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Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda Workshop 4

Gendering the Fight Against All Extremisms:

Creating Active Agents for Sustainable Change and Community Resilience

March 2017

Executive Summary

On March 1 – 4, 2017, The Carter Center (TCC) convened the fourth and final Countering Daesh workshop. The workshops are designed to identify flaws in Daesh’s narratives, develop an approach to discredit Daesh propaganda and the rise of Islamophobia, and build capacity among religious and community leaders for local engagement. Participants included 22 Muslim leaders from Belgium, France, Morocco and Tunisia. While representing a wide range of political and ideological views, these leaders possess capacities essential to prevent the spread of violent extremism, including significant social capital, grassroots knowledge, and local outreach. The workshop was facilitated by staff from The Carter Center as well as experts.¹ The Center’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Ambassador Mary Ann Peters, also participated.

Presentations and discussions centered around five major themes: 1) Daesh’s gendered recruitment strategies and role of women in preventing violent extremism; 2) Daesh recruitment and indoctrination of children; 3) Rights-based approach to reintegration of ex-foreign fighters; 4) Importance of participatory media in delegitimizing extremist propaganda; and 5) Building intra-Muslim cohesion, and developing strategic political tools against all forms of extremism. The meeting also offered participants the opportunity to provide updates on implementation of their local projects. The workshop concluded with the participants sharing their reflections on all

¹ Experts included: Ms. Ava Linea, Counselor at a deradicalization counseling network in Germany; Manal Omar, Associate Vice President of United States Institute of Peace (USIP); Daisy Khan, Founder and Executive Director of the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality; Khadija Ryadi, a prominent human rights activist and Former President of Moroccan Association for Human Rights; and Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, President of the World for All Foundation and former South African Ambassador to the United States.

four workshops and providing recommendations for future activities and collaborations. A sense of trust, mutual collaboration, and collective responsibility emerged as positive outcomes of the workshops.

Daesh's Gendered Recruitment Strategies and the Role of Women in Preventing Violent Extremism

TCC Associate Director, Dr. Houda Abadi, opened the workshop with a presentation on Daesh's recruitment of women. She questioned why an organization like Daesh, which is fundamentally misogynistic and patriarchal, has recruited successfully young women, both from Muslim-majority countries as well as the west. To ensure a better understanding of the many reasons motivating women to participate in Daesh, Dr. Abadi challenged the prevalent media portrayal of women in Daesh as "Jihadi Brides," passive victims, or subsidiary supporters of male fighters with little to no influence in the organization's overall structure. Men and women are susceptible to Daesh's rational and emotional appeals. However, Daesh also taps into gender-specific grievances for recruitment. The push factors include: 1) economic disadvantage and political oppression; 2) discrimination and marginalization based on one's religious expression and/or racial-ethnic background; and 3) gender-exclusion. Pull factors include: 1) sense of agency and alternative vision of freedom and empowerment, 2) concrete material advantages; 3) pure practice of faith; and 4) sisterhood and community. Participants also discussed the many roles women play in advancing Daesh's ideological and military agenda. Women in Daesh are regarded as the guardians of the *caliphate*, responsible for indoctrinating the next generation of child soldiers as the mothers of "lion cubs." Women also serve as propaganda translators, recruiters, *Nasheed* and poem writers, law enforcers, fundraisers, and even military combatants.

Just as it is important to acknowledge women's role as perpetrators of terrorist acts, it is necessary to recognize their pivotal role in creating foundations for sustainable and inclusive approaches to peace and security. Ms. Manal Omar, argued that any meaningful approach to preventing violent extremism must engage women activists and community leaders as frontline decision-makers. Omar emphasized that women are the gatekeepers of their communities with unique knowledge of their neighborhoods. One participant summed up the point noting: "Women are integral to peacebuilding. We must break the stereotype that peace and security is a man's job." Ms. Daisy Khan discussed women's legacy in Islam to challenge patriarchal norms. Dr. Abadi pointed out that women not only have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh, but, given their social and community capital, can play an important role in framing the overall discourse on PVE.

The Phenomenon of Children in Daesh's Communication Propaganda

Dr. Abadi led a session on day 2 with a focus on Daesh's approach to children who are an important asset for its growth and long-term survival. Daesh is recruiting children at an unparalleled rate with an aim to create an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism that could outlive its territorial loss. Reflecting on children in Daesh's propaganda videos, one participant noted: "Daesh is using children to increase the emotional appeal and resonating power of its messages."

Discussions also focused on Daesh's methodology for recruiting children. For local recruitment, Daesh uses opportunities to mobilize support and systematically condition children, reaching them in schools, mosques, town squares, and markets. Another recruitment tactic depends on desensitizing children to violence, achieved by forcing children to witness public executions. To recruit foreign children, Daesh offers adventure, a sense of purpose, and an inclusive society that welcomes and celebrates Muslims from all national and socio-economic backgrounds.

This session resulted in a profound dialogue with participants, who noted that children within Daesh territories are the most vulnerable demographic. While it is impossible to prevent children inside Daesh territories from joining its ranks, strong measures must be taken to prevent foreign recruitment. Ambassador Rasool, noted that children and youth between the ages of 12-18 have an increased appetite for risk and adventure, but often lack appropriate outlets to express those urges. This makes them vulnerable to Daesh's false promises of adventure and empowerment. It is therefore important to provide young children with opportunities for adventures. Steps are also needed to nurture their imagination, stimulate critical thinking, and provide them with safe avenues for legitimate risk-taking. One participant who is a youth mentor shared his experience: "It is important to find creative ways to continually inspire and involve young children on both physical and emotional levels." In the end, participants expressed appreciation to TCC for delving into this subject that, despite being so consequential, is often excluded from the policy debates on Daesh's recruitment methods.

Rights Based Approach to Reintegration of Foreign Fighters

With Daesh's increasing loss of territory, the challenge of foreign fighters returning to their home countries has become even more acute. To date, counterterrorism policies on foreign fighters emphasize exclusively a security approach. While this approach is needed, participants noted that an exclusive reliance could intensify the risk of terrorist recidivism. Drawing from their extensive research and fieldwork, Manal Omar and Ava Linea, emphasized the need for a holistic approach to reintegration that includes programs at the individual, family, and community levels. Increasing attention should be placed on creating social environments that can serve as an emotional anchor for returnees. Programs should be designed to provide returnees with access to education, life skills, employment, and psychosocial and legal support. Reintegration efforts must also focus on addressing root causes that triggered the fighters' departure in the first place. Governments must provide counter-offers in the form of opportunities and prospects that render rejoining the society and abandoning previous allegiances appealing for the returnees.

Khadija Ryadi discussed the challenges faced by activists in the North African region who are working on issues of deradicalization and reintegration. The implementation of rights-based approach to reintegration is severely hampered by the absence of the rule of law, and governments' propensity for a security approach that adopts a one-size-fits-all strategy. As one participant stated, "any successful rehabilitation program must consider the specificities of each returning individual and the sociopolitical contexts of the countries to which they are returning." Even if governments are willing to create a balance between security measures and rights-based approach, governments encounter operational barriers, such as the lack of capacity to distinguish between different categories of returnees and to accurately track their flows. Ryadi concluded by

urging that rights-based approach to reintegration cannot materialize in a vacuum without grassroots activism and mobilization. To this end, human rights defenders have a major role to play in lobbying and advocating for policy change as well as cultivating positive relationships with Islamist organizations that work on reintegration.

Political and Social Strategies for Change and Action

Ambassador Rasool, articulated the need for Muslim leaders to develop a value-based paradigm, inspired by the Quranic model, that inform their messages and actions. The values would include Quranic notions of justice, honor, dignity, tolerance, and coexistence. Adopting such a paradigm will permit Muslim leaders to foster solidarity and greater convergence among various communities of faith. Ambassador Rasool further highlighted that while Muslims are good at committing to principles and determining tactics, they fail at developing strategies that cut across ideological and political fault-lines. Participants agreed that to counter effectively all forms of extremism, Muslims must unify amongst themselves, understand their rights and duties as citizens, and strike partnerships with other social and political groups that promote peaceful coexistence. The strategy is to focus and build on the commonalities that Muslims share with their natural allies, and overcome any differences that might weaken the collective goal. After wide-ranging discussions, participants developed an implementation plan for future activities that captured their vision, strategic objectives, central challenges, and narrative-paradigm shifts. Participants ended on an optimistic note and vowed to follow through with this strategic plan to achieve policy outcomes in their respective countries.

Reclaiming the Narratives: Participatory Media and Citizen Journalism

The final session focused on the importance of alternative media platforms in efforts for Muslims to reclaim their narratives. The twin threats of Daesh and Islamophobia pose challenges to Muslim communities around the world. Yet an unprecedented opportunity exists for Muslim communities to reclaim their voices. Muslims must endeavor to move beyond conventional media approaches and adopt innovative and media-savvy ways to populate the online space in a manner that discredits hate-driven rhetoric of extremists. Participants reflected upon the need to revise their approach in countering Daesh propaganda, with one noting “even though Muslim leaders have made progress in countering Daesh’s narratives, most responses have been dense and hyper-rational.” Acknowledging this limitation, Dr. Abadi stressed that an effort is missing to respond simultaneously to the strong emotional appeals that Daesh generates.

The session also examined the role of citizen media in combating Islamophobia, which is fueled by the use in the western media of crude and exaggerated stereotypes to portray Muslims. Diversification of how Muslims are presented can help combat such negative characterizations. Dr. Abadi presented the example of an American Muslim couple, who, after the San Bernardino and Paris attacks, launched a campaign called #AskAMuslim to fight Islamophobia. The couple designed creative ways to engage in dialogue. These efforts were shared on social media, including Facebook, and reported in local and national news outlets. The effort resulted in the creation of a movement that has presence in universities. Dr. Abadi emphasized the importance of using creative methods to counter all extremism. Participatory media and citizen journalism have the potential to empower individuals and raise collective societal consciousness. However,

for alternative media to work effectively, Dr. Abadi stressed that online efforts must be supplemented with offline organization, mobilization, and political participation.

Conclusions

The workshop participants took advantage of iterative training over the course of the four workshops. Participants were provided space during the workshop to present detailed progress reports on their local initiatives. They also used the opportunity to share successes and challenges and consider opportunities for the future. Based on their understanding of the need to focus on emotional as well as rational appeals, as Daesh does, they have designed and launched nearly 60 individual and collective projects across multiple vectors, including online media, religious outreach, youth engagement, and gender programming.

Important lessons for PVE practitioners and grassroots religious and community leaders have emerged from the first phase of the project. Participants acknowledged that aggressive security approaches are not only ineffective, but also place additional pressures on already marginalized and at-risk communities. There is a need for inclusive approaches to PVE that include the following: 1) gender-conscious agenda; 2) hyper-local media strategies that include emotional and rational appeals; 3) engagement with mainstream and conservative religious leaders; 4) a twin approach to extremism that addresses Daesh and the impact of Islamophobia; 5) rigorous and locally rooted research; and, 6) counteroffers or alternatives to marginalized communities.

Effective programs must be community-led and designed to respond to the strengths and challenges of local contexts. Mastering innovative and media-savvy ways to populate the online space is a crucial strategy in the overall fight against all extremisms. Youth, women, and religious leaders play a critical role in this process. As positive agents of change, their meaningful engagement avoids further entrenching of the security approach to PVE. Women not only have the insight to respond to the gender-specific vulnerabilities exploited by terrorist groups like Daesh, but given their social capital and fluency in cultural vocabulary, they are also an important asset in shaping the overall discourse on PVE.

For the next phase of the project, TCC will continue to engage with the participants and assist them in expanding their local activities. TCC will also extend the training to a new cohort of participants from Tunisia, Morocco, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Participants from phase one will be invited as mentors to share their field experiences with the new cohort in the next round of workshops.

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