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EX POST PAPER
RAN Policy & Practice Workshop – Narratives and Strategies of Far-Right and Islamist Extremists, 4 July 2019, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

RAN Policy & Practice Workshop – Narratives and Strategies of Far-Right and Islamist Extremists

This ex post paper is written for both policymakers and first-line practitioners engaging or dealing with violent far-right extremists and Islamist extremists. This paper can serve as a guideline for practitioners and policymakers involved in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). We list factors to be considered when formulating P/CVE strategies, including alternative and counter-narratives, and use examples to illustrate their relevance. We also discuss the challenges that may arise in formulating P/CVE strategies and suggest ways of dealing with these challenges.

Introduction

On 4 July, policymakers and practitioners from around the EU came together in Amsterdam to talk about ways of responding and dealing with the overarching narratives used by far-right extremist (FRE) groups and Islamist extremist (IE) groups to attract followers. In trying to formulate possible counter or preventive actions as a response to these (violent) extremist narratives, participants identified numerous factors and challenges that need to be considered by anyone involved in P/CVE.

The first part of this paper discusses four key factors that should be considered by policymakers and practitioners in their attempts to counter or prevent violent extremism, whether of a far-right or Islamist nature.
To increase the chance of a P/CVE strategy being effective, it should:

1. differentiate between various violent extremist overarching narratives (frames) used to attract followers;
2. consider the local context;
3. understand and empathise with the underlying emotions and grievances to which the narrative appeals;
4. avoid adopting the same binary discourse (ab)used by extremist groups.

Each of these factors will be explained below by referring to narratives employed by both FRE and IE groups, and by suggesting ways of incorporating these factors into a P/CVE strategy.

The second part of this paper focuses on the challenges that arise when formulating P/CVE strategies.

1. One challenge is responding to the sheer scale of fake news and false facts that circulate in our societies and are used to justify the convictions and actions of (violent) extremist groups.
2. Another challenge is the tricky interplay between far-right extremism and Islamist extremism; what might be a suitable P/CVE strategy for one, could fuel the other.

On a final note, this paper highlights the importance of distinguishing between the different levels of responsibility of policymakers and practitioners. When formulating P/CVE strategies, it is important to differentiate between actions that should be carried out by practitioners at a local/regional level and those that fall under the responsibility of national policymakers.

Formulating P/CVE strategies

During the RAN Policy and Practice event in Amsterdam on 4 July, participants were divided into smaller groups and assigned to look into how to deal with one specific overarching narrative used by FRE groups and one specific overarching narrative used by IE groups. Although there are clearly differences in P/CVE strategies and responses depending on the extremist group, the used narrative and the context of both, four factors can be identified as particularly important in formulating a response to an extremist narrative.

1. Differentiate between extremist overarching narratives (frames)

Extremist groups use frames to describe their own movement and to define their enemies; frames thereby represent the group's perception of the world, which can subsequently be extended to define and describe people, events and occurrences ([1]). There is often a general or overarching frame, which can be moulded into different shapes to help give the extremist meaning to certain (local) issues or situations. As such, framing allows for contentious issues to be simplified — often by creating the appearance of a binary reality — and can then be used by extremist movements to promote their cause to a wider audience, even if this audience does not yet adhere to the same ideology or belief system ([2]).

Deconstructing the IE frame "Islam is under attack": According to the Salafi notion of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, (loyalty to Islam and disavowal of un-Islamic ways), *al wala'* (loyalty) must be directed towards God and Islam. According to this interpretation, Muslims must express their hatred of unbelievers and stay away from them ([3]). More concretely, according to the Salafi interpretation of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, Muslims must, on a political level, reject all diplomatic ties with non-Muslim countries and, on a personal and religious level, believe that any loyalty

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([1]) Wagemakers, J. (2008). Framing the "threat to Islam": Al-wala' wa al-bara' in Salafi discourse. *Arab Studies Quarterly, 30*(4), 1–22 (p. 2).
([2]) Ibid. (p. 2).
([3]) Ibid. (pp. 4–5).

or contact with non-Muslims corrupts the purity of Islam. If Muslims do not adhere to this interpretation this is a threat to Islam ([4]).

Al-wala' wa-l-bara' is a concept that is used by IE groups to justify their use of violence and to call on true believers to counter the threat against Islam. The concept of al-wala' wa-l-bara', however, hardly has any resonance outside Salafi circles and is therefore unlikely to attract many followers to the Daesh cause ([5]). Hence, to attract followers, Daesh produces political grievances that do resonate among a large target audience — resentment against US military actions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria or the occupation of the Palestinian Territories, to name just a few examples. These grievances are tied to the overarching frame of "Islam being under attack" ([6]). As such, the frame that Islam is under threat because of non-adherence to the wala' and bara' concept has been extended to include the political and military actions that fuel anti-Western resentment among a wider Muslim audience, thereby increasing resonance of the overarching frame "Islam is under attack" and serving as legitimisation for violence.

The particular frame described above can appeal to followers on different levels: the concept of al-wala' wa-l-bara' can be enough for the more fundamental believers, those with a strong ideological conviction rooted in a strict interpretation of Islam, but the frame can also be extended to appeal to followers who are motivated more by political grievances than by religion. In this case, deconstructing the frame "Islam is under attack" can tell you, for example, whether to engage your target audience at the level of theology or at the level of grievances and emotions.

The relevance to P/CVE: When formulating P/CVE strategies, differentiating between different frames is the first step in understanding what it is you are trying to prevent or counter. Identifying and understanding whether an extremist frame plays into ideological convictions, political grievances or individual psycho-social issues will allow you to identify which emotions and grievances the frame appeals to. Deconstructing the particulars of a frame is thus vital for understanding why it resonates among its target audience. Without this understanding, it will prove difficult to formulate a counter or preventive narrative or strategy that engages at the appropriate level.

2. Remember that local is key

Understanding the local dynamics and the hyperlocal nuances of a specific area are important elements that need to be considered when formulating a counter or alternative strategy ([7]). Extremist groups exploit hyperlocal vulnerabilities and events to reinforce their narrative and strengthen their appeal. Since the local context plays a crucial role in the process of radicalisation, the local context forms the basis of any potential solution or counter/preventive strategy.

Although a number of frames are used by FRE and IE groups ([8]), the next logical step is to consider how these frames are manifested at a local level. One must look at which local events and developments have occurred for that narrative to have resonance locally; e.g. changes in demography, attitudes, behaviour or tactics, and meeting points used by extremist groups ([9]). Once these contextual elements are understood, one can begin to think about which local vulnerabilities (such as housing shortages or unemployment) need to be addressed in a P/CVE strategy so that its impact can be equally local. Ideally, a counter message will address the same local issues, but from a different — i.e. a positive and less destructive — angle, and will offer ways of strengthening local resilience instead of increasing the existing vulnerabilities.

([4]) Wagemakers, J. (2008). Framing the "threat to Islam": Al-wala' wa al-bara' in Salafi discourse. Arab Studies Quarterly, 30(4), 1–22 (pp. 6–8).
([5]) Ibid. (p. 9).
([6]) Ibid. (p. 10).
([7]) Russell, J., Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities, Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018.
([8]) For further reading on the various overarching narratives used by FRE and IE groups, please see: Sterkenburg, N., Smit, Q., & Meines, M., Current and future narratives and strategies of far-right and Islamist extremism, Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2019.
([9]) Russell, J., Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities, Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018.

Example of IE frame "you will never be accepted, you will never succeed as a Muslim in Western societies": This frame builds on specific experiences to justify this conviction; experiences that are likely to be different for someone in a poor rural village with a predominant "white" Christian or secular population than for someone else in a big city. For both, however, identity issues can likely be identified as their vulnerability. As such, a resilient factor that needs to be strengthened in any strategy trying to present an alternative to this frame is a sense of belonging ([10]). However, specific contextual elements, such as experiences, attitudes, behaviour, etc., are essential to determine what will help build that sense of belonging. Counter and preventive strategies are encouraged to use local role models to make their messaging more credible; their close proximity to the target audience is more likely to encourage behaviour change than a national role model with whom very few people can identify or relate ([11]).

Inspiration for local campaigns and P/CVE strategies

Dare to DNA: On 4 July, "Dare to DNA" was suggested as an idea for a local counter campaign against the FRE narrative that the national identity is under threat. In areas where FRE groups use this frame to justify their call for a racially pure state, challenge members of a community to test their DNA and trace back their ancestry. This will likely prove that the white race is not 100 % pure and that most individuals are a mix of races and ethnicities. This can form the basis for formulating a local identity that everyone can buy into.

Jamal al-Khatib: This is an example of an alternative narrative developed with local communities. Jamal al-Khatib is inspired by the story of a young prisoner who disengaged from the jihadist scene in Austria and wanted to help others radicalising. In a series of short films, participating youngsters and young adults reflect on their own lives and on the situation of Muslims in general. For more information on Jamal al-Khatib, please see the RAN Issue Paper 'Developing counter and alternative narratives together with local communities'.

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3. Engage with the underlying emotions and grievances

One of the reasons that extremist groups are able to attract followers is because many of the grievances they voice are the (perceived) grievances of a much wider, and often more moderate, audience ([12]). On top of that, there is often an element of truth in their narratives, which they then use to justify a certain belief or conviction. As explained above, it is often the emotions and grievances associated with a certain occurrence and subsequently highlighted in an extremist narrative, rather than a (violent) extremist conviction, that gives a narrative its strong traction.

It is precisely because so many extremist narratives tap into existing emotions and grievances that mere facts and figures are insufficient to illustrate the inaccuracy of an extremist narrative. Often, emotions and grievances are too deeply ingrained for facts to carry any weight, hence the importance of first identifying which grievances play a role and then engaging with these on an emotional level.

For example, if we consider the IE narrative "you will never be accepted, you will never succeed as a Muslim in Western societies", we can identify injustice and the need to belong — often due to a perceived lack of equal rights and opportunities — as underlying grievances. These grievances must first be heard and acknowledged if a counter or alternative is to have any effect. In response, one must, for example, recognise that there is a level of discrimination in Western societies. Only once you have engaged with your audience and reached them on an emotional level can you try to influence them with facts, figures and examples of successful role models.

Another example can be given by looking at the underlying grievances of the IE narrative "the war is not over", which calls on followers to emigrate to other places and join their "brothers and sisters" in their fight against the *kuffar* (unbelievers). An underlying grievance in this narrative is again the need to belong. A P/CVE strategy will only resonate if room is given for this grievance first and if an alternative is provided that also offers a sense of belonging, or any alternative or counter-narrative is likely to fall on deaf ears. More concretely, an alternative narrative could emphasise that there is room for multiple identities; that one can be part of a local community AND

([10]) Russell, J., Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities, Ex Post Paper. Brussels, Belgium: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2018.
([11]) Ibid.
([12]) Schmid, A. P. (2013). *Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*. The Hague, the Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (p. 60).

be a good Muslim, or that one can be a good Muslim "here" and be part of the *ummah* "here", wherever "here" might be.

Both FRE and IE groups have mastered the ability to exploit large national issues that trigger complex emotional responses. Far-right extremists will use immigration, while Islamist extremists will use the wars in the Middle East, to name just one example, to legitimise their violent extremist views and convince more people to join their cause. By recognising the personal or individual level of emotions and grievances in P/CVE strategies, space is created to channel these emotions in a positive and constructive way. Acknowledging the concerns and grievances allows to reframe the narrative without confronting it, and without validating the violence advocated in the extremist narrative ([13]).

Practitioner's tip for dealing with underlying emotions and grievances

When interacting with someone who is attracted to an extremist narrative, try to give a voice to that person without becoming the one who gives the advice; try to return a sense of agency to the individual in question. One way of doing this is as follows:

> *Almost everyone has grievances. Try to externalise the grievance and speak about the problem encountered or experienced by the individual as if it were there in the room, sitting on a chair. This helps them understand the impact the grievance has on their life and then to address that issue. Once they understand what their part is in the problem and what part is imposed on them, they can begin to re-author the narrative and take control, instead of remaining a victim of that narrative.*

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4. Don't adopt a binary approach to reality

Extremist frames look for ways to provide certainty and simplicity out of chaos ([14]); they offer an escape from complexity and provide the tools to interpret events and understand the world in a simplified, binary manner of good and evil, of us versus them. This binary approach to reality is one of the reasons extremist narratives resonate among their target audience.

Understanding the world in this dichotomous way requires narrow definitions of identity. For example, the narrative "national identities are under threat" is used by FRE groups to categorise people according to their ethnic background and to illustrate that the white race is under threat. Terms such as "white genocide", "demographic jihad" and "Islamisation" are used to justify their perception that all Muslims and all immigrants pose a threat to the survival of the white race. One's identity is thus determined solely by their physical attributes — ethnicity and race — or the religion to which they adhere.

In the narrative "you will never be accepted, you will never succeed as a Muslim in Western societies" used by IE groups, people are categorised according to one aspect only: as a Muslim or as a non-Muslim (those who do not adhere to the group's strict interpretation of Islam are not considered Muslim). Unfortunately, this narrative is sometimes reinforced by the negative portrayal of Muslims since the attacks of 9/11 and the start of the war on terrorism in 2003. As a result, Muslim minorities are increasingly seen in religious terms rather than in ethnic or cultural ones, encouraging large parts of society to generalise Islam and Muslims, a trend that has become hyper-normalised ([15]). This generalisation has on the one hand contributed to the rise of FRE groups and, on the other hand, been used by IE groups to justify their actions.

We all generalise. Generalisations allow us to make sense of the complexity of the world and are not necessarily wrong as such. However, generalisations will play into the binary discourse likely to fuel the extremist narrative.

For any counter or alternative strategy to have effect, it must incorporate a broader concept of identity and make room for the existence of multiple identities; we must break away from the binary discourse employed by extremist groups, and avoid generalisations such as the one described above. Counter-narratives must sketch a more

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([13]) Beutel, A., Weine, S. M., Saeed, A., Mihajlovic, A. S., Stone, A., Beahrs, J. O., & Shanfield, S. B. (2016). Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives. *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations, 7*(3), 35–49.
([14]) Ibid.
([15]) Abbas, T. (2017). Ethnicity and politics in contextualising far right and Islamist extremism. *Perspectives on Terrorism, 11*(3), 54–61.

integrative and nuanced definition of identity, one that allows its target audience to stop seeing the world in a binary manner ([16]) and instead see the possibility of being an observant Muslim AND loyal citizen, for example.

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Practitioner's tip for countering the binary distinction used by FRE groups

The frame "we are not living according to our nature" used by FRE groups distinguishes between individualism and community welfare. This frame is used to explain how feminists and LGBTI persons, for example, can be blamed for declining birth rates. They promote a conservative society that relies on communitarian values and traditional gender roles as the only way to save the white race.

> *When formulating a counter-narrative, there is no point in simply denying that feminists and LGBTI persons are harmful to the community because it is unlikely to resonate among the intended target group. Rather than using this opposite binary distinction, the counter-narrative can challenge the notion of the individual as being destructive to the community and illustrate that one does not need to choose between the individual and the community. This can return a sense of agency and control to the individual that may prevent them from submitting to the extremist frame. Role models can be used to give an example of this type of integrative complexity as an alternative to the binary reality presented by the extremist frame.*

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Living Libraries in Slovakia

People tell their stories of overcoming obstacles they faced because of, for example, their social or racial background. They share their experiences with racism and discrimination, and thereby encourage the involvement of a wider audience in finding solutions to what is a real and current issue. Individuals use their personal stories as a tool for understanding and developing critical thinking in their society. Through human touch and storytelling, Living Libraries help erase the boundaries that exist in the binary discourse promoted by extremist groups and instead encourage inclusive thinking by focusing on a shared identity.

For more information, see:
https://www.sozialmarie.org/en/projects/7494

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Tips to deal with the challenges of formulating P/CVE strategies

The problem of propaganda and fake news – Fact-check responsibility

Extremist groups rely heavily on the internet for spreading their narratives and recruiting new followers, and they use propaganda, fake news or facts taken out of context to spread their messages. Through multiple platforms, both FRE and IE groups offer followers the opportunity to comment, engage and be part of a wider movement ([17]). The result of this is vast amounts of propaganda floating around online, attracting new recruits or reinforcing the extremist views of existing followers.

It should come as no surprise that some of the biggest challenges in P/CVE are the sheer scale of extremist content available online and the difficulty of exposing all fake news and propaganda available on social media platforms in general and extremism platforms specifically. One of the main difficulties is deciding where to draw the line between imposing strict measures on censorship that reflect a more critical approach to the media and the internet and violating a state's respect for freedom of speech ([18]). Many lone actors who identify with FRE groups, for instance, only connect with each other through online platforms and much of the content that inspires their views cannot

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([16]) Beutal, A., Weine, S. M., Saeed, A., Mihajlovic, A. S., Stone, A., Beahrs, J. O., & Shanfield, S. B. (2016). Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives. *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations, 7*(3), 35–49.
([17]) RAN CoE, One-to-one digital interventions, Ex Post Paper. Berlin, Germany: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2016.
([18]) Schmid, A. P. (2013). *Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*. The Hague, the Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (p. 59).

strictly be considered illegal ([19]). Similarly, not all fake news can be legally removed from online platforms. Also, contextualising or correcting all fake news or propaganda out there is an impossible task. That being said, many of the larger social media companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, do moderate their online content and have committed to removing all hate speech and racially inspired comments within 24 hours, but the question remains whether that alone will suffice ([20]).

Individual responsibility to fact-check the information
P/CVE strategies should seek to inspire a sense of individual responsibility to fact-check the information we receive. Although we have seen that many individuals are more susceptible to emotions than to facts alone, at a hyperlocal level statistics and facts may be able to counter some of the false information intended to recruit followers to an extremist cause. There should thus be a concerted effort — between media, civil society organisations (CSOs), schools and individuals — to encourage critical thinking and to commit to an ongoing production of facts and contexts that will expose fake news wherever possible. A platform like Wikipedia, which invites readers to flag and correct any false information they come across, can serve as inspiration for developing a platform that is resilient against false information, manipulation of facts and spreading extremist content.

Interplay between FRE and IE

Formulating P/CVE strategies, a challenging endeavour in itself, is further complicated by the tricky interplay between far-right and Islamist extremism. Although the underlying causes of radicalisation, whether of a far-right nature or an Islamist nature, have much in common, both extremist narratives are increasingly referring to another and feeding off each other's rhetoric, which they both then use to justify their existence ([21]).

How this dilemma is extended to P/CVE is illustrated in the following scenario:

To counter the IE frame "Muslims will never be accepted in Western societies", it is important to identify the grievances and deal with these head on. It is still often denied that discrimination of Muslims is present in our society, so in any effective alternative strategy there must first be acknowledgment that discrimination in fact exists. This way, the target audience can feel heard and understood. At the same time, recognising that discrimination of Muslims is a problem in our society is likely to play into the FRE narrative that immigrants are favoured over "natives" or that the national identity is under threat. So, a tailored P/CVE strategy for one IE narrative will likely nurture indignation among FRE groups and reinforce their narratives.

Careful distinction and checking for negative effects
Recognising how both extremist groups feed off each other's rhetoric is incredibly important in order not to succumb to a divide-and-rule way of dealing with the different beliefs and values present in society ([22]). In other words, we must be careful not to limit P/CVE programmes to a specific group considered to be at risk of radicalising — often Muslim communities — but should instead aim to engage at a much broader level of preventing targeted violence and promoting public safety of all citizens ([23]). In short, P/CVE strategies should avoid stigmatising specific parts of the population to avoid a potential adverse effect. One example might be that instead of encouraging inter-faith dialogues, which could be interpreted as stigmatising individuals according to their religion, bring people together through sport or music events, which are more likely to incorporate an entire community. In addition, counter- and alternative narratives, and campaigns specifically, should be formulated with a very specific target audience in mind. Only when campaigns are made hyperlocal can we seek to control how the narrative is received and hopefully prevent it from being used to justify the opposite extremism ([24]).

What else can we do? – Responsibilities

When formulating P/CVE strategies, it is important to consider the responsibilities of actors at different levels, to distinguish between actions that should be carried out by practitioners at a local or regional level and actions that

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([19]) Alde'emeh, M. (2019). *Gilles de Kerchove: Als je geen politiestaat wilt, moet je aanvaarden dat er risico's blijven bestaan*. De Morgen, 29 July.
([20]) Ibid.
([21]) Hénin, N. (2019). *Dangerous liaisons: The alt-right–jihadists nexus, a French perspective*. European Eye on Radicalization, 31 July.
([22]) Ibid.
([23]) Beutal, A., Weine, S. M., Saeed, A., Mihajlovic, A. S., Stone, A., Beahrs, J. O., & Shanfield, S. B. (2016). Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives. *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations, 7*(3), 35–49.
([24]) For more information on formulating counter- and alternative campaigns, see: Ritzmann, A., & Meines, M., RAN Guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+), Issue Paper. Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2017.

should be carried out at a national level. Moreover, to avoid the risk of adverse effects, it is equally important to think about the messenger of a counter- and/or alternative action, since the messenger is likely to have a great influence on how the target audience receives the message. Governments, for example, might not always be the appropriate messenger since many extremist groups are likely to view their message with suspicion ([25]).

Local initiatives carried out by practitioners and CSOs can be facilitated (and funded) by central government in order to ensure multiplication and continuity of effective counter or preventive actions. It is a well-known fact that education — and critical thinking specifically — is essential for building resilience among the population. Classes that teach critical thinking and talk about the meaning of citizenship, for example, can be carried out by CSOs that can relate the content to the local context. At the same time, the overarching concept of teaching critical thinking at educational institutions should be supported on the national level. This will also help create accountability between actors engaging at different levels in society and will help ensure that actions at local and national levels reinforce each other.

Key Takeaways

When formulating P/CVE strategies and actions to counter extremist narratives, the following elements should be considered:

- Differentiate between overarching extremist narratives, or frames, used to attract followers.
- Bear in mind that extremist groups use frames to explain certain events or occurrences by abusing widely experienced emotions and grievances. These frames then come to justify a conviction or belief. Not all followers automatically adhere to the extremist conviction professed in the narrative.
- Understand the local dynamics and nuances of the community in which an extremist narrative has traction and incorporate this in any counter or alternative strategy.
- Identify and acknowledge the emotions or grievances underlying an extremist narrative and engage these in any counter or alternative strategy.
- Be careful not to adopt a discourse rooted in the same binary opposition used by extremist groups.
- Beware of the tricky interplay between both extremisms and try to avoid a counter strategy for one that will likely justify or fuel the other.
- Some actions require a hyperlocal response best carried out by practitioners, while other actions require government commitment. Differentiate between these actions and try to foster dual accountability and reinforcement.

([25]) Schmid, A. P. (2013). *Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*. The Hague, the Netherlands: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (p. 59).