



## **THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN RADICALISATION**

**November 19, 2025**

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 19, 2025, Mubin Shaikh presented, *The Role of Narrative in Radicalisation*, at the CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with audience members and CASIS Vancouver executives. The presentation examined how grievance framing, identity formation, and psychosocial vulnerabilities interact with group dynamics and mobilising structures to produce pathways toward violence.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

Mr. Shaikh framed radicalisation as a process shaped by meaning-making rather than the simple adoption of ideology. Extremist narratives function as interpretive frameworks that fuse identity, grievance, and moral urgency, and these narratives are amplified in digital environments that reward emotional intensity. Disinformation, echo chambers, and cross-pollination between extremist movements accelerate mobilisation by normalizing extreme positions and reinforcing perceived in-group cohesion. Narrative literacy, cultural competence, and credible alternative narratives were presented as central to prevention and disengagement strategies.

### **BACKGROUND**

Mr. Shaikh emphasised that radicalisation is dynamic and context-dependent. Rather than progressing in a fixed sequence, individuals interpret experiences through socialisation processes shaped by family environments, religious institutions, peer networks, and broader sociopolitical contexts. Grievances alone do not produce violence; they become mobilizing when embedded in narratives that present violence as morally justified and strategically necessary.

Mr. Shaikh introduced a conceptual model in which dissatisfaction may initially manifest through activism or non-violent engagement, with violence emerging when individuals come to perceive non-violent pathways as ineffective or illegitimate. The transition from grievance to action is influenced by psychological distress, perceived injustice, and group validation. Group dynamics, namely peer reinforcement and authority structures, can reduce inhibitions and normalise increasingly extreme positions.

Mr. Shaikh presented narrative as the central mechanism through which this transformation occurs. He stated that humans interpret the world through stories rather than abstract data and extremist narratives simplify complex realities into emotionally resonant frameworks. These structures are not unique to any one ideology or religion; rather, they reflect universal in-group versus out-group dynamics.

Mr. Shaikh noted that religious and ideological content becomes weaponised when selectively interpreted and stripped of contextual nuance. Sacred texts and historical events are often reconfigured into linear, totalising stories that legitimise violence while suppressing internal dissent or critical reflection. Historical references were used to illustrate that extremist interpretations frequently depart from mainstream religious traditions that condemn zealotry.

Mr. Shaikh stated that digital platforms can accelerate these processes. Algorithmic systems reward emotionally charged content and amplify polarization, and research demonstrates that artificial networks replicate these dynamics by concentrating attention on extreme actors. Disinformation intensifies moral shock, framing violence as both inevitable and necessary. Extremist movements may mirror one another's narratives, seeking validation through reciprocal escalation.

Mr. Shaikh stressed that fact-based rebuttals alone are insufficient in environments shaped by distrust. Effective prevention requires replacing harmful narratives with credible alternatives that restore belonging, agency, and meaning. Practitioners must possess narrative literacy as well as cultural and religious competence to avoid stigmatizing entire communities, as such approaches reinforce extremist frames.

### **Question and Answer**

*What can policymakers do to help build a resilient information environment that can adapt to foreign influence operations, rather than just reacting to disinformation campaigns?*

To build a resilient information environment, policymakers need to move beyond reactive responses to individual campaigns and focus on long-term societal resilience. One of the most effective approaches is pre-bunking—preparing people in advance to recognize manipulation before they encounter it.

Schools can teach critical thinking skills that help students learn how to deconstruct persuasive messaging, starting with simple examples such as advertising—understanding why a beer commercial makes certain emotional appeals and what realities it obscures. At the individual level, resilience also requires cultivating awareness of emotional manipulation. Encouraging individuals, especially students, to slow down, reflect on emotional triggers, and question the intent behind content is a critical step in building durable resistance.

*Do you think current policy frameworks and radicalisation prevention programmes (Canada or overseas) are effectively using narrative-based interventions or not? If not, what would a successful programme with these interventions look like?*

Mr. Shaikh noted strengths in trauma-informed and culturally competent approaches. However, he identified a recurring reluctance to address ideology directly, particularly religious dimensions, as a significant weakness. Effective programming requires engagement with religious institutions and the integration of credible theological expertise to address misinterpretations at their source.

He emphasised pre-bunking strategies that prepare individuals to recognize manipulation before exposure, citing educational initiatives in countries such as Germany and Finland as examples of sustained resilience-building through critical thinking curriculum.

*Do you think young people are now more susceptible to online radicalisation through discourses capitalising on grievances with current systems and feelings that “the past had it easier”? If so, how could we better navigate and mitigate these discussions?*

Mr. Shaikh argued that social media accelerates exposure to extremist narratives

and provides longevity to movements that might otherwise dissipate. The velocity and volume of online content, combined with state-sponsored narrative operations during electoral and political events, heighten susceptibility. Mitigation requires strengthening emotional awareness, slowing reactive engagement, and reinforcing community-based resilience.

### KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Radicalisation is non-linear and context-dependent, emerging from the interaction of grievance, identity formation, and psychosocial vulnerability rather than ideology alone.
- Narrative is the primary mechanism of mobilization, reshaping how individuals interpret reality and morally justify action.
- Group dynamics and digital amplification accelerate pathways to violence by normalising extremity and intensifying emotional responses.
- Effective prevention requires narrative literacy, cultural and religious competence, credible alternative narratives, and avoidance of stigmatizing entire communities.
- Ideology and religion are instrumentalized. Extremists rely on selective and decontextualized symbols and images to intensify outrage and reinforce dangerous narratives

### FURTHER READINGS

Shaikh, M., & Bonino, S. (2016). In conversation with Mubin Shaikh: From Salafi jihadist to undercover agent inside the “Toronto 18” terrorist group. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 10(2), 61-72.

Shaikh, M. (2015). Countering violent extremism (CVE) online: An anecdotal case study related to engaging ISIS members and sympathizers (from North America, Western Europe, and Australia) on Twitter. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 98(4), 478-487.



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