Use of the Internet to Counter the Appeal of Extremist Violence. Conference Summary & Follow-up/ Recommendations

by the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF), Working Group on Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes, Riyadh, 24 - 26 January 2011.

Background

The Internet is a key way for violent extremists to encourage others to adopt their views. In their messaging to potential supporters and vulnerable audiences, extremists use simplistic analysis and offer violent solutions to problems that span a range of complex social, economic and political issues at both a local and global level.

Finding effective ways to counter such messages was at the heart of discussions at the Riyadh Conference on the "Use of the Internet to Counter the Appeal of Extremist Violence." Co-hosted by the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the Naif Arab University for Security Sciences in Riyadh in partnership with the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, and supported by the Governments of Germany and Saudi Arabia, the Riyadh conference followed two previous meetings of the CTITF Internet Working Group, one on legal aspects of the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes, and the other on technical aspects.[1] The conference brought together around 150 policy-makers, experts and practitioners from the public sector, international organisations, industry, academia and the media. Several States participated at ministerial or ambassadorial level. The choice of

Saudi Arabia as a venue reflected its considerable effort to identify effective counter-terrorism measures, including in combating terrorist use of the Internet and in constructing and delivering effective counter-narratives.

The conference focused on identifying good practices in using the Internet to undermine the appeal of terrorism, to expose its lack of legitimacy and its negative impact, and to undermine the credibility of its messengers. Key themes included the importance of identifying the target audience, crafting effective messages, identifying credible messengers, and using appropriate media to reach vulnerable communities. The Conference agreed that Governments might not always be best placed to lead this work and needed the cooperation of civil society, the private sector, academia, the media and victims of terrorism. Given the global nature of terrorist narratives and the need to counter them in the same space, there was a special role for the United Nations in facilitating discussion and action.

This report includes a list of possible follow-up projects, further recommendations, and a summary of the discussion.

Action Points/Possible Follow-on Projects:

1. Collect examples of extremist messages on the Internet and identify the strengths and weaknesses of both their content and delivery through web-stats analysis and user reactions so as

to be able to undermine strengths and exploit weaknesses in constructing and delivering counter-narratives. Analyze themes and discussion threads on extremist websites.

2. Collect and analyze examples of counter-narratives on the Internet so as to build a picture of what works and what does not, both in terms of content and delivery.

3. Build a hub for deconstructing extremist narratives on the Internet, providing counter narratives and training workshops for practitioners, students, journalists, etc.

4. Identify the types/groups of users who access extremist messages so as to be able to reach them through the same portals with counter-narratives that play to their specific concerns and cultural influences.

5. Draw up a register of potential messengers both by category/geography and as individuals and create a platform for interaction. Messengers might include victims and former extremists.

6. Provide journalists with an easily accessible roster of experts on extremism and counter-extremism that they can turn to for substantive comment (i.e. by building on efforts such as the Global Expert Finder of the Alliance of Civilizations). Identify and draw up a list of media partners.

7. In consultation with the Organization of the Islamic Conference establish a project to offer analysis of radical messages and training for all interested stakeholders on the design and delivery of counter-narratives in order to avoid legitimizing extremist messaging and wherever possible expose its illegitimacy (in partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations).

8. Discuss with industry partners (incl. search-engine hosts) the technical possibilities of ensuring counter-narratives appear at or near the top of results pages for specific search criteria.

Recommendations:

1. Promote counter-narratives through all relevant media channels (online, print, TV/Radio).

2. Make available in the same space a counter-narrative whenever a new extremist message appears on Facebook, YouTube or similar outlets.

3. Offer rapid counter-narratives to political developments (e.g. highlight the absence of Al-Qaida and other extremist groups from popular protests).

4. Consider selective take-down of extremist narratives that have the elements of success.

5. Ensure that counter-narratives include messages of empathy/understanding of political and social conditions facing the target audience, rather than limiting the counter-narrative to lecturing or retribution.

6. Offer an opportunity for engagement in crafting and delivering counter-narratives to young people who mirror the 'Internet Brigade' members of Al-Qaida.

7. Support the establishment of civil society networks of interested groups, such as women against violent extremism, parents against suicide bombers or schools against extremism.

Summary:

Session I: Framing the Issue – The Spread of Violent Extremism through the Internet

The Internet, though a neutral medium, can play a key role in spreading violent extremist messages to individuals who might otherwise remain immune. The Internet empowers the shy and allows alienated people with extremist views to find others who agree with them. This can lead to mutual reinforcement of beliefs and validation of a world view that is otherwise hard to sustain. Forums that promote a radical philosophy however, often contain many different ideological strands. Audiences often approach forums in a state of confusion which then clarifies as they gravitate towards other members and harden their outlook. While it can and does happen, people do not always approach a forum with the intention of joining a terrorist group or even of becoming members of the ideological ghettos that exist on the Internet. The effectiveness of networks depends on their success on several levels: organizational (binding members together), narrative (strengthening self-definition); doctrinal (hardening beliefs and objectives); technological (improving capacity), and social (building trust and loyalty). Opportunities to break down networks also exist in all these categories.

The Internet has enabled the collection of extremist ideas and materials that may lead a vulnerable individual to recruit himself, sometimes unaided by any intermediary. Such self-recruited extremists can join a community of like-minded individuals which then develops its own ideology. These networks are resilient and adaptive, despite growing law enforcement efforts to take them down. Online extremist forums can play a key role in the radicalization process of an individual or a group. Often identified with religious symbolism and rituals, and a rejection of western cultures, these forums provide individuals that feel emotional outrage with a sense of identity and purpose which may lead them to consider it a personal duty to take action as soldiers in a war to protect their community. The problem of radicalization however is not limited to Al-Qaida-related terrorism. Extremism can grow out of the domestic conditions of any country, and the Internet can play a facilitating role in radicalizing any set of vulnerable individuals in the same way that it does for Al-Qaida-related extremists.

In this respect, participants cautioned against using misleading terminology, in particular as relates to deviations from Islam and the actions of violent Muslims; terms such as jihad or neo-jihad are unhelpful and counter-productive. There was complete agreement that Al-Qaida represents neither the Muslim community nor Islamic belief.

Session I: Framing the Issue II – the Terrorist Narrative (Objective and Success)

A speaker presented a comprehensive study of terrorist web forums and the ways they have been used to develop terrorist ideas and activities. These web forums provide relative anonymity; wide availability; resilient infrastructure; interactivity, and comprehensive pools of information, as well as links between armed extremists and their support bases and among themselves. It was noted that even though many Al-Qaida web forums are weakening and some have not recovered from take-down actions, they should not be underestimated, as at least three or four principal

forums are fully active and in direct contact with the Al-Qaida leadership. Most Al-Qaida web forums are now password-protected, allowing access only to established members.

Another speaker examined the types of Internet content terrorists access, using the example of the Madrid bombers. The terrorists had used the Internet for communication within and beyond the terrorist network, to share information on current events, as a tool for indoctrination and to maintain ideological group cohesion, and to share operational knowledge on violent tactics and on targets. The computers recovered from the bombers contained propaganda and proselytizing texts and audio/video clips from key leaders as well as from unidentified preachers, all reinforcing the legitimacy of terrorism.

As much as the Internet is a complementary tool for individual radicalization, in many cases the key radicalization channel still remains face-to-face interaction. Often a surprisingly short time elapses between a person becoming interested in radical ideas on the Internet and meeting someone in real life who reinforces those ideas.

The main objectives of the terrorist message are to build a sense of community, instill a sense of responsibility to defend it and promote the idea that it is under attack from a specific enemy.

Session II. The Message: Crafting a Counter Narrative

Participants made the point that extremists often get things wrong and that the web allows an opportunity for an aggressive exploitation of their mistakes. One example was the intimidating messages sent to imams and others in Afghanistan which in fact exposed the violence and intolerance of the terrorist approach. A counter-narrative was likely to succeed better if it was aggressive rather than defensive. It was also useful to underline the lack of success enjoyed by terrorist groups, the counterproductive consequences for the communities that terrorists claim to defend and the lack of legitimacy for terrorist action. However, while terrorist argumentation often shows weaknesses in content and logic, the counter-narrative that points these out needs more substance to sustain itself. Counter narratives should contain facts and have a transparency that undermines any criticism of them as information operations.

Participants emphasized the importance of finding voices that resonate with the audiences that counter narratives aim to reach, for example those of former terrorists. It was important to highlight the arguments that had led them to denounce violence. Similarly, it was useful to examine the content of internal critiques that are known to have had an impact on extremist thought. In the case of Indonesia, messages by people still involved in the movement had more impact than arguments against bombings made by former militants, in part because they went beyond the usual point-counterpoint of most arguments. Their impact suggested that an effective Internet counter-narrative requires a thorough familiarity with ongoing debates. If extremist movements are constantly evolving, then counter-strategies aimed at an Internet audience will need to do the same, showing flexibility and an ability to adapt to changing events.

A successful counter narrative should not necessarily be limited to renouncing violence but also point out that violence does not achieve the desired outcomes, while showing understanding of the political and social conditions that face target audiences. The audience that a counter-narrative should aim to persuade does not comprise foot-soldiers, but rather reasonably well-

educated computer-literate members of religious discussion groups, the intellectuals who are or might become recruiters and trainers in terrorist circles, and university students who might be tempted to provide moral, logistical or financial support. An effective message should urge them to act in a different, more effective and positive capacity. An empathetic message that demonstrates understanding of the issues that may push an individual to extremism is likely to have greater effect than one that simply says he is wrong.

A discussant gave the example of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's criticism of his former pupil, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi which was translated into Indonesian as *They are Mujahidin But They Made Mistakes (Mereka Mujahid Tapi Salah Langkah)*. The success of such counter-narrative efforts is largely dependent on the timing of their release, especially in the immediate aftermath of incidents that have dealt major setbacks to the movement.

Participants also discussed the importance of exploiting terrorist groups' strategic and doctrinal vulnerabilities. According to a discussant, this would mean that counter narrative messages need to compete in a space where undecided young people are trying to decide what activity they should support. Therefore, deploying sustained messaging to key audiences is essential. In doing so, counter narrative messages can also highlight the collateral damage of terrorist acts (Al-Qaida is killing the Ummah), challenge Al-Qaida's doctrinal vulnerabilities, undermine the authority of the messenger ('Who made you the leader, anyway?') and attack the terrorist brand image ('This isn't what I signed up for!').

Similarly, counter-narrative efforts need to focus on deconstructing religious extremist propaganda in the media where images and videos provoke emotional outrage. It is necessary to deconstruct such content by analyzing the religious sources in their original context, demonstrate the terrorist intention and replace the terrorist interpretation with a mainstream moderate perspective.

An aspect that could also be exploited is the way that web forums allow for top-down authority, and so can shape the debate towards peaceful protest, albeit radical, rather than violent protest.

Session III. The Messengers and the Media: Delivering the Narrative

The importance of the role of the messenger was highlighted repeatedly, given that the messenger is as important as the message itself. Participants discussed the critical damage that may be done if a messenger communicates the wrong message or is not knowledgeable about the topic. Individuals who have been victims of terrorism form possibly the most powerful group of messengers as they can promote a counter-narrative through personal stories and so 'speak truth to terror'. A representative of a terrorism victims' network argued that instead of terrorists getting all the attention from the media, the victims of terrorism should be allowed the same platform to challenge the terrorist narrative.

Participants discussed the routes to radicalization, and whether conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism have less to do with ideology than with personal experience of social exclusion and marginalization. In radicalisation there was often a degree of accidental contact in an hour of need rather than a deliberate path. While there was no agreement as to the specifics of what "causes" terrorism, discussants agreed that effective counter-narratives had to focus in

particular on vulnerable and marginalized communities, with an aim to empowering young people. Research from across different regions - including the Middle East, Europe, and South America - seemed to indicate that radical movements were often most successful in recruiting new followers when offering some form of identity/sense of belonging. In this context, one participant highlighted the similarities in the recruitment approach of terrorist groups and criminal gangs, pointing out that a common factor was the

focus on young people. Comparing a group like Al-Qaida to a street gang could be part of an effective counter-narrative, but an effective strategy had to offer more than words or remote role models. It had to provide the emotional and physical support that individuals sought by joining terrorist or criminal gangs. It was further agreed that developing and implementing coherent youth programs was potentially one of the more effective ways to counter the extremist narrative.

Credible Messengers as Important as the Message

While it was important to craft effective messages focused on particular target audiences, participants agreed that having credible messengers deliver the message was as important as the message itself. One participant pointed out that the image presented by Usama bin Laden was extremely persuasive to devout Muslims, regardless of what he said and did, and the counter narrative should hesitate to attack such iconic figures head on. There was broad agreement about the significance of former extremists who generally have greater credibility within their communities than governments or international organizations. The problem, however, was that there was a high demand but low supply of such voices.

Furthermore, engaging with former extremists posed two significant challenges:

 1) most are not part of any organized structure (i.e. NGOs/civil society organizations) so it is difficult to reach out to them; and 2) many of them often do not have the tools (facts, religious understanding, etc) to be effective in engaging other members of their communities susceptible to extremist ideologies. One way to address this was to build networks of credible voices, across terrorist groups, gangs, cults and other sectors of society (for example sports stars), and provide an institutional home such as a NGO which could coordinate their activities and provide them a platform.

Noteworthy Initiatives: The Power of Peace Network

Participants highlighted the important role technology can play in both crafting and delivering counter-narratives. One participant highlighted a UNESCO-led Initiative entitled the "Power of Peace Network" which strives to become a worldwide social networking community in pursuit of peace. The Network aims to engage and inspire young people by harnessing the power of media and information technology to support diverse social and cultural self-expression. In doing so, the initiative aims to self-generate effective counter-narratives as well as provide avenues for dissemination of those messages. It also aims to be a clearinghouse for audio-visual content for schools and universities as well as endorse university curricula.

Role of the Media

Participants also discussed the role of the media both in reporting on terrorism and in spreading counter-narratives. As with governments, mainstream media outlets could not easily disseminate counter-narratives. While mainstream media may generally cover terrorism objectively, it was unlikely that professional journalists would intentionally spread counter-narratives. Furthermore, language could sometimes be a barrier for foreign media. One participant highlighted several cases in which interesting repudiations of terrorism by repentant extremists, which could serve as highly effective counter-narratives if disseminated to a broader audience, simply did not get picked up by mainstream media due to a lack of language ability or a lack of appreciation of the source's credibility and impact. Some of these challenges could be offset by providing journalists with specific training or an online guide, or by

linking them with a group of experts whom they can easily turn to for substantive knowledge and additional context, similar to the Global Expert Finder (GEF) program of the UN Alliance of Civilizations (see: < http://www.theglobalexperts.org/ >).

On the upside, participants pointed out that mainstream media did have significant reach, often also into vulnerable communities and relevant audiences. And while not being co-opted as propaganda instruments, professional journalists did have the responsibility to "dig deeper" – with solid reporting going beyond mere news coverage, and ideally focusing on uncovering the truth behind a story, including going beyond the terrorist narrative, discounting prevailing myths, and establishing transparency. One of the effective ways to leverage media reporting was to encourage and disseminate articles/stories about the debates and arguments inside terrorist organizations. Exposure of these fault lines – while being sound reporting – could also be used by credible messengers to pinpoint the weaknesses and illegitimacy of the terrorist narrative. Indeed, such topics could provide the strongest counter-narratives. One participant highlighted the current debate among Al-Qaida strategists on the justifications for killing Muslims. In this regard, studies had shown that Al-Qaida-related terror attacks had killed eight times more Muslims than non-Muslims. It was agreed that mainstream media could and should report this type of information while preserving necessary objectivity and transparency and ensuring proper sourcing.

Session IV: What Has Been Done, What Should Be Done – National, Regional, Global Initiatives

Participants learnt about one country's efforts to harness the internet to spread counter-terrorist narratives as well as to limit/filter its content in order to prevent vulnerable groups from being exposed to radical websites and chatrooms. While internet filtering is not without debate, representatives of that government explained how the internet had become in that country the main source of motivation for people travelling to conflict zones. Terrorist websites had grown from about 15 in 1998 to several thousand in 2010, many of them, however, were not accessible from within that particular country. At the same time, positive messages, including images and videos, were effective tools in engaging vulnerable groups, especially the country's youth. Government initiatives included a cadre of about 200 volunteers who engaged participants in radical chatrooms to challenge the ideologies and extremist ideas spread through online

discussions and websites. One of the key successes in countering the influence and ideology of terrorist groups was an independent campaign (supported by a Government Ministry) to counter online radicalization and recruitment. Focusing on a significant group of violent extremists, the campaign uses Islamic scholars to interact online with individuals looking for religious

knowledge with the aim of steering them away from extremist sources, leading about 1500 out of 3250 participants to renounce their extremist beliefs. The government also promoted the role of the family in monitoring the use of the Internet in the home.

Many participants acknowledged that while governments had become relatively successful on the repressive side of counter-terrorism, it was imperative to focus more energy on the preventive side. The move of some governments from monitoring websites that incited to violence to shutting them down was noted as a countervailing current. However, while counter-terrorism policies should continue to evolve, there was also a danger in "securitizing" counter-terrorism-related policies (i.e. socio-economic development programs, integration policies, human rights campaigns, etc), which had a merit of their own. Governments needed to walk a fine line between utilizing such programs as part of an effective counter-narrative and tainting particular programs/institutions with a counter-terrorism label. Furthermore, effective counter-narratives – and effective counter-terrorism in general – needed to be grounded in the rule-of-law and in a respect for human rights. Similarly, the debate around monitoring terrorist websites vs. shutting them down needed to take into account privacy and freedom of expression concerns. Several participants called for increased international cooperation in this area where many felt too little had been achieved to date.

One key recommendation was for governments to increase their support for translation and dissemination of messages by repentant radicals. Those messages, while often very specific to a particular context, frequently contained very effective material for counter-narratives but were only available in one language. In order to reach local audiences more efficiently, the messages/stories needed to be translated and disseminated (though not necessarily by governments). It was noted that terrorist organizations had become very adept at spreading propaganda through the internet in numerous languages. Several participants stated that Al-Qaida's online/media activity had become as important to the group's global reach as its real-world activity.

Participants discussed how governments could more effectively counter the challenge of internet/media-savvy terrorist groups. One approach entailed working more closely with the private sector/industry, for example with regards to search engines, in order to ensure that radical content does not appear among the top search results. Furthermore, private sector companies can play a critical role in designing and disseminating effective counter-narratives as government efforts (online and offline) are often poorly designed and not very attractive to target audiences. Participants also recommended that the United Nations, through the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, could create both a library of effective counter-narratives and build a platform for credible messengers.

One of the challenges, according to some participants, was that Western audiences often only learned about Islam through translated statements by extremists which caught the attention of the media. Instead, some argued, governments as well as NGOs and religious leaders should ensure that knowledge of mainstream Islam is enhanced in the Western world – also with a view to

reaching vulnerable communities – to highlight how religion is being distorted by terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida. This was as easily achieved through the general exposure of the population to the reality of other religions and cultures, for example through TV shows, as it was through a deliberate counter-narrative. A further problem was the lack of a coordinated plan to react to the exploitation of issues by radical extremists, such as the publication of cartoons disrespectful to Islam in Europe in 2005.

Session IV: Ideas for New Initiatives; the Role of the UN and other Mechanisms for Cooperation

Role of social media and search engines

Participants stated that one of the major challenges for countering radicalization online was to identify the right target audience, and then design the message in a way that resonated with it. News environments were becoming increasingly insular and balkanized and people had begun to gravitate toward news sources that simply validated their opinions, thus making it more difficult to challenge their views. Social-networking such as Facebook and Twitter was increasingly used by terrorist organizations without any sustained/credible counter-effort in those forums. One participant highlighted the need to increase positive messaging and "anti-Al-Qaida" information which was very hard to find on the internet, so as to drive out the bad with the good. When searching for statements about Al-Qaida or similar extremist groups, search results were more likely to turn up extremist content then counter-narratives – and with about 75% of users never going beyond the first page of search results, this presented a major challenge. Such search-engine-optimization should become a critical component of government dialogue with the private sector.

A One-Stop-Shop for Counter-Narratives

Participants agreed that there was a need to develop a one-stop-shop for counter-narratives, for example by building an online library which could contain texts and other material arguing for moderation and non-violence, a CVE (countering violent extremism) news hub, victims' statements, and exposés of false statements made by terrorist organizations. Another idea was to promote citizen journalism, including videos made by youth groups and NGOs. Governments should encourage the private sector to do more on this front, such as through crowd sourcing. At the same time, governments themselves should engage more in positive messaging, particularly through social-networking forums. Participants acknowledged that there could be authenticity issues with some government-driven initiatives. Experience has shown, however, that target audiences will look at such messages if they are well designed. Furthermore, the internet can be leveraged to provide platforms and venues for people coming together to solve radicalization problems, to exchange experiences from different national contexts, and to discuss what worked and what did not. Some of these efforts could be led by the United Nations; others could be led by regional organizations or national governments. One national experience highlighted the

recent institutionalization of a *Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications* which tried to leverage information technology in countering terrorist narratives.

The meeting agreed that there should be a baseline for a counter-narrative that was as simple as the terrorist message that the West was at war with Islam. This could centre on the actual consequences of terrorism. It was important to be able to react with a counter narrative to actions by terrorists as quickly as terrorists reacted to actions by States. Often terrorists were able to cover up or 'justify' their mistakes before States took any action. It was pointed out that even in the war paradigm there was a difference between fighting and killing.

Understanding the Target Audience & Encouraging Former Extremists

Other participants gave examples of how counter-narratives had become a major part of counterterrorism, even on the operational level, for example in defeating the Taliban in the Pakistani Swat valley, during which targeted messages on the internet (as well as through traditional media) had played a major role. Yet nothing had been more powerful than a video of the Taliban flogging a young woman, or a recording of a Taliban leader claiming to be the only true Muslim, and every advantage should be taken of such self-inflicted setbacks. There was still an insufficient understanding of target audiences which could vary even within a particular country – here, too, former extremists could be the key to a more effective outreach, using their knowledge of local languages and local circumstances. It was thus important for governments to do a lot more to win over and encourage such ex-militants. The importance of political will to unite and sustain any effort to promote counter narratives on a regional or international basis was self-evident, but it often failed at the first hurdle because there was no clarity in many States as to who was in charge of such initiatives.

Many participants emphasized the importance of working with community leaders, including religious leaders and recognized figures from the sports and entertainment world. Counter-narrative work was a "slow-burn" activity and finding partners in communities, as well as seeing what messages resonate, took time. And while the terrorists were increasingly relying on the Internet to spread their ideology, several participants recalled that there was still limited access to the Internet in many parts of the world, particularly in communities governments would like to reach. This, in turn, meant that counter-narrative work could not be limited to new technologies but should encompass traditional media as well.

While extremists might exploit vulnerable people to recruit them to terrorism, most radicals were self-selecting and they needed to be able to access counter arguments to violence. It was unclear what role governments could play in this process, whether facilitation, initiation, inspiration or some other role. Civil society was clearly an essential force-multiplier that could promote positive messages about alternatives to terrorism that would have a more powerful impact than the negative messages distributed by violent extremists. The key was to operate in the same milieus as the extremists, for example within diaspora groups.

Conference Roundtable "The Path to Rejecting Violent Extremism"

The conference also featured a roundtable discussion between two former extremists who explained what had led them down the path of radicalization towards violent extremism. The discussants explained how different drivers had motivated them to join terrorist organizations, ranging from the Palestinian situation in the 1970s and 1980s and corrupt governments, to conflicting information they had received about the meaning of 'jihad'.

One discussant stated that while studying religion he was approached by people from his local community and began to form ideas about the situation of Muslims in Afghanistan under Soviet occupation. When beginning to shape his opinions about how to address these perceived or actual injustices, the discussant was approached by violent extremists trying to recruit anyone they felt was vulnerable enough to adopt their ideology and engage in their cause. The discussant recalled how he eventually rose through the ranks until he became the "emir" of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in Jordan, and how his role continued even for part of his sixteen year-long prison sentence. As emir, he became both a theorist propagating the terrorist organization's beliefs and a controller of its activities. He admitted to deliberately misleading his followers through radical explanations of religious texts, knowing that they were open to alternative interpretations. The discussant highlighted that the Al-Qaida leadership was convinced that young people could easily be manipulated and deceived in their search for recognition and a sense of belonging. The extremely lively audience participation tended to underline that the lack of ideological cohesion was an area of vulnerability for terrorist groups.

Session V: Follow-up Discussions and Recommendations on Crafting Narratives

Participants broke out in two separate sessions designed to discuss practical areas for follow-up and concrete proposals for future action.

The breakout-session on crafting the narrative discussed the need for different messages for different target audiences. Participants agreed on the need to do more research on why and how people became terrorists in the first place, and of indicators that an individual was about to cross the line. This would help in designing the counter-narrative. The language of the counter-narrative had to be clear and easily understood, it needed to avoid using terms that had been hijacked by terrorist groups, and by ignoring them allow them to recover their proper meaning. The counter-narrative should show some sympathy for people who had been tempted towards extremism and an understanding of the reasons. Participants agreed that a counter-narrative should explain what terrorism is and expose the gap between what terrorists say and what they do. It should be fact-based and highlight the illegitimacy of terrorist behaviour and the lack of any policy solutions offered by terrorists to the grievances they exploit. The message should aim to promote a proactive narrative rather than a reactive counter-narrative. It should be personalised as well as targeted. Ridiculing terrorists is a useful tactic, as is exposing drug dealing or other anti-social activity as a source of terrorist income.

Participants agreed that the ownership of the counter narrative remained with the global community, not with governments or the United Nations. It should not reflect particular cultural values except where the audience shared those values. In relation to Al-Qaida-related groups, the counter-narrative should highlight in particular the significant Muslim contribution to the fight against terrorism in both words and deeds. The counter-narrative should emphasise the

unattractiveness of terrorist groups and their failure to terrorize their intended victims. There should also be some conformity between macro and micro level initiatives. There was agreement on the need to identify, share and reinforce success and a suggestion that the United Nations should host a central repository of messages and examples that anyone could draw from in crafting a counter narrative.

The breakout-session on delivering the narrative focused its discussion on the audience, the best ways to reach it and the messengers. Participants agreed that the audience could potentially be segmented and different communications applied accordingly. The primary target audience was a broad section of youth, who had access to a range of technologies and media but had no common religious or cultural heritage. Social networking forums were one of the key areas where the vulnerable audience met, and could be reached. Participants agreed that messages were not just single verbal narratives but rather layered and diverse, and they underlined the importance of images. Participants also underlined the role of public diplomacy in correcting the misconceptions that play into the terrorist narrative and the capability of industry, including Internet, telecoms and cable firms, to reach out to the target audience, while avoiding branding their efforts as Counter Terrorism.

The Working Group was of the general view that the ideal carriers of counter-narrative messages should be part of the audience, which posed a great challenge for governments, not only in identifying the messengers but in managing the political risk when messengers had anti-government opinions. Participants agreed that a variety of messengers was desirable, such as victims, repentant extremists, or government officials. Civil society networks such as those of *Women against Violent Extremism*, *Parents against Suicide Bombers* or *Schools against Extremism* could reach out to a wide audience. Whilst not all networks might desire links to governments, governments could play an important role by supporting and institutionalizing such efforts.

There should be an attempt to close research gaps, especially on audience segmentation and mapping, as well as on available capacity-building resources and current initiatives. Participants also proposed creating a platform/task force for mobilizing counter messages and disseminating them widely and rapidly around key events.

Conclusion

The meeting showed that there was considerable interest in and support for action on using the Internet to counter the appeal of terrorism. The Working Group proposes to turn the recommendations and proposals that emerged from the meeting into practical projects for the consideration of Member States, subject to further financial support.

Note

[1] CTITF reports on legal and technical aspects of countering terrorist use of the internet are available at < www.un.org/terrorism/internet >.