

Countering Terrorist Narratives: Best Practices from around the Globe

Recommendations from PTSS Alumni

During the same week that President Obama announced the United States had killed the leader of the Taliban and investigators searched for clues to the crash of Egypt Air Flight 804 between Paris and Cairo, the Marshall Center hosted a Global Counterterrorism Alumni Community of Interest (COI) to address the critical challenge of countering terrorist narratives. At a time of unprecedented levels of radicalization and mobilization to terrorism, extremist narratives and propaganda are key to the spread of terrorist ideology and the increasing recruitment of individuals around the world. As a result, there is now growing recognition of the need to counter terrorist narratives more robustly within the framework of comprehensive strategies for countering violent extremism (CVE). COI participants thus convened to identify best practices and lessons learned in this emerging area of counter-terrorism (CT).

Nine alumni of the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies (PTSS) and a graduate of the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies gave presentations on their nations' perspectives and experiences. These presentations served as a catalyst for analysis, discussion, and exchange of best practices within the group of 73 CT professionals from 41 countries. The following conclusions and recommendations are the product of these discussions.

1. **Narratives are weapons.** Terrorist groups are adept at using narratives in their communications both to mobilize support and to delegitimize governments. It is vital to understand how narratives are weaponized in order to counter them. Terrorists exploit both online and traditional media, but both media may also be important partners for CVE.
2. **Targeting the right audience.** Prevention of radicalization is likely to be a more productive approach than attempting to deradicalize those who have already joined terrorist organizations. In particular, a key target audience for counter-narrative efforts should be *fence sitters*, individuals who are showing an active interest in extremism (or are being targeted by recruiters) but who are still undecided and have yet to mobilize.
3. **Simplicity of messaging.** Terrorist narratives tend to convey simple, yet powerful messages. Tailored to their target audience, these messages are often visually, intellectually or emotionally stimulating. Counter-narrative efforts must use similar techniques to be equally effective.
4. **The importance of non-governmental partners.** Regardless of the method of delivery (on- or off-line, direct or indirect) non-governmental partners have a crucial role to play. Key partners may include a variety of NGOs, charities, faith institutions, local networks, community leaders and individual citizens as well as the private sector. Governments must seek to build trust, engage with, empower, and facilitate the actions of these key partners, without destroying their credibility as influential messengers. It was also recognized that a hard CT approach may sometimes undermine these relationships, meaning that special care must be taken to maintain them.
5. **Timing is everything.** Counter-narrative efforts must be dynamic and flexible to respond to rapid changes in the environment. This is a particular challenge for government bureaucracies.



6. **Measuring impact.** Online platforms in particular provide some readily available measurements such as number of *visits* or *page views*, *likes*, *shares*, *discoverability* in search engines, global reach and comments. However, as important as such measures are, they are relatively superficial. It is essential to try to measure the impact of counter-narratives among the target audience in as much detail as possible in order to identify best practices.
7. **The way ahead.** They further recognized that there is a need to make greater use of disillusioned former members of terrorist organizations and to be more proactive in countering terrorist narratives. Finally, it was agreed that “actions speak louder than words” – counter-narratives must therefore be matched by activities in the real world in order to be effective.
8. **Counter narrative examples.** Case studies on countering terrorist narratives from nine countries – Mauritius, Uganda, Poland, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Australia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the United States – were presented. Two particularly striking examples are highlighted below.
 - *Pakistan.* In response to the Peshawar school attack of 2014, in which the Pakistani Taliban killed 141 people, mostly children, Inter Services Public Relations produced a powerful music video (available [here](#)).
 - *United States.* Taking second place in a global State Department sponsored competition called “Peer 2 Peer,” a team from the United States Military Academy leveraged several best practices noted in this document to develop an innovative online campaign targeting youth at risk of radicalization (for more information, see [here](#)).

About the COI

The Global CT Alumni COI workshops support and engage over 1500 alumni of the Marshall Center's premier Program on Terrorism and Security Studies, as well as CT-focused alumni from other U.S. Regional Centers. COI events provide a forum for active networking (and renewed friendships/relationships) for Marshall Center alumni of the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies (PTSS) and other U.S. Regional Center alumni who are current security leaders serving in counterterrorism (CT)-related positions around the world. Deliverables during COI events directly inform upcoming PTSS programs, ensuring the overall program's continuous currency and relevance.

About PTSS

The Program on Terrorism and Security Studies is a four-week resident program that supports the Marshall Center's increasing emphasis on transnational threats and challenges, as well as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). The PTSS provides advanced professional education to those charged with understanding and reducing the scope and capability of terror threats.

Recognizing the global nature of terrorism and its disdain for international borders, however, today's PTSS attracts participants from all corners of the globe. The PTSS builds a network of security professionals dedicated to the mission of combating terrorism (CT) by helping their countries successfully cooperate in the global struggle against terrorism.

Connect



GlobalNET