelihood of extremist behavior. The 3 Ns theory stands out from others because it is comprehensive, is based on empirical data from experiments and field research, and builds on reasoning already established in the field of psychology.

According to the 3 Ns theory, the first stage of the radicalization process occurs when an individual experiences a form of psychological loss, which results in a motivation to pursue personal significance as a form of compensation. Second, they encounter an existing narrative that justifies violence as a means by which to achieve this need for personal significance. Third, the individual joins a social network that encourages violent acts through an incentive or reward structure. These steps are not necessarily sequential – people can follow different temporal pathways among these three pillars of radicalization. Below is a more thorough explanation of each of the three pillars, using historical examples to illustrate the process.

### *"Needs"*

A key factor in understanding radicalization is the argument that all humans are motivated by what Kruglanski et al describe as "the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to have respect."[16] In some cases this "quest for significance" becomes predominant and obsessive, blocking out other moderating motivations. Individuals in this state may no longer care about social norms against harming others. The individual's preoccupation with their own significance creates a motivational imbalance that dominates their outlook and affects their

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[16] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 42)

behavior.  Extremist behavior resulting from motivational imbalance is not limited to political

activism - it can apply to various aspects of human life, including sports, eating, and love.[17]

This obsessive quest for significance often arises because of a sense of loss or

humiliation.[18]  Losses of significance include personal tragedies, such as the deaths of family

members, and deep feelings of shame or stigma.  Losses can also be socially based, such as

ethnic discrimination.  Individuals in regions dealing with armed conflict and economic collapse

– target populations for U.S. government public diplomacy programs – may be suffering from

personal losses and thus be vulnerable to extremism.

### *"Narratives"*

A key factor that differentiates violent extremists from other people is their adherence to

an existing narrative that justifies violence.[19]  After all, most individuals who have experienced

personal loss or harbor social grievances do not resort to violence.  These violent narratives can

come from a variety of sources, including groups with religious or political aims.  The narrative

"provides the moral justifications that transform extreme behaviors, violence included, into

something that is acceptable and even desirable in serving supreme values."[20]  Islamic terrorist

groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS espouse narratives that justify their actions in moral and

religious terms.  Left-wing terrorist groups like the FARC in Colombia and the Weather

Underground Organization in the United States described violence as morally justified in

accomplishing political objectives.

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[17] (Kruglanski, Kopetz, & and Szumowska, 2022)
[18] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 44)
[19] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 47)
[20] (Kruglanski, Kopetz, & and Szumowska, 2022, p. 269)

Individuals become vulnerable to radicalization because they latch on to these narratives as means to compensate for their own losses of significance. The narrative's religious or political message provides the person with a sense of purpose. It carries the message that someone who is "willing to make sacrifices for its sake is thereby a person worthy of admiration and (self-) respect."[21] Extremist narratives thus address the psychological needs of vulnerable individuals who are looking for ways to achieve personal significance. The U.S. government came to realize the enormous psychological impact of extremist narratives following the September 11, 2001 attacks and during the fight against ISIS.

### *"Networks"*

The third psychological driver of radicalization in the 3 Ns theory is a social network or organization that validates the narrative and guides the individual in their quest for significance. A social network provides important encouragement that propels an individual to adopt violence in the pursuit of an ideological cause. The network is a source of rewards and incentives. Some networks reward members in tangible ways, such as payments or meetings with leaders, while others provide a more symbolic reward through assumed admiration and respect.[22]

In some cases, family members serve as a social network, with siblings or married couples engaging in violent acts together. This was the case with the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris and the April 2013 Boston marathon bombing. Large, well-organized organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS are well-positioned to attract recruits and provide these structures of support and reward. Though face-to-face interactions are useful in motivating

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[21] (Kruglanski, Kopetz, & and Szumowska, 2022, p. 269)
[22] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 51)

group members, terrorist organizations have become effective in using online social networks to engage vulnerable individuals with persuasive content.[23]

## Case Studies of the 3 Ns Theory

The factors discussed above – needs, narratives, and networks – are all important contributing factors to individual radicalization.  The existence of all three factors concurrently increases the likelihood of violent extremist activity, according to field research and interviews with extremists.[24]  Below are three historical examples that illustrate how these psychological drivers influenced individuals to join violent extremist movements.

### *Ku Klux Klan*

Southern white Americans created the Ku Klux Klan as a response to the expansion of civil liberties for black Americans following the Civil War.  A 1905 estimate based on public documentation estimated that white mobs lynched 3,337 black people between 1882 and 1903.[25] Though the KKK stated a variety of reasons for the killings of black Americans, their motivations are generally seen as social and political in nature.  During Reconstruction, the federal government enacted laws granting black Americans the same property rights, hospital and school access, and voting privileges as white Americans.  According to Martin Miller, "The

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[23] (Weimann, 2022)
[24] (Kruglanski, Belanger, & Gunaratna, 2019, p. 93)
[25] (Miller M. , 2013, p. 147)

violence reached its zenith in the years when whites felt most insecure about losing their traditional status in the racial hierarchy."[26]

The KKK's widespread campaign of violence aligns with the 3 Ns theory. White Americans, including local officials and retired Confederate soldiers, were experiencing a loss of significance after the dismantling of the slaveholding system and the enforced equality of black Americans. White supremacy narratives justified violence as a response to these social changes and provided a means by which disaffected white individuals could achieve significance. The KKK as an organization provided a social network with a membership structure and rituals that validated existing extremist narratives and incentivized violent acts.

### Tamil Tigers

The origin of the Tamil Tigers dates to 1972, following a major political reorganization in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese Buddhists dominated the new government and implemented reforms, including designating Sinhala as the country's official language, leading to discontent among the Tamil Hindu minority. The Tamil Tigers organized as a group after the government refused a Tamil request for increased power in the north and east of the country. The organization's stated goal was to gain independence or autonomy. Following years of attacks and recriminations by both sides, the elite Black Tigers unit in 1987 began a campaign of roughly 200 suicide bombings - becoming "perhaps the most advanced practitioners of this gruesome art in the world."[27]

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[26] (Miller M. , 2013, p. 158)
[27] (Cronin, 2009, p. 57)

The emergence of the Tamil Tigers fits with the 3 Ns theory. Individuals in the Tamil minority felt sidelined by the new political structure of the state, creating a personal loss of significance. A number of extremist Tamil leaders at the time – including Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder of the Tamil Tigers – used narratives evoking ethnic and religious nationalism to justify violent attacks against the government. Disaffected individuals in the population discovered a sense of belonging with the Tamil Tigers, and the organization strengthened this bond through a membership and reward structure.

### Al Qaeda

The origin of Al Qaeda can be traced to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when disparate Islamist groups grew in size and improved coordination in support of the mujahidin resistance. Osama bin Laden created Al Qaeda to liberate Muslims worldwide as part of a global Islamist struggle. He advocated attacks against governments in the Middle East and the West with the aim of creating an Islamist caliphate.[28] Al Qaeda bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 signaled the beginning of an ongoing campaign of violence that featured numerous large-scale attacks, including the USS Cole in October 2000 and the World Trade Center and Pentagon in September 2001.

The emergence of Al Qaeda can be viewed from the perspective of the 3 Ns theory. Individuals who joined Al Qaeda generally expressed a socially based loss of significance, citing the persecution and humiliation of Muslims. Many sought significance gain through a narrative that promoted the creation of a global caliphate. Al Qaeda provided an organized network that

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[28] (Cronin, 2009, p. 169)

encouraged, rewarded, and trained individuals to engage in violent extremism. As is the case with other extremist organizations, Al Qaeda also attracted individuals who were experiencing a personal loss, such unemployment, the death of a loved one, or social alienation. They latched onto Al Qaeda narratives and networks that provided them with a means to achieve significance through violence.

**The U.S. Government's Use of Public Diplomacy to Counter Violent Extremism**

The 3 Ns theory described above provides a useful framework to analyze the practice of countering violent extremism (CVE). If the 3 Ns are frequently factors that contribute to radicalization, how can the U.S. government target these factors to undermine radicalization? The following section of the paper applies the 3 Ns theory to the U.S. government's strategies and methods. The goal is to evaluate the extent to which the U.S. government takes these psychological insights into account and to identify opportunities to improve CVE work more broadly.

This paper is primarily concerned with public diplomacy, which are government activities that aim to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics. Scholars have divided public diplomacy techniques into those that are informational and those that are relational.[29] Informational techniques involve communications with foreign publics either face-to-face or through media. Relational techniques are those that build interpersonal or institutional ties, including community-based projects. Both techniques target individuals directly, with the aim of influencing society at a broader level.
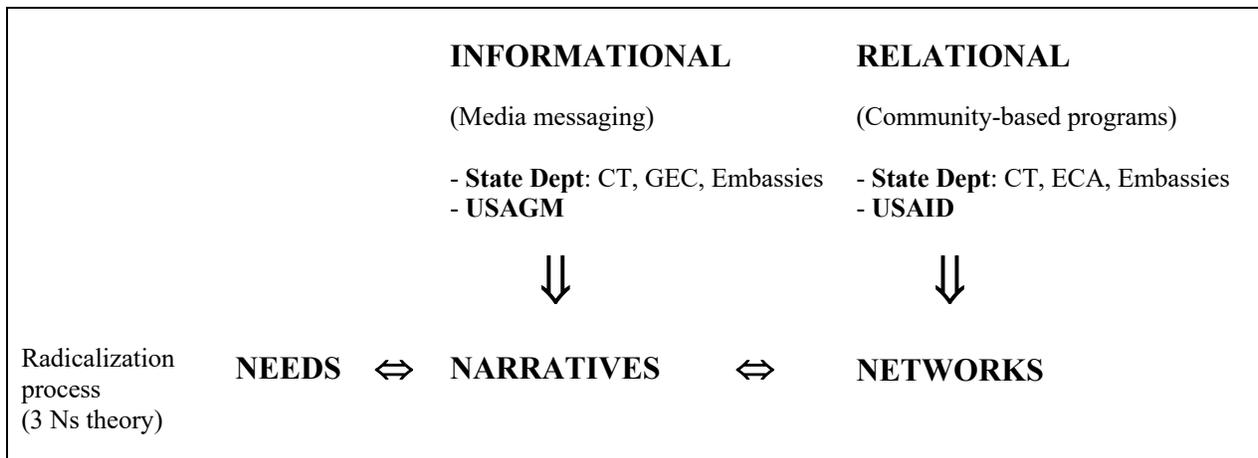
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[29] (Sanders, 2018)

Public diplomacy programs are uniquely suited to the fight against violent extremism. The informational and relational techniques correspond roughly to two of the three psychological drivers from the 3 Ns theory: narratives and networks. Informational techniques use messaging to build narratives that are compelling and truthful. Relational techniques use exchange programs to build networks that promote positive social development. This alignment between public diplomacy techniques and the narrative and network drivers of radicalization presents important entry points for practitioners to interrupt the radicalization process. Public diplomacy programs are generally preventive – they aim to interrupt the radicalization process before it occurs. They target communities that are facing social and political upheaval and, usually in coordination with local institutions, strengthen narratives and networks that support peace and moderation.

Public diplomacy interventions are less suited to address the needs pillar of radicalization. Psychological needs in this context are rooted in underlying grievances that often stem from external conditions that are structural and deep-seated, including war and conflict, political instability, and economic collapse. Public diplomacy programs can play a role in addressing these challenges, but lasting solutions require broader government efforts, including conflict mediation and economic support. Also, public diplomacy does not include military and law enforcement operations, which are essential tools in the fight against violent extremism but are less relevant to the focus of this paper.

This review will look at three key U.S. government agencies that use public diplomacy methods to contest violent extremism worldwide: the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). State Department public diplomacy programs include media communications, professional

exchange programs, and grants to NGOs. USAID programs include assistance projects in

partnership with governments, private sector, and civil society. USAGM manages news and

messaging platforms, including Voice of America, that target oversees international audiences.

Each of these agencies counters violent extremism using a unique set of public diplomacy tools

that fall under either the informational or relational approach (see Table 1).

**Table 1**: U.S. government public diplomacy techniques and the drivers of radicalization

| | | **INFORMATIONAL** | | **RELATIONAL** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | (Media messaging) | | (Community-based programs) |
| | | - **State Dept**: CT, GEC, Embassies<br>- **USAGM** | | - **State Dept**: CT, ECA, Embassies<br>- **USAID** |
| | | ⇓ | | ⇓ |
| Radicalization process<br>(3 Ns theory) | **NEEDS** ⇔ | **NARRATIVES** | ⇔ | **NETWORKS** |

CT: Bureau of Counterterrorism
GEC: Global Engagement Center
USAGM: U.S. Agency for Global Media
USAID: U.S. Agency for International Development

**U.S. Government Strategy and Interventions**

The following section is a review of publicly available strategy documents published by

the State Department, USAID, and USAGM. These documents demonstrate that the three

agencies have a clear understanding of psychological research relating to violent extremism,

including the theoretical foundations of the 3 Ns theory. The documents also describe

intervention strategies that generally align with the narrative and network drivers of extremism. Documents of particular relevance to this review include the State Department's and USAID's Joint Strategy on CVE (2016), USAID's Policy for Countering Violent Extremism Through Development Assistance (2020), and USAGM's CVE Fact Sheet (2018).

### *Grievance as a driver of radicalization*

In their strategy documents, the State Department, USAID, and USAGM incorporate the idea that grievance can lead individuals on a quest for personal significance.  In their Joint Strategy on CVE, the State Department and USAID note that "violent extremists mobilize people by capitalizing on the grievances of those who feel underrepresented, marginalized, and left behind or who are seeking a larger purpose as well as on structural dynamics that deny them equal participation in society, fair economic opportunity, and/or equal justice."[30]  In a separate document, USAID says that individuals prone to radicalization seek "access to material resources, social status and respect from peers; a sense of belonging, adventure, and self-esteem or personal empowerment that individuals and groups that have long viewed themselves as victimized and marginalized can derive from the feeling that they are making history; and the prospect of achieving glory and fame."[31]  Separately, USAGM cites "a sense of voicelessness and disenfranchisement" as a root cause of extremism.[32]

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[30] (Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016)
[31] (The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency Policy, September 2011)
[32] (Countering Violent Extremism Fact Sheet, September 2018)

*Intervention: Targeting narratives and networks*

In their strategy documents, the three agencies outline intervention strategies that focus on targeting narratives and networks.  They describe the importance of addressing the psychological needs of vulnerable individuals by attacking extremist narratives and providing compelling alternative narratives.  They stress the importance of building positive social networks that weaken the influence of extremist groups.

On the informational side, USAID says "marrying alternative narratives with activities designed to promote social and behavioral change can be an important means of interrupting the cognitive biases that underpin support for violent extremism….  Building a sense of agency, resilience, and cohesion can increase the engagement of youth and reduce their susceptibility to violent extremism."[33]  USAGM highlights the critical role of free media in providing "an alternative to propaganda or violent extremism" and providing "platforms for community voices to be heard and disrupt extremist narratives."[34]

On the relational side, the agencies note the importance of sidelining extremist groups by building networks of individuals that support community needs.  The Joint Strategy on CVE highlights the potential of the private sector and local NGOs to "build local capacity and strengthen community resilience to counter violent extremist radicalization and recruitment."  Positive networks support "good governance and the rule of law, respect for human rights, and sustainable, inclusive development."[35]  USAID states that "influential community, private-sector,

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[33] (Policy for Countering Violent Extremism Through Development Assistance, April 2020)
[34] (Countering Violent Extremism Fact Sheet, September 2018)
[35] (Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016)

diaspora, and religious leaders, youth, women, and people with disabilities can contribute significantly to building local trust and resilience and disseminating narratives that emphasize peaceful coexistence."[36]

**Public Diplomacy Programs: A CVE Toolbox**

This section identifies specific U.S. government activities that have the potential to interrupt the radicalization process by targeting the narrative and network inflection points (see Table 2). As discussed, informational and relational public diplomacy techniques are well suited to target the narrative and network drivers of violent extremism. Informational programs debunk extremist messages and build positive alternatives. Relational programs weaken extremist networks and strengthen pro-social organizations.

The programs below are taken from publicly available U.S. government documents, including annual reports that collect representative examples of CVE activities. Data on their impact are not generally available, and it is not within the purview of this paper to determine their rates of success. Nevertheless, they serve as useful examples of practical ways that the U.S. government is countering violent extremism by addressing psychological factors.

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[36] (Policy for Countering Violent Extremism Through Development Assistance, April 2020)

**Table 2**:  A CVE Toolbox.  The table below includes sample U.S. government public diplomacy programs designed to counter violent extremism.  The programs are matched with either the narrative and network psychological drivers of radicalization as described in "The Three Pillars of Radicalization" by Kruglanski, Belanger, and Gunaratna.

| | Narratives | Networks |
|---|---|---|
| *U.S. Department of State* | | |
| *Bureau of Counterterrorism* (Informational and relational approach) | Peer to Peer | Strong Cities Network Young Cities |
| *Global Engagement Center* (Informational approach) | Defeat ISIS Campaign Djibouti Messaging Training The Way Forward | |
| *Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs* (Relational approach) | | Int'l Visitor Leadership Program Citizen Exchanges English Access Microscholarship |
| *Regional Bureaus and Embassies* (Informational and relational approach) | Sawab Messaging Center | Syrian Refugee Youth and Theater Madrassa Youth in Kyrgyzstan |
| *U.S. Agency for International Development* (Relational approach) | | Trans-Sahara Partnership Niger CVE Network Somali Youth Learners Initiative |
| *U.S. Agency for Global Media* (Informational approach) | Not in Our Name Raise Your Voice Benar News | |

Given the outsized role of the State Department, this review looks at its three lead CVE offices: the Bureau of Counterterrorism, the Global Engagement Center, and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.  It also highlights the role of State Department regional bureaus and U.S. embassies worldwide – many of which have their own active CVE programs and grant activities.  The review looks at USAID and USAGM programs and activities agency-wide, without breaking them down by bureau or office.

### *State Department: Bureau of Counterterrorism*

The Bureau of Counterterrorism guides CVE policy, programs, and assistance for the State Department.  It also coordinates CVE policy in the interagency and with partner nations and oversees the Department's annual country reports on terrorism.[37]  The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs funds a policy advisor position in the Bureau of Counterterrorism to support public diplomacy activities and advise embassies overseas.  The bureau's approach broadly aligns with the relational approach to public diplomacy, including through speaker programs and workshops.

Programs for CVE toolbox:

- **Strong Cities Network**:  Launched in 2015 at the UN General Assembly, this program includes roughly 150 partner cities across 40 countries.  Participants design local responses to CVE challenges with support from workshops and innovation grants.  For

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[37] (Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism, May 2016) (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020)

example, local governments can receive training on youth interventions and have access to mapping software that uses ethnographic research to track extremism.[38] (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Young Cities**:  Managed by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, this program trains and mentors youth leaders in internationally recognized best practices on working with their local governments to counter violent extremism.  One initiative in Lebanon provided peacebuilding and violence prevention training to poor and marginalized communities in the city of Saida.[39]  (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Peer to Peer**:  The Peer to Peer (P2P) Countering Hate and Intolerance initiative helped university teams in the United States and Europe develop effective counter-narratives to reduce the threat of ideologically motivated violence.  Teams produced campaigns that aimed to have measurable impacts in their campuses and communities.  Successful teams have gone on to start their own NGOs and received grants to scale up their efforts.[40] (This program targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

*State Department: Global Engagement Center*

Initially created by executive order in 2011 as the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, the Global Engagement Center (GEC) coordinates U.S. government efforts to expose and counter propaganda and disinformation.  GEC collaborates with partners – think tanks, NGOs, and the private sector (including a full-time liaison in Silicon Valley) – to develop

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[38] (Strong Cities Network, n.d.) (Duffin, 2017)
[39] (Young Cities, n.d.)
[40] (2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2021) (Peer to Peer (P2P), n.d.)

effective technologies and joint programs.[41]  GEC's Counterterrorism Team uses an

informational approach to dealing with violent extremism to roll back the counterfactual

narratives of terrorist organizations and disrupt recruitment and radicalization.[42]  GEC's

Analytics and Research Team supports innovations in data analytics tools to map emerging

trends and provide early warnings to domestic and international partners and stakeholders.[43]

GEC's Technology Engagement Team enables the rapid identification and testing of technology

tools including for dark-web monitoring, crowd-source content assessment tools, and web

annotation.[44]

Programs for CVE toolbox:

- **Defeat-ISIS Resiliency Campaign**:  In cooperation with interagency and partner nations,
  this operation aims to degrade the legitimacy and ideology of ISIS.  For example, GEC
  coordinated a messaging campaign on ISIS leader Al-Mawla that weakened his appeal
  and created distrust within ISIS.  The campaign featured interrogation reports in which
  Al-Mawla betrayed ISIS members to U.S. interrogators in 2008.  The effort shifted the
  public narrative about al-Mawla – he became known widely as "the Betrayer" – and
  weakened the legitimacy of ISIS leadership more broadly.[45]  (This program targets
  narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Djibouti Messaging Training**:  In partnership with regional governments and the Center
  of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, headquartered in

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[41] (Lea Gabrielle, March 5, 2020)
[42] (2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2021)
[43] (Lea Gabrielle, March 5, 2020) (2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2021)
[44] (2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2021)
[45] (2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2021)

Djibouti, GEC funded technical training for civil society groups to conduct information campaigns online. This initiative created multimedia content, alternative narratives, and audience analysis tools.[46] (This program targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **The Way Forward:** Implemented by Equal Access International and reviewed by RAND, this was a CVE-themed radio talk show in areas affected by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. The radio program addressed the roles of local committees in reintegrating at-risk youth. It aired every week for 49 weeks and included live call-in sessions moderated by a radio host.[47] (This program targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

*State Department: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs*

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) is the largest and most well-resourced of the State Department's public diplomacy offices, with a fiscal year 2019 budget of $701 million. It uses a relational approach to public diplomacy with its wide variety of exchange programs. One of ECA's priorities is to build professional capacity and strengthen networks to provide skills and opportunities to individuals who may be vulnerable to radicalization. Relevant programs encourage participants "to share information on the drivers of violent extremism, to promote messages that counter extremist narratives and recruitment tactics, to explore educational approaches to building resilience, and to engage tribal and religious leaders, youth, women, and civil society."[48]

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[46] (2019 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2019) (IGAD Inaugurates Its Center For Preventing And Countering Violent Extremism, n.d.)
[47] (Helmus & Bodine-Baron, September 11, 2020)
[48] (Functional Bureau Strategy, 2018-21)

Programs for CVE toolbox:

- **International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP)**:  IVLP facilitates 2-3 week visits to the United States for emerging leaders on a variety of themes, including CVE. International participants in CVE-related exchanges generally have prior experience running programs and are expected to continue working in the field.  A recent CVE program brought NGO and government representatives from 10 countries to the United States to meet American counterparts and study community CVE strategies.[49]  (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Office of Citizen Exchanges**:  This office supports exchange programs among professionals, artists, athletes, and youth who are well positioned to lead public engagement efforts on a variety of issues including CVE.  A recent program recruited former extremists from the United States to travel abroad and discuss their experiences. The aim was to dissuade others from becoming radicalized and exchange best practices on support networks.[50]  (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **English Access Microscholarship Program**:  This program, which reaches 15,000 high school students worldwide each year, teaches English-language skills and democratic values to students from disadvantaged sectors of society.  The aim is to provide better educational and job prospects and strengthen social and economic well-being.[51] Participants have opportunities to join other State Department programs and alumni

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[49] (International Peace & Security Institute, n.d.)
[50] (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020) (Godfrey, 2021)
[51] (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020)

networks on topics such as peace building and conflict resolution.[52]  (This program

targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)


### *State Department: Regional Bureaus and Embassies*


The State Department's bureaus of Near Eastern Affairs, African Affairs, and South and

Central Asian Affairs oversee numerous CVE programs, many of which are managed by U.S.

embassies.  These programs include both informational and relational techniques of public

diplomacy.  Examples of topics include preventing terrorist recruitment, promoting religious

tolerance, and strengthening civil society networks.  Funds are often dispersed as grants to local

or international NGOs and monitored by embassy officers.  The U.S. embassy in Pakistan spent

$7.3 million on CVE and counterterrorism public diplomacy programs in fiscal year 2019.  Other

active U.S. embassies include those in Afghanistan ($3.5 million), Saudi Arabia ($490,000),

Nigeria ($420,000), Bangladesh ($370,000), and Kyrgyzstan ($300,000).[53]  (All figures are fiscal

year 2019.  These figures fluctuate year-to-year depending on changing geopolitical

circumstances.)


Programs for CVE toolbox:

- **Sawab Center for CVE Messaging**:  A joint UAE-U.S. initiative, this regional online

    messaging center and content creation hub "combats the online presence of ISIS and

    other terrorist groups, while offering positive messages of hope, tolerance, and peaceful

    coexistence."  The center – which operates in Arabic, French, and English – includes

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[52] (Promoting Regional Peace and Socio-economic Development, n.d.)
[53] (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020)

Emirati and American diplomats, private-sector entities, and creative talent. It has nearly

8 million followers on its social media accounts around the globe.[54] (This program

targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Syrian Refugee Youth and Theater**: This partnership with Jordan's National Center for
  Culture and Arts uses interactive theater to strengthen resistance to extremist recruitment
  among Syrian refugee youth. The training focuses on techniques that develop self-
  confidence, critical thinking, and communication.[55] (This program targets networks
  under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Madrassa Youth in Kyrgyzstan**: Managed by the U.S. embassy in Bishkek, this
  program supports vocational education program for madrassa students. Active in 41
  religious schools throughout the country, the program offers a viable alternative for
  gainful employment among vulnerable youth.[56] (This program targets networks under
  the 3 Ns theory.)

### *U.S. Agency for International Development*

USAID is an independent federal government agency that provides economic,

development, and humanitarian assistance around the world. It operates on a budget of roughly

$27 billion and receives overall policy guidance from the Secretary of State. USAID primarily

uses a relational approach to CVE, including through development programs that support

inclusive societies, strengthen responsive governance, and build civic engagement.[57] Its

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[54] (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020)
[55] (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020)
[56] (2020 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2020)
[57] (Policy for Countering Violent Extremism Through Development Assistance, April 2020)

informational CVE programs aim to convey narratives that "create positive identities, opportunities for engagement, and expressions of agency."[58]

Programs for CVE toolbox:

- **Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership**: An interagency effort, this partnership combats violent extremism by building stronger, stable communities in the Sahel region of northern Africa. Projects support vulnerable communities by providing entrepreneurial opportunities, literacy instruction, and vocational training. The goal is to reduce tensions that could be exploited by terrorists or insurgents.[59] (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Niger CVE Network**: This initiative worked with 12 civil society leaders in southeast Niger to create the Nalewa Mada network to enhance the resilience of local leaders to regional terrorist groups. The network now includes more than 300 community leaders in 30 villages.[60] (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Somali Youth Learners Initiative:** This project supports the Ministry of Education in improving access to secondary education for over 160,000 youth in Somalia. The project provides leadership and conflict resolution training to strengthen civic participation and social cohesion. The goal is for participants to have economic opportunities and become leaders in their communities.[61] (This program targets networks under the 3 Ns theory.)

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[58] (Policy for Countering Violent Extremism Through Development Assistance, April 2020)
[59] (Working in Crises and Conflict, September 2021)
[60] (Policy for Countering Violent Extremism Through Development Assistance, April 2020)
[61] (Somali Youth Learners Initiative, 2014)

*U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)*

USAGM is an independent U.S.-funded international media organization.  It provides accurate and professional news services to international audiences and is protected by a Congressionally mandated "firewall" that prohibits editorial interference.  USAGM uses an informational approach to engagement through its five media networks: Voice of America, Office of Cuba Broadcasting, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN).  USAGM media reaches more than one third of Iraqis, 42 percent of young men in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas region of Pakistan, and 54 percent of Hausa speakers in Nigeria (where Boko Haram is present).[62]  USAGM counters violent extremism by establishing platforms for community voices to be heard, engaging youth in conversations about factors that motivate them, and disrupting extremist narratives through credible, fact-based journalism.  USAGM had a budget of $823 million in fiscal year 2020.[63]

Programs for CVE toolbox:

- **Not In Our Name**:  A documentary video series from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that empowers communities to stand up to violent extremist recruiters. The initial series hosted town halls and facilitated discussions with communities in different regions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to explore how residents can work together to prevent the spread of extremism.  A subsequent series in Bosnia and Kosovo engaged

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[62] (Countering Violent Extremism Fact Sheet, September 2018)
[63] (2021 Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting, 2021)

social media audiences on the root causes of extremism to dissuade those vulnerable to extremist ideologies.[64]  (This program targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Raise Your Voice**:  A campaign on MBN television, radio, and digital platforms in Iraq that discusses the causes of violent extremism and showcases local acts of heroism.  The Facebook page, which has nearly 3 million followers, hosts discussions on unemployment, religious intolerance, and women's and minority rights.  MBN's Radio Sawa hosts a weekly, one-hour discussion on the effects of extremism and intolerance, inviting listeners to call or text to engage with hosts and guests.[65]  (This program targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

- **Benar News**:  A Radio Free Asia online news service that documents the impact of radicalization on communities in Southeast and South Asia.  It publishes news and content in five languages: Bengali, Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian, and English.  Recent projects have highlighted the human cost of extremist violence, religiously motivated murders of bloggers in Bangladesh, and the plight of the Rohingya.[66]  (This program targets narratives under the 3 Ns theory.)

**Common Attributes of Selected Public Diplomacy Programs**

The government programs cited above are all designed to intervene in the radicalization process.  They all recognize the idea that deep grievances sometimes motivate individuals to obsessively seek personal significance.  The programs acknowledge that individuals are more

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[64] (Countering Violent Extremism Fact Sheet, September 2018)
[65] (Countering Violent Extremism Fact Sheet, September 2018)
[66] (Countering Violent Extremism Fact Sheet, September 2018)

prone to engage in violent extremism when existing narratives and social networks validate their grievances. The selected public diplomacy programs rely on informational and relational techniques, which are well suited to target the narrative and network drivers of radicalization.

As discussed, informational programs counter extremist narratives by exposing falsehoods and hypocrisy and undermining key messages. They provide alternative, compelling narratives that help individuals achieve self-esteem and personal significance. If done effectively, these narratives can create pathways that lead individuals away from aggression and anti-social behavior.

The informational programs featured in this paper's CVE toolbox focus primarily on content creation. Many of the programs feature the voices of residents of target populations, and many include online interactive components (Not in Our Name). The programs vary in terms of who directs the creation process: some are led by joint teams of government and private sector personnel (Sawab Center), some are led by media professionals (Benar News), and some are led by civil society organizations (Peer to Peer). All of the programs are tailored to individual countries or regions to account for local sensitivities.

In contrast to informational programs, relational programs aim to establish networks of individuals who can provide mutual understanding and support – professionally, socially, and culturally. These programs provide training and exchanges that can lead to greater self-awareness and economic opportunities.

The relational programs included in this paper's CVE toolbox are largely in-person programs. Roughly half of them target youth and half of them target community leaders and professionals. The programs that target youth emphasize skills training such as peacebuilding (Young Cities). The programs that target professionals focus on the mutual exchange of

expertise, including best practices in community CVE strategies (International Visitor Leadership Program). Programs that target community leaders are a mixture of skills training and exchange of expertise (Niger CVE Network). Roughly half of the programs are global in nature, but in all cases projects are tailored to specific countries or regions.

A possible next step would be to scale up the toolbox through a broad review that goes beyond the U.S. government and extends to programs conducted by foreign governments and international NGOs. This global CVE toolbox would provide a coherent overview of tested CVE techniques used by organizations around the world. In addition to illustrating how practice meets theory in the fight against violent extremism it would offer a menu of programs ideas for public diplomacy practitioners.

This paper endeavored to analyze U.S. government public diplomacy activities from a psychological perspective. It looked to the 3 Ns theory to help explain the motivations of violent extremists and suggested that public diplomacy agencies, given their readiness to engage narratives and networks, are uniquely suited to CVE work. It applied the 3 Ns theory to the strategies and programs of the State Department, USAID, and USAGM to identify areas where these agencies are addressing the drivers of radicalization. The aim was to provide a framework that clarifies the causes of violent extremism and identifies ways to reduce the influence of violent extremist organizations worldwide.

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