Influencing Violent Extremist Organizations and Their Supporters without Adverse Side Effects

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PREFACE

This working paper collects material developed as RAND along-the-way contributions to a DoD project, “Influencing Violent Extremist Organizations” (I-VEO project) being conducted by the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) program under the Rapid Reaction Technology Office of the Office of the Director, Defense Research and Engineering. Some of the material here appears also, in shortened form, in one of the project’s final reports (Helfstein et al., 2011).
SUMMARY

In developing strategy to affect violent extremist organizations (VEOs) it is useful to take a “system perspective” to characterize the different elements of a VEO and the larger environment in which the VEO operates. It is also useful to think about an influence spectrum that includes efforts at one end to co-opt or induce and, at the other end, actions taken to punish now so as to deter later. Strategy, then, takes actions to promote different kinds of influences on different elements of the system with the intention of achieving desired effects, avoiding or mitigating unintended side effects, and being in a position to exploit unintended but favorable side effects.

Many different approaches can be taken in seeking knowledge and insights to guide influence strategy. Researchers even have highly varied concepts of what constitutes both “theory” and “empirical evidence.” One approach to theory identifies discrete hypotheses. Another approach, favored in this paper and a larger body of RAND work, is more systemic—attempting to see the whole rather than just the various fragments represented by discrete hypotheses. A related contrast exists in empirical work. Statistical analysis is one type of empirical inquiry. It can be used to test discrete hypotheses and for inductive discovery. However, empirical inquiry may instead be informed by more systemic theory and may be either qualitative or quantitative. In that approach, empirical data is used to help test and improve systemic theory, rather than for inductive work. Further, the conclusions drawn are based on causal thinking and expressed as contingent expectations (i.e., expectations dependent on the situation), rather than conclusions about “on average” past correlations. Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses. The SMA project included an ambitious and fruitful review of hypotheses, as well as new quantitative testing. It also included, as discussed here, reviewing advances in systemic theory and in qualitative, theory-testing empirical work. Some of that work uses a nonclassical approach to model “validation” that focuses on falsifiability, coherence, and usefulness rather than quantitative comparison with controlled experimental data.

Numerous sources of knowledge and insight are seldom included in scholarly discussions but can be valuable in understanding unfamiliar cultures and patterns of thinking, as in explaining how others perceive the world and why some apparently logical influence actions could be counterproductive. The nontraditional sources include red teaming, historical studies, modeling and simulation, gaming, on-scene observation
Developing a knowledge base is one thing, but communicating and reasoning about that knowledge is another. Some methods for doing so that seem particularly apt include factor trees, influence diagrams, action-interaction tables, and effect-mitigation tables. The paper illustrates a number of these. It then uses a factor-tree depiction of qualitative systemic theory to discuss how to understand and influence public support for VEOs. It adds some rough-cut tables that attempt to anticipate, and to suggest mitigations for, unintended side effects.