

THE CARTER CENTER



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Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism

New Cohort Workshop I Report

March 2018

Executive Summary

The Carter Center (TCC) convened a three-day workshop in Switzerland on March 16-18, 2018, with a new cohort of religious and community leaders from Belgium, France, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and the US. This is the first workshop in Phase 2 of TCC's Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) initiative. Participants included mainstream and conservative religious leaders, lawyers, human-rights activists, teachers, and journalists with large local networks and the social capital to influence public discourse. Participants quickly developed a shared sense of purpose around preventing violent extremism, and independently established an online communication platform before even the workshop ended in order to continue the discussion remotely. They also felt inspired by the 60 grassroots PVE projects established by the Phase 1 participants, and they look forward to assuming local ownership of their own initiatives in due course.

Four principal themes underpinned the three days' sessions: 1) deconstructing and countering of Daesh recruitment propaganda; 2) understanding Islamophobia and white supremacy; 3) reclaiming narratives through social media and participatory politics; and 4) fostering intra- and inter-Muslim coalitions in the fight against extremism.

Understanding Violent Extremist Propaganda

TCC associate director, Houda Abadi, introduced participants to the origins, methods and lessons learned through the Center's Inclusive Approaches to PVE project. Through action-oriented research and reiterative capacity-building workshops, the project aims to discredit Daesh propaganda and the rise of Islamophobia through an alternative, grassroots model that focuses on strengthening capacity among local religious and community leaders.

A significant proportion of workshop participants had no familiarity with Daesh propaganda material. Participants were briefed on Daesh recruitment methods and political communication; Daesh exploits image and text to construct culturally-specific narratives that garner legitimacy, foster division, and promote violent action. Workshop participants were particularly interested in the seven narratives that TCC has identified in Daesh propaganda, and surprised to note the scarcity of purely religious narratives. Overall, TCC analysis shows that explicitly religious arguments appeared in roughly 9% of Daesh videos; 58% of videos analyzed contain no Quranic references whatsoever.¹ Participants learned that Daesh's communication strategies evolve in real time. Current propaganda urges sympathizers to commit acts of terror in their countries of origin. Simultaneously, the proportion of videos advertising state-building and providing social services has declined (from 18% to 6%) since the group's 2015 territorial peak, while narratives of military jihad have increased (from 37% to 56%) and religious appeals (from 6% to 15%).

Training on extremist recruitment propaganda included interactive sessions where participants were asked to analyze and deconstruct a compilation of Daesh recruitment videos. Participants noted that thematically videos could appeal to all Muslims, while simultaneously containing hyperlocal aspects. The slick logo and editing of the videos helped establish a Daesh "brand" and veneer of legitimacy. Participants commented on the racial diversity and harmony portrayed in the videos. The balance between scenes of violence and a utopian setting was also acknowledged.

¹ See The Carter Center, *Guidebook of Research and Practice to Preventing Violent Extremism*, September 2017, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/countering-isis/guidebook-of-research-and-practice-to-preventing-violent-extremism.pdf

Following the Daesh-produced material, participants were given the opportunity to critique a de-radicalization video disseminated by a Western government. Participants observed that the video relied on stereotypes and that the message of the video was severely compromised by the messenger; reflecting the reality that governments are often perceived as lacking legitimacy on religious issues and that prevention programming is more effective when community-led.

The Rise of Islamophobia and White Supremacy Groups

The extremism practiced by Daesh is not unique, nor is it the most urgent threat for Western Muslims, many of whom face Islamophobia in the form of hate crimes and discriminatory state policies. Heidi Beirich, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) Intelligence Project, highlighted the parallels between Daesh and white supremacy groups. Recruits of both suffer from social dislocation and grievances, develop a sense of belonging in on- and offline communities and consider themselves the protagonists of their own narratives. Hate has become increasingly globalized and intersectional (misogyny, anti-semitism, Islamophobia and homophobia feed into one another.) The SPLC's tracking of US hate groups reveals a steady rise in the number of white supremacy groups since 2000. Between 2016 and 2017, US anti-Muslim hate groups increased from 101 to 114. This real-world expansion is dwarfed by the proliferation of hatred in the online space, and the growth of both correlates with the increasing normalization of white supremacist views in political discourse.

Islamophobia holds that terrorism is solely a Muslim problem, and Beirich showed that combating it requires widespread acknowledgement that white organizations are not only capable of terrorist violence but are actively engaged in terrorism in the US. She expressed her confidence that a firm foundation of facts and figures, when allied with compelling emotional narratives, could begin to change the tide of public perception. The positive representation of Muslims as inspirational figures might also begin to alleviate the situation. Meanwhile, SPLC continues to work with social media organizations to remove hate speech.

Marouane Mohamed, the former Executive Director of the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), considered how Islamophobia is aided and abetted by the state and social

structures, in contrast to Beirich's presentation on overt racism and hatred. The 2015 Bataclan attacks allowed the French government to implement prepared-in-advance state of emergency measures (such as border controls, home raids) that disproportionately and misguidedly target French Muslims. Furthermore, statistics on Islamophobic acts suffer from underrepresentation: 1 in 5 victims of anti-Muslim hate-crimes do not report the abuse. Reasons for underreporting include fear that reporting will lead to additional state scrutiny of the community, lack of awareness of rights and law, or the belief that reporting abuse will not lead to justice. Mohamed explained that corrosive Islamophobic narratives popular in the French media depicting a Muslim invasion of Western societies serve to legitimize discrimination.

Mohamed offered some proposals to improve the situation. He noted that the most effective counter-narrative to "Muslims are dangerous" is not "Muslims are nice" but rather "Muslims are normal": Muslims must be portrayed as real humans with positive and negative traits. Inspirational role models and representations of prominent Muslims are also necessary to galvanize and inspire youth. Mohamed also strongly advocated for the rigorous collection of data. Data can provide a clearer idea of the scope of the problem, thereby enabling groups to plan, target and fund-raise campaigns against Islamophobia. Data also allows relatively small NGOs to have a big impact. Despite the emphasis on statistics, Mohamed acknowledged that certain components of Islamophobia cannot be quantified, such as the psychological toll of Islamophobic narratives and micro-aggressions.

Participants agreed that the reporting of hate crimes should be interpreted as a sign of strength, not weakness. Participants also concluded that data alone was not sufficient; statistics must be combined with compelling anecdotes to develop powerful narratives that counter extremism and support justice.

The Power of Story-Telling: Social Media and Navigating a Hostile Media Environment

Over the past decade, political and media landscapes have changed dramatically through increased communication, citizen journalism and ubiquitous social media platforms. With biased media coverage of Muslims and crude stereotypes on the one hand, and Daesh overpopulating the media

space on the other, local Muslim leaders must shift their roles from passive consumers of media to active producers of their own stories. Several workshop sessions were designed to equip participants with media training for effective counter-narratives. Wajahat Ali, a New York Times contributor and Emmy-nominated producer, emphasized the importance of stories as vehicles for strengthening grassroots organizations and sustaining solidarities among local communities. Ali reviewed the basic elements of effective storytelling, reminding participants that if they neglected to write their own stories, others, including Daesh and the Islamophobia industry, would do it for them.

In a particularly effective session, participants were given four minutes to prepare their own stories utilizing the elements of narrative, and then their stories were discussed by the groups and revised. The participants were introduced to the core components of the “public story”: “me” (a story of the self), “us” (the shared goals of the community) and “now” (the choice the community must now make). Having established these principles, participants returned to their stories and composed more emotionally effective stories. Participants acknowledged that, previously, they had struggled to convey their message concisely. The session concluded with the top rules for communicating a message. These comprised the importance of combining emotions with facts, the storytellers’ need to cultivate their own authority and the ability to offer concrete, practical solutions.

Media training sessions also focused on social media and citizen journalism as a potentially effective means of storytelling to impact the political and media landscape. Experts focused on the opportunities and challenges of navigating complex media landscapes and claiming alternative platforms; outlined the four main functions of social media – storytelling; networking; promoting one’s ideas and projects; publishing – and suggested a selection of core rules to make the most of this resource. Some of these rules – what you say matters less than how it is interpreted and, the accuracy of facts is more crucial than the immediacy of the message – really resonated with participants. Interactive sessions required participants to create and share one original story on social media. The story had to be personal, illustrate a shared value, connect with their communities and inspire action. At the end of the day, the social-media post with the greatest impact was declared the winner.

Additional interactive group activities put the media trainings into practice. Participants were presented with a simulated news-flash on a terrorist attack in a Western city with a perpetrator identified as Muslim. Workshop participants were divided into six groups and modeled answering questions in front of a hostile media. Participants' response to the media expressed their condemnation of the attack; emphasized that terrorism knows no religion, ethnicity or nationality; dissected the true meaning of the word *jihad*; urged a rights-based approach to tackling violent extremism; and called for the media to provide Muslims with a platform on a regular basis and not solely in the aftermath of an attack. Participants received constructive criticism from their peers. Positive attributes included the supporting of their answers with statistics; the calls for solidarity and the use of vivid anecdotes. Areas for improvement focused on the dangers of analyzing terminology immediately after an attack where nuances are overlooked and the tendency to be overly defensive and apologetic. While it was intense, most participants engaged with and valued this activity.

Political and Social Strategies for Effective Action

Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, former South African Ambassador to the United States and founder of the World for All Foundation, shared key lessons from South Africa relevant to the fight against extremism. A struggle for justice must remain moral with inclusive processes for justice and reconciliation. South Africa's Muslims refused to prioritize their suffering or elevate their enslavement over other forms of oppression. This stems from the awareness that different types of oppression come from a single source and are mutually reinforcing. Rasool argued that the problems of Daesh and Islamophobia are profound, but not isolated or unique. Effective change requires partnerships with other groups that address all forms of extremism.

Partnerships can be divided into three different categories: alliances (long-term principled agreements between people with shared values); coalitions (medium-term arrangements with shared goals and objectives); and campaigns (ad hoc partnerships formed on an issue-by-issue basis). Ambassador Rasool invited participants to consider with which groups in their communities they could partner. Belgian and French participants, as representatives of their country's Muslim

minority, found it hard to envisage alliances with any long-term partners. Instead, they envisaged medium-term coalitions with civil society organizations working on human-rights issues. Participants from Libya had the sole main objective of uniting warring parties under a single government and expressed their willingness to work with almost any group to achieve this. US participants were more specific and suggested medium- to long-term coalitions with African-American organizations and even an ad hoc campaign with Republican groups on shared issues. Ambassador Rasool explained that the formation of such strategic partnerships could be aided by defining one's opponents and obstacles. He again requested contributions from participants and the response varied by region. Participants from North African countries such as Morocco and Tunisia both cited corruption, economic difficulties and a lack of education. French participants explicitly identified Islamophobia, while the US listed white supremacy and the apathy of the Muslim community.

Having stressed the need for partnerships, Ambassador Rasool inspired participants with his call for intersectional solidarity. This can develop from an intra-faith (within Islam), inter-faith (between other religious groups) and inter-community (moving beyond religion to incorporate government and civil society actors) basis. These partnerships will give Muslims the right to be considered the same as other groups, while maintaining their right to be different. Participants were moved by the South African example, and agreed that religious and community leaders must become engaged citizens, forming broad coalitions in a long-term struggle against extremism.

CVE Perspectives Between MENA and the West

Countering Violent Extremism programs in the U.S. have historically been narrowly focused on Muslim communities, revealing their fundamentally discriminatory impetus. Neglecting other forms of violent extremism and working only with Muslim communities plays into the hands of those who depict Muslims as always being the people in need of de-radicalization. While these programs have sought to build resilience and prevent violent extremism, this narrow security approach has made American Muslim communities, in many cases, perceive these programs as just another surveillance and intelligence-gathering exercise. However, Muslim communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which are the primary victims of violent extremists,

feel acutely the need for preventing violent extremism programming instead of countering. They are both the primary physical victims of extremist violence and suffer from the aggressive security approach.

Conclusions and the Way Forward

A sense of trust and a desire for collaboration developed among the participants over the course of the workshop. Mutual understanding and a shared sense of purpose overcame barriers based on nationality, gender, and political and religious ideology. Participants immediately established an online communication platform to continue their discussions remotely and they are keen to meet again for the second reiterative workshop in mid-2018. They felt inspired by the 60 grassroots PVE projects established by the Phase 1 participants and they look forward to assuming local ownership of their own initiatives in due course.

There was broad recognition that religious and community leaders should take a more active role in navigating online media, and post-workshop evaluation surveys indicated that participants requested more in depth training on media and coalition-building. Participants encouraged The Carter Center to continue its engagement on these issues. The expanding networks of PVE practitioners developed through these reiterative workshops have the potential to promote peace and advance a culture of human rights at home and abroad.

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