COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMIST NARRATIVES IN THEORY AND PRACTICE:

THE CASES OF INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA

MASTER THESIS

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Abstract

Ever since the start of the war on terror, governments worldwide have struggled with countering the narratives that are spread by violent extremist organisations. Recent academic research has produced several prescriptions that indicate what aspects potentially successful counter-narrative, alternative narrative and government strategic communications programmes need to possess. Testing the scholarly recommendations on target audience, message, messenger and medium to the actual policies of Malaysia and Indonesia, it becomes apparent that the policies of both states are partially congruent with the dominant ideas in the literature. However, what both Malaysia and Indonesia lack is a clear delineation of target audiences based on level of radicalisation, the provision of alternative things to do to complement their alternative narrative programmes and a comprehensive strategy to combine online and offline measures to achieve the most sustainable effect. Still, when comparing the respective policies of the two states, it must be noted that Malaysia is more congruent with the scholarly prescriptions than Indonesia. The most important differences between the two states are that the Malaysian authorities showcase a more sophisticated awareness and application of the relevant academic definitions and take a rather comprehensive approach to providing government strategic communications, the latter of which is practically lacking in the case of Indonesia.

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Introduction

If we want to defeat terrorism, we need to win the battle for hearts and minds. Then Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed this sentiment in 2005, right after the Al-Qaeda bomb attacks on the London metro system.[1] However, winning these hearts and minds through countering the propaganda of violent extremist organisations has proven to be a key weakness of Western governments since the start of the war on terror.[2] In 2007, then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates called it "plain embarrassing" that Al Qaeda was better than the United States of America at communicating its message online.[3] Gates recalled a question he was asked by a foreign diplomat a couple of years earlier: "How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communications society?"[4] He clearly did not have an answer. In 2019, looking back on the rise and fall of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the propaganda machine of the Islamic State is often considered to have trumped all its predecessors in terms of effectiveness. While the Islamic State has lost its territory, the ideas it has nurtured will survive and possibly spread much further.[5] Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) are returning to their home countries and prosecutors face enormous difficulties with collecting enough evidence in order to convict FTF suspects.[6] While returnees might form a physical danger to society, the continuous spread of their radical ideas might in the long term be equally perilous. As there is a continuous political and academic debate on the effectiveness or even the possibility of deradicalisation, further research into the practice of countering violent extremist narratives is necessary.[7]

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[1] "Full text: Blair Speech on Terror," *BBC,* 16 July 2015, accessed online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/4689363.stm.

[2] Haroro Ingram, "Why we keep getting snared in Islamic State's Propaganda Trap." *The Conversation,* 21 January 2016, accessed online at https://theconversation.com/why-we-keep-getting-snared-in-islamic-states-propaganda-trap-53311.

[3] Ibid.,

[4] Ibid.,

[5] Daniel Byman, "What happens when ISIS goes underground?" *The Brookings Insitution* , 18 January 2018, accessed online at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2018/01/18/what-happens-when-isis-goes-underground/.

[6] Bibi van Ginkel, "Prosecuting Foreign Terrorist Fighters: What Role for the Military?" *ICCT Policy Brief* (May 2016) : pp. 1-19.

[7] Edwin Bakker, "Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies : Comparing Theory and Practice," *Leiden University Press* (2015) : p. 159.

The academic work on countering terrorist narratives has predominantly been written by Western scholars. As a consequence, the prescriptions that have followed from contemporary studies are inherently Western-centric. In this thesis, an attempt will be made at exploring how the academic prescriptions relate to the policies of countering violent extremist narratives of two non-Western governments: Indonesia and Malaysia. The basis of the exercise lies in developing a thorough understanding of the academic state of the art on counter-narratives. It is important to establish a working definition of the relevant concepts, identify the core prescriptions on counter-narratives in the literature and explore the current challenges encountered in a comprehensive manner before narrowing down to particular experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia. An essential part in the literature on counter-narratives is the work on narratives itself, and then specifically Salafi-Jihadi narratives. For that matter, the first part of the literature review will revolve around a brief examination of the narrative that governments and civil society organisations seek to counter. After this, the efforts to counter these messages will be explored through setting out a framework that differentiates between counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. Subsequently, a review of the relevant literature will reveal various prescriptions and challenges that scholars currently observe when dealing with this subject matter. These academic conclusions provide four parameters: target audience, message, messenger and medium. These will be used to test and compare the respective efforts of Indonesia and Malaysia since the start of the war on terror.

1. State of the Art

1.1 Narratives and Propaganda

As is the case with many concepts in terrorism and security studies, various definitions of narratives and counter-narratives can be found within the academic realm. For that reason, clearly establishing working definitions of all the relevant concepts is essential for the wider analysis. As a start, narratives can be defined as systems of stories that "share themes, forms and archetypes.[8] The exact stories do not necessarily share the same characteristics, but rather complement one another in a way that the unified whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.[9] A so-called 'single narrative' is "a unifying framework of explanations that provides its followers with an emotionally satisfying portrayal of the world in which they live and their role in it, offering them a sense of identity and giving meaning to their lives."[10] A concrete example of a narrative that will be familiar to most readers is that of the American myth: the pilgrim fathers, the bastion of freedom, land of opportunity, the melting pot where hard work pays off and anyone can become president.[11] In this example, the narrative becomes a tool that organises experience, provides a framework for understanding events and can thus be regarded as a resource to shape perceptions, beliefs and behaviour.[12]

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, it is important to have a clear understanding of what narratives are and how the term differs from the concept of propaganda. In a way, the terms are indeed very similar. It could be argued that counter-narratives are mainly a semantic variation on counter-propaganda that is more neutral and has a less "war-related ring" to it.[13] However, using counter-narratives as a mere euphemism for propaganda does not entirely do justice to the full meaning of the concept. In short, propaganda can be defined as one-sided

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[8] Steven R. Corman, "Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication," *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies* (September 2011) : p. 37.
[9] Ibid.,
[10] Alex Schmid "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge." *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : p. 7.
[11] Ahdaf Soueif. "The Function of Narrative in the 'War on Terror'", in Chris Miller (ed.), War on Terror (The Oxford Amnesty Lectures, 2006) : p. 29.
[12] Alex Schmid "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge." *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : p. 5.
[13] Bibi van Ginkel, Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 5.

information that is spread with the intention to influence people's opinion.[14] Narratives, on the other hand, are systems of stories that provide a framework through which it is possible to achieve a shared sense of belonging, thereby representing a past, present and future with corresponding obstacles and an end point.[15] In this sense, narratives can provide the basis for propaganda; the underlying system of stories that allows for the one-sided message to be understood in the way the messenger wants it to be understood. When indeed understanding the two concepts as outlined above, the narrative can be regarded as an enabler. An example of this is that historical narratives have been used by various groups as a way to strengthen their propaganda and justify their causes.[16] Thus, throughout this paper, the term propaganda will only be used to refer to specific messages that include one-sided information and attempt to change opinions. The term narratives will be used to point to the bigger picture; the systems of stories, which provide the basis for propaganda and enable the reception of specific messaging among the targeted audiences. In the case of counter-narratives, an additional distinction between three inter-related concepts will be provided further on in this paper: counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications.

1.2 The Salafi-Jihadi Narrative

The case of Al Qaeda (AQ) can be used as a prime example of a violent extremist Islamist group embracing a particular narrative. The main attraction of Al Qaeda does not lie in its firepower, but in its stories that are combined in an attractive product for predominantly young people.[17] The ideology of AQ is expressed in a single narrative. The strength of the message lies primarily in the fact that it is founded upon grievances and perceptions that many Muslims believe to be true.[18] This single narrative of Al-Qaeda prepares the path for vulnerable young Muslims to terrorism in six interconnected ways: it presents a problem not as a misfortune but as an injustice, constructs a moral justification for violence, blames the

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[14] "Propaganda," *Cambridge Dictionary,* accessed online at
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda.
[15] Alex Schmid, "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter
Narratives: The State of Knowledge," *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : p. 3.
[16] Alastair Reed and Jennifer Dowling, "The role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda,"
Defence Strategic Communications 4 (2018) : p. 80.
[17] Alex Schmid, "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter
Narratives: The State of Knowledge," *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : p. 5.
[18] Ibid., p. 7.

victims, dehumanises victims through symbols and language, displaces responsibility through referring to divine will and misconstrues harmful effects, for example through the use of euphemisms.[19]

The radical narrative of Al Qaeda has proven to be persuasive, as exemplified by the fact that the organisation has supporters and operatives in dozens of countries worldwide.[20] In September 2013, the Economist noted that the Salafi-Jihadi view of the world put forward by Al Qaeda has never had greater traction.[21] With the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State (IS) or ad-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fi al-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām (DAESH), the world has to deal with an even more sophisticated propaganda machine that is considered to have trumped its predecessors.[22] The Islamic State has gained significant attraction among young Muslims, but also among marginalised non-Muslims throughout the West.[23] From the 57 countries that are part of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), more than 10,000 people had joined the Islamic State by the end of 2017, clearly showcasing the resonance of the message that was spread by IS, and thereby laying bare the problem that states face with foreign terrorist fighters.[24]

Given the claim that the IS propaganda machine is unprecedented in its scope and reach, it is interesting to explore what scholars and policymakers believe makes their particular message so successful. There are various factors that are often pinpointed as essential components of the successful narrative of the Islamic State. One of them is the effective use of the Internet and social media networks by IS to spread their messages. The specific characteristics of these technologies explain why it is so effectively used: most

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[19] Alex Schmid, "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge," *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : p. 7-8.

[20] Ibid., p. 8.

[21] "The Unquenchable Fire," *The Economist*, 28 September 2013, accessed online at http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21586834-adaptable-and-resilient-al-qaeda-and-its-allies-keep-bouncing-back-unquenchablefire.

[22] Haroro Ingram. "Why we keep getting snared in Islamic State's Propaganda Trap." *The Conversation,* 18 January 2018, accessed online at https://theconversation.com/why-we-keep-getting-snared-in-islamic-states-propaganda-trap-53311.

[23] Alex Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the "Islamic State"," *ICCT Researh Paper* (June 2015): p. 1.

[24] Peter R. Neumann, "Countering Violent Extemism and Radicalisation that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations and Good Practices from the OSCE Region." *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence,* 28 September 2017.

importantly it is cost-free and user-friendly.[25] Furthermore, the immediacy of this kind of media also enables extremist organisations to live report certain events, a tactic used by Al Shabaab during the Westgate attack in September 2013 in Nairobi.[26] While the Internet is often pointed at as a tool misused by extremist groups for radicalisation, it is important to note that a 2013 study by the RAND Corporation concluded that there is little evidence that supports the notion that online propaganda is capable of causing self-radicalisation without physical contact, or that it even accelerates the process.[27] However, the Internet and social media do provide a platform, thereby facilitating radicalisation.[28]

While acknowledging the tactical use of the Internet and social media as an amplifier, the effectiveness of the Islamic State's message has some more traditional core strengths. What is unique about IS is their ability to adapt their communications to fit the strategic requirements of their campaign.[29] Drawing on IS propaganda materials, three traits of the Islamic State's information warfare can be pinpointed: the use of a multidimensional and multiplatform approach, synchronisation of messaging and politico-military action and the centrality of their 'brand'.[30] Furthermore, when putting IS and Al Qaeda propaganda in a historical context, the argument can be made that while the resonance might be unprecedented, successful components of IS propaganda have been employed from ancient Greece until the present day.[31] Three inter-related principles that are key to the successful approach can be identified. Firstly, messaging needs to be diverse, leveraging both rational and identify-choice appeals. Furthermore, the message needs to have some sort of coherence with a larger theme or, ideally, a grand narrative. Thirdly, various means of communicating the message must be used to maximise reach, timeliness and targeting.[32] Messaging alone cannot win, for the mere fact that there is always someone on the other side trying to partake

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[25] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative, *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 3.

[26] Ibid.,

[27] Ines Von Behr et al. "Radicalisation in the digital era," *Rand Corporation* (2013) : p. 13, accessed online at https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html.

[28] Ibid.,

[29] Hararo Ingram, "Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare," *RUSI Journal* 159:6 (2014) : p. 8.

[30] Ibid.,

[31] Hararo Ingram, "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict," *ICCT Research Paper* (June 2016) : p. 35.

[32] Ibid., p. 36.

in the battle for hearts and minds as well.[33] For that reason, communication efforts need to be synchronised with strategic-policy or politico-military efforts in order to nullify the efforts of the adversary, in this case the national governments, multilateral institutions and NGO's trying to counter the message of the Islamic State.[34]

One of the most recent research projects on countering violent extremist narratives is commissioned by the *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum* (WODC) - the research branch of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security. While their conclusions will be discussed more specifically when exploring the dominant assumptions on counter-narratives, some of the findings provide noteworthy contributions to the debate on extremist narratives itself as well. Adding to the definition provided earlier in this paper, the writers of the WODC research paper structurally refer to 'strategic narratives' when discussing Salafi-Jihadi propaganda. In their definition, strategic narratives should be seen as a form of deliberately constructed discourse that is employed by both state and non-state actors to give meaning to past, present and future.[35] As was noted before, these narratives do not necessarily have to be rational, but can also appeal to emotion and historical analogies.[36] When exploring these strategic narratives in the Salafi-Jihadi context, the authors of the WODC paper draw on the *ABC model* that was set out by the British historian Mark Sedgwick. In this model, Salafi-Jihadi narratives provide an account (A) of Muslims suffering because of non-Muslims, a vision of a better (B) world and a perspective of change (C) through jihad.[37] An additional insight provided by the WODC paper is that the overarching Salafi-Jihadi narrative exists of four separate narratives: political, moral, religious and socio-psychological.[38] The political narrative emphasises the wrongdoings of the West, the moral narrative highlights Western values as indicators of moral decay, the religious narrative justifies violence in order to

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[33] Haroro Ingram, "A Brief History of Propaganda during Conflict," *ICCT Research Paper* (June 2016) : p.36.

[34] Ibid.,

[35] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 16.

[36] Ibid., p. 17.

[37] Mark Sedgwick, "Jihadist ideology, Western counter-ideology, and the ABC model," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5:3 (2015) : pp. 362-365.

[38] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 18.

defend Islam and the socio-psychological narrative creates a classic *'us versus them'* rhetoric, thereby differentiating between infidels and true believers.[39]

1.3 Different Types of Counter-Messaging

Having explored the relevant literature on (Salafi-Jihadi) extremist narratives, it is now important to perform a similar exercise on the efforts to counter these narratives. The first thing that needs to be addressed is what exactly encompasses the concept of counter-narratives. According to a document from the Radicalisation Awareness Network, a working group liaised with the European Commission, counter-narrative has become a term that is used for a rather wide array of activities: from government initiated strategic communications to targeted campaigns that directly seek to discredit violent extremist ideologies, actions and messages.[40] A threefold differentiation is made between counter-narratives, alternative narratives and strategic communications.[41] While these three are often referred to with the overarching concept of counter-narratives, the term strictly speaking only fits one of the three variations.[42] In order to avoid ambiguity, the concepts counter-narrative, alternative narrative and strategic communication will be discussed separately. From this point onwards, when referring to all three messaging strategies, the term 'counter-messaging' will be used.

Counter-narratives

A counter-narrative seeks to, directly or indirectly, challenge extremist narratives through ideology, logic, fact or humour.[43] It can do so by debunking myths, signal the misrepresentation of facts, expose the atrocities committed and challenge the idea of violent

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[39] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 18.

[40] "Proposed Policy Recommendations for the High Level Conference," *Radicalisation Awareness Network Working Group* (December 2012) : p. 1, accessed online at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-high-level-conference/docs/proposed_policy_recommendations_ran_at_en.pdf.

[41] Ibid.,

[42] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 4.

[43] "Proposed Policy Recommendations for the High Level Conference," *Radicalisation Awareness Network Working Group* (December 2012) : p. 1, accessed online at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-high-level-conference/docs/proposed_policy_recommendations_ran_at_en.pdf.

extremist offering camaraderie and heroism.[44] Counter-narrative programmes are mainly reactive, targeting audiences that are already rather far down the line of radicalisation.[45] The spectrum of people that are targeted includes sympathisers, passive supporters and those that are already more or less active within extremist groups.[46] Counter-narratives can involve targeted and tailored responses, including person-to-person interventions.[47] While there are various actors that could broadcast such a message, it is suggested that specific actors are in a better position than others. For example, religious scholars are often pointed at as a suitable messenger for religious or ideological counter-narratives, given that they possess the religious authority and credibility that the government lacks.[48] Ultimately, the main aim of the counter-narrative is to discredit the narrative it is responding to, which thereby inherently makes the counter-narrative defensive in nature.[49] With this in mind, the consensus is that a long-term commitment and a pro-active and timely response to events are vital for a counter-narrative to be successful.[50]

Alternative narratives

As was mentioned earlier, counter-narratives are largely reactionary and defensive in nature. In a way, this is the main problem that governments and civil society organisations face when dealing with this issue. A more pro-active approach can be found by exploring alternative narratives, a notion which is derived from the work of Rachel Briggs and Sebastian Feve. According to these authors, alternative narratives can take on a variety of forms and employ various different types of messengers: "From inter-faith and inter-community networks of influential grass-roots activists, opinion and community-leaders (both religious and secular), to entrepreneurs, sports personalities and even pop artists, they have provided powerful avenues through which to engineer more moderate and inclusive discourses through social

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[44] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : pp. 6-7.

[45] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 28.

[46] Ibid.,

[47] Ibid.,

[48] Ibid.,

[49] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies.", *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 12.

[50] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 7.

action and public outreach."[51] Rather than focusing on what we are against, an alternative narrative should focus on what we are for.[52] Thus, an alternative narrative is a more positive message that can be used to counter radicalisation through focussing on social values such as tolerance, freedom and democracy.[53] It may create doubt in the mind of people who feel misunderstood in Western societies and look for guidance, but can also contribute to the development of critical thinking skills of those who are religious illiterates.[54] In this sense, alternative narratives do not necessarily have the purpose of directly countering violent extremist messages in the way that counter-narratives do. Rather, the positive message that is spread can have an undermining secondary effect on the extremist narrative.[55] Like it is the case with counter-narratives, a variety of actors can be the messengers of the alternative narrative. A noteworthy example is the Dutch initiative "Dare to be Grey" in which students are the actors that attempt to amplify the voice of 'the middle ground' in order to put a stop to polarisation.[56] In the end, the main difference between counter-narratives and alternative narratives can be summarised as follows: where the counter-narrative aims at discrediting an exclusive narrative (e.g. that of Al Qaeda or ISIL), the alternative narrative has to focus on the propagation of the own core values of a society. Both narratives – the counter-narrative and the alternative narrative – need to be pursued simultaneously in order to realise maximum utility.[57]

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[51] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 12.

[52] Ibid., p. 2.

[53] "Proposed Policy Recommendations for the High Level Conference." *Radicalisation Awareness Network Working Group* (December 2012) : p. 1, accessed online at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-high-level-conference/docs/proposed_policy_recommendations_ran_at_en.pdf.

[54] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 6.

[55] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 29.

[56] Ibid.,

[57] Alex Schmid, "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge," *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : p. 31.

Government Strategic Communications

Where counter-narratives and alternative narratives can be delivered through a variety of actors, the action for strategic communication campaigns predominantly lies with the government. Fundamentally, government strategic communications include actions to spread information on what the government is doing, thereby refuting misinformation and forging relations with key constituencies and audiences.[58] Topics that can be included in a strategic communications campaign mainly relate to sensitive foreign policy issues, involvement in foreign conflicts and a positive narrative on norms and values.[59] Essentially, it needs to put government policy in a positive light.[60] This specific category might seem obvious, but is often taken for granted and therefore not considered carefully enough.[61] Strategic communications can be executed by governments directly, but could also be realised indirectly, for example through continuously sharing fact sheets with the mainstream media in order for them to report on it in their broadcasts or newspapers.[62] In comparison with the other two counter-messaging strategies, strategic communications is the area where the government has the most natural and effective role to play.[63] However, it is not risk-free and should take into account that some shifts in responding to extremist messages is required, specifically when it comes to moving from the transmission of spreading factual information towards an appeal to the emotional instinct of specific target audiences.[64]

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[58] "Proposed Policy Recommendations for the High Level Conference," *Radicalisation Awareness Network Working Group* (December 2012) : p. 1, accessed online at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-high-level-conference/docs/proposed_policy_recommendations_ran_at_en.pdf.

[59] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 5.

[60] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies." *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 10.

[61] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 5.

[62] Ibid.,

Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies,"*Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 25.

[64] Ibid.,

1.4. The Efficacy of Countering Violent Extremist Narratives

Before exploring the academic prescriptions on counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications, it is important to note that the academic debate revolving around the efficacy of the various efforts to counter violent extremist narratives remains inconclusive. Since the rise of the Islamic State, government agencies, civil society organisations, tech executives and the media have found themselves preoccupied with discussing the possibility of countering violent extremist narratives. While countering terrorist narratives appears to be the "new black", it is argued that a lot of the efforts are based on false assumptions and therefore may not be effective at all.[65] Nonetheless, the counter-message has gained remarkable importance amongst decision makers and opinion formers, even though its efficacy is supported by very little evidence.[66] Four main concerns are highlighted in the academic debate: under-conceptualisation, the lack of evidence that supports the effectiveness of (counter-)narratives, counter-messaging being insufficient and the potentially counter-productive effects of current attempts to counter terrorist narratives.

The first criticism that arises is partially related to the status of counter-narratives as a relatively new field, as the concept is surrounded with confusion and vagueness.[67] At times, this causes the notion of counter-narrative to seem nothing more than a euphemism for state propaganda.[68] This is an issue that can be dealt with through providing a clear definition of (counter-)narratives, and thereby differentiating the concept from propaganda. An attempt to come to terms with this particular issue has been made earlier in this paper. Another related issue is the notion of counter-narratives being used as an umbrella term for different communication strategies. This broader issue of ambiguity is not merely an academic problem, since it can lead to practical effects.[69] Clarifying the taxonomy when discussing these issues can provide a solution to this, for example through making a clear distinction between counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. This threefold differentiation has gained prominence in the academic field in the past years, which reflects in the conceptual discussion that has been provided in the previous chapter.

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[65] Christina Nemr, "Strategies to Counter Terrorist Narratives Are More Confused Than Ever," *War on the Rocks,* 2016, accessed online at https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/strategies-to-counter-terrorist-narratives-are-more-confused-than-ever/.

[66] Andrew Glazzard, "Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter Narrative and Violent Extremism," *ICCT Research Paper* (May 2017) : p. 5.

[67] Ibid., p. 6.

[68] Ibid.,

[69] Ibid., p. 7.

A second criticism revolves around the unclear relationship between consuming violent extremist content and engaging in actual violence.[70] While it is apparent that the majority of terrorist actors share and engage with terrorist narratives, it is important to question if this has a direct effect on future violent extremist activity.[71] There is some evidence that suggests that discourse and patterns of communication can create a condition that contributes to violent extremist actions becoming more likely.[72] Nonetheless, the exact causal relationship remains unclear.[73] Empirical research has suggested that not all the people who develop radical ideas become terrorists, and that many terrorist actors do not radicalise in a traditional way.[74] With this in mind, the rationale for allocating scarce resources to programmes that look to counter violent extremist narratives becomes rather thin. On top of that, there remains an immense difficulty with trying to measure success of the programmes that have been conducted so far. As was stated before, the hard evidence that counter-narratives are in fact effective is simply non-existent.[75] While this is a returning point of criticism that applies to all three messaging strategies discussed in this paper, it is important to recognise that the difficulty to measure effectiveness does not inherently render the efforts ineffective.

Thirdly, some scholars have pointed out that counter-messaging in whatever form is insufficient when not complemented by other policy measures.[76] One of the key explanations for the success of Salafi-Jihadi narratives is the pathway for action it provides.[77] It can be argued that more attention should be paid to offering alternative "things to do" as well rather than remaining completely focussed on counter-narratives, alternative narratives or strategic

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[70]Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies," *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 11.

[71] Kate Ferguson, "Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies," *Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research* (2016) : p. 10.

[72] Ibid.,

[73] Kate Ferguson, "Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies," *Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research* (2016) : p. 10.

[74] Randy Borum, "Rethinking Radicalization," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4:4 (2011): p. 2, accessed online at https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1150&context=jss.

[75] Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen and Karin Ingrid Castro. "The Trouble with Counter-narratives." *Danish Institute for International Studies* (2017) : p. 5.

[76] Nafees Hamid, "Don't Just Counter-Message; Counter-Engage," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 28 November 2018, accessed online at https://icct.nl/publication/dont-just-counter-message-counter-engage/.

[77] Ibid.,

communications.[78] This is the say-do-gap that is mentioned in other academic analyses on counter-narratives as well.[79] Although this is indeed a valid concern, it does not mean that counter-messages are completely pointless. Rather, there remains a potential for them to be successful, for example through incorporating them in a wider approach that includes concrete alternatives in terms of actions that can be undertaken by those potentially falling prey to violent extremist narratives.

While three major criticisms have been highlighted in the paragraphs above, a fourth critique goes a step further by arguing that counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications are not only ineffective, but could even have a counter-productive outcome. A study of the Danish Institute for International Studies concludes that the potential negative side effects of counter-messaging campaigns are not acceptable when measured against the expected benefits.[80] They state that those campaigning for the importance of counter-messaging initiatives underestimate the degree to which the people who are affected by violent extremist propaganda actively interact with those narratives.[81] Based on the case of Danish attempts at alternative narratives, it is argued that there lies a risk in even further marginalising the people who do not recognise themselves in what the alternative narrative portrays as normal in relation to the norms and values of Danish society.[82] While this is a very sceptic view on counter-messaging, it must be noted that the authors focus solely on relatively broad approaches, and thereby recognise the potential that a more targeted approach could have on minimising these challenges.

Having explored the major critiques on countering terrorist narratives, the question remains why governments worldwide still allocate scarce resources to programmes dedicated to this exact issue. Even though it has been mentioned that there is limited information available that proves the added value of counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications, there are studies that do support the notion that attempts to counter terrorist narratives have meaningful impacts. A study from the Institute

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[78] Nafees Hamid, "Don't Just Counter-Message; Counter-Engage," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 28 November 2018, accessed online at https://icct.nl/publication/dont-just-counter-message-counter-engage/.

[78] Ibid.,

[79] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 9.

[80] Ibid.,

[81] Ibid., p.26.

[82] Ibid.,

for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) thoroughly examined three counter-narrative programmes, and found that people going through the process of radicalisation are willing to reach out and contact an organisation in response to their counter-narrative campaigns.[83] While there are more examples like this, the evidence for the effectiveness remains scarce and largely anecdotal. This has not gone unnoticed in the academic realm, causing institutions such as ISD to develop frameworks for measuring the impact of counter-narratives.[84] These efforts should allow for achieving a better understanding of the efficacy of these programmes in the future.

1.5 Academic Prescriptions

In the paragraphs above, the main academic critiques on countering violent extremist narratives have been set out. The debate remains inconclusive. All the criticisms provided are valid in their own rights, but do not irrevocably render all measures to counter violent extremist narratives ineffective. The difficulty with measuring success is at this point still a hindering factor in fully rebutting the arguments of the most critical minds. Nonetheless, in the end it must be noted that messaging in the broadest sense does have an effect on people, a conclusion that is mainly based on extensive studies in relation to psychological research in the realm of advertisement.[85] Also, the fact remains that violent extremist organisations have heavily invested in their narratives, which in itself is a fact that cannot be ignored.[86] In a way, the uncertainty only provides additional reasons for more comprehensive research that can provide a better understanding of the exact relationships and dynamics at work.[87] Notwithstanding the lack of academic consensus on the effectiveness of counter-messaging, a lot of programmes aiming to counter terrorist narratives have been carried out and assessed in

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[83] Tanya Silverman, Christopher Stewart, Zahed Amanullah and Jonathan Birdwell, "The Impact of Counter-narratives," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2016) : p. 7.

[84] Louis Renolds and Henry Tuck, "The Counter-narrative Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue (*2016) : p. 3.

[85] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies.", *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 11.

[86] Ibid., 12.

[87] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies," *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 12.

the last few years. Even though the gathered evidence of these programmes is insufficient to holistically counter the dominant critiques on the effectiveness of counter-messaging, it has resulted in several insights and corresponding prescriptions on what characteristics potentially successful programmes to counter violent extremist narratives need to possess. In essence, the current state of the art lists four elements that need to be taken into account: the target group, the message, the messenger and the medium.[88] Although the recommendations are based on all three earlier established counter-messaging strategies, differences in the prescriptions based on the type of counter-message will be discussed when necessary.

Firstly, in terms of the target group, it is important to understand that this is rarely homogenous. There are multiple audiences that need to be targeted, and they are not necessarily receptive to the same type of message. For that matter, a successful counter-message starts with identifying the consumers of the message, thereby differentiating between different levels of radicalisation. The spectrum of targeted people can include intended or unintended consumers of the violent extremist message, but also supporters, adversaries and neutrals.[89] Furthermore, specific target groups could include foreign fighters, former fighters, religious leaders, sympathisers and active facilitators.[90] It is considered of utmost importance to achieve a nuanced behavioural and attitudinal comprehension of the identified audience.[91] Ideally, the broader target group would then be segmented by dividing the heterogeneous audience into relatively homogeneous subgroups, which subsequently allows for a tailored response.[92]

After having mapped out and potentially divided the relevant target audiences, the second element that is mentioned in the literature on counter-messaging is the message itself. The assumption here is rather straightforward: in order to be able to produce strong counter-narratives, alternative narratives or government strategic communications, the first step is to

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[88] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 9.

[89] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies," *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 8.

[90] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 9.

[91] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies," *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 8.

[92] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 49.

develop a thorough understanding of the violent extremist narrative that needs to be countered.[93] On the basis of that analysis, the message must then be tailored to the specific context.[94] It is helpful to understand what might have attracted the specific target group to the violent extremist message in the first place.[95] There are some basic characteristics the government needs to take into consideration when drawing up their counter-messaging strategies. The message must be clear and realistic, have legitimacy through matching norms and values and hold the prospect of success.[96] Furthermore, the counter-message needs to be presented in a consistent manner and should fit within an overall communication plan that reflects major themes of our identity.[97]

Thirdly, it is important to identify the messenger most suitable for spreading the counter-narrative, alternative narrative or messages part of a strategic communications plan. Various persons or groups can take on this role. Possible messengers include government actors, semi-public actors, religious leaders, minority groups, youth leaders, former jihadists, victims of terrorism, educators and direct family and friends.[98] Since there is no one size fits all strategy to counter terrorist narratives, different messengers will be better positioned for different target groups and different types of messages. An example that is often discussed is the role of former jihadists in spreading certain messages. Through discussing their experiences and ideas, it becomes possible to deglamourize the life as a jihadi and highlight the contradictions in the ideologies and actions of a terrorist group.[99] It is easy to understand how someone who has experience with being drawn in by certain extremist ideas is well placed to present a counter-message to those people who might otherwise follow a similar path.[100]

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[93] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 9.

[94] Ibid.,

[95] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 53.

[96] Alex Schmid, "Al-Qaeda's "Single Narrative" and Attempts to Develop Counter Narratives: The State of Knowledge," *ICCT Research Paper* (January 2014) : pp. 7-8.

[97] Ibid.,

[98] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : pp. 10-13.

[99] Marina Tapley and Gordon Clubb, "The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism," *ICCT Policy Brief* (April 2019) : p. 6.

[100] Ibid.,

Based on the current research on this topic, an overview can be made that summarises what messengers are considered to be well placed to deliver a specific type of message. In the table underneath, it shows which actors are well placed (+), actors whose effectiveness depends on other circumstances (+-) and actors that are not perceived to be effective in a specific message category (-). Although the table does provide a good indication of what is currently perceived as effective and what is not, the hard proof and extensive research to conclusively argue what actor should deliver what specific message is currently still lacking. Furthermore, the table is based on a rather small number of cases, making it impossible to draw definitive conclusions on the credibility of various actors in specific messaging categories.

	Public information campaign	Alternative narrative	Counter-narrative
Public actors: government representatives	+	+/-	-
Semi-public actors: first-line professionals	-	+	+/-
Religious leaders/associations	+/-	+	+
Representations of minority groups	+/-	+	+/-
Role models/youth leaders	+/-	+	+
Former jihadists	+/-	+	+
Victims	+	+	+
Educators	+	+/-	-
Family members/neighbours	-	+/-	+/-

Table 1: Credibility actors in message delivery

Source: Van Ginkel, Bibi. "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative." *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 13.

The one issue most scholars do agree on is the fact that the government is not particularly well suited to act as a messenger when it comes to counter-narratives and alternative narratives. A large contributing factor to this is the fact that governments suffer from the perceived "say-do-gap", practically meaning that in the view of the target audience, the words

and actions of the government are often perceived to be in conflict with each other.[101] This makes their position to spread counter or alternative narratives very weak. However, they can play an important role in streamlining their own strategic communications and facilitating grass-roots and civil-society organisations that are better placed to get the counter-narrative across.[102] In their position as a messenger, the focus of the government should therefore be on public information campaigns, and only a limited role remains in certain types of counter-narratives and alternative narratives.[103] The notion that governments should predominantly act as facilitators rather than direct messengers was also acknowledged by the United Nations Security Council in their April 2017 'comprehensive international framework to counter terrorist narratives'.[104]

A fourth and last element that is considered crucial to the effectiveness of counter-narratives is the medium that is used to communicate the desired message. This has particularly risen to prominence since the rise of IS and their use of social media and other online networks. The pitfall that governments must be aware of is to react to this development through focussing solely on the digital world.[105] Intuitively, it would make sense to use similar channels of communication that are being used to spread the violent extremist narrative.[106] However, limiting the campaign to social media channels is in itself insufficient. In order to reach a sustainable effect, it is considered to be important to counter jihadist narratives through multiple platforms simultaneously.[107] Not all target groups are necessarily active on social media, which renders a campaign that solely uses social media channels vulnerable and incomprehensive.[108] A coordinated set of communication activities spread

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[101] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 9.

[102] Ibid.,

[103] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 10.

[104] "Comprehensive International Framework to Counter Terrorist Narratives." *United Nations*, S/2017/375, 28 April 2017, accessed online at: https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/document/s2017375-comprehensive-international-framework-counter-terrorist-narratives/

[105] Alastair Reed, Haroro Ingram and Joe Whittaker, "Countering terrorist narratives. Directorate General for Internal Policies.", *Study for Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs* (November 2017) : p. 34.

[106] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 14.

[107] Ibid.,

[108] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 75

over multiple platforms expands the number and types of people reached, and can be additionally beneficial as it partially compensates for the limitations of any of the single delivery methods in isolation.[109] While acknowledging the importance of social media in trying to counter violent extremist narratives, it is important not to neglect the offline possibilities to counter these messages.

In short, the literature on the topic provides several key prescriptions in four separate but interconnected areas: target group, message, messenger and medium. Ideally, policymakers need to showcase a clear understanding of the different groups they are trying to target. This allows for a tailored response in terms of what type of message will be delivered to what specific group, but also helps to choose the right type of messenger that is most suitable to get the counter-narrative, alternative narrative or government strategic communication across. Then, the medium that is used to spread the various messages comes into play. While the reach and potential of using social media platforms is indeed very promising, it is considered most effective to combine online counter-messaging strategies with offline campaigns in order to reach the most sustainable effect.

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[109] Jan-Jaap van Eerten et al, "Developing a social media response to radicalization," *Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum,* September 2017, p. 75

2. Research Design

In the overview of the state of the art literature, different forms of messaging have been discussed, as well as the prescriptions that currently dominate the academic debate on countering violent extremist narratives. It is interesting to explore how these scholarly ideas are congruent with the actual policies conducted by the Indonesian and Malaysian governments respectively. Before narrowing down to the specific approaches of these two states, this chapter will first elaborate on the research questions, methodology, case selection and relevance.

2.1 Research Questions

Research question:	To what extent are the dominant academic notions on counter-messaging congruent with the respective policies of Indonesia and Malaysia since start of the war on terror?
Sub question 1:	What are the key trends in the policies of Indonesia and Malaysia in terms of countering violent extremist narratives?
Sub question 2:	How do Indonesian and Malaysian counter-messaging programmes deviate from the scholarly conclusions on the topic?

2.2 Methodology

As was stated before, the academic debate has provided certain parameters that are useful for this analysis. Thus, the research will from this point on consist of two separate but interconnected parts. Firstly, programmes of both states will be assessed by the distinctions between counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. It is important to have a clear understanding of the differences between these subgroups, as they are not always clearly delineated in policy. The key elements of the different strategies have been set out earlier in this paper and will function as a way to measure to what specific messaging group the different government policies belong. Counter-narratives seek to directly counter an extremist message and focus on condemning the aspects of the narrative that are seen as morally wrong. They are largely reactive in nature, and thereby specifically targeted at those individuals who are relatively far down the line of radicalisation. Alternative narratives,

on the other hand, are more positive and pro-active. Rather than focussing on what we are against, it emphasises what we are for. In this way, it seeks to highlight societal values and target a larger base of people who might feel misunderstood in society, through providing an alternative view to that which is spread by violent extremist organisations. Lastly, government strategic communications are aimed at giving the public insight in the actions of the government, thereby refuting misinformation and gaining trust. With the threefold distinction specified above in mind, it becomes possible to identify what sub-group of counter-messaging specific government actions belong to.

Secondly, the scholarly prescriptions on countering violent extremist narratives will be tested against the policies of Indonesia and Malaysia, hereby differentiating between the four elements that were discussed in the previous part of the paper: target audience, message, messenger and medium. Through doing this, it becomes possible to explore to what extent both states conform to the scholarly prescriptions, but also how they deviate from it. Building from there, the key trends in their respective counter-messaging programmes since the start of the war on terror will be studied, and finally the differences between Indonesia and Malaysia in this respect will be explored.

Various types of data will be used for this thesis. One of the difficulties when studying issues related to terrorism is the level of confidentiality when it comes down to government policies, meaning not all information will always be publicly accessible. This does not have to be a major problem, since the open-source information that is available on the topic provides sufficient information to make the analysis. Nonetheless, it is important to realise that the inevitable secrecy around certain information simply makes it impossible to catch every particular government measure relating to counter-narratives, alternative narratives and strategic communications. Both Indonesia and Malaysia do produce government reports on the issue, but these are not detailed or plentiful enough to provide a comprehensive overview of everything that the respective governments are doing on this particular issue. For that reason, data from official government documents will be complemented with data on specific programmes, which is collected from academic sources, reports from civil society organisations and journalistic articles.

2.3 Case Selection

Two cases will be explored in this thesis. This creates the opportunity for an in-depth analysis of both, but can also provide a more comprehensive view on how academic prescriptions on countering violent extremist narratives relate to actual policy in non-Western states. Furthermore, it allows for a between state comparison, as Indonesia and Malaysia have different experiences with terrorism and take different approaches to countering violent extremist messages, but also share some common characteristics. A short summary of both states' experience with terrorism since the start of the war on terror and a brief overview of their respective responses to violent extremism is provided below.

Indonesia

The contemporary battle against violent extremism in Indonesia finds its roots in the 2002 Bali bombings. In an attack on popular tourist spot Kuta on 12 October that year, 202 people were killed.[110] Among the deceased were people of 21 different nationalities, including 88 Australians, 38 Indonesians and 28 Britons.[111] The bombings were claimed by Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a militant organisation operating in Southeast Asia that is liaised with Al Qaeda.[112] A series of arrests followed in the direct aftermath of the bombing, which practically decimated the leadership structure of JI.[113] Nonetheless, Indonesia has had to cope with multiple terrorist attacks since the first Bali bombing. The most noteworthy examples are the 2003 attack on the JW Marriot in Jakarta, the 2005 Bali bombing, the 2009 double attack on the Ritz Carlton and the JW Marriot in Jakarta and the 2016 Starbucks attack, again in Jakarta.[114] Most of these attacks were carried out by terrorists linked with JI, the main exception being the IS-claimed 2016 Starbucks attack.[115]

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[110] "The 12 October Bali bombing plot," *BBC*, 11 October 2012, accessed online at https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19881138.

[111] Ibid.,

[112] Angel M. Rabasa, " Chapter 5: Terrorist networks in Southeast Asia," *The Adelphi Papers,* 43:358 (2003) : p. 59.

[113] Sidney Jones, "The Re-emergence of Jemaah Islamiyah," *IPAC Report* 36 (April 2017) : p.8, accessed online at http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2017/04/IPAC_Report_36.pdf.

[114] Bilveer Singh, "Terrorist Attacks in Indonesia: Insights for Practitioners and Policymakers," *in* "Majeed Khader et al. "*Learning from Violent Extremist Attacks*," Singapore: World Scientific Publishing (2019) : pp. 7-9.

[115] Ibid., pp. 9-10.

A brief examination of the literature on the current approach of Indonesia reveals a couple of trends that stand out. One of the most important things to note is that the leading government organ for policies to counter violent extremist narratives is the *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terrorisme* (BNPT), which stands for the National Agency for Combatting Terrorism.[116] In general, their approach has been largely top-down and focussed on the state ideology of Pancasila: the belief in one god, nationalism, humanitarianism, social justice and democracy.[117] The BNPT is often praised for the effectiveness of law enforcement capacities and attempts have been made to include victims, Islamic scholars and former extremists as credible messengers.[118] Nonetheless, their overall efforts are criticised for a lack of effective strategic communications to win broader public support for their goals.[119] The next chapter will provide a closer examination of various Indonesian initiatives to counter violent extremist narratives.

Malaysia

In comparison with Indonesia, Malaysia has a much less turbulent history when it comes to terrorist attacks since the start of the international war on terror. While there have been relatively few terrorist incidents in recent years and none of a large scale, there have been a lot of terrorism related arrests in Malaysia.[120] When it comes to government policies towards countering violent extremist narratives, government officials claim that Malaysia is active in designing counter and alternative narrative products, in particular through the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT), a research and training organ created by the Malaysian ministry of foreign affairs.[121] Furthermore, Malaysia has established the

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[116] Irfran Abubakar, "Effective Strategic Communication in Countering Radicalism in Indonesia," *Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* (2016) : p. 1.

[117] Cameron Sumpter, "Countering violent extremism in Indonesia: priorities, practice and the role of civil society," *Journal for Deradicalization* 11 : (2017) : p. 119.

[118] Elis Zuliati Anis, "Countering Terrorist Narratives: Winning the Hearts and Minds of Indonesian Millennials," *1st International Conference on South East Asia Studies* (2018) : pp. 189-210.

[119] Irfran Abubakar, "Effective Strategic Communication in Countering Radicalism in Indonesia," *Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* (2016) : p. 1.

[120] "Malaysia arrests 17 for alleged terrorist attack plot in Kuala Lumpur," *The Guardian*, 6 April 2015, accessed online at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/06/malaysia-arrests-17-for-alleged-terrorist-attack-plot-in-kuala-lumpur.

[121] "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Muhammad Shahrul Ikram Yaakob at the United Nations High Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States," *United Nations*, accessed online at

Counter-Messaging Centre, which is a part of the Royal Malaysian Police.[122] Malaysia claims that they have a comprehensive approach when it comes to countering violent extremists, with a combination of force and softer measures being in place.[123] An analysis of specific programmes being conducted in Malaysia will provide a better insight in how this reflects on their policies on countering violent extremist narratives, and eventually how this compares to the prescriptions in the academic literature on the topic.

2.4 Relevance

The analysis in this paper provides a way to achieve a better understanding of the gap between theory and practice in this specific field. While there are obvious differences between Indonesia and Malaysia, both states are made-up of a large Muslim-majority population and are facing similar challenges in terms of the potential terrorist threat to their countries. One of their shared concerns is the return of foreign terrorist fighters of Katibah Nusantara, a fighting unit that was established in the caliphate in Syria, made up of Malaysian and Indonesian nationals.[124] With the demise of the Islamic state and the difficulty that law enforcement agencies have with legally prosecuting foreign terrorist fighters, gaining a better understanding of the approaches of different states and how this relates to theory can provide a fruitful baseline for further studies on this topic. Furthermore, the wider analysis can be relevant to every state that is struggling with the issues of returning foreign fighters and people radicalising on national soil. As was stated before, the literature on the topic is mainly written by Western scholars, which makes it interesting to study how the prescriptions from the academic realm relate to policy in these two Southeast Asian states. In the end, the conclusions reached in this thesis will contribute to the larger debate on counter-narratives,

https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/S3-Malaysia.pdf.

[122] "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Muhammad Shahrul Ikram Yaakob at the United Nations High Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States," *United Nations*, accessed online at
https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/S3-Malaysia.pdf.

[123] Ibid.,

[124] Bilveer Singh, "Southeast Asia Braces for the Post-Islamic State Era," *The Diplomat Magazine*, 17 July 17 2017, accessed online at https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/southeast-asia-braces-for-the-post-islamic-state-era/.

alternative narratives and government strategic communications, which is of value to policymakers worldwide dealing with issues of returning FTFs and (de)radicalisation.

3. Countering Violent Extremist Narratives in Practice

In the previous part of this paper, the academic background of countering violent extremist narratives has been set out. The exploration of the literature has led to a set of prescriptions on the main elements that a successful government programme has to possess. With these in mind, the analysis now proceeds with examining the specific cases of Indonesia and Malaysia. Where the academic prescriptions are mainly written from a Western point of view, it is interesting to explore how they relate to the practice of countering violent extremist narratives in two non-Western states. It is important to note that the analysis focuses on government policies. Therefore, all initiatives that are highlighted in the analysis are conducted, sponsored or supported by the Indonesian or Malaysian governments.

Two important distinctions have been made in the literature review, and these will be adhered to in the remaining part of the analysis. The first revolves around the different strategies to counter violent extremist narratives. As was stated before, the term counter-narrative is often broadly used to indicate a wide variety of strategies, but technically only refers to one specific approach. For this reason, the first distinction divides the government efforts into three categories: counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. This threefold differentiation shapes the structure of the analysis that follows. Subsequently, the policies of Indonesia and Malaysia will be tested to the four elements of the second distinction: target audience, message, messenger and platform. Through this exercise, it becomes possible to identify to what degree the policies of both states are congruent with the academic prescriptions on the issue.

3.1 Indonesian Policies

As was stated in the methodology, the terminology that is dominant in the academic debate is not necessarily used in the policy domain. For that reason, it is important to holistically examine the government's efforts and subsequently distil the specific aspects that can be pinpointed as counter-narratives, alternative narratives or government strategic communications. After that, it is possible to analyse these policies and explore how they relate to the academic prescriptions on the issue. In the case of Indonesia, the governmental body that is in the lead when it comes down to executing counter terrorism policy is the National

Agency for Combatting Terrorism (*Badan Nasional Penganggulangan Terorisme*, BNPT).[125] The policies of the BNPT can be roughly divided in two pillars: soft approach and hard approach.[126] In brief, the soft approach of the BNPT includes addressing vulnerable groups and ex-terrorists, dealing with deradicalisation initiatives and disseminating counter-narrative efforts using digital media and interfaith dialogue.[127] The hard approach is executed in cooperation with Special Detachment 88 (Densus 88).[128] This special police unit has become the main counter-terrorism task force since its establishment in 2003.[129] They reported to have arrested or killed more than 600 terrorism suspects within the first ten years of their existence.[130] As the hard measures focus predominantly on intelligence gathering and law enforcement, it is the soft approach that is most relevant to this study. For this reason, the policies of BNPT are particularly highlighted in this discussion. However, as organisational responsibilities can sometimes be fluid in Indonesia, Special Detachment 88 will be referred to throughout the paper when their policy measures or statements of key figures contribute to the analysis of Indonesia's counter-messaging strategies.

Counter-narratives

The war in Syria has resulted in a surge in websites, Facebook pages and print media articles about the conflict, published in radical Indonesian communities.[131] A first step in Indonesia's efforts to counter violent extremist messaging revolves around blocking and removing extremist content from the Internet.[132] The obvious problem with this approach is the ease with which sites can reappear, and blocked social media accounts can be recreated.[133] Furthermore, a lot of the information that appears on extremist websites is not necessarily in

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[125] Alif Satria Fitriani, Pricilla Putri Nirmala Sari and Rebekha Adriana, "The Current State of Terrorism in Indonesia: Vulnerable Groups, Networks and Responses," *CSIS Working Paper Series* (2018) : p. 12.

[126] Ibid.,

[127] Ibid.,

[128] Ibid.,

[129] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Meijer, Roel, et al. *"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : p. 51.

[130] Ibid.,

[131] Sidney Jones, "Indonesians and the Syrian Conflict," *IPAC Report* 6 (January 2014) : p.5.

[132] Elis Zuliati Anis, "Countering Terrorist Narratives: Winning the Hearts and Minds of Indonesian Millennials," *1st International Conference on South East Asia Studies* (2018) : p. 201.

[133] Sidney Jones, "Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Need for a Rethink," *IPAC Report 11* (June 2014) : p.19.

conflict with Indonesian law, making it difficult to justify taking down certain targets.[134] For that reason, challenging the ideas thorough providing counter-narratives can be a more sustainable approach. This is partially reflected in Indonesia's policies. In 2014, the BNPT published the *Blueprint Deradikalisasi* (Deradicalisation Blueprint), a 122-page document on countering religious radicalism in Indonesia.[135] While the document does address the ideological battle, its main focus is on prisoners convicted on terrorism charges and stresses the importance of providing rehabilitation, re-education and reintegration with continuous monitoring and evaluation along the way.[136] As this is phrased in a rather abstract manner and limits the scope to only a small target group, looking at concrete initiatives from the Indonesian government provides a better insight on what BNPT is doing to counter violent extremist narratives.

A noteworthy example of the government's effort in the battle of ideas is the cooperation with former members of Jemaah Islamiyah, who assisted the government in shaping and spreading a counter-narrative in the aftermath of the 2002 Bali bombings. Several high-profile former terrorists, most notably Nasir Abas, were convinced to cooperate with the Indonesian government and spoke out against violent extremism.[137] Abas published various best-selling books, in which he criticises his former colleagues and thus provides a counter-narrative to violent extremist Islam by explicitly insisting that terrorism is not JI's initial mission, and that it is based on a misunderstanding rooted in false interpretation of the meaning of jihad.[138] After the publication of the book, other militant Islamic leaders joined his criticism and spoke out against the methods of Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah and other terrorist groups.[139] The importance of integrating these types of messages by former terrorists into Indonesia's counter-terrorism strategy was highlighted by Brigadier-General Tito Karnavian, former head of the earlier mentioned Special Detachment 88 and current chief of the national

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[134] Sidney Jones, "Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Need for a Rethink," *IPAC Report 11* (June 2014) : p.19.

[135] Ibid., p.6.

[136] Ibid.,

[137] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Meijer, Roel, et al. *"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael' (2012) : p. 29.

[138] Ian Chalmers, "*Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Bringing Back the Jihadists*," Asian Studies Review 41:3 (2017) : pp. 342-343.

[139] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Meijer, Roel, et al. *"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : p. 29.

police.[140] Although at the time he was the head of the department that focuses predominantly on hard measures in the battle of countering violent extremism, Karnavian was a key figure in the Indonesian government who pointed out the importance of the ideological battle.[141] At the same time however, he acknowledged the fact that there is no grand strategy. According to him, all successful hard and soft policies of the Indonesian government have been personal and ad-hoc initiatives that were thought to be most effective at the time.[142] This is an important statement that indicates a contradiction in Indonesian policy that reflects on the actual efforts that are being undertaken. While the importance of counter-narratives is highlighted by a prominent figure within the administration, there seems to be no systematic strategy that the Indonesian government puts forward in at attempt to realise its goals. This particular issue will be reflected on later, when discussing Indonesia's effort at providing government strategic communications.

With the aforementioned lack of an overarching grand strategy, the only way to achieve a better understanding of Indonesia's policies is by looking at another prominent counter-narrative initiative that is conducted by the state. A recent example of the involvement of the Indonesian government in counter-narratives can be seen in the Online Peace Ambassador project, supervised by the BNPT.[143] This is an activity that seeks to raise awareness amongst young people about the spread of violent extremist information on the Internet.[144] Young 'social media activists' are being trained at recognising violent extremists information, in the hope that these Peace Ambassadors will subsequently be able to pass on their knowledge to other youths in their environments.[145] Since 2015, training sessions have been held in some of the largest Indonesian cities, including Jakarta, Bandung, Padang, Yogyakarta, Semarang, Malang and Banjarmasin.[146] Going directly against the violent

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[140] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Meijer, Roel, et al. *"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : p. 28.

[141] Ibid., p. 30.

[142] Ibid., p. 14.

[143] Alif Satria Fitriani, Pricilla Putri Nirmala Sari and Rebekha Adriana, "The Current State of Terrorism in Indonesia: Vulnerable Groups, Networks and Responses," *CSIS Working Paper Series* (2018) : p. 13.

[144] "BNPT Latih Anak Muda Banjarmasin Menjadi Duta Perdamaian." *BNPT*, 12 September 2017, accessed online at https://www.bnpt.go.id/bnpt-latih-anak-muda-banjarmasin-menjadi-duta-perdamaian.html.

[145] Ibid.,

[146] Ibid.,

extremist message in an attempt to discredit it, this reactionary initiative falls into the category of counter-narratives.

Alternative narratives

In the previous paragraphs, some of the counter-narrative policies of the Indonesian government have been discussed; those messaging initiatives were addressed that go directly against the violent extremist messages it seeks to counter. Building on the previously made distinction between the different counter-messaging strategies, it is interesting to explore the more pro-active messaging initiatives conducted. Alternative narratives provide a more positive message and focus on what we are for, rather than stressing what we are against.

Even though the concept of alternative narratives is relatively new, the Indonesian government can be observed to have started efforts in the early 2000s that, in hindsight, fit the contemporary definition of alternative narratives.[147] Between July 2001 and October 2004, Megawati Sukarnoputri, commonly referred to as Megawati, was the president of Indonesia. In her speech after the 2002 Bali Bombings, she personally made an appeal to the moderate Muslim organisations the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) to join Indonesia's war on terror by promoting the image of Islam as a peace-loving and cooperative religion.[148] By pushing a narrative that focuses on the things that Islam stands for, rather than agitating directly against the violent extremist narrative, this appeal can be seen as the first step in Indonesia's pursuit of what can be referred to as an alternative narrative. Another central organisation that has been involved in providing alternative narratives the Indonesian Council of Ulamas (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI)), a semi-governmental body of Muslim scholars.[149] They were part of an initiative that was carried out by former vice-President Yusuf Kalla, who brought together a team of Islamic scholars to design religious programmes to propagate religious harmony and thus indirectly counter terrorist ideologies.[150] The specific programme is not deemed to have been a large success, mainly due to the ignorance of the

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[147] Kate Grealy, "Indonesia: Countering a message of hate," *Lowy Institute,* 28 March 2018, accessed online at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-countering-message-hate.

[148] Ali Muhammad, "Indonesia's Way To Counter Terrorism 2002-2009: Lesson Learned," *Journal of Government and Politics* 5:2 (August 2014) : p. 194.

[149] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Roel Meijer, et al,*"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : p. 46.

[150] Ibid.,

scale of the violent extremist Islamic threat.[151] However, under the increasing threat of terrorism in Indonesia, the MUI eventually issued a *fatwa* distinguishing between jihad and terrorism, thereby explicitly forbidding terrorist acts in the name of jihad.[152] This also exemplifies the thin line between counter-narratives and alternative narratives. Where the main purpose of the government's cooperation with religious organisations was to produce an alternative narrative, this act of explicitly forbidding terrorist acts through a fatwa is clearly agitating directly against the terrorist narrative, and should therefore be classified as a counter-narrative act rather than an alternative narrative one.

In the years since Megawati, a similar approach can be observed. The government has continued to seek cooperation with predominantly religious organisations in order to advocate their alternative narrative. At the moment of writing, the NU and its various bodies have signed multiple memoranda of understanding (MoU) with BNPT agreeing to fight terrorism through a persuasive approach.[153] A specific example of how this leads to action can be found in the cooperation with Fatayat NU, the women's youth wing of the NU. They set up a project in which they appointed 500 anti-radicalism preachers across Java in April 2017.[154] These preachers have since worked as strategic partners of BNPT, specifically advocating terrorism prevention narratives among women and children through spreading religious values and ideology.[155] It is these types of positive messages that the government of Indonesia focuses on in their alternative narrative initiatives. The target group is rather broad: mainly moderate Muslims who follow the Muhammadiyah or the NU. The alternative message itself is brief and clear: portraying Islam as a peaceful and loving religion and thus providing an alternative to the hateful messages spread online by violent extremist groups. The messengers are Muslim leaders, whose support is clearly seen as very crucial for the success of government policies.[156]

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[151] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Roel Meijer, et al,*"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : pp. 46-47.

[152] Ibid., p. 47.

[153] The four articles on the specific forms of cooperation can be found in the bibliography under the title of "MNU Online".

[154] "Kepala BNPT: Bentengi Perempuan Dari Ancaman Terrorisme*," Damailahindesiaku*, August 2017, accessed online at https://damailahindonesiaku.com/kepala-bnpt-bentengi-perempuan-dari-ancaman-terorisme.html.

[155] Ibid.,

[156] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"*

As was the case with examining Indonesia's counter-narrative programmes, there are only a few alternative narrative programmes that can be directly traced back to the Indonesian government. There are more comprehensive projects to be found in Indonesia, but these are carried out by civil society organisations with little or no interference of policymakers. While it is irrelevant to discuss these specific programmes for this particular research on government policies, it is interesting to note that leaving a large part of the distribution of alternative narratives to civil society seems to be a deliberate choice of the Indonesian government. One explanation for this is the fact that there is simply a wide geographical area to cover for Indonesian policymakers. Although densely coordinated action may be lacking, independently conceived local projects are perceived as promising efforts.[157] The Indonesian government realises the importance of cooperation with civil society, and therefore seeks partnerships with especially mass civil society groups such as the NU and the Muhammadiyah.[158] This in itself can be seen as a policy decision as well; rather than keeping central state control on all counter-messaging efforts, the government has decided that there are powers within society with a better position to spread counter-narratives and alternative narratives. For the large part, civil society's participation has come as a blessing for the Indonesian government since the start of the war on terror.[159] However, doing so does mean losing some control over the bigger picture, leading to a situation where most government initiatives seem to be reactive and lacking of an integrated grand strategy. This will be highlighted when discussing the Indonesian government's efforts on government strategic communications.

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in Roel Meijer, et al,*"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : p. 42.

[157] Cameron Sumpter, "Reintegration in Indonesia: Extremists, Start-ups and Occasional Engagements," *ICCT* (February 2019), accessed online at https://icct.nl/publication/reintegration-in-indonesia-extremists-start-ups-and-occasional-engagements/.

[158] Emma Keizer and Fynn-Niklas Franke, "The Indonesian Fight Against Terrorism After the Elections," *The Clingendael Spectator* (2019), accessed online at https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/indonesian-fight-against-terrorism-after-elections.

[159] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"* in Roel Meijer, et al,*"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (2012) : p. 46.

Government strategic communications

The definition of government strategic communications has been discussed previously in this paper. Practically, it involves providing insight in the actions of the government and involving the population in the measures being taken. As was stated before, the BNPT is largely responsible for countering terrorist activities in Indonesia. The general consensus in the literature is that their actions, especially when it comes to law enforcement, have been effective and have made Indonesia less susceptible to major terrorist attacks.[160] However, when it comes to communicating their actions to the wider audience, there are some severe shortcomings.

Since the creation of the BNPT in 2010, no formal document has been made publicly available that explicitly sets out the wider communication plan of the organisation.[161] This, in itself, is already a shortcoming of the Indonesian government's policy of countering violent extremist messaging, since it exemplifies the failure of policymakers to involve the wider population in challenging violent extremist ideologies.[162] Of course, there is the BNPT Deradicalisation Blueprint, which was referenced when discussing Indonesia's counter-narrative efforts. As of now, this is indeed the most tangible government document from which the government's national strategies can be derived. After all, it was the very first official guide that sought to set out paradigms, strategies and approaches in the battle against violent extremist narratives.[163] However, it does so only in a very limited fashion. While BNPT does claim through the document that it seeks closer coordination between different organisations within Indonesian society, studies have stated that there is a lack of sufficient engagement with all sectors of society.[164] This is where the largest challenge lies for Indonesian policymakers; winning broader public support for their overall counter-terrorism strategies through effective strategic communication.[165] Three main issues need to be highlighted. First of all, ever since its creation, BNPT has been unsuccessful in clearly

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[160] Irfran Abubakar, "Effective Strategic Communication in Countering Radicalism in Indonesia," *Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* (2016) : p. 1.

[161] Ibid., p. 3.

[162] Ibid., p. 1.

[163] Emma Keizer and Fynn-Niklas Franke, "The Indonesian Fight Against Terrorism After the Elections," *The Clingendael Spectator* (2019), accessed online at https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/indonesian-fight-against-terrorism-after-elections.

[164] Ibid.,

[165] Irfran Abubakar, "Effective Strategic Communication in Countering Radicalism in Indonesia," *Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* (2016) : p. 1.

communicating the definition of radical ideology and how radical ideology can potentially threaten national security.[166] Secondly, there is no indication that they have broadened their scope from cooperation with Islamic organisations such as the NU, Muhammadiyah and MUI to other target audiences.[167] Lastly, the government has yet to fulfil the potential that is offered by using multiple channels of communication, thereby utilising both online and offline messaging strategies involving a plethora of different groups in the Indonesian society.[168] Only a coherent strategic communication effort from BNPT can foster sustainable change and ensure engagement with and trust of the various target audiences.[169]

3.2 Malaysian Policies

In comparison with Indonesia, Malaysia has had a lot fewer concrete incidents of terrorism since the start of the international war on terror. The only high-profile recent incident occurred on the 28th of June 2016, when two terrorists threw a grenade into a bar in Puchong, a town outside of Kuala Lumpur.[170] A total of eight people were injured in the attack.[171] Then Inspector General of the Police, Khalid Abu Bakar, confirmed that the terrorist act was masterminded by Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi.[172] He had himself already claimed ISIS responsibility for the attack on Facebook.[173] On top of this recent attack, Malaysian officials state that a total of 25 terrorist plots have been foiled since 2013.[174] When it comes to law enforcement in the context of terrorism prevention, the main organisation responsible is the National Special Operations Force (NSOF).[175] This multi-agency counter-terrorism

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[166] Irfran Abubakar, "Effective Strategic Communication in Countering Radicalism in Indonesia," *Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* (2016) : p. 2.

[167] Ibid., p. 3.

[168] Ibid., p. 3.

[169] Ibid., p.8.

[170] "Malaysia: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed online at https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/malaysia.

[171] Ibid.,

[172] Ibid.,

[173] Ibid.,

[174] Amy Chew, "Islamic State 'wolf pack' in Malaysia planned wave of terror attacks, police say after detaining four suspects in sting operation," *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 2019, accessed online at https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3010061/islamic-state-wolf-pack-malaysia-planned-wave-terror.

[175] "Malaysia: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed online at https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/malaysia.

force is made up of 17 officers and 150 personnel from the Malaysian Armed Forces, the Royal Malaysian Police and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency.[176] The mission of the NSOF is to "act as a quick-reaction force to curb terrorism in its early stages… to confront, fight, and eliminate threats".[177] Also worth mentioning here are Malaysia's, somewhat controversial, Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and Special Measures Against Terrorism in Foreign Countries Act (SMATA). The former is an act to provide "for the prevention of the commission or support of terrorist acts involving listed terrorist organisations in a foreign country or any part of a foreign country and for the control of persons engaged in such acts and for related matters"[178] while the latter "provides for special measures to deal with persons who engage in the commission or support of terrorist acts involving listed terrorist organisations in a foreign country or any part of a foreign country and for related matters".[179] Although the power granted to the Malaysian authorities under these acts has come under scrutiny from a human rights perspective, the legislation has thus far succeeded in preventing large-scale terrorist attacks in Malaysia.[180] As of early 2019, more than 300 people had been arrested on ISIS-related charges.[181] Given the continued high threat, the current Inspector General of the Police, Abdul Hamid Bador, has stressed the importance of continued investment in an overall programme to counter and prevent violence.[182]

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[176] "Malaysia: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed online at https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/malaysia.

[177] Ibid.,

[178] "Act 769, Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015," *Malaysian Attorney General's Chambers Official Portal*, 20 January 2018, accessed online at http://www.federalgazette.agc.gov.my/outputaktap/aktaBI_20150604_Act769(BI).pdf.

[179] Thomas Koruth Samuel, "Undergraduate Radicalisation in Selected Countries in Southeast Asia," Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2018, p. 99, accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/images/Articles_2016/Articles_2018/Undergraduate_Radicalisation_in_Selected_Countries_in_SEA.pdf.

[180] Michael Hart, "Malaysia's Counterterrorism Strategy: Keeping ISIS in Check," *Geopolitical Monitor*, 2 January 2018, accessed online at https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/malaysias-counterterrorism-strategy-keeping-isis-in-check/.

[181] Nicholas Chan, "The Malaysian State Responds to IS: Force, Discourse, and Dilemma," *Middle East Institute*, 15 August 2017, accessed online at https://www.mei.edu/publications/malaysian-state-responds-force-discourse-and-dilemma.

[182] Amy Chew, "Islamic State 'wolf pack' in Malaysia planned wave of terror attacks, police say after detaining four suspects in sting operation," *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 2019, accessed online at https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3010061/islamic-state-wolf-pack-malaysia-planned-wave-terror.

Next to the 'hard measures' to combat terrorism, Malaysia has publicly expressed the importance of winning the hearts and minds through softer measures. In an article published online by Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, he expressed the need of a combination of approaches: "Malaysia maintains the view that the mere use of penalty and criminalisation approach will not solve the problem of extremism, and the blending of soft approach and the conventional methods offer a better alternative."[183] In terms of government policy on the 'softer' side of preventing terrorism, there are two institutions that are especially relevant to mention: the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT) and the Counter-Messaging Centre (CMC).[184] The former is a research and training organ created by the Malaysian ministry of foreign affairs, while the latter is part of the Royal Malaysian Police.[185] SEARCCT was established in 2003, and its official objectives are threefold: develop and organise comprehensive capacity building and public awareness programmes on counter-terrorism, produce and publish quality research on (counter-) terrorism and enhance soft power initiatives towards countering terrorism and extremism.[186] The purpose of the Counter-Messaging Centre is similar, albeit more specifically focussed on the online world: curbing "the spread of extremist ideology and the influence of [the] Islamic State in the cyberworld".[187] The main focus of the analysis will be on SEARCCT and their role in Malaysia's policies on counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. Other government institutions involved in these efforts will be introduced when relevant to the discussion at hand.

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[183] Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, "Malaysia's Policy on Counter Terrorism and Deradicalisation Strategy," *Journal of Public Security and Safety* 6:2 (2016) : p. 14, accessed online at http://www.moha.gov.my/images/terkini/WORD.ARTIKEL-TPM-JURNAL-VOL.6- 2016.pdf.

[184] "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Muhammad Shahrul Ikram Yaakob at the United Nations High Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States," *United Nations*, accessed online at https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/S3-Malaysia.pdf.

[185] Ibid.,

[186] SEARCCT, "About SEARCCT - Introduction" *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/about-searcct/introduction.

[187] Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, "Malaysia's Policy on Counter Terrorism and Deradicalisation Strategy," *Journal of Public Security and Safety* 6:2 (2016) : p. 14, accessed online at http://www.moha.gov.my/images/terkini/WORD.ARTIKEL-TPM-JURNAL-VOL.6- 2016.pdf.

Counter-narratives

On the official website of SEARCCT, a lot of information can be found on the policies of Malaysia in regards to counter-narratives. The objectives of the organisation have already been mentioned in the previous paragraph. Since 2010, SEARCCT has published a yearly prospectus in which they state their goals, reflect on the previous year and briefly describe the programmes that will be conducted in the upcoming year. Since 2013, SEARCCT has started to explicitly mention counter-narratives in their documentation, and multiple programmes targeting different audiences and using various platforms have been carried out. At first, the programmes were specifically aimed at (regional) policymakers. Mainly in a workshop format, the initiatives had the main objective of creating awareness of the terrorist narratives and best possible ways to counter these.[188] This later expanded to include local participants from civil society, lecturers, young people and undergraduates. The use of specific messengers is explicitly discussed in only available documents. Possible actors that are mentioned here include sports stars, former terrorists, victims of terrorism, bloggers and entertainment celebrities.[189] Furthermore, at the start of the war on terror the main focus was rather broad and aimed at raising awareness on the violent extremist narratives that needed to be countered. More specific programmes, for example based on equipping Malaysian undergraduates with CVE-based digital skills, were conducted in more recent years.[190] In the latest prospectus published by SEARCCT, a wide variety of counter-narrative initiatives can be found. Programmes conducted in 2019 include workshops for professionals aimed at introducing a whole of government approach to CVE, a counter-narrative video competition for young people, collaborations with prisons on the rehabilitation of terrorism suspects and training sessions with the Malaysian Press Institute on the role of the media in (countering) violent extremism.[191] Another prominent counter-narrative initiative is led by the Malaysian

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[188] SEARCCT, "Prospectus 2013," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/images/PDF_My/Prospectus/Prospectus2013.pdf.

[189] Thomas Koruth Samuel, "Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) : p.122, accessed online at https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2016/Radicalisation_SEA_2016.pdf.

[190] SEARCCT, "Prospectus 2018," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/images/PDF_My/Prospectus/Prospectus2018.pdf.

[191] SEARCCT, "Prospectus 2019," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/images/PDF_My/Prospectus/Prospectus_2019.pdf.

Islamic Development Department (JAKIM). Where SEARCCT is mainly focussed on a media campaign, JAKIM occupies itself with countering violent extremist messaging through religious channels, such as issuing fatwas.[192] Twelve religious leaders were also tasked with clarifying different concepts to the public.[193] Muslim students throughout local universities are identified and assisted in disseminating the true meaning of jihad and in conducting anti-violence awareness campaigns on campuses.[194] Furthermore, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission launched an initiative named 'Click Wisely'. This programme entails running programmes in mosques and schools to raise awareness of online recruitment tactics.[195] Young people are encouraged to participate in conversations that explain what ISIS has done and why they are called terrorists.[196] Trying to undermine the positive image of violent extremists, this also can be seen as a counter-narrative initiative. The various Malaysian efforts on counter-narratives have not remained unnoticed. In December 2017, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the West-Asia North-Africa Institute (WANA) referred to Malaysia as the "leading Southeast Asian example on counter-narratives."[197]

Alternative narratives

In the years after the 9/11 attacks, the Malaysian government chose a similar approach to that of the Indonesian agencies when it comes to providing what can now be categorised as alternative narratives. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi promoted a programme called "Islam Hadhari", or Civilisational Islam.[198] The main idea of the project was to emphasise the

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[192] "Lessons from State-Sponsored Counter-Narrative Campaigns," *The West Asia-North Africa Institute* (December 2017) : p. 3, accessed online at
http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Annex_CounterNarratives_English.pdf
[193] Ibid.,
[194] "Malaysia: Extremism and Counter-Extremism," *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed online at https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/malaysia.
[195] "Lessons from State-Sponsored Counter-Narrative Campaigns," *The West Asia-North Africa Institute* (December 2017) : p. 3, accessed online at
http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Annex_CounterNarratives_English.pdf
[196] Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, "ISIS Recruitment of Malaysian Youth: Challenge and Response," *Middle East Insitute*, 3 May 2016, accessed online at https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-recruitment-malaysian-youth-challenge-and-response#_ftn27.
[197] "Lessons from State-Sponsored Counter-Narrative Campaigns," *The West Asia-North Africa Institute* (December 2017) : p. 1, accessed online at
http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Annex_CounterNarratives_English.pdf
[198] Sara Zeiger, "Counter-narratives for Counter Violent Exrtremism (CVE) in South East

foundational elements of Islam such as "justice, peace, economic development, security, protection of human rights, freedom and independence of people, and quality of life for all citizens".[199] What followed was a five year government-led information campaign that included religious leaders, academics, journalists, psychologists and lawyers, in total incorporating over 600 speakers disseminating information through various different forums, thus reaching a broad array of audiences.[200] Since it is a pro-active message that focuses on positive values rather than reacting on the bad aspects of the violent extremist narrative, this initiative fits into the definition of an alternative narrative.

While the information on Malaysia's current counter-narrative programmes is rather easily found in online available documents, their efforts on alternative narratives are more difficult to find in open-source information. One of the few clear alternative narrative initiatives currently conducted by the Malaysian government is the Student Leader Against Youth Extremism and Radicalisation Programme (SLAYER). The initiative consists of a set of workshops that brings together one hundred undergraduate youth leaders from all over the country.[201] One of the exercises in the workshop is specifically meant to "both counter the terrorist narratives as well as provide a compelling alternative narrative".[202] The lack of additional publicly available information on other concrete alternative narrative programmes does not mean that the Malaysian government does not preoccupy itself with this particular type of counter-messaging. On the contrary, Mohamed Shahkrul Ikram Yaakob, permanent representative of Malaysia to the United Nations in New York, specifically mentioned alternative narratives in a speech at the 2018 UN High Level Conference of Heads of Counter-terrorism agencies: "SEARCCT has designed and produced hundreds of digital counter/alternative narrative products".[203] The significance of this statement is twofold. On

Asia," *Hedayah Center* (May 2016) : p. 6, accessed online at
http://www.hedayahcenter.org/Admin/Content/File-2792016102253.pdf.
[199] Ibid.,
[200] Andrew Humphreys, "Malaysia's Post-9/11 Security Strategy," *Kajian Malaysia* 28:1
(2010) : p. 38, accessed online at: http://web.usm.my/km/28(1)2010/KM%20ART%202%20(21-
52).pdf.
[201] Thomas Koruth Samuel. "Don't-Lah Wei: A Peer-to-Peer Resource Guide on Ensuring Your
Kawan Never Becomes a Terrorist," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2018) :
p. 114, accessed online at
http://www.searcct.gov.my/images/Articles_2016/Articles_2017/DONT_LAH_WEI.pdf.
[202] Ibid., p.121.
[203] "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Muhammad Shahrul Ikram Yaakob at the United Nations High
Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States," *United Nations*,

the one hand, it further confirms the fact that the Malaysian government attaches significant value to counter-messaging. On the other, the fact that a high level civil servant differentiates between alternative narratives and counter-narratives reveals that the taxonomy of the academic debate has transcended into Malaysia's policy realm.

Furthermore, in a report published in 2016, SEARCCT also explicitly emphasised the added value of alternative narratives on top of counter-narratives: "While countering Daesh's narrative is essential, it could mean that the authorities in this region are constantly reacting to the agenda set by the group and are most of the times, one step behind, which is often times the case in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. There is therefore a need to present the alternative narrative to the audience, one that tells or 'retells' the story in a way that is both positive and proactive."[204] According to the report, this can be done through retelling the story of Islam (for example, as Indonesia does through their state philosophy of Pancasila) and presenting non-violence as a viable model to address grievances.[205] In a similar vein, Malaysia emphasises the importance of the concept of moderation in religion, which reflects in their Global Movement of Moderates initiative.[206] As the programme stresses the virtues of moderate Islam *vis a vis* a violent extremist perspective on the religion, this also qualifies as an alternative narrative.[207]

Government strategic communications

As is the case with Indonesia, there is no mention in official policy documents of the Malaysian government engaging in strategic communications. However, studying the efforts of the government, there are most definitely examples that reveal the policies of the Malaysian government on this particular counter-messaging strategy. On the official website

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accessed online at
https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/S3-Malaysia.pdf.

[204] Thomas Koruth Samuel, "Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) : p.120, accessed online at
https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2016/Radicalisation_SEA_2016.pdf.

[205] Ibid., p. 121.

[206] Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, "Malaysia's Policy on Counter Terrorism and Deradicalisation Strategy," *Journal of Public Security and Safety* 6:2 (2016) : p. 14, accessed online at
http://www.moha.gov.my/images/terkini/WORD.ARTIKEL-TPM-JURNAL-VOL.6- 2016.pdf.

[207] Ibid.,

of SEARCCT, a special page has been designed where public awareness is discussed.[208] It is explicitly mentioned here that their objective is to include local and foreign academics, policymakers, diplomats and students by presenting papers, giving presentations and discussing the dynamics of terrorism and counterterrorism in the region.[209] To reach and inform an even broader audience, SEARCCT further incorporated a menu on their website that contains openly accessible information for the wider public.[210] Since 2010, a yearly prospectus has been published that contains a short reflection on the goals and completed initiatives of the previous year and subsequently lists various programmes, workshops, trainings and public lectures that may be of interest to organisations as well as to individuals who want to learn more about Malaysia's policies on counter-messaging.[211] All of the above listed information is available in English as well as in Malaysian to ensure as many people as possible are able to gain an insight in the actions of Malaysia's main counter-messaging organ.

While all of the above falls under the banner of government strategic communications as defined in the literature, the exact conceptual awareness on this specific counter-messaging pillar has not transcended into Malaysia's policy realm. This was exemplified in August 2016, when the Digital Strategic Communications Division (DSCD) was established.[212] This special branch of SEARCCT is has as its official goal to address the threat of terrorist messaging, especially on digital platforms, in an attempt to mitigate the overall risks of recruitment and expansion in the Southeast Asian region.[213] Furthermore, the DSCD is tasked with producing "counter-narrative end products to win the hearts and minds of the people".[214] When adhering

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[208] SEARCCT, "Public Awareness, " *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/public-awareness.

[209] Ibid.,

[210] SEARCCT, "Public Menu, " *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/for-public.

[211] SEARCCT, "Prospectus, " *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/about-searcct/prospectus.

[212] SEARCCT, "Director General's Message, " *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism,* accessed online at http://www.searcct.gov.my/component/content/article?id=23:director-general-s-message.

[213] Ibid.,

[214] Thomas Koruth Samuel, "Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) : p.67 , accessed online at https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2016/Radicalisation_SEA_2016.pdf.

to the definitions on the three messaging categories as established in the dominant literature on the topic, the tasks of the DSCD are focussed on providing counter-narratives, and not strategic communications as the name would suggest.

4. Policies *vis a vis* Academic Prescriptions

Having examined the most important policies of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments on counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications, how do these actions relate to the academic prescriptions on counter-messaging? In other words, to what extent are Indonesia's and Malaysia's policies congruent with the four parameters that were established in the literature review? Do their counter-messaging programmes reflect a specific delineation of target audiences, adaptation of the content of messages to various target groups, inclusion of messengers that have the most impact and the use of a combination of online and offline platforms to reach the most sustainable effect? The policies of Indonesia and Malaysia will be tested to these four pillars, and subsequently to one another.

4.1 Target Audience

As stated before, the literature on the topic prescribes the favourability of clearly delineating specific target audiences when engaging in counter-messaging initiatives. To a certain degree, Indonesia does make an attempt to do so, albeit in a rather limited fashion. The main official distinction that Indonesian policymakers have made is that between prisoners convicted on charges related to violent extremism, and those citizens who have been earmarked as potentially vulnerable for radicalisation. Next to this differentiation, there are programmes, such as the Peace Ambassador initiative, that specifically target younger people as well. However, the distinction between different gradations of radicalisation, something deemed desirable in the academic literature, cannot be found explicitly in Indonesia's policies, other than the earlier mentioned divide that the Blueprint document makes between prisoners and vulnerable subjects. Further differentiation is made, as indeed exemplified in the case of the Peace Ambassador initiative and the alternative narrative campaign targeting people affiliated with moderate religious groups such as the NU and the Muhammadiyah, but these examples are not sufficient to speak of an integrated strategy within Indonesia's wider counter-messaging policy. When examining the BNPT Blueprint document, the design of the prevention programmes seems to be focussed on whole swathes of the 'Muslim community', while more specific studies on who exactly are susceptible to violent extremist narratives and thus should be targeted would be beneficial to the overall counter-messaging efforts of the Indonesian government.

In comparison with Indonesia, Malaysia is taking a more specific approach when it comes to target audiences. It must be noted however, that this has historically not always been the case. Where initially the scope of their programmes was also rather broad and the main efforts concerned creating awareness of the issues at hand amongst policymakers, their current projects reveal a comprehensive mixture of specific groups being targeted: young people, prisoners and religious groups are all targeted in specified counter-narrative programmes. The main difference with Indonesia is that official government documents and websites mention this selection of target audiences, whereas in the case of Indonesia this had to be deducted from examining specific programmes. Similarly to Indonesia however, separating target audiences based on the level of radicalisation cannot explicitly be found in Malaysian policy documents. What is interesting to notice though, is the focus of certain initiatives on people who can act on the Malaysian government's behalf in their mission to spread counter-narratives. Rather than just aiming solely on groups at risk of falling prey to violent extremist narratives, examining the programmes conducted by SEARCCT reveal that efforts are also being undertaken to include civil society, policymakers, lecturers and journalists of the Malaysian Press Institute in the process. This is an interesting contrast with Indonesia: where the programmes carried out by the Indonesian institutions are only focussed on the groups at risk, Malaysia has taken it a step further by targeting an even broader group of people. Obviously, programmes such as 'Click Wisely', SLAYER and JAKIM's cooperation with Muslim scholars still reflect that they attempt to work with specific target audiences. However, this broader focus of the Malaysian government reveals a more sophisticated attempt of integrating the skills to undermine violent extremist messages into larger parts of society, thereby not only targeting those who are deemed most likely to fall prey to violent extremist narratives.

4.2 Message

In terms of the message, it is important to note that policy documents do not necessarily reveal the conceptual awareness from the Indonesian government on the differences between counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. However, through examining the details of the various projects conducted by the government, it is possible to box the different categories based on the characteristics of the distinct messaging strategies that were put forward in the literature review. It becomes clear that the

Indonesian government uses both counter-narratives and alternative narratives in an attempt to reach its objectives. On the one hand, an example of alternative narratives put forward by the Indonesian government is the cooperation with the NU and Muhammadiyah to promote Islam as a loving and peaceful religion. On the other hand, the Online Peace Ambassador initiative and the cooperation with former terrorists such as Nasir Abas can be classified as counter-narratives, given their intent to directly agitate against violent extremist narratives. The differentiation made in these projects reveals that the Indonesian government does use different types of messages for different target groups, which is congruent with the literature, even though the programmes are not explicitly labelled as alternative narratives or counter-narratives in official government documents. Furthermore, the notion that those targeted by alternative narratives need to be given the opportunity of alternative things to do as well, rather than just giving them alternative things to think, is not reflected in Indonesia's alternative narrative initiatives.

The cases listed in the previous paragraph are examples of programmes in which the Indonesian government seems to match, to a certain degree, the dominant ideas in the literature what message ought to be spread. At least, this is the case when it comes to counter-narratives and alternative narratives. However, the apparent lack of a clear conceptual understanding and comprehensive national coordination of policies seems to undermine especially the third category of counter-messaging: government strategic communications. In the literature, the main concern is that this messaging strategy is often taken for granted and not considered carefully enough.[215] This is exactly what seems to be the case in Indonesia. The sheer lack of any mention of a comprehensive messaging strategy in the BNPT Blueprint Document, any other official government communications or secondary sources make it seem as if such a strategy is simply non-existent. Where a passive role of the government on counter-narratives and alternative narratives can be partially compensated by civil society organisations, this is not an option for strategic communications, which is by definition a government-led endeavour.[216] The fact that highly placed civil servants such as former head of Special Detachment 88, Brigadier-General Tito Karnavian, indicated that most counter-

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[215] Bibi van Ginkel, "Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effectic Counter Narrative," *ICCT Research Paper* (March 2015) : p. 5.

[216] Kate Grealy, "Indonesia: Countering a message of hate," *Lowy Institute,* 28 March 2018, accessed online at https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-countering-message-hate.

messaging policies are ad-hoc and not backed by a grand strategy, further reinforces the suspicion that there is a complete absence of a government strategic communications plan.[217]

Contrary to Indonesia, Malaysian officials can be observed to explicitly make a distinction between counter-narratives and alternative narratives, thereby mentioning the added value of alternative narratives next to counter-narrative projects. However, this does not always reflect in the publicly available information on concrete initiatives. In the case of Malaysia's counter-narrative programmes, most are being labelled as such: think about the counter-narrative video competition for young people and JAKIM's efforts to counter violent extremist messaging through religious channels. However, a programme such as the 'Click Wisely' campaign, conducted by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, is not specifically labelled as a counter-narrative, even though it can be classified as such given its attempt to lay bare the negative aspects of ISIS. All in all, the approach of the Malaysian government is rather similar to that of Indonesia. Especially at the start of the war on terror, their alternative narrative initiatives in the form of cooperation with religious leaders to portray Islam as a loving and peaceful religion reveal some parallels. Also similar is the focus on alternative things to think and the absence of clear policies that indicate an attempt is being made to provide different things to do as well. However, there are two key differences in which Malaysia distinguishes itself when looking at the messages that are being spread in more recent years: their clearer use of the relevant lexicon to differentiate their messaging strategies in official government documents and their comprehensive effort at providing government strategic communications.

Where Indonesia can be criticised for their lack of a grand strategy and comprehensive government strategic communications plan, Malaysia clearly outperforms Indonesia in this pillar. It must be noted that, like Indonesia, Malaysia does not specify strategic communications as a specific category in their broader counter-messaging approach. Where the understanding of the Malaysian government on the concepts of alternative narratives and counter-narratives matches the dominant academic definitions, the prescribed tasks of the Digital Strategic Communications Division of SEARCCT reveal that Malaysia's conceptual awareness of this third messaging strategy is not congruent with the literature. Still, the publicly available, bi-lingual information on the SEARCCT website reveals that Malaysian

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[217] Noorhaidi Hasan, *"Towards a Population Centric Strategy: The Indonesian Experience,"*
in Meijer, Roel, et al, *"Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia,"*
Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael' (2012) : p. 14.

policymakers are clearly aware of importance of giving the broader public a better insight in the efforts that are being undertaken to counter violent extremist narratives. In the end, a rather comprehensive effort at providing government strategic communications is made by the Malaysian authorities, even though they might themselves not explicitly classify these actions as such.

4.3 Messenger

The Indonesian examples of counter-narratives and alternative narratives reveal the use of different types of messengers. Most of them have indirectly been mentioned when discussing the chosen target group and broadcasted messages. On the one hand, messengers from the Islamic community have been employed in their alternative narratives since the start of the war on terror, as President Megawati attempted to mobilise moderate Muslim scholars of the NU and Muhammadiyah to promote Islam as a loving and peaceful religion. This type of cooperation with Islamic organisations has continued until today. On the other hand, the earlier mentioned Online Peace Ambassador initiative is an example of how a counter-narrative strategy incorporating young people as messengers is being used by the Indonesian government. Young people are being trained, so that they can act as messengers to spread the narrative among their peers. Both cases are congruent with the academic prescriptions, which mention the credible position of people within a specific community; in this case that of youth leaders and of Islamic scholars. To a certain extent, the Indonesian government seems to have realised that they themselves are not credible messengers, and therefore attempt to mobilise people from within the community to spread the message they are trying to communicate. The cooperation with former terrorists, such as Nasir Abas, is another example of this.

The Malaysian authorities have come to a similar insight. The programmes that have been described can be observed to use a wide array of messengers that are used to get the government's counter-messages across. On top of that, the possibility of using various specific messengers is mentioned in government-published reports. According to the Malaysian government, actors deemed potentially effective as messengers include sports stars, former terrorists, victims of terrorism, bloggers and entertainment celebrities.[218]

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[218] Thomas Koruth Samuel, "Radicalisation in Southeast Asia: A Selected Case Study of Daesh in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines," *Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2016) : p.122, accessed online at

Even though the analysis of specific programmes does not show that all of these actors have been used in concrete initiatives, the intent to use various messengers is present on a policy level. Where the focus of the Indonesian government on choosing different actors is rather limited, Malaysia has tried to incorporate even more groups of messengers and has explicitly mentioned their intent of doing so in official government documents. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Malaysia does not limit itself to including messengers that can directly have an impact on certain specified target groups. This can be deducted form their attempt to also include policymakers, diplomats, journalists and lawyers in their broader counter-messaging approach.

4.4 Medium

After having tested the counter-messaging policies of the Indonesian government to the academic prescriptions on target group, message and messenger, the last parameter that is tested is the medium used to spread the messages. The literature prescribes a coordinated set of online and offline measures. It is clear that the Indonesian government uses both online and offline platforms. However, what seems to lack here as well is the element of coordination. The BNPT Blueprint Document does not specify the deliberate coordination of spreading messages through various platforms simultaneously in order to reach a sustainable effect. By merely exploring the initiatives of the Indonesian government, there is nothing that suggests any degree of comprehensive planning on this issue. In a broader sense, this problem of coordination was already exemplified by the absence of government strategic communications and the statements made by Brigadier General Tito Karnavian on the lack of a grand strategy in their counter-messaging attempts.

In the case of Malaysia, the medium being used for counter-messaging seems to be a more deliberate choice. Even though there are no policy documents that indicate there is an integrated strategy that seeks to include both online and offline platforms, the different institutions dealing with the topic reveal a divide in focus. For example, where SEARCCT does not have a specific medium to concentrate on for their counter-messaging, the relatively new Digital Strategic Communications Division of the organisation has a clear focus on the online world. Furthermore, the Counter-Messaging Centre holds similar objectives to

https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2016/Radicalisation_SEA_20 16.pdf.

SEARCCT, but is also predominantly occupied with the cyberworld. Thus, an institutional divide can be observed when it comes to the medium being used. It must be noted that it is at this point unclear if this also means that there is a comprehensive government approach that coordinates simultaneous action on both online and offline platforms to reach the most sustainable effect, as is prescribed in the literature.

Conclusion and Discussion

All in all, both states can be observed to be at least partially congruent to the prescriptions in the literature. In most regards, the efforts of Indonesia and Malaysia are comparable, although Malaysia adheres to more of the academic parameters than Indonesia. The Indonesian government does a lot of things that match the dominant prescriptions in the literature. However, this is when examining individual programmes that are being carried out by the relevant government bodies, as there are no official government documents publicly available that suggest a deliberate strategy. Still, different types of messages are being used, several initiatives target specific groups, and the Indonesian government seems to understand what messengers to use to spread different kinds of messages. The main problem that faces the Indonesian government is their lack of a comprehensive national strategy and corresponding strategic communications plan. The relevant policy documents do not reveal an integrated approach, and key (former) policy figures such as Tito Karnavian confirm the suspicion that the main *modus operandi* of the government is ad-hoc, reacting in a way that seems most appropriate at the time without incorporating any sort of long-term vision. This results in rather successful individual initiatives, but will unequivocally inhibit the overall sustainability of Indonesia's counter-messaging efforts. While a diverse array of CVE activities is carried out in Indonesia, a large part of the credit must go to civil society organisations that are active in the country. More comprehensive, government-driven measures to tackle violent extremist messaging in Indonesia are held back by a serious lack of institutional coordination, which also shows in the absence of a clear plan to combine offline and online counter-messaging measures.[219] While the academic literature deems strategic communications the type of counter-messaging that is the most natural domain for the government to operate in, it is practically absent in the case of Indonesia.

The case of Malaysia is slightly different, as various bodies within the government reveal awareness of the academic lexicon and clearly state their aims to achieve a comprehensive counter-messaging approach. In principle, Malaysia is congruent with the literature on every aspect that Indonesia is, but the former outperforms the latter in some fields. The main differences are the awareness and application of the academic terminology and a more comprehensive attempt to provide government strategic communications.

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[219] Kate Grealy, "Indonesia: Countering a message of hate," *Lowy Institute,* 28 March 2018, accessed online at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-countering-message-hate.

Furthermore, government officials explicitly acknowledge the difference between alternative narratives and counter-narratives, more messengers and target groups are being specified and there are certain government bodies that particularly preoccupy themselves with online messaging. Still, there are some aspects in which Malaysia is not congruent with the literature: target audiences are not explicitly divided on level of radicalisation, alternative things to do to complement their alternative narrative initiatives are not provided and there is no explicit mention of an integrated government strategic communications effort or coordination of online and offline counter-messaging strategies.

In the end, the policies of the Malaysian government are more congruent with the academic prescriptions than the policies of Indonesia. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to dig deeper in the reasons behind the main differences between the two states, there are some factors that may explain the gap. Firstly, there is the mere practicality of size. Realising a comprehensive government approach can be significantly more complicated for a relatively large country such as Indonesia. Secondly, the two states' respective experiences with terrorism may be a contributing factor. Where Malaysia has had very little concrete terrorist incidents since the start of the war on terror, Indonesia has had to cope with a serious amount of high-profile attacks. With this history in mind, an intuitive response would be to shift resources from the soft approach to the hard approach of combatting terrorism, thereby limiting the possibilities of those government bodies dealing with counter-narratives, alternative narratives and government strategic communications. Thirdly, there might be a bit of a luxury position for Indonesia when it comes to involvement of civil society organisations. It was noted that Indonesian civil society has had an important role in countering violent extremist narratives. This may have allowed the government to take the back seat, given the efforts that were already put into counter-messaging programmes without extensive interference from the Indonesian government. Further research will be necessary in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the root causes of the most apparent differences between the respective counter-messaging policies of Indonesia and Malaysia.

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