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Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda Workshop 1

Mastering the Message: Engaging our Youth

September 2016

Executive Summary

The Carter Center (TCC) convened a workshop on Sept. 6 – 9, 2016, in Switzerland, the first in a series of six reiterative workshops designed to analyze Daesh recruitment strategies, develop counter-messaging strategies, and build capacity among participants for engaging youth vulnerable to manipulation by Daesh recruitment propaganda. Twenty participants from Morocco, Tunisia, France, and Belgium included religious and community leaders, social activists, and ex-foreign fighters with large grassroots followings in their local communities.

The workshop featured leading experts on political and media communication, digital media production, and political transitions and coalition building. The objective was to develop insights into Daesh recruitment, specifically the use of video production and social media, and engage religious and community leaders in peacebuilding in their local communities, both online and offline. Each of the three days featured sessions organized around four subjects: 1) deconstruction of Daesh recruitment propaganda strategies, 2) effective strategies to engage with marginalized youth, 3) practical applications to address the rise of Islamophobia and delegitimize Daesh narratives, and 4) attaining media literacy tools to produce efficient and effective arguments. By the end of the three days, a sense of agency, shared responsibility, trust, and collaboration developed among participants that cut across ideological and gender lines, and eroded not only resistance to technology but also emphasized the need for religious leaders to engage on these difficult issues.

The Vocal Minority: Deconstructing Daesh Media

Participants were in broad agreement that Daesh represents, as one participant described, "a cancer on the *ummah*." While acknowledging that Daesh is small in numbers, participants initially expressed dismay at the outsized effectiveness of Daesh in both (1) capturing global public attention and equating Islam with violence, and (2) recruiting youth from all over the world, and in the process, destroying lives, families, and communities. Participants were eager to use the

workshop to better understand Daesh recruitment strategies, requesting analysis so that they could be better equipped when they return to their communities. Other participants countered that the Daesh problem was well-known; instead of diagnosis, prescriptions were needed, practical strategies that could be quickly implemented in local contexts. All, however, agreed on the urgency of the problem, and its multifaceted nature. Workshop experts provided both analysis of Daesh recruitment strategies and practical tools for constructing counter-narratives.

Daesh has proven terrifyingly effective in its propaganda, though its range and strategies were largely unknown to participants. Participants were provided with research and analysis by TCC expert and Associate Director Dr. Houda Abadi, and informed on the strategies, tactics, and content of Daesh recruitment appeals. Daesh produces propaganda from multiple transnational media outlets and through print, visual, and social media. Also important is the speed with which the Daesh propaganda machine produces content. Media products, including videos, audio tracts, and online print, are released almost daily by Daesh and affiliates, with sometimes as many as 4-5 media products released in a day. Their flagship e-zine, Dabiq, now in its 15th issue, is released roughly every two months; the current issue runs to more than 80 slick and well produced pages. Daesh recruitment strategies include at least seven distinct master narratives, deployed tactically to reach a range of target audiences. For example, media targeted to populations in Syria or Iraq may focus on the ability of the self-declared "caliphate" to provide social services, while media targeted to North Africans may emphasize the hypocrisy of Muslim political leaders, and Western youth may receive narratives about the humiliation of the global *ummah* and the need to humiliate the West in turn. Daesh also modifies its message to particular audiences based on other factors such as language, ethnic identity, gender, and level of religious literacy.

While workshop participants were certainly aware of Daesh, few, if any, had experience directly with Daesh recruitment media, despite its wide availability on the internet. The opportunity to view and deconstruct Daesh propaganda had a galvanizing effect on workshop participants. Participants were shown multiple videos, including those with targeted messages to potential Moroccan, Tunisian, and European recruits. One video in particular, an Eid greeting from Daesh that advertises the diversity of life in the Islamic State and encourages foreign recruits to travel to Syria to join, shocked the workshop participants. Not because the video was graphic, but just the opposite—it presented an image of life in Daesh territory as inclusive, joyous, safe, and pious. Several participants admitted, to their horror, that the video was emotionally powerful and incorporated cultural appeals that were immediately recognizable, and therefore insidious.

Participants were trained on the range of Daesh propaganda media and recruitment strategies; it was emphasized that, for Daesh, the media battlefield is as important as the physical battlefield. It must be equally important for religious and community leaders that seek to counter Daesh recruitment propaganda. Prior to being divided into groups to work collaboratively to deconstruct Daesh propaganda, participants assumed countering Daesh was a matter of rational appeals. Dissection of the videos allowed participants to realize that Daesh media operates through emotional and behavioral appeals alongside rational argument. Workshop participants agreed that effective counter-messaging must move beyond a text-centric rational refutation of extremist ideology.

Viewing and deconstructing videos, noting the production value and the force of the argument, galvanized participants and marked a critical turning point in the workshop. One participant

commented, "We are the silent majority. We have a collective responsibility to speak out and act. Daesh is perhaps only one million, but they are very good at getting their message out. They have skills, but we have more numbers. Whenever we talk about terrorism, we are talking about the minority, but we need to be talking about the majority." In post-workshop evaluations, participants agreed by a wide margin (70%) that TCC analysis of Daesh recruitment propaganda was the most valuable workshop session. Based on this feedback, workshop two will incorporate a more granular analysis of Daesh's online recruitment strategy.

Media Literacy and Populating the Online Space: Competing with "Sheikh Google"
The workshop operated under the assumption that deconstruction of Daesh recruitment strategy must necessarily be followed by development and construction of counter-narratives that compete with Daesh on the media battlefield. Expert Sahar Khamis, Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, further defined the online space, delivering presentations on new media, Muslim identity in the digital age, and Islamophobia in online and offline spaces. Expert Mark Robinson, Director of the Digital Media Lab at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, worked with participants on the technical knowledge required to both understand digital media and begin producing original content designed to counter Daesh recruitment propaganda.

Initially, exercises to acquire technical proficiency in video production and online messaging was met with resistance by some workshop participants. As religious leaders, they felt their role was to be in the mosque; online messaging and media production was left best to others. Two interventions by workshop experts allowed participants to move beyond the impasse. Workshop expert Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, former Premier of the Western Cape province of South Africa and former South African Ambassador to the United States, reminded participants that there is a competition for the attention of today's youth, and outreach must extend beyond the mosque. "You are competing with Sheikh Google," he advised. "If you do not populate the online space, putting your *khutbahs* on social media and producing content, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the leader of Daesh) will be happy to do it for you." TCC expert Dr. Houda Abadi facilitated a comparison between Daesh media and attempts by mainstream Muslim religious leaders to counter Daesh, including the Letter to Baghdadi, now signed by over 200 religious scholars and available in nine languages. Participants agreed that Daesh online propaganda is winning the media war in terms of speed, scale, and production value. It was also recognized that not all counter-messaging must be done online; participants cited the importance of coalition building and engaged citizenship. Cooperative exercises allowed participants to reflect on their own role in the online space; they agreed that defining the *ummah*'s cyber identity was a critical task in which all religious and community leaders have a valuable role to play. In the words of one participant, "We live in an online world now, and we must meet the youth where they are."

Once resistance to technology was overcome, participants were asked to download an app that allows the production and editing of video media via cellphone. Mr. Robinson provided a tutorial on media production, highlighting that all participants were already master storytellers, and emphasized that one does not need technical expertise or extensive training to produce and release high quality media, an important intervention for those participants with no background in social media or video production. He emphasized the important of audience, intention and craft, and reviewed basic production techniques.

After gaining insight into basic media production, participants worked collaboratively to script,

shoot, edit, and present a short video designed to counter Daesh's recruitment narratives. Despite the range of participants in age, ideological orientation, nationality, and technical knowledge, each group worked collaboratively to create a video geared to a particular audience. The videos, for a first attempt, were excellent, incorporating complex editing and narrative techniques, and produced and edited entirely on smart phones. Participants viewed and assessed each other's work, and workshop experts provided technical advice. Even those who struggled with technology found value in the cooperative nature of the exercise and developed a sense of agency in creating counter-messaging. Working together to solve technical problems and deliver a product in limited time deepened the sense of community established on day one, and served as evidence that the technical and theoretical training was well received and put to immediate use.

The Islamophobia Industry: The Other Form of Extremism
A constant theme of the workshop, and a vital concern for workshop participants, was the rising tide of Islamophobia. This was of particular concern to participants from France and Belgium, most of whom expressed that Islamophobia has become common political currency within Europe. It was recognized that the rise in Islamophobia and the existence of Daesh are deeply intertwined; Daesh regularly uses Islamophobia and discrimination of Muslims in the West as a recruitment tool, and Daesh's political war and violent tactics generate increasing Islamophobia. As one participant described the rising tide of Islamophobia, "If, in France, you are a member of a Muslim organization or wear the hijab, this is seen as terrorism. And this is a tragedy."

Participants recognized the importance of working collectively across political and ideological divides to combat Islamophobia. One participant reflected that "we must deal with Islamophobia, but we must not do what others have done to us." Amb. Rasool shared lessons learnt from the South African experience. He reflected that, for some 200 years, it was illegal to be Muslim in South Africa; there is a long history of suffering and victimization for South African Muslims. However, Amb. Rasool emphasized that the South African Muslim community knew that their fight for justice was intimately connected to that of black South Africans. He stated "We didn't stand only for Muslim rights, but we stood for human rights. Human rights are Muslim rights." He further highlighted five key themes from the South African context that are of continued relevance to the Muslim community in their fight for justice: 1) maintaining a vision of peace, 2) balancing the demands of peace and justice, 3) the principle of sufficient consensus, 4) incorporating the vanquished, and 5) reconciliation. It was agreed that religious and community leaders must be engaged citizens, and that inter-religious collaboration, including outreach, education initiatives, and shared battels for social justice will be essential to the long term fight against Islamophobia.

Conclusion: Next Steps and Suggestions
Perhaps the most important outcome of the workshop is the sense of community and collective responsibility that developed among participants. Regardless of the ideological and political orientation, workshop participants built trust and a working relationship with each other that *has the potential to reduce political conflict even beyond the issue of Daesh*. This was equally true across national and gender lines. The women participants in particular assumed a very active role during deliberations and brought a fresh perspective to the discussions. This was reiterated throughout the workshop by two of the workshop experts who commented that the inclusion of strong and visible women leaders was one of the most valuable aspects of the workshop. As Ambassador Rasool eloquently stated, "the greatest strength of the workshop was the multi-faceted diversity of participants: men-women; young-senior; Salafi-orthodox-liberal; clergy-activist-

professionals; majority-minority." Experts and participants repeatedly expressed their appreciation to TCC for the inclusion of a diversity of leaders who are at the forefront in their communities. Participants emerged with ambitious but attainable actions plans. The various exercises within the workshop proved effective, encouraging religious and community leaders to develop creative and comprehensive programs for preventing violent extremism within their local communities. Each participant will return to their local contexts with the knowledge and tools to implement a program along these lines, and will return to the next workshop with a report on their project development, along with successes and failures, problems and prospects.

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