

# Jihadi Johns: Virtual Democracy and Countering Violent Extremism Propaganda

Matthew Crosston

A growing body of literature documents how Islamic extremist groups utilize technology to recruit potential new extremists. This back-end analysis is not matched, however, by the equally important front-end part of the process: How and why do these virtual propaganda/recruiting tools work on populations living in Western societies? Why are people susceptible to extremism while living in stable, free democracies? This paper fuses elements of cognitive psychology (specifically Siboni's concept of the "first cognitive war") and virtual technology with the world of countering violent extremism to explain why Western counterterrorist organizations, from governments to the military to intelligence agencies, are having difficulty battling the virtual recruitment front. The overall failure of countering violent extremism (CVE) programs across Western democracies in the face of this virtual extremist onslaught will force some uncomfortable questions to the fore about how modern democracy in the digital age might be falling short of its ideals and civic promises, especially compared to the tech-savviness of radical extremists. This failure likely means the continuing success of extremist groups who advance violent agendas and kill more innocents. It also means the most advanced democracies will continue to lose the first cognitive war to extremist groups.

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## Introduction

Although the Islamic State has not been able to maintain its physical geopolitical gains across Iraq and Syria, its ability to maximize its influence through various social media platforms in order to recruit people to commit atrocities in major Western metropolitan areas continues to be a disconcerting success. A growing body of literature documents exactly how Islamic radical groups utilize technology to ultimately recruit potential new extremists, but this back-end analysis is not matched by the equally important front-end part of the process: How and why do these virtual propaganda/recruiting tools work successfully on immigrant populations living in Western societies? Why are these people susceptible to extremism while living in stable, free democracies? This paper fuses elements of cognitive psychology (specifically Siboni's concept of the "first cognitive war") and virtual technology with the world of countering violent extremism (CVE) to explain why Western counterterrorist organizations, from governments to the military to intelligence agencies, are having difficulty in battling the virtual recruitment front.<sup>1</sup>

This article will address Western societies that have failed to psychologically integrate migrant communities into their democratic values. This lack of accountability to develop positive countermeasures is crucially causal as to why some groups are "in the West" but remain frustratingly not "of the West." How the internet seems to be a perfectly pernicious tool to exploit this failure of modern democracy's psychological promise will also be analyzed. The timeliness of this topic cuts across numerous important themes when it comes to the internet and society, including the role of social media in political campaigns and the formulation of intelligence policy; accountability and the rights of redress in the platform society; innovations (negative and positive) in civic participation and engagement; online social movements; instability and volatility in political life; and the rise of extremism and polarization.

This article will highlight an analysis of how extremist virtual propaganda works, relating to the effectiveness of the different types of virtual technology used and contrasting these techniques against the less efficacious and disappointing policies used by Western democracies to counter these groups. The overall failure of CVE programs in the face of this virtual

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1 Gabi Siboni, "The First Cognitive War," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2016–2017*, ed. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2016).

extremist onslaught will force some uncomfortable questions about how modern democracy in the digital age might be falling short of its ideals, especially compared to the tech-savviness of radical extremists. Failure to bring about this innovation likely means that extremist groups will continue to successfully advance violent agendas and killing more innocents. It also means the most advanced democracies will continue to lose the first cognitive war to extremist groups.

## The Concept of the First Cognitive War

Siboni was the first to specifically coin the term “first cognitive war” in relation to the increasing use of virtual technology by sub-state groups to recruit actors to engage in a wide-range of activities undermining state welfare. Siboni highlighted how expansive these approaches were, ranging from engaging in academic and economic boycotts to undermining electoral and judicial legitimacy to committing physical acts of terror. In addition, he made explicit the efficacious use of virtual technologies to not only recruit so-called “lone wolves” to perform these tasks but also to make such incidents more spontaneous, less predictable, and requiring little to no formal organizational infrastructure or logistics.<sup>2</sup>

Siboni’s original work focused exclusively on the immediate threat this capacity had on the proper functioning of the State of Israel. This article argues that the relevance of the first cognitive war concept extends far beyond the geographical territory of Israel and already has had a powerful impact on many advanced Western democracies across the globe. Perhaps most disconcerting is that Western consolidated democracies are not incorporating new counterstrategies to deal with this evolution in extremism. While the literature on cyber terrorism and the virtual recruitment of extremists is vast, as will be examined later in more detail, most of it details the method and logistics of the actual recruitment and the personal backgrounds of potential recruits. This means that a crucial aspect of the investigation is not being properly emphasized: the true “front-end” part of the virtual recruitment process, which tries to ascertain what has gone wrong psychologically and/or perceptually for these recruits who reside in immigrant communities in Western democracies and who thus should be less susceptible to extremist propaganda.

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2 Siboni, “The First Cognitive War.”

This attitudinal aspect of potential recruits toward the democracies within which they reside is important because it speaks to the heart of the psychological foundation that might make them ripe for extremist recruitment. In some ways, this is the proto-battlefield in the first cognitive war: It matters how potential Jihadi Johns have experienced their initial foray of living in a proper democracy, and how this experience fosters a negative attitude about democratic institutions in general. Most important, counterterrorist agencies need to better understand this initial disenchantment because, arguably, it is only during this phase—which I call the pre-cursor phase—when governmental agencies have a legitimate opportunity to deter and stop the transformation of potential recruits into Jihadi Johns. The literature on cyber recruitment mostly has ignored this part of the process, having determined that any such critical perceptions about democratic society are largely *misperceptions* and thus not valuable to the overall investigation. This is erroneous. Since the entire point of the first cognitive war is about the ability of non-state groups to psychologically affect and influence individuals more powerfully than formal state organizations, the attitudinal positions of recruits about their host countries *before they are converted* do matter, and they matter a lot. Before diving deeper into this missing component, an overview of the literature on extremist recruitment is necessary.

### **Social Media, Cyber Jihad, and the Internet as Extremist Weapons**

The idea of “electronic jihad” or “www.mujahideen” is not so new, as al-Qaeda first capitalized on it most prominently nearly twenty years ago. Thompson has critically analyzed how social media, which has become prevalent particularly among the millennial generation, has been dangerously effective at luring users in with promises of friendship and belonging. The virtual bombardment of radical messages could easily lead many unsuspecting recruits down a high-tech rabbit hole with no real knowledge of how to get out. Thompson showed how virtual penetration across various societies was actually well above average in the Middle East and North Africa, despite conventional Western impressions that these are backward regions. The Middle East even outpaced China’s 31.6 percent virtual societal penetration, even though

most in the West consider China to be far more technologically advanced and savvy and its population overall far more connected to the internet.<sup>3</sup>

Keene elaborated on the connection between the internet and terrorist recruiters.<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging how difficult it is to not just monitor but also shut down radical internet sites and chat rooms, he recognized the power of the virtual media in positioning terrorist groups as purveyors of great causes and that the internet was a tool of empowerment in which potential recruits could be easily swayed to supporting positions far different from those of their host countries. Keene's work is emblematic of the early cyber-radicalism literature, where the positions and attitudes of potential recruits toward the host societies *before* they are exposed to extremist sites and propaganda are largely blank slates awaiting imprint. Elaborating on this space will help us understand the initial attractiveness of virtual radicalism among some Muslims living in the West. Indeed, Levin cataloged how during the early phases of virtual radicalization, the internet became a nearly fully-functioning ecosystem where American citizens (i.e., people who were born in America or naturalized after living for a long period of time in America, thus making it difficult to characterize this issue as an exclusively "other" problem) were fundamental in creating, maintaining, and propagating online content that would radicalize emigrant Muslims and even native-born Americans to carry out attacks on the homeland.<sup>5</sup> But once more, these overviews did not investigate the initial attitudinal state of potential recruits before their virtual exposure.

Of course, the key feature of the internet that gained so much approval by radical clerics has been its consistent fidelity. Unlike oral speeches or word-of-mouth, the internet allows someone to copy messages verbatim, send them literally all over the world without loss of any content, and give it a permanent virtual landing spot that people could return to or find no matter how much time has passed. Rudner recently extrapolated, in ascending order of severity, the multi-functionality of virtual activity by extremist Islamic groups:

- 3 R. L. Thompson, "Radicalization and the Use of Social Media," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 167–190.
- 4 S. D. Keene, "Terrorism and the Internet: A Double-Edged Sword," *Journal of Money Laundering Control* 14, no. 4 (2011): 359–370.
- 5 Brian Levin, "The Original Web of Hate: Revolution Muslim and American Homegrown Extremists," *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 12 (2015): 1609–1630.

1. subvert Muslim communities in Western democracies while deceiving and distracting
2. host governments from reacting to the threat at hand;
3. cultivate supportive attitudes toward acts of terrorism;
4. offer theological justification for acts of political violence and terror;
5. provide technical instructions and operational guidelines for terrorist acts;
6. promote direct involvement in preparatory activities that expedite terrorist operations;
7. encourage personal engagement in committing acts of terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

Works like this are focused more on the internal conversion element of recruiting. Indeed, Martin showed how virtual religious teaching played a greater role for recruitment than purely political philosophies, calling them the more necessary pre-cursor training. I argue the ultimate pre-cursor training for Western recruits is their process of disillusionment with Western society when initial migration came with high hopes and optimism. The literature needs a stronger focus on this process because, after all, it is doubtful that any amount of virtual recruitment would be successful if the “real-life” success of potential recruits in the West was substantial.

Gendron dug even deeper into understanding the nuances that were being used when producing a virtual call to jihad. These so-called grooming techniques employed a range of psychological, environmental, and social factors, each one with the capability of affecting individuals to varying degrees. Her study leaned heavily on the important work of the Center on Social Cohesion, which focused on three distinct core functions performed by jihadist websites:

1. **Online libraries:** Jihadist websites play a key role as repositories of lectures by keynote figures in the jihadi pantheon; videos prepared by al-Qaeda and other militant groups; and Nasheeds, traditional Arabic songs glorifying Islamic violence. Much of this material is made available online in English translations of the original Arabic sources;
2. **Venue for preachers:** Jihadist websites post sermons and tracts by prominent radical Islamist preachers and expositors of jihadism, which can be readily accessed through the internet;

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6 Martin Rudner, “Electronic Jihad: The Internet as Al Qaeda’s Catalyst for Global Terror,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 10–23.

3. **Forums for discourse:** Jihadist websites usually host chatrooms, discussion forums, and newsgroups that facilitate e-conversations among like-minded followers and serve as organizational hubs for planning and coordinating activities addressing key issues. Social networking and media sites create and support online communities that enable jihadists and fellow activists to share information and reinforce bonding.<sup>7</sup>

Capitalizing on this work, Hamblet also utilized multiple expansive studies from Rand, the George Washington University, and the New York Police Department (NYPD), emphasizing that the Islamic State not only had deviated and had become more sophisticated in its internet usage over al-Qaeda but also that its recruitment bases were different, from geographical points of origin to overall average age. Perhaps most elucidative were the four stages of radicalization as identified in the NYPD report:

1. pre-radicalization: life before adoption of Salafi jihadist ideology;
2. self-identification: exploration into Salafi Islam;
3. indoctrination: intensification of beliefs, complete adoption of ideology;
4. jihadization: acceptance of the duty to wage jihad; planning and execution of attack.<sup>8</sup>

The NYPD report unfortunately does not provide equal analytical attention to each of the four stages. The latter three stage—self-identification, indoctrination, and jihadization—received far greater interest. As shall be seen later, the agencies and organizations most concerned with deterrence and countermeasures against radicalism have missed valuable opportunities by ignoring the pre-cursor stage; that is, life before adopting the extremist beliefs. Understanding why potential recruits can become so disillusioned with their host societies that they become ripe for extremist recruitment is a critical element most policing and intelligence organizations have still not analyzed deeply enough.

The importance of works like Gendron and Hamblet is that they show that internet technology has repurposed and rebranded this ideology—often portrayed by Western media and pundits as archaic, backward, and stuck in the sixteenth century—into something far more modern, charismatic,

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7 Angela Gendron, “The Call to Jihad: Charismatic Preachers and the Internet,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 44–61.

8 M. Hamblet, “The Islamic State’s Virtual Caliphate,” *Middle East Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2017): 1–8.

and appealing. The present article requests, however, to remember that no matter how appealing or charismatic certain radical imams might be, and no matter how slick and attractive certain extremist websites have become, the style is not the sole factor in delivering individuals to jihadism.<sup>9</sup> The substance of what has gone wrong in the lives of potential recruits in the West (at least according to their own self-perception), which is subsequently blamed on the failure of Western society to deliver on its promises, is the crucial pre-cursor phase that needs to be amended in all of these fine works. Perhaps more important, it might be significantly easier to stop the path to jihadist ideology when it is in its embryonic stage rather than when it has already created card-carrying supporters of jihad. Aiming to virtually counter radicalism in the pre-cursor stage is logically more effective than countering it in the active adoption stages. This has been underemphasized in the literature to date and thus is missing from policy.

Picart comes close to exposing this gap when elaborating what was called “jihad chic” and “jihad cool.” At first glance, Picart’s investigation seems to be perfectly aligned with the principles of the first cognitive war and the need to understand the internal psychological processes of potential recruits. Ultimately, the inner desire to be relevant—a so-called “bad ass”—is deemed powerfully influential over young men as they are exposed to virtual recruitment.<sup>10</sup> While the stylistics of the actual recruitment—talking to potentials in the vernacular they understand and making radical behavior seem “cool”—is no doubt important, it still misses the essential pre-cursor element: Why would it be attractive to be a “bad ass” in extremist communities if a person already felt a “bad ass” in the majority host community? In contrast, in this article, I argue that it would not be attractive at all, and thus it becomes important to analyze the lack of integration success among recruits.

9 Anne Aly, “Brothers, Believers, Brave Mujahideen: Focusing Attention on the Audience of Violent Jihadist Preachers,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 62–76; Peter Wignell, Sabine Tan, and Kay L. O’Halloran, “Under the Shade of AK47s: A Multimodal Approach to Violent Extremist Recruitment Strategies for Foreign Fighters,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (2017): 429–452; Javier Argomaniz, “European Union Responses to Terrorist Use of the Internet,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 50, no. 2 (2015): 250–268.

10 C.J.S. Picart, “Jihad Cool/Jihad Chic: The Roles of the Internet and Imagined Relations in the Self-Radicalization of Colleen LaRose (Jihad Jane),” *Societies* 5 (2015): 354–383.

Post properly framed the new dangers of this radical internet world, discussing how alienated individuals can be enticed into a “community of hatred.”<sup>11</sup> Post also considered how even “homegrown” terrorism was a product of deliberate foreign outgroup strategies, making the necessary state counterstrategies incredibly difficult as they still had to honor Western principles of civil liberty and freedom. It is in this nuanced argument that we find a possible flaw: Works like this accurately acknowledge how easily Western counterpropaganda is dismissed but do not bother to ask why this dismissal is so de facto. If the potential recruits were enjoying the aforementioned civil liberties, freedoms, and advantages—the hallmark of the host democratic society—then counterpropaganda should *not* be easily dismissed, but it should not even be considered propaganda at all. Examining this disconnect is what keeps getting missed.

Moir built further on this community of hatred by looking at the revelation that radical social media sites were more than just communication venues; in fact, they were fundamental in building an isolated sense of belonging among recruits that would make them feel less attracted to or less enticed by anything offered in their native host countries.<sup>12</sup> While studies like these focus more on the process of indoctrination and on the seductive qualities offered through social media to potential new extremists, they do give credence to the argument made here that a competent understanding of how host communities failed to reach potential “lone wolves” is crucial to early and effective countermeasures.

Interestingly, some new emerging literature focuses on increased radicalization across the European Union and touches upon the pre-cursor factor. Macnair, Logan, and Frank have focused exclusively on the production of recruitment videos by the Islamic State’s Al-Hayat Media Center. They rightfully emphasized that it was not just the professionally slick PR-type quality of the videos but also the highly emotional appeals embedded within the videos to groups already living in the West who are distraught or dissatisfied

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11 J. M. Post, “Terrorism and Right-Wing Extremism: The Changing Face of Terrorism and Political Violence in the 21st Century: The Virtual Community of Hatred,” *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 65, no. 2 (2015): 242–271.

12 N. L. Moir, “ISIL Radicalization, Recruitment, and Social Media Operations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines,” *Prism: A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations* 7, no. 1 (2017): 90–107.

with their lives there.<sup>13</sup> They ultimately focused on how the Islamic State videos sought to remedy that problem by promising joy, honor, and glory not just in this world but in the spiritual world beyond. This was actually something of a missed opportunity because the true level of potential recruits' susceptibility is not so much based on future promises as it is on dissatisfaction felt with their present countries.<sup>14</sup> Connecting from the promises of glory, they intimated that political indignation over perceived Muslim oppression was the flame that ignited their new radicalism. In contrast, in this article, I argue that instead of connecting to abstract grievances about global political repression, it is more logical and cogent that radicalization ignites within people who feel *personally aggrieved* by the countries within which they live. This feeling of disappointment about their individual success has been under-analyzed in terms of its counterterrorism value.

Brzica comes closest to aligning the existing literature with the aforementioned pre-cursor societal factor. Cogently linking together the decentralized and autonomous nature of the internet with the socially isolated characteristics of lone wolf terrorism, Brzica attested how difficult it was to figure out which sites—out of literally tens of thousands—deserved special deterrence attention and were more effective in creating real lone wolves motivated to carry out terrorist acts on Western soil.<sup>15</sup> Creating a category ranking of potential adherents to radical Islam, it is the fourth category that is most relevant to the present analysis: “migrants who have arrived to the EU, and who will potentially become radicalized due to their frustration with living conditions at their final destinations and in combination with

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13 Logan Macnair and Richard Frank, “To My Brothers in the West . . . : A Thematic Analysis of Videos Produced by the Islamic State’s Al-Hayat Media Center,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 33, no. 3 (2017): 234–253.

14 Mohammed Hafez and Creighton Mullins. “The Radicalization Puzzle: A Theoretical Synthesis of Empirical Approaches to Homegrown Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 11 (2015): 958–975; Brian Levin, “The Original Web of Hate: Revolution Muslim and American Homegrown Extremists,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 12 (2015): 1609–1630; Guy D. Golan, “Countering Violent Extremism: A Whole Community Approach to Prevention and Intervention” (master’s thesis, California State University 2016).

15 N. Brzica, “Potential Adherents of Radical Islam in Europe: Methods of Recruitment and the Age of Perpetrators in Acts of Terror,” *Politička misao* 54, no. 4 (2017): 161–184.

exposure to radical jihadist propaganda online or via adherents of radical ideologies among established European Islamic communities.”<sup>16</sup>

This is so close and yet still so far away, as Brzica analytically leaps forward to online propaganda and not backward to this “frustration with living conditions at their final destinations.” By sticking with abstract concepts while ignoring more direct and explicit sources of local anger and aggression, the body of knowledge about lone wolf terrorism and extremist recruitment in the West remains tenuously connected to the first cognitive war concept. Indeed, Brzica’s four categories of potential jihadists were given the following “vulnerabilities”: socioeconomic status, cultural differences, sense of ethnic belonging (or lack thereof), religious convictions, and/or psychological factors.<sup>17</sup> While all of these factors clearly do play a role, mashing them all together with no distinction or analytical explicitness is conducting counterterrorism by throwing in the kitchen sink: it is accurate but relatively unhelpful for crafting deterrence strategies.

Greenberg’s work is a wonderful archetype for the growing literature that is looking to determine if the internet, so effectively utilized as a tool for radicalization, can be equally utilized as a weapon for countermeasures. Unfortunately, this literature takes the internet as a form of deterrence too literally and focuses on potential solutions belatedly in the radicalization cycle. Greenberg, for example, focused on three main virtual techniques that might hopefully bear deterrence fruit: 1) Disruption efforts, which have relied on a series of technical interventions by internet companies on behalf of the US government; 2) Diversion and alternative engagement; and 3) the dissemination of counternarratives or countermessages.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, disruption has had little effect as the internet is an agile, highly adaptive technology. Even heavily autocratic regimes like China are incapable of simply “removing” radical transgressors through disruption. In many ways, diversion and alternative engagement goes hand-in-hand with countermessaging. Indeed, it is logical to presume that effective countermessaging should lead to alternative engagements for potential recruits. When it does not, the critique is always about the content of the

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16 Brzica, “Potential Adherents,” p. 170.

17 Brzica, “Potential Adherents,” p. 170.

18 Karen J. Greenberg, “Counter-radicalization via the Internet,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668, no. 1 (2016): 165–179.

countermesssage. In other words, if a state can simply find the right message, the deterrence strategy will fall into place. The problem with this is that it fails to consider the crucial aspect of timing. Even the best countermessaging will prove ineffective when the potential recruit is too far down the extremist path. And since so much of state deterrence emphasizes trying to counter radicals long after they have been engaged by and recruited through online propaganda, it should not be surprising to learn that many of the deterrence strategies are engaged far too late in the process. In addition, these strategies do not draw a critical eye to possible societal culpability in creating a psychological atmosphere ripe for online recruitment. Greenberg notes that to date there is little confidence in countermeasure programs but that data and metrics still need to be properly cataloged and analyzed.<sup>19</sup> In the end, she remains optimistic that the internet can be used as a powerful tool to combat terrorism. I share that optimism, but only if the timing and self-criticism of Western governments becomes more acute when developing countermeasure strategies.

This extensive overview of the literature has shown a general failure to engage and analyze the lives and thinking of recruits prior to their full engagement with virtual radicalism. Rather than current tendencies to focus on heroic tales of glory, spiritual declarations of holiness, and abstract concepts of political resentment, I argue here that a more concrete estimation of frustration, despair, and general malaise produced by a failure to achieve success in the Western host country activates extremist attitudes among immigrant populations. Arguably most important for policy is the fact that if this is true, it actually gives states a better sense of *when* their countermeasure strategies need to be employed: when the potential recruits are both *in the West* and still hopeful to be *of the West*. Disrupting, diverting, and countermessaging when they are only in the West but no longer of the West is simply too late; it is a waste of state resources. A brief critical case study of the Tsarnaev brothers of the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013 will be used to explain.

### The Tsarnaev Brothers: Frustrated American Dreamers?

The story of how two brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokar, were caught for the Boston Marathon bombing is well documented. The process of how

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19 Greenberg, "Counter-radicalization via the Internet."

Tamerlan slowly turned to charismatic Islamic imams online and got into trouble for domestic violence toward his American wife was covered with almost voyeuristic intensity.<sup>20</sup> While Dzhokar has often been characterized as the younger brother who simply idolized his older brother too much, the American public by and large felt no sympathy for him when given the death penalty.<sup>21</sup> In short, the Boston Marathon bombing case is largely a cautionary tale of how seemingly normal young men can inexplicably turn to radicalism even when given every opportunity in Western democratic society.<sup>22</sup> It was also mentioned numerous times how they were ethnically Chechen, as if this fact alone should have alerted local authorities to the potential danger when it came to Tamerlan and Dzhokar.<sup>23</sup>

This type of hindsight-oriented analysis in the aftermath of radical extremism is quite typical: Charismatic online Islamic preachers are just a religious interest until they are the source for radical brainwashing; being Chechen does not matter until it obviously means the spiritual essence of the brothers was always potentially violent; a man making his wife conform to strict Islamic dress codes is just being conservative until it means an overt rejection of Western principles of freedom. Even the details that documented their initial attempts to become more fully ensconced in American society were somewhat passed over, fleeting, superficial, and always doomed to failure.<sup>24</sup> I, however, think this type of analysis is missing the critical intervention period for effective extremist countermeasures and the important clues that help police, intelligence, and societal organizations in the first cognitive war.

The Tsarnaev brothers' case highlights how many opportunities exist for deterrence within the pre-cursor period. Tamerlan—who seemed the more athletic if also the less-educationally motivated brother—became quite serious in his pursuit of boxing, advancing far enough to represent the New

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20 Peter Foster and Tom Parfitt, "Boston Bomber Arrested: Tamerlan Tsarnaev's Hateful Rage Behind American Dream," *The Telegraph*, April 20, 2013.

21 Ron Borges, "Dead Suspect's Coach: 'I Never Saw any Hatred,'" *Boston Herald*, April 19, 2013.

22 Marc Fisher, "The Tsarnaev Family: A Faded Portrait of an Immigrant's American Dream," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2013.

23 Benjamin Lytal, "The Chechen Grievance: Tolstoy's 'Hadji Murad' After Boston," *Daily Beast*, April 21, 2013.

24 Peter Finn, Carol D. Leonnig, and Will Englund, "Tsarnaev Brothers' Homeland was War-Torn Chechnya," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2013.

England region in the National Golden Gloves Boxing Championships. During this time period he even openly stated that if his native Chechnya were to never gain independence and remain a troubled part of the Russian Federation, *then he would rather represent and fight for the United States at the Olympics* than be part of any Russian Olympic team.<sup>25</sup> In terms of the first cognitive war where virtual extremism is taking such a strong foothold, these kinds of statements are opportunities upon which to build. Tamerlan's resentment toward Russia is quite understandable to any member of the Chechen diaspora; but that resentment does not automatically transform into any desire to represent the United States. Any student of the Chechen wars knows that the Chechen "fight for independence" is just as easily characterized as a Russian conflict with radical Islamic extremism, given that the independence movement in Chechnya has been largely fueled by such extremist groups. Transnational Islamic extremism has always been equally dismissive and contemptuous of American and Russian societies, so at this early stage of Tamerlan's development it is clear he was still making a distinction between Russia (where his anger was more political than religious) and the United States (where he was clearly still willing to embrace his adoptive home country).

If anything, Dzhokar's foray into American life was even more immersive. Described as a friendly high school student who loved skateboarding and ultimately became captain of his school's wrestling team, Dzhokar would enroll at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. While enrolled there he was outgoing, social, and well-liked, telling many people his ultimate intention was to become a dentist. This is again where most analyses of the Boston Marathon bombers simply dismiss Dzhokar as a weak-minded individual who was essentially powerless to stop his own brother's recruitment, subsequently following along out of familial loyalty. Whether this pop-psychological analysis is accurate or not is immaterial to the present work: What matters most is how obvious the opportunity was to intervene and deter Dzhokar during the pre-cursor phase. If anything, the younger brother was more immersed in American society than Tamerlan, looking to pursue the intensively socialized profession of dentistry. These

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25 Snejana Farberov, "He Dreamed of Being an Olympic Boxing Hero for the USA but then Turned to Radical Islam; Older Bomb Suspect was a 'Talented' Fighter with a Dark Side," *Daily Mail*, April 20, 2013, p. 4.

opportunities should not be dismissed nor should the standard lament in such cases of extremism be affirmed: Counterterrorist agencies often believe potential recruits are only detectable after actively pursuing associations with radical groups. In reality, this is not always true. The Russian FSB in 2011 actually requested that the FBI look into Tamerlan as they believed during one of his recent family visits to the ethnic republic of Dagestan (which has its own longstanding history of Islamic extremism within Russia), he may have become involved with radical groups; alas, the FBI looked into it but found no credence to the Russian worry.

This shows that the current countermeasure model of seeking out recruit targets based on their dabbling with known extremist groups is too late and not effective in terms of discovering real threat agents. It certainly did not work with the Tsarnaev brothers. A program of proactive countermeasures based on positive immersion within the host society might have been more effective. It does not mean “fix” the Golden Gloves Boxing Championships so that Tamerlan wins or give Dzhokar an undeserved full scholarship to UMass-Dartmouth in order to become a dentist more easily. Rather, it means developing programs of interaction with those groups that come from “threat areas” like Chechnya but are aimed at helping them become even more successfully integrated into the local society. These types of programs exist across numerous Western democratic states for various groups and for many different reasons. Surely it is appropriate to add more programs on the principle of limiting the development of radical extremism at home.

These types of countermeasure programs would matter because in the case of the Tsarnaev brothers, it seems their radicalization was not spurred on by some innate anti-democratic, anti-Western hatred of American values. On the contrary, their radicalization seemed to perfectly coincide with the exact moment their American immersion paths started to go off the rails (Tamerlan’s boxing future was stalled and Dzhokar’s first year college grades put him in danger of academic probation). While he temporarily became something of a local celebrity with a single famous television interview, Ruslan Tsarni, uncle of the Tsarnaev brothers, explained rather simply that they were provoked to extremism by “being ‘losers’ and hating those who were able to settle themselves better.”<sup>26</sup> This comment should have been taken more seriously; it intimated the critical tipping point of intervening

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26 Finn, Leonnig, and Englund, “Tsarnaev Brothers’ Homeland was War-Torn Chechnya.”

at the moment when potential recruits are not yet enamored with extremist ideology but are nevertheless rocked by their own inability to “succeed” in their new homes. Assistance at this time period not only could be decisively effective in keeping potential recruits away from radicalism, it also would likely engender a deeper and more permanent sense of loyalty to the new home country, thus giving a greater layer of counterterrorist security. In a manner of speaking, it would be that rare instance of “positive profiling”: assessing and pinpointing individuals for helpful intervention based on their backgrounds and heritage for increased security advantage. The effort to stop extremism as a “fallback option” for those who do not succeed needs to be the intervention/prevention focus for Western law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Pre-cursor intervention in the first cognitive war is about providing opportunity so that such fallbacks are seen as the poor choice that they truly are. Again, such positive interactions programs have long existed elsewhere for many diverse communities. It is time to let these programs work in the sphere of national security and intelligence.

### Conclusion: The First Cognitive War Expanded

In February, the Program on Extremism at George Washington University released an eye-opening new report. *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Iraq and Syria* is a powerful mix of political science and sociology, exposing readers to American and European-based jihadist travelers. In the United States, evidence points to a loosely connected network of radicalization that dates all the way back to the early 1990s Balkan ethnic conflict. This provides further evidence of the “social balkanization” that has remained stubbornly prevalent with newer waves of emigrant populations. The George Washington University report acknowledges the feelings of isolation expressed among many new recruits in America but does not make a connection between this isolation and the clear failure of security communities to successfully integrate immigrants into American culture.<sup>27</sup> Understanding why some groups come to the United States but do not develop any great attraction to American political values could help law enforcement agencies ascertain who are the most susceptible individuals to such poisonous recruitment. As a whole,

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27 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes, and Bennett Clifford, *The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq* (Washington DC: Program on Extremism, George Washington University, 2018).

the American diplomatic community, the social assistance services, and the academics have not done an adequate job investigating the phenomenon best described as being “in the West” but never becoming “of the West.”<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, Western governmental methods of counterterrorism may be growing antiquated as they continue to focus on the too-late phases of indoctrination and recruitment. If so, then the emergence of “Jihadi Janes and Johns” will not be marked by travel overseas or by direct personal contacts with known radicalized communities but rather will be frighteningly localized, hidden, and unpredictable. Until now, a patchwork of loose, radicalized elements, centered around well-known communities within major Western cities, have produced the most highly motivated recruits.<sup>29</sup> But as this work has evidenced, it is unlikely that this strategy of focusing on late-phases of indoctrination and recruitment will be highly efficient for preventing terrorism. Innovation in countermeasure strategy demands a new focus on the pre-cursor period to make progress in the first cognitive war, to discover recruits *before* they are recruited rather than *after* they have been well groomed.

This work is meant to hopefully fill a prominent gap in the literature: The analysis of radicalization and recruitment across the virtual space tends to be geared toward solutions that are also virtual. The argument here proposes, however, some of the best fighting tools against virtual radicalization are still housed within the social-psychological-cultural institutions and programs that can and should exist *in the real world*. After all, the pre-cursor phase is ideal for interventions that propose tangible results in the lives of potential recruits, not just esoteric e-promises. Very little research is presently making this connection. We should not fall into the trap that presumes virtual problems are best resolved only by virtual solutions. Besides, social assistance and law enforcement agencies both have advantages in terms of tangible programs and healthier financial budgets compared to distant radical groups reaching across the internet. These local social organizations must not turn their backs on one of the few areas in which they can prove more adept and be more directly participatory.

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28 Matthew Crosston, “Jihad Selfie: The Evolving Strategy of Homegrown Radical Recruitment,” *Homeland Security Today*, March 14, 2018.

29 Crosston, “Jihad Selfie.”

Some prominent scholars long ago made explicit the issues of exclusion, isolation, and real-life difficulties of Muslims living in the West.<sup>30</sup> This article builds upon the shoulders of these scholars and shows the connection between these largely sociological revelations and the world of national security. Most importantly, it attempts to be a first step in revealing how that connection can elucidate new and innovative real-world strategies meant to reduce or prevent the development of lone wolf homegrown terrorism. This connectivity overall is currently lacking. Most distressing, this gap is not just about a missing niche in the body of knowledge; rather, it is about resultant policy lagging in its effectiveness to safeguard democratic societies from within the West itself. It is also about how policy is losing the battle over its own “brand”; that is, how individuals within susceptible migrant communities, new to the West and still fully impressionable, are not experiencing the ideals, values, opportunities, and advantages supposedly innate to Western democracy. This pre-cursor phase, where we connect the social-psychological-cultural to national security, is where we need to wage the initial forays in the first cognitive war. This is where the best opportunity for victory is found.

Siboni’s original warning to the State of Israel to be more prepared and more adept for all aspects of the first cognitive war should be expanded, both in terms of states needing to get ready and the strategies that intelligence and political communities should employ to fight it. Producing innovation in the world of counterterrorism is not easy, especially when the argument here is to invest in “positive profiling” and proactively intervene in certain communities, and not to intimidate but to invest in group success. Another added benefit to this approach is that it makes no demands on private companies or commercial activity that might hinder virtual freedoms or limit overall societal access to the internet; rather, it demands that formal governmental agencies be at least as savvy and slick in its virtual engagement as extremist

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30 Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Hale Afshar, “Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity,” *International Affairs* 71, no. 4 (1995): 831; Carool Kersten. “Islam, Cultural Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism: New Muslim Intellectuals on Globalization,” *Journal of International and Global Studies* 1, no. 1 (2009): 89–113; Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Ali Mohammad, *Islam Encountering Globalisation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

groups are and as proactive in engaging potentials as the bad guys are. The important point to remember when facing the inevitable backlash to such proposals (because in the end groups will try to reframe this argument as “rewarding potential terrorists” or “bribing extremists to behave”) is that this is where the efficacy of success will be highest, and where the impact will be greatest in terms of preventing successful recruiting and training. Moreover, these new pre-cursor period strategies will also have a secondary positive benefit of reaching deeper into communities that have traditionally been slow to embrace Western principles and tend to remain socially isolated from the ideas of civil liberty. Proactively breaking down this recalcitrant social balkanization by putting more duty upon the host country to invest in the success of these vulnerable communities is not “national security welfare”; rather, it is strategic domestic diplomacy aimed at winning the first cognitive war.