

ISSUE BRIEF

COUNTERING TERRORIST NARRATIVES & STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS:

*Lessons Learned for Tackling
Far-Right Terrorism*

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KEY FINDINGS

- Al-Qaeda and ISIS leveraged new communications technologies and invested more resources in media capabilities to recruit, finance, and sow psychological fear on an unprecedented level, recognizing the importance of strategic communications in tandem with kinetic efforts. Far-right terrorists are now doing the same.
- While Salafi-jihadist groups and violent far-right extremist groups certainly differ in ideology and organization, important similarities remain in their narratives. Both premise their efforts on a quest for a racially or religiously pure community; use of violence to achieve end goals; anti-government sentiment; and espousal of intolerant and misogynistic narratives.
- Traditional stereotypes about men's and women's roles shape the outreach of both Salafist-jihadist and violent far-right groups to men and women; the same narratives used to incentivize their support are also often ones that closely circumscribe their roles in the organizations.
- Successful counter-narrative initiatives and those utilizing strategic communications tools to challenge violent extremism and terrorism have relied on a contextualized understanding of the target audience, and on ensuring credible and resonant interlocutors that offer interventions tailored to specific groups and places.
- While international initiatives to counter terrorist narratives have largely targeted those of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliates, they offer some important lessons learned for international action to counter far-right terrorist narratives.
- **Recommendations** include: adapt and expand relevant UN activities and measures to integrate responses to violent far-right groups; ensure multi-stakeholder responses that integrate gendered dimensions; focus on proactive positive messaging; address some factors creating an enabling environment; respond early to acts of violence; and strengthen public-private partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

In the two decades following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the international community has largely focused on countering the terrorist threat posed by groups like al-Qaeda and later, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), and their respective affiliates around the world.¹ In addition to efforts to degrade the groups and deny them control over territory and resources, policymakers and practitioners also turned to understanding the strategic communications of such groups and the narratives they used to successfully radicalize and mobilize supporters.²

The phenomenon itself is not new. Margaret Thatcher famously spoke of terrorists' need for the "oxygen of publicity."³ But al-Qaeda⁴ and ISIS leveraged new communications technologies and invested human and

financial resources into media capabilities to recruit, finance, and terrorize on an unprecedented level,⁵ recognizing their importance alongside battlefield operations. In April 2016, the official ISIS propaganda channel on the social media platform, Telegram, shared a document called, "Media Operative, You are a Mujahid, Too." In it, followers were instructed that pushing propaganda is the same as fighting and that media operations can be "more potent than atomic bombs."⁶ The document lays out the three elements of ISIS's strategic narrative: a positive narrative on the group's successes,⁷ counter-speech against critics and enemies, and weaponizing propaganda.

However, in recent years, there has also been increasing concern in many states about the

¹ This Issue Brief is part of a project examining the lessons learned from UN and international counterterrorism efforts over the past two decades and their implications for international efforts to address violent far right extremism and terrorism, with a particular focus on strategic communications and narratives, and terrorism financing. The Soufan Center is grateful to the German Mission to the United Nations for supporting this project.

² "Countering Terrorist Narratives," European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, November 2017. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU\(2017\)596829_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU(2017)596829_EN.pdf).

³ Thatcher, Margaret. "Speech to the American Bar Association," Margaret Thatcher Foundation, July 15, 1985. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106096>.

⁴ Burke, Jason. "How the changing media is changing terrorism." *The Guardian*, February 25, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/how-changing-media-changing-terrorism>.

⁵ Clarke, Colin and Charlie Winter. "The Islamic State May Be Failing, But Its Strategic Communications Legacy Is Here To Stay." *War on the Rocks*, August 17, 2017. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/the-islamic-state-may-be-failing-but-its-strategic-communications-legacy-is-here-to-stay/>.

⁶ Winter, Charlie. "What I Learned from Reading the Islamic State's Propaganda Instruction Manual." *Lawfare*, April 2, 2017. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-i-learned-reading-islamic-states-propaganda-instruction-manual>.

⁷ Koerner, Brendan. "Why ISIS is Winning the Social Media War." *Wired*, April 2016. <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>.

rise of violent far-right extremist groups, many of which have similarly espoused the use of terrorist tactics. While a number of groups have been recognized as domestic threats, some are also forging transnational linkages with likeminded groups and individuals.⁸ As a result, a more internationalized violent far-right milieu is emerging, with individuals traveling to collaborate and train together, including an outflow of fighters traveling to conflict zones like eastern Ukraine to gain valuable combat experience.⁹

While these Salafi-jihadist and violent far-right extremist groups certainly differ in the specifics of their ideologies and organizational structures, significant similarities remain. Both premise their efforts on a quest for a racially or religiously pure community; a focus on the use of violence to achieve that end goal; anti-government sentiment; and the espousal of misogynist, intolerant narratives that deny individuals' human rights.¹⁰ For some within these groups, the use of violence is not just a means to an end, but an end in itself, ushering in widespread conflict that will destroy progressive, multicultural societies and lead to more racially or religiously segregated ethno-states.

For many states and international organizations grappling with the complex challenges of countering terrorist narratives, both online and offline, an important objective has been to ensure that measures taken to counter terrorist narratives and prevent incitement do not themselves violate human rights obligations and curtail freedom of expression. A common denominator in mobilizing individuals to support terrorist groups has been the experience, or perception, of human rights violations at the hands of the state.¹¹ Moreover, responses that constrain freedom of expression can be seen as furthering the very same goals that many terrorist groups pursue, as well as reinforcing their recruitment narratives.

In his recent report on the implementation of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reminded us that Member States have pledged to counter “terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.” He highlighted that “in the face of a growing threat from racially, ethnically and ideologically motivated right-wing and white supremacist groups that resort to terrorist tactics, it is critical that Member States continue to strongly condemn acts of terrorism targeting individuals on the basis of or in the name of race, ethnicity, religion or belief.”¹² While the UN Global

⁸ “White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement.” The Soufan Center, September 2019. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/white-supremacy-extremism-the-transnational-rise-of-the-violent-white-supremacist-movement/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See for example: Miller-Idriss, Cynthia. *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*. 2020; “White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement.” The Soufan Center.

¹¹ “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment.” United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2017. <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/en>.

¹² “Activities of the United Nations system in implementing the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Report of the Secretary-General.” United Nations: Office of the Secretary-General, January 29, 2021. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3902203?ln=en>.

Counter-Terrorism Strategy is notable for being a consensus document reflecting a collective view of all states as represented in the United Nations – an unusually unifying document that serves an important role in setting out the normative direction for many UN entities and states – the UN can and should do more.

Beyond condemnation, the UN also has the potential to inform the legal and policy responses of states on issues like preventing terrorist financing, developing the legal and criminal justice framework necessary to address terrorism, and sharing lessons learned and providing capacity-building assistance, all of which can be critical in ensuring a role for the UN in addressing evolving terrorist threats.¹³ Moreover, a multi-pronged effort can have cascading effects that attenuate terrorist groups and accordingly, dilute the power of terrorist narratives.

This Issue Brief will examine the strategic communications of terrorist and violent extremist groups, looking at some of the specific developments regarding al-Qaeda and ISIS and the evolving narratives and communications tactics of far-right terrorists. The brief will conclude by offering some lessons learned and experiences from both state and UN responses.

AL-QAEDA

Al-Qaeda's media production was initially considered sophisticated, both aesthetically and historically. Several leaders have set the tone for this prioritization of strategic communications. Osama bin Laden was considered by many as far more inspirational, consistent in the themes he sought to convey, and overall more "on-message" than al-Qaeda's current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is frequently characterized as long-winded and pedantic. In his book, *The Management of Savagery*, al-Qaeda strategist and ideologue Abu Bakr Naji stressed the importance of the media in destroying the United States' image while also building the self-confidence of Muslims worldwide.¹⁴ However, over time its messages have been seen as increasingly wide-ranging and unfocused.

Al-Qaeda's narratives addressed myriad issues that many in the Arab and Muslim worlds were passionate about, including the liberation of Palestine, the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and the corruption of governments and regimes throughout the Middle East and South Asia that al-Qaeda labeled as apostates. This also included violence perpetrated on the *ummah*, or community of Muslims, including against women and girls in conflict zones. In many ways, al-Qaeda's ideology reflects its self-perception as a defender and vanguard of the global *ummah*.

¹³ See for example the work of UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (OCT).

¹⁴ Naji, Abu Bakr. "The Management of Savagery." Translation accessed via John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University. https://www.narrativespace.net/uploads/1/1/7/9/117904861/management_of_savagery.pdf

In declaring *jihad*, bin Laden argued that the West – and particularly the United States – was hostile to Islam and that the only way to respond to this aggression was with force or violence. In essence, the core of al-Qaeda’s narrative is individual *jihad* fused with collective revenge.¹⁵

Al-Qaeda has always maintained an impressive awareness of the targets and audiences it seeks to influence with its messaging. Understanding that terrorism is politically and/or ideologically motivated violence, the *raison d’être* of al-Qaeda’s violence is not, as some have suggested, simply hatred for American values and the American way of life – although, to be sure, Western values are certainly inimical to the Salafi-jihadist platform. Rather, al-Qaeda attacks the West to change policies and set in motion social and political responses that advance their strategic objectives. As such, al-Qaeda consistently sought to warn, intimidate, and cajole Western publics, viewed by al-Qaeda as “neutrals,” that the actions of their governments were the reason they were being targeted.

ISLAMIC STATE

Islamic State, or ISIS,¹⁶ took advantage of social media to disseminate its narratives and messaging far beyond what al-Qaeda was ever able to achieve. Despite the attention afforded to its execution videos, ISIS actually produced much more material, and on a broader range of topics, than what is covered in the mainstream media. ISIS propaganda is centered on three major themes:

- ISIS restored the caliphate, which makes it the only authentic Islamic state in the world and thus worthy of political legitimacy.
- Any existing Islamic entity (state or nonstate) that does not recognize the group’s authority qualifies as an apostate and must be vanquished.
- ISIS is more capable than al-Qaeda ever was and continues to grow as an organization and an ideology.

ISIS revolutionized terrorists’ use of social media for a variety of purposes – such as soliciting financing, recruiting fighters, establishing the political legitimacy of its proto-state, and instilling fear in its adversaries.¹⁷ The group also used social media to amplify the impact of and fear

¹⁵ Bin Laden, Osama. “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” World Islamic Front Statement, February 23, 1998. <https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>.

¹⁶ There is wide variation in how states and international actors reference this group, including ISIS, ISIL, Da’esh, and IS; the formal UN designation is ISIL/Da’esh.

¹⁷ Clarke, Colin and Charlie Winter. “The Islamic State May Be Failing, But Its Strategic Communications Legacy Is Here To Stay.” *War on the Rocks*.

from its acts of violence – such as through distribution of propaganda images of destruction of a temple in Palmyra¹⁸ and a 22-minute video of a Jordanian pilot burning alive in a cage.¹⁹

Of all the narratives propagated by ISIS, the establishment and implementation of the caliphate was a unique selling point, as it retains historical and religious resonance for the broader Muslim *ummah* and harkens back to Islam's Golden Age. Where al-Qaeda's narrative focused on individual *jihad*, global policy changes, and the creation of a specialized "Delta Force" of terrorist fighters, ISIS narratives focused on its state-building project. ISIS therefore adopted a broader and more inclusive approach, deliberately targeting women, youth, and individuals who could contribute to this new endeavor in myriad ways, besides fighting.²⁰ ISIS attempted to communicate to all its potential recruits the core narrative that its caliphate is a triumphant, model society.

In addition to the extraordinary achievement of ISIS in establishing territorial control on an unprecedented scale, the group was also notable for mobilizing a historic outflow of individuals and even families – approximately 40,000 people from more than 110 countries – to join the group.²¹ The group's slogan is *Baqiya wa Tatamaddad* (Remaining and Expanding). Rather than living under

apostate regimes in the Middle East or morally bankrupt societies in Western nations, Muslims who join ISIS are told that they can enjoy an ideal Islamic community, and those who resist this call will be eliminated. This vision is furthered by videos that focus on the caliphate as a benevolent state committed to public works and Islamic welfare, which extends a lifeline to vulnerable individuals who feel marginalized or under-resourced by their governing authorities.

The image of the Islamic State as a benevolent and inclusive society was boosted by the presence of women who traveled to the conflict zones in the Levant and encouraged others to, as well. In successive waves of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) traveling to support ISIS, unprecedented in its scale and scope, nearly 20% of those who traveled were women – some going voluntarily, others under duress, and some for a complex mix of reasons. Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS recognized the importance of including women in its state-building enterprise and created an inviting narrative for a wide range of people to contribute to this endeavor. The presence of figures, like a British woman who traveled to Syria and went by the name *Umm Layth* (mother of lions), was associated with persuading and mobilizing young women to leave the West

¹⁸ Curry, Andrew. "Here Are the Ancient Sites ISIS Has Damaged and Destroyed." *National Geographic*, September 1, 2015. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/150901-isis-destruction-looting-ancient-sites-iraq-syria-archaeology>.

¹⁹ "Jordan pilot hostage Moaz al-Kasasbeh 'burned alive'" *BBC*, February 3, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31121160>.

²⁰ Fink, Naureen Chowdhury and Benjamin Sugg. "A Tale of Two Jihads: Comparing the al-Qaeda and ISIS Narratives." *International Peace Institute: The Global Observatory*, February 9, 2015. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/02/jihad-al-qaeda-isis-counternarrative/>.

²¹ "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees." The Soufan Center, October 2017. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>.

and join ISIS.²² This messaging was critical to compete with the information widely available about ISIS's treatment of women and girls, particularly those belonging to the Yazidi community, and their horrific practices of sexual slavery and brutal gender-based violence.²³

Although ISIS sought to appeal to women, the appeal was centered fundamentally on gendered stereotypes. Women were encouraged to assume roles centered on family or acceptable professional roles which might be required to provide educational or medical services in the so-called caliphate. Beyond the roles of women in the domestic sphere, the gendered narratives adopted by ISIS included an appeal to young men based on notions of masculinity associated with traditional roles as fighters, patriarchs, and political and public leaders. Incentivizing foreign fighters with the appeal of sex slaves – many minors and children – further reinforced toxic notions of masculinity within ISIS outreach.²⁴

VIOLENT FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST GROUPS

Violent far-right extremist groups, and particularly white supremacy extremists, espouse narratives similar in many ways to those propagated by al-Qaeda and ISIS. Both sets of groups advocate the use of extreme violence and create a worldview of “them” versus “us” to justify it. While ISIS fights for a religiously pure caliphate, several white supremacy extremist and neo-Nazi groups espouse the idea of a separate ethno-state for whites, a “utopian” community based on racial and ethnic purity and adaptations of Nordic or Northern European myths, folklore, and histories.²⁵

There is also a common element of violence driven by misogyny and intolerance, together with a conception of gendered roles along the lines of traditional stereotypes, with women's ideal roles portrayed as being within the domestic sphere.²⁶ Just as groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda see gender equality as representing the oppression of women, far-right terrorists view themselves as victims of organized state feminism. Attacks on women and girls perceived as members of the pure “in-group” have also been important stories

²² Hoyle, Carolyn, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett. “Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS.” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, 2015. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.pdf.

²³ Callimachi, Rukmini. “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape.” *New York Times*, August 13, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>.

²⁴ Taylor, Lin. “From Boko Haram to Islamic State, sex slavery and trafficking fund extremism: report.” *Reuters*, October 9, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-slavery-extremists/from-boko-haram-to-islamic-state-sex-slavery-and-trafficking-fund-extremism-report-idUSKBN1CE1I3>.

²⁵ “White Nationalist.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/white-nationalist>.

²⁶ Darby, Seyward. “The Rise of the Valkyries.” *Harper's Magazine*, September 2017. <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/09/the-rise-of-the-valkyries/>.

for the narratives of violent extremist groups; in the aftermath of the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, for example, the death of Ashli Babbitt was used by white supremacy extremists as a rallying cry to others.²⁷

An element common to the communications of both kinds of groups is “propaganda of the deed,” with the message conveyed by actions making up an important component of strategic communications. For al-Qaeda, this was the attacks of September 11, 2001, whereas for ISIS it was the claim to revive the caliphate. Both groups exploited the communicative power of destruction, whether it was the imagery of the burning World Trade Center or the destruction of cultural heritage sites like Palmyra. Meanwhile, far-right terrorists within the United States and in other countries pointed to the storming of the Capitol as an achievement that could be later replicated. In Germany, for example, in late August 2020, hundreds of far-right activists in Berlin attempted, but failed, to overrun police and storm the Reichstag (German parliament). While that attempt in Germany was a failure, the successful storming of the Capitol in the United States appears to have provided a boost and inspiration to a range of far-right groups in Europe.²⁸

For violent far-right groups, the use of violence is often portrayed as a means to an end, namely accelerating an apocalyptic societal breakdown and allowing for a more racially and ethnically pure society to emerge from its ashes. It is, however, sometimes also the end in itself: a violent society that can impose segregation and protect a pure elite group. Just as ISIS and al-Qaeda drew on the *Management of Savagery* and used violence to communicate, terrorize, and create a state of constant insecurity that they could exploit, so too have many violent right-wing groups glorified violence.

POLICY RESPONSES

Governments and international organizations have mounted an extensive effort to counter terrorist narratives, including the development of counter-narrative libraries,²⁹ regional hubs,³⁰ and dedicated initiatives via the United Nations, the Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, and the Global Coalition Against Daesh. However, the effectiveness of such initiatives has been difficult to measure empirically, and long-term success remains elusive. While these have been largely targeted at the narratives of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliates, they offer some

²⁷ Bergengruen, Vera. “‘Our First Martyr.’ How Ashli Babbitt Is Being Turned Into a Far-Right Recruiting Tool.” *TIME*, January 10, 2021. <https://time.com/5928249/ashli-babbitt-capitol-extremism/>.

²⁸ Bennhold, Katrin and Michael Schwirtz. “Capitol Riot Puts Spotlight on ‘Apocalyptically Minded’ Global Far Right.” *New York Times*, January 24, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/24/world/europe/capitol-far-right-global.html>.

²⁹ “Dounter Narrative Library.” *Hedayah*.

³⁰ “UAE & US Launch Sawab Center – New Digital Communications Hub to Counter Extremist Propaganda.” United Arab Emirates and United States: Sawab Center. <https://www.uae-embassy.org/news-media/uae-us-launch-sawab-center-%E2%80%93-new-digital-communications-hub-counter-extremist-propaganda>.

important lessons learned for countering far-right terrorist narratives.

Within the UN, Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005), co-penned by the United Kingdom and Russia,³¹ called on states to prohibit incitement to terrorism and the glorification of terrorist acts. This resolution is applicable to all types of extremism and not limited to al-Qaeda or ISIS, and as such, it should be employed to combat far-right violence, as well. Furthermore, UN Security Council Resolution 2354 (2017) emphasizes the importance of credible interlocutors and a whole-of-society approach, while also highlighting the right to freedom of expression in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) adopted by the General Assembly in 1966. It calls for any restrictions on the freedom of expression to be those provided by law and necessary on the grounds set out in paragraph 3 of Article 19 of the ICCPR. Moreover, the resolution highlights the UN Comprehensive Framework, which compiles good practices and recommendations for ensuring a multi-stakeholder response that is at once credible and sustainable.³²

Several national governments have also adopted domestic measures to counter terrorist narratives. Ten years after the far-right terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya that killed seventy-seven people, mostly youth, Norway has developed a whole-of-society approach to combat all forms of violent

extremism in all its manifestations, with a focus on early prevention and cross-sectoral cooperation.³³ For example, Norway's current action plan against radicalization involves nine government industries and several civil society organizations. They have developed the same broad approach in their current effort to develop a national counterterrorism strategy. Although their policies are directed at all forms of extremism, they continuously assess whether new measures are needed to address developing challenges, such as differences in terrorist financing between far-right and jihadist extremism. Norway has also grappled with the challenge of balancing between illegal content online and freedom of speech; hate speech is prohibited and punishable by law, but it continues to be a challenge to draw a line between illegal hate speech and protected political speech.

In Belgium, meanwhile, the Central Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) examines the influence of conspiracy theories on individuals or groups likely to commit extremist or terrorist acts. In addition to violent-far right and radical Islamic extremism, CUTA has followed the emergence of more broadly anti-government movements without a political or ideological affiliation, such as violent protests against COVID-19 restrictions or threats against virologists. Belgium has also focused on the role of conspiracy theories and misinformation, particularly during times of crisis. The Belgian government has further noted the importance of clear communication

³¹ "UN Security Council Resolution 1624." United Nations Security Council, 2005. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1624\(2005\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1624(2005)).

³² "UN Security Council Resolution 2354." United Nations Security Council, 2017. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2354\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2354(2017)).

³³ "22 July Breivik Commission Report," Norwegian Parliament, August 13, 2012. https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/bb3dc76229c64735b4f6eb4dbfcdbe8/en-gb/pdfs/nou2012_14_eng.pdf; Remarks by Kristin Hemmer Morkestol, Director of the Section for National Security for the Norwegian Ministry of Justice, in The Soufan Center webinar, April 28, 2021.

from authorities, the removal of hate speech and extremist content online, and counter narratives that offer an alternative to extremist propaganda.³⁴

Nor is it only governments generating policy responses; public-private partnerships play an important role. Moonshot CVE – recently rebranded as Moonshot with an expanded remit – is an organization based in London and Washington, D.C. that works with governments, tech companies, and the international community to respond to violent extremism and a range of other online harms. Moonshot has experimented with non-ideological interventions and has found that extremist audiences are more receptive to these than explicit counter narratives that attempt to undermine extremist ideologies. For instance, it found in two related tests that white supremacist and Islamist extremist audiences were 48% and 47% more likely, respectively, to engage with self-help or mental health content compared to the general public.³⁵ Their messaging centered around feelings of loneliness, thereby mimicking the tactics of extremist groups that attempt to reach individuals who feel alienated from wider society and marginalized or discriminated against. Moonshot has pioneered various types of non-ideological messaging, including de-escalation and psychosocial messaging, such as the “redirect” method that diverts individuals searching for extremist content online. These have encountered early success and suggest new paths forward for governmental and intergovernmental bodies.³⁶

This range of approaches offers a glimpse into the array of policy and programmatic solutions available to counter terrorist narratives in order to tackle a range of ideological threats.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen the evidence base:** Within the UN system, ensure that entities like the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), and Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are taking into account the threats posed by all terrorist and violent extremist groups in terms of their assessment and capacity-building partnerships with states. Increase attention to the threats posed by far-right terrorists, including racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists.
 - A. UN entities should increase focus on supporting states to advance implementation of resolutions 1624 and 2354, including the Comprehensive Framework, and encourage states to report on these measures in their briefings to the Counter-Terrorism Committee following assessment visits.
 - B. The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the UN Counter-Terrorism Center (UNCCT) should expand the scope of programs relating to PVE and strategic communications to include violent far-right groups, and support

³⁴ Remarks by Karl Dhaene, Director Counterterrorism for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belgium, in The Soufan Center webinar, April 28, 2021.

³⁵ Remarks by Vidhya Ramalingam, Founder of Moonshot CVE, in The Soufan Center webinar, April 28, 2021.

³⁶ Moonshot. “The Redirect Method.” <https://moonshotteam.com/redirect-method/>.

states in developing responses that focus on multiple forms of terrorism.

- C. More resources should be allotted to measurement, assessment, and evaluation, so UN entities can have a better understanding of the impact of counter narratives and whether they are achieving their intended objectives.

2. Deliver targeted responses: Projects focused on counterterrorism and countering violent extremism need to be tailored to context and not broadly generalized. Moreover, they should focus on offering positive and alternative narratives presented by credible interlocutors. Counter-narratives should stress positive aspects and be centered on achievements, opportunities, and work, rather than adopting the traditional approach of merely questioning or challenging ISIS's claims without providing an alternative.

- A. Violent right-wing groups have utilized sporting events, such as mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments and concerts to reach out to supporters and new recruits; counter-narratives and prevention efforts should increase focus on the use of sport, arts, and culture³⁷ to create more inclusive opportunities to bring together communities, especially youth, to create positive alternatives.

3. Ensure the participation of relevant stakeholders: Local communities, women, youth, civil society organizations, local government, and the private sector should all be involved in project development from the beginning stages to ensure

credible messaging and reliable information. Consider differential impacts and analyses and ensure inclusive policy development and implementation, taking into account the often under-addressed roles and needs of women and girls. Many civil society organizations oriented toward women and youth may have less opportunity to inform and engage in policy development and implementation; proactive outreach will be necessary, though not sufficient, and must be considered in conjunction with a comprehensive strategy.

- 4. Pay attention to acts of violence and statements of intent:** Take early action to note trends in intentions of committing violence or a willingness to perpetrate acts of violence or encourage others to do so. Groups that have declared intentions to commit violence, already committed violence, or explicitly incited supporters to commit violence will need to be identified and addressed at early stages; countering their narratives early on will be key. Governments and communities should be prepared to intervene proactively to counter narratives from extremist groups that glorify violence and incite terrorist acts.

- 5. Address crises and enabling environments:** Successful strategic communications need to close the "say-do" gap; there needs to be visible and tangible efforts to match the rhetoric with action. Governments and international actors need to work to tackle the enabling environment that contributes to and fosters extremism, including the COVID-19 pandemic, related public health measures, and shortfalls in allocations of

³⁷ Fink, Naureen Chowdhury, Rafia Bhulai, Wedad Alhassen, and Sara Zeiger. "Thinking Outside the Box Exploring the Critical Roles of Sports, Arts, and Culture in Preventing Violent Extremism." *Global Center on Cooperative Security*, February 2015. https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/15Feb17_SAC_Brief_Hedayah_GlobalCenter.pdf

public services. In addition, greater emphasis must be placed on resolving conflicts that both drive and provide opportunities for extremism, as well as on addressing the threats of disinformation and conspiracy theories that create an enabling environment for and normalization of extremist narratives. Proactive messaging about the positive work being supported by states and others to address these issues, whether via the UN, development assistance, or diplomacy, should be increased.³⁸

6. Enhance public-private partnerships (PPPs):

This collaboration is key to connecting communities, businesses, and local and national level governments in order to most efficiently align resources, expertise, and access toward shared objectives. Social media and tech companies, financial

institutions and payment platforms, organizations like Moonshot, local businesses, and civil society organizations can all contribute to countering narratives and actions from extremist groups; examples include communities utilizing the private sector to limit violent right-wing groups' access to venues, properties, or services needed to promote their violent objectives. It will be important to work with bodies like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and technology companies to increase cooperation between the public and private sectors. Informal intergovernmental groups like the Christchurch Call also provide an important platform for collective international action to research and engage on preventing far-right terrorism.

Related Event



Permanent Mission
of the Federal Republic of Germany
to the United Nations
New York

**The Soufan Center thanks
the German Mission to the
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and partnership on this project.**

On April 28, 2021, The Soufan Center, in partnership with the Permanent Missions of Germany, Belgium, Norway, and Tunisia to the United Nations, hosted a webinar entitled, “Countering Terrorist Narratives & Strategic Communications: Comparing the Violent Far-Right with ISIL/Da’esh and Al-Qaida.” The discussions therein directly informed the further research developed in this Issue Brief.

Watch the Event

³⁸ See for example: Fink, Naureen Chowdhury and Jack Barclay. “Mastering the Narrative: Counterterrorism Strategic Communication and the United Nations.” *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation*, 2013. https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feb2013_CT_StratComm.pdf.



THE SOUFAN CENTER

ABOUT TSC:

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.

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