

# THE CARTER CENTER



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Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda Workshop 2

Mastering the Message: Engaging Our Youth

*November 2016*

### **Executive Summary**

On November 2 – 5, 2016, The Carter Center (TCC) convened its second workshop designed to analyze Daesh recruitment tactics, develop counter-messaging strategies, and build capacity among religious-community leaders for engaging communities vulnerable to Daesh recruitment. The workshop was attended by 23 religious-community leaders from four countries, across ideological and political divides, all of whom have credibility and significant social capital within their local communities.

This workshop was designed to inform and train religious-community leaders on the following: a) deconstruction of Daesh’s various recruitment strategies and building a comprehensive media campaign to discredit Daesh and the rise of islamophobia; b) rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees by exploring the profile of Daesh recruits and the challenges and opportunities of working with individuals that have been stigmatized by their association with extremist movements; c) building intra-Muslim cohesion and intercommunity coalitions; and, d) presentation of participants’ challenges and successes of implementing local initiatives. The sense of trust and shared responsibility among participants developed in the first workshop was further enriched, and collaborative working relationships among participants will reinforce individual projects among at-risk youth in their home communities.

### **Religious Diplomacy and Civic Engagement Strategy**

Expert, Mr. Bawa Jain, Founding Secretary-General of the World Council of Religious Leaders, spoke to participants on the role of religious leaders in the public sphere. Despite its relevance in

our lives, religion is rarely used as a positive force in diplomacy -- one that complements the political process. As religious hostilities continue to rise in nearly every major region around the globe, we can no longer afford to exclude religious leaders from the process of building an integrated framework for peace. Religious and community leaders constitute a major player in advancing conflict mitigation and political reform. Participants recognized the forces arrayed against them from Daesh propaganda to Islamophobia to the lack of political space in their own countries to effect sensible reform around these issues. On the one side, participants discussed the need to confront the use of religion that has been manipulated by groups such as Daesh, and on the other, they have to address the dangerous tides of Islamophobia.

Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, President of the World for All Foundation and former South African Ambassador to the United States, offered the concept of *maqasid al-shariah* (goals of al-shariah) as an operating concept for intra-Muslim dialogue. The maqasid approach provides an understanding and purpose behind the revelation of Islamic laws, and thus offers a basis for dialogue and coalition-building on the basis of welfare, justice, equity and dignity. Muslims do not have to choose between their religion and universal values. Values such as human rights and democracy are intrinsic to Islam. This approach opens great opportunities to address current challenges for Muslim societies and Muslim minorities living in the west.

Participants discussed the urgent need for the *ummah* (Muslim community) to be firm and resilient in finding its own voice. As one participant observed, “we are colonized by the vocabulary of those who want to make us invisible.” Discussions centered on the problematic usage of words like Jihad, moderate Islam, radicalization, and modern Islam. And in the words of another, “the media isn’t telling our story, and governments are not telling our story, and Daesh isn’t telling our story. We have to tell our own story. We have to define Islam for ourselves.” Participants agreed with Amb. Rasool that new, strategic leadership is necessary. Participants forged a consensus that governments are not the best positioned actors to practice strategic thinking and give the Muslim community its voice. Religious leaders and civil society organizations, however, are positioned to advocate for change.

### **Intra-Muslim Religious Dialogue**

A particular success of TCC Countering Daesh’s recruitment propaganda workshops is the opportunity for participants to engage in intra-religious dialogue. Workshop two added more religious leaders, increased the diversity of participants along nationality, gender and ideological lines, and facilitated dialogue between groups that otherwise would have never met.

The eight women religious leaders in attendance were particularly outspoken, challenging gender boundaries among more conservative colleagues. Participants were drawn from across ideological and political divides. Ideological diversity is not without its pitfalls—conversations, particularly around theological and political matters, were occasionally tense, but participants were committed to remaining engaged with their colleagues, the workshop’s neutral location and Chatham House rule allowed for even heated exchanges to remain productive.

At the close of the workshops, multiple participants expressed that the diversity of their colleagues and the opportunity to pursue dialogue within the Muslim community around a shared topic of grave concern to the community as a whole was a vitally important opportunity. Their interactions in the workshops around shared goals has the potential to reduce religious conflict beyond the issue of Daesh; for example, two workshop participants from two different ideological backgrounds have made media appearances together in their home country in the wake of workshop one to discuss ideological extremism. Future workshops will include a more specific focus on intra-Muslim dialogue and coalition building as effective strategies for civic engagement and preventing violent extremism of all kinds.

### **Belgium After Brussels Attacks: Profiles, Recruitment, and the Need for Rehabilitation**

TCC research in the MENA region have foregrounded the problem of returning foreign fighters and effective return and reintegration policy in preventing violent extremism. The workshop highlighted the complexity of Daesh returnees' dossier and explored community engagement models that offer supportive pathways for youth at risk. The security approach of "catch, kill, and disrupt" adopted by some governments have not addressed this threat. On the contrary, it further alienated and marginalized entire communities. Approaching the issue entirely from a security lens makes it difficult for civil society organizations to develop effective interventions.

The workshop featured a European legal expert, a specialist in terrorism cases, on the complex profiles of returnees and their prosecution in Belgium. There is no one profile of foreign fighters in terms of religious knowledge, education level, age, or prison record in Belgium; the heterogeneous profiles among Daesh recruits elsewhere was confirmed by participants from France, Tunisia, and Morocco. However, general trends in the prosecution of terrorism cases in Belgium indicate that the rate of terrorism arrests has increased dramatically since 2013, and that suspects are younger and the number of women arrested has increased. Contrary to popular reporting, the reference to a professional network of recruiters as the only source is an exaggeration that helps fuel the fantasy of this dossier. Networks that facilitate recruits to Daesh in Syria, Iraq, or Libya can sometimes be "haphazard and improvised."

A distinction was made between the first flow of foreign fighters and those that recently joined. Contrary to popular myth, the first wave of recruits leaving to Syria in late 2012-13, felt compelled to go as a moral obligation—they saw Muslims being massacred and went to fight Assad's regime, joining a variety of groups to do so. Some returned to Belgium quickly, disillusioned, suffering from what they witnessed in the conflict, and were subsequently arrested and stigmatized for their participation in the conflict. Workshop participants noted that this reflected the history of foreign fighters from Morocco and Tunisia in Afghanistan over the past decades, many of whom left to fight the Soviet army with the backing of their governments, only to be stigmatized upon their return and imprisoned on charges of terrorism. Currently, returnees are under increasing pressure from state institutions and public discourse: "they are defined by the media, they are demonized, they are public but also very hidden, nobody sees them, nobody knows them." This situation too was reflected in other contexts. One Moroccan participant

lamented the lack of lawyers in Morocco to take the cases of returnees or those suspected of terrorism. A participant from Tunisia cited the ambiguity of terrorism laws that allow the arrest of those only tangentially connected to extremist networks.

Participants agreed that developing effective rehabilitation programs is absolutely necessary. Participants said that countering Daesh must be about much more than arguing against—religious and community leaders must make counter-offers, and images of successful, fulfilled Muslim lives must populate our international media. The daily grind of images of violence and poverty in parts of the Muslim world ubiquitous in international media have an effect on Muslim youth. One European imam assessed the impact of this on youth in his congregation: “Daesh becomes like a dream to some of the young. When doors are closed in their faces in Europe, the door to *hijra*, to Daesh, is thrown open. Maybe we should look at ourselves and the advice that we give. Youth must be allowed to have a dream.” Another noted that, when it comes to radicalization, that “imams are the first line of defense, but the answers that the imam gives do not have to be just about religion. Imams need to be psychologists too.”

Participants agreed that effective strategies in prevention, de-radicalization, and rehabilitation are essential, but also very hard to actualize under pressure of security-focused counterterrorism policy in Europe and the MENA region. A relaxation of the punitive approach in favor of a reintegration model for returnees must be a central pillar in any policy designed to mitigate violent extremism.

### **Mastering the Message: Combating Daesh On- and Offline**

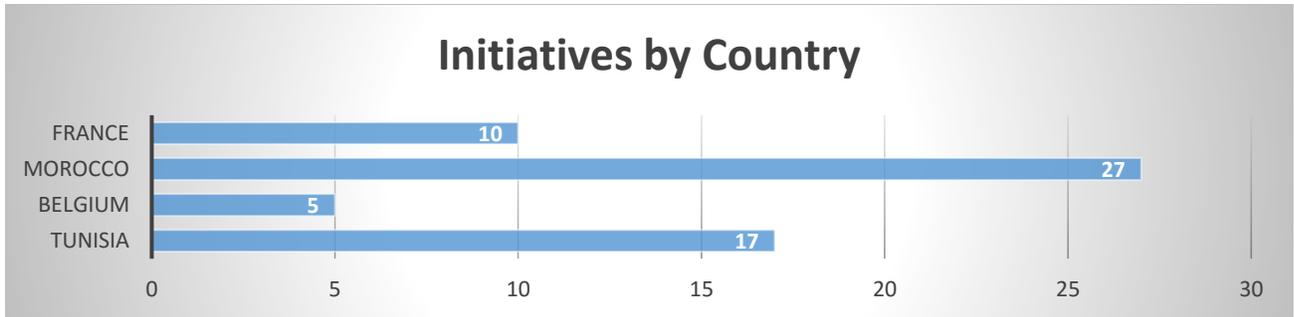
Daesh has pioneered new methods of recruitment and outreach that will outlive their territorial ambitions. TCC expert Dr. Houda Abadi provided workshop participants with analysis of recent developments in Daesh recruitment propaganda. Given their recent losses of territory, Daesh narratives focused on jihad have increased relative to narratives predicated on holding territory, such as providing law and order or social services. Participants were asked to view and deconstruct several recent Daesh videos, analyzing them in terms of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral appeals. TCC analysis emphasized the way online and offline recruitment strategies work together, and asked participants to reflect on key points in the recruitment chain where interventions are most likely to succeed. Several imams reflected on Daesh tech savviness. One European imam stated that Daesh leader, Al Baghdadi, has a very simple and short discourse. Imams should learn from this and simplify their sermons and populate the online space.

Building on the technical skills presented in workshop one, expert Mark Robinson of the Digital Media Lab at UNC-Chapel Hill worked with participants to, first, advance participant knowledge in media and, second, to provide guided practice in the process of making a media campaign plan for implementation within the counter-narrative strategy. On day 1 and 2, groups were formed by countries, so that the message produced is hyperlocal, and participants worked collaboratively to script, shoot, edit and present a short video designed to offer alternative narratives to Daesh’s discourse. The level of videos produced shows a palpable progress in technical knowledge and understanding of the power of storytelling. They incorporated complex editing and narrative

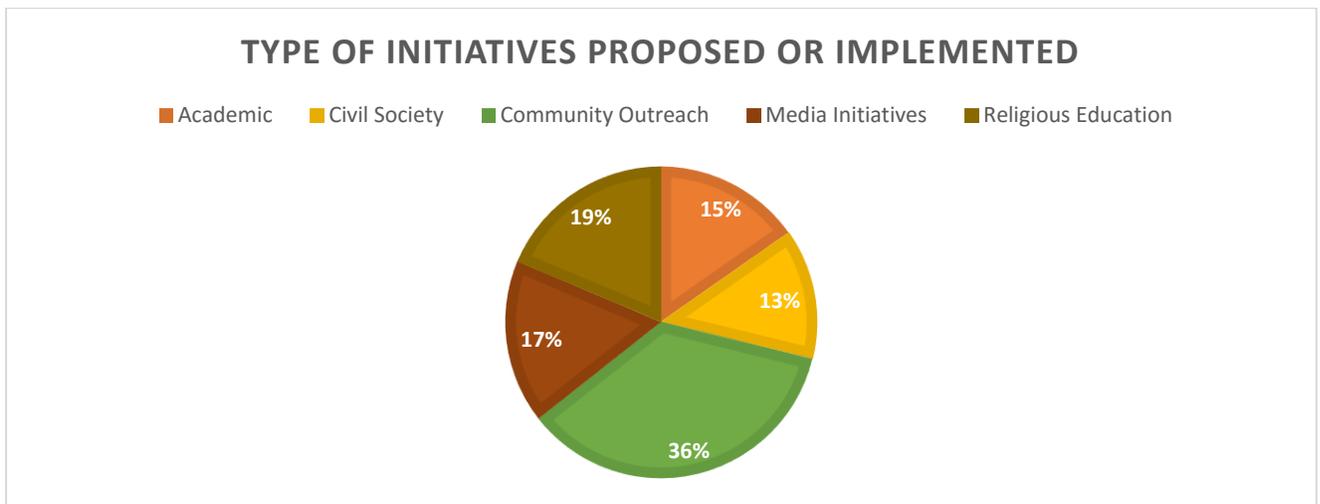
techniques, produced and edited entirely on smart phones. Participants viewed and assessed each other’s work, and workshop experts provided technical advice.

In their local communities, each workshop participant is engaged in planning and implementing projects designed to prevent violent extremism. Twenty-three participants are engaged in 59 total projects in four different countries. Figure 1 illustrates the number of project being implemented by country; figure 2 identifies the 59 projects by category:

**Figure 1: Participant Projects by Country**



**Figure 2: Participant Projects by Classification**



Workshop participants are engaged in a variety of activities both on- and off-line. After workshop one, a Tunisian imam produced several videos of his anti-Daesh sermons integrated with advanced video techniques and posted them online. Another Tunisian imam published several articles in major newspapers based on TCC workshop information, gave lectures at mosques and participated in panel discussions criticizing Daesh on television and radio, including a radio conversation with a conservative Salafi imam and fellow workshop participant. This in particular highlights the workshop’s effectiveness in building intra-Muslim coalitions in the fight against Daesh’s ideology and the importance in bringing an ideological diverse set of Muslim interlocutors to the table.

Another Tunisia participant, a civil society actor, is working through a non-profit to provide psychological service to returnees and attempting to rescue young Tunisians, including children, caught abroad when family members were recruited. Other participants are participating in local workshops and conferences to empower women and families to discourages recruitment, others are working with teachers in at-risk and marginalized communities to combat Daesh recruitment with education. Participants have future plans to build websites to counter extremist ideology; develop summer camp curricula that teach social skills, conflict mediation, and dialogue; produce a series of videos that covey the real meaning of Islam through sports and art; build lobbying campaigns around criminal justice reform and human rights; and working with university students to build social media campaigns in Islam and citizenship.

## Conclusions

The Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda workshop two built upon the successes of workshop one by enriching the sense of community and collective responsibility that developed among participants. Various themes generated and stimulated genuine discussion amongst participants- even at times tense- that helped them articulate a common vison and initiated a healthy and much needed honest exchange. Based on topic discussed and participant feedback, future workshops will include sessions on women and child soldiers, intra-Muslim dialogue and coalition-building, and elevating technical capacity in video production to branding and communication strategies. Participants will continue to report on their project development and implementation, and will benefit from interactive workshops with experts and peers that aids in the reach of their individual interventions.

The Carter Center  
One Copenhill  
453 Freedom Parkway  
Atlanta, Georgia 30307



[www.cartercenter.org](http://www.cartercenter.org)