



THE CARTER CENTER
Countering Daesh Recruitment Propaganda Experts Workshop
March 2016

Executive Summary

The Carter Center (TCC) convened an experts workshop on Feb. 22 – 24, 2016, that brought together 21 leading scholars and practitioners from 10 different countries to examine new insights in Daesh recruitment strategies and its use of social media technologies to appeal to alienated youth. Five thematic issues were addressed: branding efforts, foreign fighters, the recruitment and emotional appeal of women and youth, the support and empowerment of religious leaders, the return and reintegration of defectors, and sharing best practices and lessons learned Daesh has developed a modern, tech-savvy brand enabling its leadership to recruit marginalized youth across digital borders. Their communication strategies include the use of humor and cultural codes, re-appropriation of Western media, tech-savvy videos, and Daesh-created media events. Daesh’s visual focus allows viewers to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to understand the intended messages. Workshop panelists evaluated the messaging strategies for internal and external audiences — varying by language, subtitles, narratives, compositional elements, and gender. Participants agreed on a need for proper evaluation of Daesh video propaganda to understand the persuasive powers of these videos.

Most disaffected youth who have joined Daesh have little religious literacy and no prior connection to Syria, which provides Daesh a blank canvas for their brand of Islam — a “path to Jihad” through destruction and desperation. Daesh relies on a clash of civilizations between the West and the Muslim community. By amplifying the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment and racism in the West, Daesh creates a perfect breeding ground for youth extremism. Religious leaders who are trusted in their communities can influence potential recruits. Such leaders are the only ones who can credibly refute Daesh’s manipulation of religious texts and concept of caliphate.

Participants agreed that Daesh will continue to exist under different names, whether it be Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, or Al Shabab. Therefore, it is vital that effective partnerships be created for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and re-integration. Practitioners who work with defectors and families of radicalized youth urged governments to view returnees as opportunities rather than challenges. A successful example of defection was the case of one of the participants in the workshop, an ex-Jihadist, who now directly engages with online recruits and counters Daesh online narratives.

The panelists reviewed multiple case studies to illustrate the elasticity of Daesh’s appeal, notwithstanding background, gender, age, culture, or location. Discussions centered on the revolving supply of fighters, digital and physical paths to extremism, and different

government responses from security to community engagement models. Daesh's multi-narrative recruitment tactics require a multifaceted approach to countering them. While the development of well-crafted and localized narratives is critical to countering Daesh recruitment strategies, nevertheless, counter messages must be complemented with "counter offers," where local grievances are addressed. The battle against Daesh recruitment strategies cannot be won without effectively engaging religious and community leaders. Panelists agreed that Trust is the most important currency in countering violent extremism and in the credibility of counter narratives.

Daesh Branding Efforts in Media

Daesh relies on varied propaganda strategies distributed through print, visual, and social media. Workshop panelists on communication called for a proper evaluation of Daesh video propaganda to fully understand the persuasive powers the videos provide. One panelist suggested a series of issues to examine — language usage, arguments made, compositional elements used, and source of footage. Another panelist suggested approaching its persuasive methodology as a commercial enterprise marketing or branding its products — first identify the target audience, and second identify the existing mindsets. This could be achieved through neuro-marketing research, by conducting a series of surveys and focus groups, analyzing implicit and explicit emotional associations that cut across national, ethnic, and cultural distances and disparities.

While narrative identification assists counter-narrative processes, our communication panelists agreed that visual imagery is more likely to assist in radicalization of potential recruits. Using both imagery and graphics in its print propaganda, Daesh's visual focus allows viewers to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers to understand the intended messages. Its official magazine, *Dabiq*, is a platform for its external audiences — produced in English, French, Chinese, Russian and Turkish among other languages. *Dabiq*'s use of imagery is very apparent — an average of 88 photographs per issue were used, totaling more than 1100 images in the first 12 issues. Daesh's online periodical *Naba*, an Arabic-only news platform, is more clearly targeted at internal audiences. Unlike *Dabiq*, *Naba* has only 18 images on average per issue, totaling 176 images across 18 issues. To simplify information for its internal audience, Daesh consistently uses infographics in *Naba*, such as diagrams, icons, and maps. Specifically, these infographics focus on physical and psychological security, assuring internal audiences of a credible military entity while eliminating any credible information from Daesh enemies. Together, this combination provides a successful branding of Daesh as a trustworthy alternative to its Western counterparts.

The breadth of technology access by both Daesh and its audiences must not go unacknowledged. In addition to crisp print media, its rapid communication across social media applications like Twitter and WhatsApp is noteworthy. Near universal access has made it possible for youth in traditionally protected environments to be romanticized by "Hollywood"-style videography depicting a world with glorified violence, accessible sex slaves, and unrestricted influence in a new society. One of our experts discussed these romanticized scenes available first in digital gaming such as *Call of Duty*, which Daesh often masterfully re-creates or mimics in videos targeting potential youth fighters. Workshop panelists agreed that this type of branding must be combatted with media and religious literacy programs.

Workshop panelists concluded that no single counter-narrative would be successful, as Daesh is not producing a single narrative. Counter-policies must address Daesh recruitment strategies, acknowledge the complexity of its target audiences, and take into account the variation in imagery and technology. For instance, Daesh takes advantage of humor and culture codes to create identification with young Muslims who have been marginalized and disempowered. Following Boko Haram's kidnapping of over 200 girls, Daesh leadership and sympathizers re-rendered U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama Twitter campaign #BringBackOurGirls, to state #BringBackOurHumvees, poking fun at the United States' commissioned Iraqi vehicles now captured and used by Daesh fighters. Similarly, a popular photo distributed across platforms is of a forlorn U.S. President Barack Obama, with the American nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty" used as a caption. By pairing a widely recognized children's poem witnessing a character "having a great fall" with an image of the leader of the Western world, Daesh can visually fracture the strength of Western leadership and demonstrate its own supremacy.

The re-appropriation of Western media plays on a twin approach of humor and cultural codes. While Daesh uses humor and cultural codes to target individuals and fracture the image of Western leadership, the use of statements from major media such as CNN and FOX News provide a testament to the recognition and grandeur of Daesh. Often seen in its print media, Daesh will repurpose full speeches from former CIA directors, U.S. secretaries of defense, and Prime Ministers and Presidents, and use those words as confirmation of their "Islamic State."

Panelists agreed that there has been a heightened sense of fear since the Paris attacks in November 2015. The attacks committed or claimed by Daesh stir emotions of both Islamophobia and radicalism — further alienating mainstream Muslims living in Western countries. One of the workshop panelists dissected the Paris attacks, labeling them as "synchronized terrorism." This type of terrorism was presented chronologically, beginning with a physical attack, followed by rapid social media communication, and completed with modern branding strategies. Panelists stated that the U.S. public diplomacy model responds only to physical attacks but ignores Daesh's media battlefield — which benefits its grandiose branding image.

Flow of Foreign Fighters

An important statement made by one of the workshop panelists was "extremists are made — not born." Discussions centered on figures, digital and physical pathways, and different government responses from security to community engagement. By viewing data by country, participants agreed that Daesh aims for emotional appeals regardless of geopolitics in efforts to expand its *Khilafah*. To put it in plain numeric terms, Afghanistan attracted about 10,000 fighters in the 10 years following 9/11 — Syria has attracted at least double that number in less than five years of activity. An interesting case study is Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, where the highest number per capita of foreign nationals fighting for Daesh is found — nearly 6,000 individuals since 2013. In December 2014, Daesh directed its first video message at Tunisian citizens, featuring a Tunisian foreign fighter explaining how his government oppresses Muslims. Workshop panelists discussed the historic government policy context dating to the 1960s, specifically a struggle for a secular state. Most recently, in 2015, Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi sparked

reaction from the Daesh leadership and sympathizers, who proceeded to threaten that those who substitute earthly laws for *Shari'a* must be killed. This type of extreme religious rhetoric affirms the narrow definition of Islam by which Daesh abides, and thus declares war against mainstream Muslims. While none of the case studies individually explained the appeal of Daesh, what is clear is the exponential growth since the *Khilafah* declaration, and the unprecedented threat globally — the Daesh phenomenon has built a robust infrastructure on nearly every continent, not just in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. The discussion on the flow of foreign fighters raised two subcategories: the role of women and youth in recruitment and prevention, and return, rehabilitation and reintegration models.

Women & Youth Recruitment

A German participant in the workshop discussed the confrontation many youth face today deciding between their religion and their nationality; a decision in which Daesh states there is no room for integration. Daesh creates a clash of civilizations where it seems the West and the entire Muslim community must fight each other for lasting succession. By playing up cultural disparagement and the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments, Daesh creates a perfect dichotomy and a breeding ground for youth extremism.

This breeding ground thrives online, as Daesh has developed a modern, tech-savvy brand enabling its leadership to recruit marginalized youth across digital borders. Through social media platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp, recruitment conversations can be held, not monitored by their family or local governing bodies. A participant discussed his success in engaging online with Western youth who had expressed interest in travelling to Syria by challenging their interpretations of Islamic scripture. He would encourage private conversations to address reasons for joining. Many of the youth he engaged with based their choices on emotion rather than reason. He stated that PTSD would often develop due to repeated online interaction with and viewing of suffering of others. This type of engagement was hailed by workshop participants as more effective overall than traditional policy or intervention methods; however, it was also agreed that this type of guidance is difficult to re-create on a larger scale.

To tackle this identity crisis and dissonance, one of the workshop panelists founded a program in Germany that empowers young Muslims against Islamophobia and religious radicalization. Her program created a platform for critical and reflexive analysis of both radicalism and Islamophobia, stating: Both share the conviction that certain people are worth more than others; both work only through discrimination of unlike or unfamiliar people; and both portray the sphere of good vs. evil. She urges European Muslim youth to accept a hybrid identity: They are Muslims, they are German, and they belong to Europe. By hosting her workshops in German mosques, youth are enlightened on the multifaceted cultural heritage of Islam. Analyzing propaganda from German Salafi groups, the program provides a safe environment to discuss the impact on both German Muslim and non-Muslim society. She challenges imams to overcome language discrimination and gender-based stereotypes seen in traditional religious settings.

Along with youth, the role of women and girls was seen as important in Daesh recruitment. A panel was held on why women and girls are lured by Daesh propaganda, the role women play in prevention, and the need for counter-narrative messaging that is targeted for a female audience. Workshop participants were in agreement that the current analysis of

Daesh's gendered dimension has fallen short and needs to be researched further. Women and girls cannot be seen as only victims or mothers of violent extremists. This paradigm needs to shift. As gender is an important critical entry point for engaging communities in dealing with and countering Daesh, addressing the complexities of gender can help us understand violent extremism better.

Often, women already in Daesh play an active supporting role in recruiting other women or girls via social media platforms. Following the release of the New York Times article highlighting the raping of over 200 Yazidi women, Daesh added a section in its print media magazine *Dabiq* titled "To Our Sisters," responding directly to New York Times allegations.¹ One panelist, who opened a counseling program in German for persons involved in radical Salafist groups or on the path to radicalization, discussed the attractiveness of Daesh. Younger girls discussed wanting to be the "mothers of the first *Khilafah*," to help others in hospitals and social services settings (for which they are currently too young in Western societies), and to marry a strong fighter. To get out of their family and country, panelists said, underage girls will often travel with older girls or young women to the Turkish border where they are then transported in small groups to Syria.

However, the reality women and youth encounter is very different from original expectations. Upon arrival, Daesh controls every step of the integration process. First, all documents, communication devices, and forms of identification are confiscated. Young girls and women are placed in women-only housing, and put to work regardless of their choice. Women are allowed to fight but are more often used for the sexual satisfaction of men fighters. Workshop participants agreed that the marginalization of women and youth in societies must be addressed. Their inclusion in security discussions should not be restricted to gender and youth, but rather engage and empower them to be equal partners in peacebuilding efforts.

Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration

Given that Daesh will continue to exist under different guises, resiliency should be based on capable partnerships in de-radicalization, rehabilitation, and re-integration. A participant observed, "We must remember that insurgents and terrorists are not born, but created." This creation has been encouraged by quick fixes. Rather than creating an enterprise of private business, public servants, and nonprofit organizations, Western counter-terrorism strategy has focused on the "catch, kill, and disrupt" method. While there are challenges with both a security approach and community engagement, participants agreed that if programs are not established, these threats will regenerate in the future.

Practitioners shared stories of defectors and how their marginalization and alienation pushed them to join Daesh. These individuals were contacted through online social media and face-to-face communication. Practitioners who work with defectors and families of radicalized youth urged governments to view returnees as opportunities rather than challenges. Participants agreed that they can be a first-hand resource to understand Daesh

¹ The first "To Our Sisters" article was released in Issue 7 of *Dabiq* in February 2015 targeting women and girls. After the NYT rape article, "From Our Sisters" was released in Issue 9 featuring a female author [Umm Sumayyah] as the authoritative voice addressing capture and possession of slaves; however, the word "rape" was never used.

ideology and serve as a powerful voice against Daesh. One of our participants established a national counseling hotline on radicalization, partnering with the country's national immigration office, as a tool to redirect calls to local, nongovernmental partners. Contact must be made by returnees or respective families so risk assessment can be determined for counseling options. Individual counseling, offered in German, English, Arabic and Farsi, is then conducted systematically through three pillars: pragmatic, ideological, and affective. This pillar approach allows for a stable rehabilitation processes through basic work and a stable home environment, active communication to dismantle radical narratives, and the renewal of old social contacts to strengthen emotional bonds.

The concept of reintegration can be challenging based on regional policies; however, workshop participants offered numerous examples of active reintegration options that offer supportive pathways for youth at risk. In New York, the Arab-American Family Support Center adopted a "settlement house" model in 2009, in efforts to provide trauma-informed, culturally and linguistically competent social services. For 22 years, the Arab American Family Support Center has helped AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian) immigrants acclimate to adopted communities in New York City, through adult education and literacy programs, legal services programs, and anti-violence programs. Notably, their youth program serves students ages 7 to 18, encouraging academic excellence and collegiate ambitions by community participation, local excursions, and ESL programs. Additionally, the Center began a partnership with the New School's Engage Media Lab, creating the "I Need to Be Heard" project, which allows its students to learn technical and creative skills, create short films, and participate in national film festivals. This positive media education counter-acts the messages of the Daesh propaganda machine through youth empowerment and community engagement.

Role of Religious and Community Leaders

Unlike the media's portrayal, most disaffected youth who have joined Daesh have little religious literacy and no prior connection to Syria. This characteristic of religious illiteracy is supported by qualitative analysis completed by TCC, as well as through first-hand de-radicalization efforts by numerous participants. Panelists on the role of religious and community leaders highlighted the positive role that religious and community leaders can assume in countering extremism. Two of the participants who work on religious issues urged Muslim faith-based organizations to develop and adopt a more "*maqasid*," or values-oriented, approach in their curricula for presenting Islamic teachings that also encourages critical thinking. Additionally, religious leaders who are trusted by their communities and seen as authoritative can exert enormous influence on public opinion. They are the only ones who have the legitimate and authoritative power to refute Daesh manipulation of religious texts and the Daesh concept of caliphate.

Workshop participants agreed on the need to commit to long-term engagement of religious leaders who are authoritative and trusted among their communities. We cannot select religious leaders who only think "like us." There was a caution on the methodology of engaging religious leaders and the pitfalls of many international programs using top-down models. To avoid the "kiss of death," participants discussed the need to listen to religious leaders and to treat them as equal partners in peacebuilding efforts. Also, by elevating and amplifying voices of Muslim leaders who are involved in peacebuilding efforts, they can better counter Daesh's misuse of religion. Lastly, discussions also touched on the gendered

dynamic of religion and how the religious sphere is still controlled and maintained by men. There are few female religious scholars within the Muslim communities, and as such, there's an urgent need to nurture and empower women in religious scholarship.

Challenges in Countering Daesh: Government, Grievances, and Best Approaches

Daesh has capitalized on the political vacuum created by failed states and the failure of national governments to address core sociopolitical grievances. Increased militarization and fear of Islamophobia have spread in the rise of this violent group. Yet to date, discussions concerning how best to deal with Daesh's violent ideology have been superficial. These debates need to move beyond the military options, and instead, adopt nuanced approaches that will better diminish the emotional appeals that have been attracting foreign fighters. One of our panelists presented on the adoption of a broader approach encompassing peace, security, and development in Nigeria — an entirely non-military CVE program. The program was designed to engage already radicalized persons, prevent potential radicalization, counter extreme narratives, and provide psycho-sociological support for victims of terror. By engaging a horizontal — federal, state, local government — and vertical — civil society, academia, religious and community leadership — approach, the program utilized existing structures to ensure stability. While it is unknown if this tiered approach would succeed in a larger country, or a different region, the collaboration of government and civil society actors is likely to be crucial in both prevention and intervention of foreign fighters.

Following the conclusion of the workshop, participants were offered the opportunity to provide feedback to the organizers on the workshop and discuss next steps. TCC was urged to provide a platform for the following: a repository of resources, including but not limited to current TCC qualitative and quantitative data on videos, print media, and Qu'ranic sources; and to provide media training and understanding of Daesh narratives and approaches for Syrian women IDPs and to religious and community leaders. Participants urged TCC to be the main convener for bringing together community practitioners and academics to share global efforts in successful de-radicalization programs, rehabilitation programs, and community engagements.