The Paradox of Source Credibility in Canadian and U.S. Domestic Counterterrorism Communications

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This article examines the interface of rhetorical theories of credibility and the domestic counterterrorism communications of government and nongovernment actors in Canada and the United States. We track evolving attempts to controvert terrorists' propaganda through official and unofficial channels. Each country has a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy that employs both deterrence and "soft" approaches, such as diplomacy and engagement. Our focus is the latter. First, we discuss how governments undertook counterterrorism communications following September 2001. Second, we explore attempts to engage credible voices outside of government, such as former violent extremists and religious leaders, in the fight against terrorism. We conclude that although counterterrorism messaging must negotiate the challenge of source credibility, further examination of elements such as context, audience reception, and digital engagement is needed to refine domestic campaigns launched by government and civil society actors.

Keywords: credibility, counterterrorism, extremism, deradicalization, formers, religious leaders, rhetoric, soft power

Public officials acknowledge the inherent difficulties of developing and deploying credible counterterrorism messaging. Speaking at the January 2018 Internet policy conference State of the Net, in Washington, DC, Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Elaine Duke acknowledged the limited role that government plays in pushing back on online terrorist propaganda through messaging campaigns. Duke stated, "The truth is the government doesn't have great credibility in the online space, for good reasons. . . . We are too old, too big, and too square" (State of the Net, 2018, Min 11:01). Yet Duke also recognized that government, together with private sector and community partners, must continue to address the evolving terrorist threat through counter and alternative messaging.

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This article explores the seeming paradox of projecting credibility through counterterrorism communications in Canada and the United States. On one hand, both countries' government agencies are charged with ensuring the safety and security of citizens. Their messages are intended to provide safety information and reassure the public about security issues. In the United States, the well-known "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign serves as an example of one way to encourage the public to report possible threat incidents, including potential acts of terrorism.[1] In Canada, the National Security Information Network is a telephone hotline for Canadians to report safety and security concerns that do not pose an immediate threat.[2] On the other hand, each government's ability to speak credibly is sometimes called into question. The U.S. Department of State, for example, launched a controversial attempt to push back on online terrorist messages, including from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other international terrorist groups, with the Center for Counterterrorism Communications' "Think Again, Turn Away Campaign."[3] Researcher Rita Katz (2014) observed that online engagement between government representatives and terrorists (or supporters) was not only "counterproductive" but also came close to crossing "dangerous ethical lines" (para. 14) when, in some instances, U.S. officials communicated directly with leaders of a terrorist group. Another State Department effort to create a video parody of terrorist propaganda received harsh criticism for "playing into the Islamic State's hands by bolstering its reputation for cruelty and expanding its audience" (Miller & Higham, 2015, "Inspired by Monty Python," para. 13). Highlighting the paradox of government messaging and source credibility, government actors must at times present themselves "not as current government spokespersons but as independent voices" (Riley & Hollihan, 2012, p. 72).

To investigate the paradox of source credibility in more depth, we examine the extent to which rhetorical theories of message and source credibility align with the counterterrorism communications of government and civil society actors in Canada and the United States. These two countries provide a useful lens through which to view evolving attempts at countering terrorists' propaganda through official and unofficial channels. In recent years, both countries have reported an increasing number of individuals attempting to join or provide support to ISIS. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service indicates that approximately 190 Canadian persons are suspected of terrorist activity aboard. The breakdown of membership is uncertain.[4] In the United States, government agencies publicly estimate that 250 individuals have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to join ISIS.[5] Both governments have proposed that counterextremist communications might effectively address this issue, and both countries have framed their counterterrorism engagements on a model of partnerships between public and private

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[1] See https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something

[2] http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/national-security-information-network

[3] The Center for Counterterrorism Communications was renamed the Global Engagement Center by Executive Order 13721 on March 14, 2016 (https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2016/03/17/2016-06250/developing-an-integrated-global-engagement-center-to-support-government-wide-counterterrorism).

[4] See https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/pblc-rprt-trrrst-thrt-cnd-2017/pblc-rprt-trrrst-thrt-cnd-2017-en.pdf; http://www.macleans.ca/news/number-of-canadian-fighters-in-syria-iraq-levelling-off-csis/

[5] For further discussion, see
https://sites.duke.edu/tcths/files/2013/06/Kurzman_MuslimAmerican_Involvement_in_Violent_Extremism_2015.pdf

sectors (see Government of Canada, 2013; White House, 2011). Moreover, both countries have developed their counterterrorism messaging approaches over the 16 years since 9/11. The article proceeds in three steps. We (1) trace the application of soft power, (2) outline the use of formers, and (3) explore the potential of a community-driven religious response. With respect to this last point, we examine a 2015 anti-ISIS fatwa published by the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada. To establish context for the fatwa, the first author interviewed a respected Canadian imam. The article concludes with several theory-based recommendations for future domestic counterterrorism communications.

Counterterrorism Communications as National Security Strategy

Western governments have paid increasing attention to the need to win the so-called battle for hearts and minds as part of a comprehensive national security posture. This approach evolved in the years following the September 11, 2001, al-Qaʼida attacks in the United States. To be sure, the immediate reaction of the United States and its allies focused heavily on military solutions. However, over time, this military orientation evolved beyond the battlefield to include engagement, prevention and strategic communications approaches, often with Muslim communities at home and abroad.

Theories of soft power, "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008, p. 94), developed in this context and have figured into national policies addressing terrorism and security. Soft power suggests that in a complex global environment, strategic communication entails "a contest of competitive credibility" (p. 100), and that a target individual is more easily brought into alignment with desired beliefs if she or he identifies with a rhetor's narrative and corresponding actions. This is rarely straightforward. A broad scholarly literature engages the idea of strategic communication (e.g., Corman, Trethewey, & Goodall, 2008; Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014; Zaharna, 2010). Patricia Riley and Thomas Hollihan (2012, p. 62) have identified challenges associated with appeals to multiple audiences (with conflicting goals), and suggest that strategic communication may require creative application of diverse forms: speeches, press conferences, interviews, visits, engagements, media campaigns, and tactical leaks. Crucially, because of its unpredictability, social media constitutes a unique challenge to message coherence.

This said, the use of soft power within a counterterrorism context can be seen in how Canada and the United States engaged Muslim communities in the years after 9/11. For instance, the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy released by the Bush Administration recognized the need for deeper engagement with "the Muslim world . . . to ensure that the conditions and ideologies that promote terrorism do not find fertile ground" (U.S. Department of State, 2002, "Strengthen alliances," para. 8). Although the thrust of this engagement was primarily directed toward communities abroad, the U.S. and Canadian governments also initiated incremental efforts to engage domestic Muslim (and other minority) communities. In 2004, Canada developed cross-cultural roundtable events with "ethno-cultural and religious communities . . . to engage in a long-term dialogue to improve understanding on how to manage security interests in a diverse society" (Government of Canada, 2004, p. 2).

The U.S. government has also addressed the concern that counterterrorism programs unfairly target Muslim Americans. In 2007, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Michael Chertoff met with influential Muslim Americans to discuss ways in which the department could work with U.S. Muslim communities. Following this meeting, the DHS disseminated a list of recommendations regarding optimal terminology to use when describing the terrorist threat and for engaging Muslim communities.[6]

More broadly, U.S. interaction with the Muslim world took the form of international diplomacy. Shortly after his election, President Obama traveled to Egypt in June 2009 and gave a speech that is generally considered the defining "reset" for U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Speaking at Cairo University, the President declared:

> I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. (Obama, 2009, para. 5)

Noting that the impacts of globalization "led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam [and] violent extremists have exploited these tensions" (Obama, 2009, para. 34), Obama declared, "Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism—it is an important part of promoting peace" (para. 21). Whether or not one interprets these words as sincere, the speech indicated an attempt to reframe the relationship between the U.S. government and Muslim populations. A 2016 report by the Homeland Security Advisory Council on countering violent extremism continued this pattern. Emphasizing that "tone and word choice matter" (p. 12), the report recommended that federal agencies use the phrase American Muslims, not Muslim Americans.

It is worth noting that U.S. policy has shifted on this issue. In a break from the Obama administration, the incoming Trump administration focused federal attention on Islamic extremism (see Köhler & Miller-Idriss, 2017). The December 2017 National Security Strategy (White House, 2017) affirms that terrorism prevention activities remain a national security priority. The document calls for improved trust between law enforcement, the private sector, and U.S. citizens, and explicitly states that national security experts will "work with law enforcement and civic leaders on terrorism prevention" and provide "accurate and actionable information about radicalization in their communities" (White House, 2017, p. 11). Administration officials continue to recognize multiple forms of extremism, including violence enacted by domestic anarchists and racial supremacists. However, both the National Security Strategy and government officials emphasize that the greatest international threat comes from "violent global jihadist groups" (DHS, 2017, para. 11).

Some critics have denounced the emphasis on "terrorism prevention" and suggested that the shift away from the broader issue of violent extremism may increase suspicion and marginalization, especially within Muslim communities, and lead to less trust between law enforcement and communities. However, experts also suggest that the current environment may offer unexpected

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[6] See https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/dhs_crcl_terminology_08-1-08_accessible.pdf

opportunities to "build an ecosystem independent of the federal government" (Rosand & Meserole, 2017, para. 11) to address radicalization and recruitment by putting local communities in charge of prevention efforts, taking a broader approach to extremist threats, and engaging the private sector more robustly.

In the post-9/11 era, Canada and the United States also recognized the need to address terrorist propaganda online. These efforts came in response to incidents in which terror groups began recruiting individuals in Canada and the United States through digital platforms. In Canada, the Internet factored prominently into a 2006 plot by 18 individuals to bomb prominent landmarks in Toronto. Investigators found that members of the group were inspired by online propaganda (Desjardins, 2014, para. 4).

To address the evolving digital landscape, Western governments began to focus counterterrorism efforts under the rubric of "countering violent extremism," or CVE. In the United States, the prevention-based CVE strategy is articulated in the 2011 document *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States.* Beyond stating the need for a community-based approach to security, the document also calls for countering extremist propaganda, including "narratives that feed on grievances, assign blame, and legitimize the use of violence" (White House, 2011, p. 6). Similarly, the Government of Canada's (2013) *Building Resilience Against Terrorism: Canada's Counter-Terrorism Strategy* provides a comprehensive assessment of national security concerns. The strategy outlines a four-pronged approach for addressing the terrorist threat: (1) preventing violence, (2) detecting plots, (3) denying the means and opportunities to pursue terrorist activities, and (4) developing the ability to respond to terrorism "proportionally [and] rapidly" (p. 3). The document recognizes that the Internet is "a significant forum for violent extremist communication and coordination" (p. 16), and calls for "positive alternative narratives that emphasize the open, diverse and inclusive nature of Canadian society" (pp. 16–17). Overall, the recommendation is to create messages that "resonate more strongly than terrorist propaganda" (p. 17).

The importance of addressing online aspects of terrorists' influence has expanded in the age of ISIS. The group's online presence and ability to mobilize and recruit individuals via the Web has been well documented (e.g., Stern & Berger, 2015a, 2015b). With the rise of ISIS and its media production arm known as Al Hayat Media Center, there has been increased attention on terrorist propaganda online, its function in the radicalization and recruitment process, and, importantly, growing discussions about how governments and communities might counter digital propaganda (Neumann, 2013; Stern & Berger, 2015b).

As the Government of Canada recognized in its 2016 *Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada*, ISIS members "provid[e] online guidance and direction to would-be attackers in the West" (Government of Canada, 2016, p. 16). Similarly, a report by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (n.d.) found that 86% of more than 200 U.S.-based foreign fighters' profiles examined since 2005 had "used the internet to view extremist materials, research conflicts, groups, and attack methods, and participate in online communities of like-minded individuals" (p. 2).

Yet, despite the fact that both Canada and the United States recognize the central role of the Internet in the process of radicalization to violence, neither governments' domestic CVE efforts make comprehensive use of Web-based counterterrorism communications. In some cases, these governments

are limited by "legal barriers that currently make many former violent extremists reticent to speak out" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, n.d., p. 7). To be sure, the United States has developed messaging approaches through the Department of State as well as Department of Defense projects, although these projects have been restricted domestically because of concerns about disseminating propaganda to U.S. citizens (e.g., Sager, 2015). The following sections illustrate how domestic Canadian and U.S. counterterrorism communications programs have often prioritized nongovernment actors' denunciations of terrorist actions.

Rhetorical Credibility and Counterterrorism Messaging

Rhetorical credibility cuts across various disciplines. Public relations research has drawn on theories of branding, reputation, identity, loyalty, and image management (van Ham, 2002, p. 255). Health communication research has examined the challenges posed by antivaccination campaigns, wherein "the credibility of an information source may serve as a cue to discount or augment the communicated message" (Haase, Betsch, & Renkewitz, 2015, p. 920). Thomas Hollihan and Kevin Baaske (2015) define rhetorical credibility as both an "audience's assessment of the competence and trustworthiness of the source" (p. 129) as well as the "source credibility and integrity that contributes to the persuasiveness of an argumentative claim" (p. 354). In other words, rhetorical credibility is premised on careful attention to a number of dimensions related to the speaker, message, and audience. These elements combine to persuade and ultimately to inform action. As outlined below, several countermessaging strategies have attempted to bolster rhetorical credibility through engagement with former members of extremist groups and prominent religious leaders.

Formers

In the arena of counterterrorism communication, government officials often acknowledge the necessity and challenges of achieving messaging credibility. One element involves source or "extrinsic" credibility. Governments may be perceived as credible messengers on some issues, but less credible on others. As such, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (2009), a platform for policy makers and practitioners, notes:

> Former violent extremists who come from certain settings have innate credibility and can relate to at risk youth who may be in similar situations as they once were. Victims of terrorism also have innate credibility because they are a testament to the violence, trauma, and suffering that terrorism can wreak. (p. 5)

Governments have established efforts to work with former extremists and parents of children who have joined ISIS. One example is the Extreme Dialogue project ("About Extreme Dialogue," 2018), launched in Canada in 2015 and partially funded by Public Safety Canada (equivalent to the U.S. DHS). The project aims to "build resilience to radicalisation among young people [by fostering] critical thinking and digital literacy skills" (para. 1). Central to the platform are documentary films that detail personal stories of two Canadians affected by violent extremism: one a former member of an extreme far-right movement, and a

mother whose son was killed fighting for ISIS in Syria.[7] These films are supplemented with resources designed for classroom or community education.

Certainly, marketing strategies for various public health and safety initiatives have drawn on the assumption that "formers" make credible messengers. This suggestion is frequently made by terrorism policy analysts, suggesting that a "key tactic" in the counter-ISIS campaign should be to make use of those who have left ISIS and "who are disillusioned by its ideology" (Olidort & Sheff, 2016, para. 7; see also Samuel, 2015, p. 95). This approach of using real stories from individuals with experience is a tactic well known in the public health arena, where government-sponsored antismoking campaigns with "tips from former smokers"[8] intend to expose the negative long-term health consequences of tobacco and cigarette smoking.

This tactic of ISIS defectors promoting a public counternarrative can be seen in the example of "Mo," a 27-year-old American citizen who traveled to Syria to join the terror group in 2014. Hoping to find paradise for Muslims, Mo reported that he found only destruction and violence in ISIS-controlled territory. Speaking publicly with NBC News in a May 2016 nationally broadcast video, in cooperation with federal authorities, Mo said, "The Islamic State is not bringing Islam to the world, and people need to know that" (Engel, Plesser, & Connor, 2016, para. 9). The aim of disseminating such messages is to dissuade others from similar decisions (e.g., 19-year-old Mohammed Hamzah Khan of Illinois, who after his arrest for attempting to join ISIS told the Federal Bureau of Investigation that he hoped to participate in "a public-service role" in Syria to help other Muslims; Reitman, 2015).

From a rhetorical perspective, countermessaging such as the Extreme Dialogue project rests on the premise that formers may achieve inherent source credibility for specific audiences. In the examples above, Mo's description of the shortcomings he found with ISIS's message could potentially be persuasive to someone like Mohammed Hamzah Khan because of Mo's experience traveling to ISIS-controlled territory. Eugene Garver (2004), for instance, has argued that conviction derives from a speaker's credibility (pp. 6–7). In 1953, Hovland, Janis, and Kelly defined credibility as the result of perceived intentions, expertise, and trustworthiness. More recently Charles Larson (2010) identified several key elements of credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, dynamism, charisma, and image (pp. 247–249). Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (2001) have also foregrounded the importance of perceived authority, established via "institutional certification" (p. 15).

Crucially, a source's credibility will often outweigh internal deficiencies or contradictions in supporting evidence (Zarefsky, 2007, p. 298). This is particularly relevant in the digital age wherein many people inhabit virtual echo chambers structured by filtered, self-reinforcing information. As individuals access information that reaffirms existing viewpoints, society may fragment into niche groups. And as people gain confidence due to corroboration, beliefs become entrenched (Sunstein, 2007). This insulation may prevent individuals from hearing alternative perspectives, which in the context of terrorism can lead

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[7] Another project that highlights the use of both "formers" and "victims" is the Against Violent Extremism Network (http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/).

[8] See http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/

to extremism or a "radicalization echo chamber" (Vidino & Hughes, 2015, p. 21). Crucially, insulation that may influence an individual's radicalization trajectory may also reduce a radicalized individual's willingness and/or ability to hear appeals from government-supported programs, such as the Extreme Dialogue project, or publicly broadcast messages from formers like Mo.

Highlighting the role of evidence in health campaigns, Dale Hample and Jennifer Hample (2014) call attention to the importance of "intrinsic" (evidence-based) credibility that can significantly affect attitudes (p. 26). Yet messages must address humans "with complex minds [sometimes] beyond the reach of even the most rigorous logic" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 232). Even with access to optimal (accurate and contextualized) information, individuals may not engage in rational discussion, form collective opinions, and communicate these desires to responsive government bodies (Habermas, 1991). Successful communication often encourages an audience's emotional identification with institutions, values, and ideas. Building on an audience's shared beliefs, a rhetor may amplify and capitalize on preexisting notions of community.

Returning to the examples of how formers have engaged Canadian and U.S. society through small dialogue events or via the mass media, it is important to emphasize that a speaker's credibility (or lack thereof) is ultimately judged by an audience. There is not yet clear evidence on the efficacy of either the Extreme Dialogue Project or the media events centered around Mo's story, and it is difficult to know whether a former's credibility is persuasive to broad audiences or even to those few people considering terrorist actions. To date, research on the use of formers in the deradicalization process has shown limited but promising outcomes in one-on-one online intervention efforts[9] and when using formers as mentors in a disengagement program for violent white supremacists (Christensen, 2015). Nonetheless, the Canadian and U.S. approaches to counterterrorism messaging have attempted to address deficiencies in each government's perceived lack of extrinsic credibility by injecting the voices of formers into larger public conversations about violent extremism.

Religious Response

Terrorist propaganda often appeals to an individual's desire to achieve meaning and purpose in his or her life, whether through religious identification or a sense of personal superiority (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). Criminologist Garth Davies (phone conversation, 2015) emphasizes the importance of social-psychological factors in the radicalization process. Although acknowledging that some individuals drawn to ISIS would meet the standards of religiously devout fanatics, Davies suggests that it would be inaccurate to conflate this subset with the whole. In the language of Benedict Anderson (2006), all people identify as part of an "imagined community" (p. 25). All people identify with a grand narrative, and strive for dignity and esteem via a set of social networks that foster a sense of belonging. Youth radicalization researcher Amy Thornton (as cited in Perreaux & Stevenson, 2015) at University College London affirms the importance of belonging as a core feature of terrorist propaganda. Noting that gangs, cults, sports teams, and the military all recruit based on youths' desire to belong to a greater cause, she states, "Young people are looking for a narrative to their lives. They are looking for a transcendental justification" (para.

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[9] See http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/One2One_Web_v9.pdf

37). Researcher Jytte Klausen (2015) has shown through analysis of ISIS members' images posted on Twitter that "the most graphic pictures send a message of unconstrained power" (p. 13). Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam (2017) affirm the importance of narrative in a study based on 20 interviews with foreign fighters in Syria. Acknowledging multiple factors that influence radicalization to violence, the authors suggest that low social and economic prospects are rarely a prime motivating force—rather, more attention should be given to existential concerns and the role of religion.

Numerous governments have collaboratively explored how societies can respond to terrorism, and have highlighted the centrality of religion. The Global Counterterrorism Forum (n.d.), for instance, has recommended including a variety of community and religious leaders in activities to promote tolerance and inclusiveness. Aligned with this framework, the governments of Canada and the United States have gone beyond the use of formers to identify religious leaders as potentially credible messengers in the fight against terrorism. RAND researchers Helmus, York, and Chalk (2013), citing the White House (2011), assert that "the most effective, potent, and credible messages against al-Qa'ida and other Muslim extremist groups will rise from within the American Muslim community" (p. 1). They suggest that religious leaders have elevated credibility because of their abilities "to address thorny and complex issues of religious ideology" (p. 1).[10]

In the United States, for instance, government messaging about and/or interpretation of religious texts is severely limited by the Establishment Clause that prohibits governmental privileging of one religion over another. Research associated with Public Safety Canada has specifically called on government to support development of "alternative narratives" that do not

> challenge extremist messaging directly, but instead attempt to influence those who might be sympathetic toward (but not actively supportive of) extremist causes, or help to unite the silent majority against extremism by emphasizing solidarity, common causes and shared values. (Briggs & Feve, 2014, section 5.2)

This approach skirts direct engagement on religious issues by broadening the discussion to topics more easily addressed by official sources.

Beyond the challenge of government involvement in religious debates, research has shown that foreign policy actions may fuel grievances toward Western governments. For example, Islamic religious leaders point to the United States' and United Kingdom's invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), which contributed to a sense of isolation and distrust for many Muslims worldwide and may have "paved the way" for the rise of ISIS (Hussain, 2015). Moreover, these military actions may, "encourage the process of radicalization [by developing a] perception that there exists only one solution, extreme violence" (Pettinger, 2015, p. 92). David Kilcullen (2009) has further argued an explicit correlation between Western military operations and the exacerbation of local sentiment:

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[10] For a discussion of charismatic authority and terrorist radicalization, see Hofmann and Dawson (2014).

> Most of the adversaries Western powers have been fighting since 9/11 . . . fight us not because they hate the West and seek our overthrow but because *we* have invaded *their* space to deal with a small extremist element that has manipulated and exploited local grievances to gain power in their societies. (p. 262)

Desire to avenge perceived injustice is found in the example of John Maguire, a Canadian who converted to Islam and traveled to Syria to join ISIS in 2013. In response to the Canadian government's participation in an international military coalition fighting against ISIS, Maguire urged other Canadian Muslims to take arms "in retaliation to . . . unprovoked acts of aggression" (Bell, 2014, para. 15), and stated in a propaganda video: "The more bombs you drop on our people, the more Muslims will realize [that] waging jihad against the West [is] a religious obligation" (para. 11).

Given that the domestic approaches of the United States and Canada have focused on empowering credible voices within Muslim communities to speak out against extremism, it is worth highlighting the response of one religious group, the Fiqh Council of North America (2015), to the December 2015 San Bernardino shootings. In an online condemnation of the event, Executive Director Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Shah stated:

> Those who commit acts of violence, cruelty and terror in the name of Islam are not only destroying innocent lives but are also betraying the very faith they claim to protect. No injustice done to Muslims can ever justify the massacre of innocent people, and no act of terror will ever serve the cause of Islam. . . . We refuse to allow our faith to be held hostage by the criminal actions of a small minority acting outside the teachings of both the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. We remind all Muslims that loyalty to one's homeland and compassion to one's neighbors is an integral part of the Islamic faith. (para. 1)

Another, more sweeping example of a religious response to Islamic terrorism comes from the Calgary-based organization Muslims Against Terrorism (MAT). In March 2015, MAT founder Imam Syed Soharwardy initiated an anti-ISIS fatwa, the first Canadian instance, and one signed by 38 Canadian imams and Islamic scholars. The Islamic Supreme Council of Canada's (2015) text declares:

> We, the undersigned Imams, strongly disagree and condemn those policies of the United States, Canada and other Western countries in the Middle East which are completely unjust, based upon Islamophobia, bias and intolerance towards Muslims. We also understand and condemn the highly destructive and hateful role of the media in intentionally promoting intolerance towards Islam and Muslims. However, in order to counter the anti-Islam and anti-Muslim efforts, a Muslim cannot choose the path of ISIS or other terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, Taliban, Boko Haram, Al-Shabab, Al-Nusrah, Lashkar Taiba, Lashkar Jhangwi, etc. (para. 21)

Such pronouncements from Islamic organizations are important for several reasons. First, distinguishing individual terrorists from majority Muslim society, they may defend against Islamophobia.

Second, they may discourage radicalization of Muslim youth, and thereby support community-based efforts to combat Islamic extremism.. These two messages face different audiences, and there is no guarantee that a specific Islamic organization will have authority to speak to both. That said, as proposed by Alex Schmid (2015), research fellow at the International Counter-Terrorism Centre (The Hague), there is a pressing need for "credible Muslim opinion makers who interpret [religious] verses in their respective historical and political contexts" (p. 74). Although the fatwa's language is direct, and of an intensity that would deter some Canadian citizens, this very anger might provide the fatwa (and its signatories) with sufficient credibility in other circles—specifically, Muslims vulnerable to ISIS's extremist propaganda and/or charismatic champions of Islamic terrorist organizations. In other words, it is possible that, with respect to the small minority of Muslims at risk of radicalization, responses to extremist propaganda must come from voices/organizations with credibility derived from both Islamic authority and open criticism of Western foreign policy. If so, in its efforts to dissociate extremism and Islam, the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada holds a unique position in Canada's public landscape.

The fatwa's language is particularly striking when contrasted with high-profile federal pronouncements. For example, unveiling Canada's 2015 antiterrorism legislation, Prime Minister Harper (as cited in Leblanc & Hannay, 2017) evaded serious engagement with the possible causes of terrorism. In stating that "Canadians are targeted by these terrorists for no other reason than that we are Canadians" (para. 7), Harper offered a superficial explanation, one divorced from historical context. The fatwa (2015) explicitly does not advocate violence against Western countries; however, by directly condemning the "policies of the United States, Canada and other Western countries in the Middle East which are completely unjust [and] based upon Islamophobia" (para. 21), the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada offers one (historically contextualized) explanation for why some Islamic youth might be attracted to extremist ideas. And it is this very understanding of audience that bestows the fatwa with credibility, for certain key audiences, in the arena of counterterrorism communication.

In a 2015 conversation with a respected Canadian imam, the first author asked about the fatwa's scathing condemnation of Canada's foreign policy. The individual emphasized that these views are accepted by a significant number of Canadians Muslims. Throughout the conversation, two central themes became apparent. First, regardless of intent, the Canadian military's combat operations in Afghanistan encouraged some individuals to support extreme Islamic organizations. Further, the Harper government's active lobbying against Palestine's bid for a United Nations seat deepened the alienation of some Canadian Muslim youth. The Harper government is gone from power, but the lesson remains—federal actions can significantly affect public attitudes and perhaps situate individuals as receptive to either terrorist or antiterrorist messages. Second, language matters, including mass media depictions of Muslims and governmental characterizations of the battle against "Islamic extremism." Efforts to clarify that Muslims are a diverse population, and that terrorism derives from extreme outlier groups, can diminish Islamophobia and reduce tension between Muslim youths' religious and civic identities. As highlighted via a rhetorical recognition of audience, fatwas achieve a different audience than government statements. This point is simple but important.

The fatwa (2015) continues to state that "there is very clear guidance in the holy Qur'an and in the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) clearly guiding Muslims on how to handle anti-

Islam and anti-Muslim aggression on the part of groups and governments" (para. 22). Specifically forbidden are multiple acts routinely practiced by ISIS (e.g., killing Muslims, destroying mosques, murdering Islamic scholars, mutilating a human body alive or dead). Noting that ISIS/ISIL has committed multiple violations of Islamic law (paras. 23–24), the fatwa proceeds:

> We warn all Muslims, especially the youth, regarding the very deceptive un-Islamic, criminal nature of ISIS/ISIL OR Da'esh (داعش). This organization has recruited several Muslim youth, girls and boys, by deceiving them in the name of the Khilafah (Caliphate). Some Muslim youth from Western and Islamic countries have been misguided by ISIS/ISIL (Da'esh). We urge all of them to repent to Allah and leave ISIS/ISIL immediately. We, the undersigned Imams inform all Muslim youth, girls, boys and general public that:
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> - Joining ISIS/ISIL and groups like ISIS/ISIL is HARAAM (forbidden) in Islam.
> - Any Muslim who joins these KHAWARIJ (ISIS/ISIL) groups actually disconnects and disassociates himself/herself from the Ummah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).
> - Any Muslim who joins ISIS/ISIL OR similar groups disobeys Allah and His Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).
> - And whosoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him), and transgresses His limits, He will cast him into the Fire, to abide therein; and he shall have a disgraceful torment. (paras. 33–36)

After drawing a clear disjuncture between Islam and ISIS, the cosignatories turn to more secular, civic concerns. The fatwa (2015) warns Muslim youth against "speeches, songs and the literature available on the Internet or on social media produced by the imposters pretending to be Muslims." Because such sources are "a trap for young Muslims," youth are advised to "visit their local mosques and discuss any questions or points of confusion with the Imam publicly" (para. 39). Making clear the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada's position on terrorism, the text asserts that, "any person who inspires people to cause harm to Canada and Canadians must immediately be reported to the Police" (para. 39).

A notable turn is made in framing such counterterrorism principles as "our Islamic duty" to protect the rights of Canada's 1.1 million Muslims to practice their religion in safety and peace. Canada is home to

> more than 1000 mosques [and] more than 700 Islamic schools (madrasah) [and is a country where] large gatherings on Islam, Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are freely and publicly held, and where every day several non-Muslim 'Canadians embrace Islam. (para. 39)

The fatwa (2015) highlights that radicalization and support for ISIS threatens Muslims' "freedom to practice Islam in Canada" (para. 39) including conversions to the faith. As such "any attack on Canada will be an attack on the freedom of Canadian Muslims. It is the duty of every Canadian Muslim to safeguard Canada" (para. 40). Particularly notable here is the direct appeal to Muslims' self-interests. After

censuring Canadian policies in the Middle East region, as well as mainstream media portrayals of Muslims in general, the fatwa nonetheless acknowledges the religious freedoms broadly enjoyed Canadian Muslims. To support terrorist organizations such as ISIS, it asserts, is to put at risk the ability to exercise religious duties.

These formal pronouncements come from religious leaders, but other voices also hold promise for specific audiences. For instance, a 2016 story in the fashion magazine *Teen Vogue* provides an example of how members of the Muslim community may amplify countermessaging in novel ways (Eaton, 2016). Joshua Eaton reports about a college student in Boulder, Colorado, who, when asked by a classmate why Muslims do not condemn terrorist acts, created a spreadsheet of thousands of instances where Muslim religious groups have denounced terrorism in the name of Islam. The project, which has now become a searchable Web platform called Muslims Condemn,[11] allows users to find links to examples of Muslims who have spoken out against terrorism, such as the ISIS-linked 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, France, and the 2016 Orlando, Florida, shooting. This example underscores the fundamental importance of audience reception. Although religious leaders are knowledgeable about Islam, and thus ostensibly well-situated to challenge terrorist messages that incite violence in the name of Islam, their messages do not always reach a wide audience or those most vulnerable to radicalization. Source credibility is potent, but it has rhetorical force only in relation to audience.

The Role of Credibility in Counterterrorism Communication

Counterterrorism messaging can have multiple objectives: to influence select opinion leaders, to appease a constituency, or to constitute community, to name but a few. To maximize impact, a rhetor must understand a target audience's beliefs and motivations. Generally speaking, hostility and transparent persuasion have limited efficacy in that they spark defensiveness. More persuasive are appeals phrased in the language of shared aims that resonate with an audience's experiences and values (Burke, 1969, p. 55).

Thus far, we have explored the extent to which Canadian and U.S. domestic counterterrorism messages have aligned with basic principles of rhetorical credibility. To date, efforts have typically focused on engagement with either the Muslim community, as in the example of religious leaders speaking out against terrorist acts, or through messages from "formers" who engage broader audiences via mass media. In certain contexts, religious leaders may achieve credibility through their knowledge of religious texts and ability to translate that wisdom to real-life situations. In other contexts, former terrorists may speak credibly about their experiences and disillusionment. Following the assumption that certain individuals are more prone to extremist messages such as those of ISIS, it is both prudent and strategic to support voices and organizations that have the perceived credibility within key audiences to challenge those messages.

Yet a fundamental challenge involves successfully reaching key audiences that may be susceptible to terrorists' appeals. In early 2016, the U.S. Department of State launched the Global Engagement Center with the aim of reaching foreign audiences and developing "networks of governmental

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[11] See https://muslimscondemn.com/

and non-governmental partners to . . . create, develop, and sustain effective positive alternative narratives" (Executive Order 13721, 2016, p. 14686). Joint regional efforts with support from the U.S. Department of State, such as the Sawab Center in the United Arab Emirates, take a similar approach.[12] As we have noted, U.S. domestic counterterrorism messaging has been hampered by regulations prohibiting government messaging, such as the Smith–Mundt Act.[13] However, we believe that, to the extent legally possible, more should be done to develop targeted digital approaches to engage domestic audiences via a broad range of potentially credible messengers. Indeed, at a micro scale, Williams, Horgan, and Evans (2016) report that friends of those radicalizing to violence may be best placed to notice concerning behavior, although they may be reluctant to report concerns to law enforcement authorities. And to be clear, communities play a vital role in any comprehensive CVE strategy. One promising illustration is outlined in Joosse, Bucerius, and Thompson's (2015) exploration of the resilience of Somali youth in Toronto. Based on interviews with 118 members of Canada's largest Somali community, the researchers found that Somali Canadians have established sophisticated counternarratives to counter the recruitment propaganda of al-Shabaab.

Back at the national scale, the United Kingdom has found that there are serious challenges associated with developing a credible counterterrorism communication strategy. Beyond the overarching concern that community leaders who participate in these activities may be suspect of collusion with the government, some CVE programs risk alienating and stigmatizing Muslim communities in spite of public statements to the contrary (Awan, 2012; Thomas, 2010). Further, no single Muslim organization can claim to speak for or represent all Muslims, and, for those who do choose to speak up, serious safety risks may be incurred.

For these reasons, it is vital to look beyond Islamic extremism to the much broader category of extremism.[14] For instance, surveys of law enforcement officials in the United States have found that other types of violent extremism, such as antigovernment militia groups, constitute the number-one domestic terrorist threat (Kurzman & Schanzer, 2015). A lens that situates Islamic extremism within a wider landscape of other forms of ideologically motivated violence, such as violent white supremacists or militia groups, may offer the most comprehensive perspective to address a wide range of public safety issues without stigmatizing one group in particular. In addition, integrating counterterrorism programs within a larger strategy of public safety and violence prevention may address concerns raised by civil rights organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, that CVE programs, in effect, simply ask community members to spy on each other, or aim to restrict citizens' right to freedom of speech.[15] This point is crucial—efforts to counter extremist propaganda must reach out broadly and guard against practices that might alienate Muslim communities.

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[12] See https://twitter.com/sawabcenter?lang=en

[13] See http://www.state.gov/pdcommission/library/177362.htm

[14] Lasse Lindekilde's (2016) recent chapter addresses the complexities associated with the term *radicalization*. See also Barash and Webel (2014, pp. 71–98). Addressing right-wing extremism in the Canadian context, Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens (2016) emphasize that Canada's terrorism challenge extends beyond the sphere of al-Qa'ida and ISIS.

[15] See https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/cve_briefing_paper_feb_2016.pdf

Overall, there is mounting evidence to suggest that, in certain contexts, nongovernment actors are best situated to speak credibly. Crucially, the public pronouncements of the Fiqh Council and Islamic Supreme Council of Canada (noted above) indicate awareness among U.S. and Canadian Muslim communities about the importance of counterterrorism messaging, as well as the influence of source credibility. As such, these communicative acts are a proactive and positive response to the threat of extremism. Yet there may be other contexts wherein official government communications are credible and thus impactful. Government-sponsored counterterrorism communication campaigns may find it useful to draw on research from related fields such as disaster communication, emergency management, public health, and/or efforts to combat human trafficking to develop models for effective and inclusive government communication strategies.[16] At a minimum, these efforts might seek to clearly define and delineate the purpose of community-based counterterrorism programs to firmly separate prevention efforts from law enforcement actions. These programs also underscore the vital need for partnerships between government actors and community and private-sector partners.

As efforts evolve, evaluation and assessment are essential. In the end, any successful counterterrorism communication program will likely employ multiple tactics as part of a rigorous and diverse preventative strategy enacted by both governments and nongovernment organizations, reaching both broad-based publics as well as more targeted interventions among those more at risk for recruitment and radicalization. As counterterrorism policy analysts Green and Proctor (2016) assert, this approach may be viewed as "saturating the marketplace of ideas" through a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. They write, "strategic communications efforts will only be effective if they are organic, embedded in local peer networks, delivered by credible messengers, and articulate a positive vision for society" (p. 42). To that, we would also add that messages must reach intended audiences, whether a broader public or specific at-risk groups. Further, interdisciplinary models are needed to improve how counterterrorism messages are effectively targeted to specific audiences.

Returning to our discussion of paradox, outlined at the article's start, we recognize the practical difficulties of government and nongovernmental actors working together to produce credible and effective counterterrorism messages. In his conversation with the Canadian imam, the first author discussed the challenges of developing programs to meet the needs of at-risk youth. The imam explained that community engagement often requires government resources to fund and develop initiatives. He noted, however, that government-funded programs are frequently met with suspicion in local communities. Nonetheless, he recognized the need for additional federal engagement with representatives of Canada's Muslim community, and resources directed specifically to moderate Muslim organizations throughout the country. Official government reframings of its battle against extremist Islamic organizations are important, he affirmed, but engagement with Canada's Muslim population to solidify an Islamic buffer against extremist ideologies is a crucial dimension of a comprehensive federal policy. Similarly, working with former extremists requires a delicate balance of government awareness and community participation. In the United States, where it is illegal to travel to support terrorist organizations, disillusioned individuals

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[16] See http://tcv.gsu.edu/files/2016/09/Civic-Approaches-Sept-8-2016-Digital-Release.pdf

returning home will by law face severe legal consequence.[17] Vidino and Hughes (2015) note that there is a great need to develop integrated intervention models, perhaps modeled on programs in Europe, that provide an "alternative to prosecution" (p. 2).

We further recognize that this article raises multiple questions surrounding the development of effective counterterrorism communications. For example, it may not be politically feasible for a government to support an organization that explicitly condemns federal policy as "unjust, [Islamophobic, biased, and intolerant]" (Islamic Supreme Council of Canada, 2015, para. 21).[18] Within the U.S. context, the legal separation between church and state might complicate government efforts to support a Muslim nongovernmental organization's operations (even if such religious programs have uniquely credible voices). No single voice or organization represents all Muslims (a fact that affirms the importance of engaging target audiences via credible messengers). Community members may be reluctant to report concerns to law enforcement authorities, and those that do risk possible retaliation. Finally, some CVE programs risk alienating and stigmatizing Muslim communities despite public statements to the contrary. These are serious challenges. It is crucial that policy makers and practitioners take steps to genuinely collaborate with Muslim communities. Ultimately, efforts to publicize the testimony of formers, and engage and support moderate Muslim religious leaders, highlight the promise and consequence of close attention to audience and rhetorical principles of credibility.

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[17] For a detailed investigation of criminal charges for U.S.-based individuals who have traveled or attempted to travel to join terrorist organizations, see
https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf

[18] An example of possible challenges associated with government cooperation with religious organizations is found in the Canadian RCMP's withdrawal of support for a handbook written by the National Council of Canadian Muslims and Islamic Social Services Association. Alleging an "adversarial tone" (para. 5), the RCMP pulled support for the document, *United Against Terrorism: A Collaborative Effort Towards a Secure, Inclusive and Just Canada*. See http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/group-stunned-rcmp-pulled-support-from-anti-terrorism-handbook-1.2783234

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