



**Countering Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) Recruitment Workshop:**  
Counter-Messaging and the Role of Disillusioned Former Fighters  
8-10 June 2015  
Abu Dhabi, UAE

**SUMMARY REPORT**

**INTRODUCTION**

Foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) returning to their home countries from the conflict stimulated by the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” or ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil-Iraq wa as-Sham (DA’ESH) abroad, are a growing concern for many countries—particularly those in the international counter-DA’ESH coalition. Past conferences and workshops have focused on issues related to FTF rehabilitation and reintegration back into society, but the need for effective counter-narrative communication strategies to prevent the spread of violent extremism and terrorism is now more relevant than ever. The use of interviews, testimonials, and statements of once-inspired FTFs, who now denounce the actions of DA’ESH and other terrorist groups, can be potentially powerful in countering DA’ESH recruitment.

This three-day countering violent extremism (CVE) workshop—hosted by Hedayah, the Abu Dhabi-based international CVE center of excellence—convened government and non-government CVE practitioners to share communication approaches relevant to countering FTF radicalization and recruitment into DA’ESH, with a particular focus on the role of disillusioned FTFs in creating counter narratives/ messages. Over the course of the three days, participants were asked to apply knowledge gained from the panel sessions to create and develop the content and structure of an alternative or counter-narrative/message that involves actual case studies of individuals who have traveled to join DA’ESH.

This workshop served as a starting point to build on the CVE communications network and its projects that were developed during and after the Global CVE Expo 2014. It recognized the value of former FTFs as effective messengers and encouraged project development

between different sectors on counter messaging. The workshop enabled participants to identify the development process of counter-messaging and its key components. Panelists and keynote speakers demonstrated how to apply a counter-messaging framework that can be used as a model for regional and local approaches. Ultimately, this three-day workshop aimed to create a network of CVE communicators that will continue to engage and work together into the future.

## **DAY 1**

The workshop opened with an introduction from Hedayah's representative, who emphasized the need for more actors, across fields of expertise, to develop proactive and positive counter narratives to disrupt FTF recruitment. The role of youth was further emphasized, not only as the target audience of counter narratives, but also as active developers who can produce youth-based content.

The first panel established a common baseline understanding of FTF radicalization and recruitment. One key theme was acknowledging the importance in offering non-violent inspiring alternatives to those who may be inclined to support or join extremist groups. It was also suggested that more research should be developed to investigate the underlying brain physiology causation that increases one's vulnerability to radicalization and FTF recruitment. Some key push and pull factors that contribute to FTF recruitment were identified, including feelings of revenge, trauma, discrimination, guilt, as well as the search for purpose, meaning and the consolidation of gender identities. "Martyrdom" ideology was identified as a short-term psychological 'fix' for which proactive alternatives must be identified and shared, acknowledging that terrorists are not born, but made.

The second session provided a "counter-messaging 101" background and discussed the current trends and most useful approaches in the field. The panelists discussed the different types of narratives (i.e. positive/alternative, strategic, ideological/religious etc...) that are used to counter FTF recruitment, as well as the need to identify a clear target audience using credible, local messengers. They further highlighted the lack of collaboration between governments and private sector stakeholders in CVE efforts,

especially in the area of counter narrative development. Panelists expressed concern regarding the increasing focus on FTFs of Western origins, stressing the need to adopt a global perspective on the growing threat of recruitment. The session also emphasized ways to amplify Arab and Muslim audiences to discuss and deconstruct the drivers of FTF recruitment.

The third session discussed various FTF-relevant counter-messaging approaches that were either in the planning phase or currently in place. It included representatives from traditional media, new media, and community-based outreach. A senior official presenting at the workshop shared concerns on the rapid spread and threat of DA'ESH in North Africa, analytically comparing the group's ideology and propaganda to that of historical extremist organisations. He described DA'ESH messaging as one that turns vices into virtues and encouraged the adoption of a holistic approach to empower youth with a renewed meaning to life and contribution. The panelists also identified the development of a strong educational system that promotes creative and critical thinking as a key to reduce the push/pull factors associated with radicalization and FTF recruitment.

## **DAY 2**

The first session, of day 2, highlighted country and NGO examples of counter messaging programs employing former FTFs. Panelists shared the importance in understanding the regional context and perceptions when trying to amplify the voice of victims of terrorists. Successful counter-DA'ESH messaging techniques discussed by the panelists include sharing the stories of former radicals, highlighting testimonies of victims, and disseminating accounts of the living conditions under DA'ESH-held territories. In identifying Islamophobia as a key grievance that motivates some individuals' path towards radicalization, the panelists emphasized the need to acknowledge the different faces to extremism in every society.

The afternoon Q&A session welcomed participants to pose questions to former extremist focusing on the mechanics of finding and evaluating suitable messengers amongst the disillusioned FTF population. This included an exploration of overcoming obstacles, such as

fear of retaliation and persecution by governments and other extremists. The formers shared their personal radicalization experience, and the ways in which human kindness exhausted their hateful attitudes. They deplored the international community for failing to reach out to the young people and those below the radar, emphasizing that "time is not running out, it has run out already". They also highlighted the value of formers' experience and relatability to prospective recruits and called on more female formers voices to be amplified on the CVE platforms.

The last panel session of day 2 focused on strategic communications, specifically exploring what the message from a former FTF, who chooses to speak out, should be and how it should be packaged to enhance credibility, resonance, and persuasiveness. The panelists emphasized the importance to be dynamic and adapt narratives to an evolving context, in order to trump FTF recruitment tactics. They also suggested counter messengers to follow the influencer engagement models as well as brand ambassador programs to effectively integrate former FTFs stories in their campaign.

Finally, participants were invited to join breakout sessions to work through the process of developing a counter narrative in response to a specific FTF case study. The groups had to focus on identifying a type of counter-narrative, its key objectives and target audience, as well as a credible messenger and a suitable platform to share the final product.

### **DAY 3**

Day 3 of the workshop was dedicated to the development and management of content platforms as well as good marketing and amplification practices. The first session focused on the most effective means to compile, archive, and store a growing resource of materials that can be used by partners worldwide to counter the threat of FTF recruitment. The panelists outlined the process of broadcasting content, from developing a strong strategy, to ways of reducing the distance between the message and its target audience. They also emphasized how quantity is not necessarily a measure of success when assessing the impact of a CVE program. A smaller-scale, individualized, direct and offline approach can be as successful in reaching out to communities vulnerable to FTF recruitment. They finally

pointed to the identification of the different layers of responsibility for each partners involved in counter messaging as key to an effective campaign.

The second session highlighted the efforts of communications organizations and the work they are doing to create counter narratives against DA'ESH. Panelists identified the importance for counter-messaging developers to agree on what they stand for, and to develop a proactive, empowering and evidence-based narrative, as opposed to one that simply contradicts the messages sent by FTF recruiters. They further recognized the need for the human factor to be integrated in an effective campaign, privileging direct communication at a human level instead of distanced mass media outreach. Panelists finally detailed successful and organic social media campaigns and the benefits of collaborating with former FTFs who have the potential to be role models for youth vulnerable to radicalization and FTF recruitment.

During the afternoon, participants were invited to present to their colleagues the results of the breakout counter-messaging development session that was peer-led on the second day. Each team adopted a unique approach to creating a counter-narrative that could successfully reach out to specific target audiences in response to an FTF personal story. Following the team presentations, a representative of Hedayah representative gave the closing remarks and identified key points and good practices generated through the three-day workshop, including adopting a human-level approach and involving a range of credible voices in counter-messaging development.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, the workshop highlighted the crucial need for a global and coordinated approach to tackle the growing threats that FTF recruitment represent. Since the geopolitical situation is a key contributor to the push and pull factors towards radicalization, the importance of consistency between messages sent and government actions were emphasized. Participants and panelists also identified the need to empower youth, women and disillusioned FTFs to gain more presence on the CVE policy-making platform and to play a key role as credible messengers in counter-narrative campaigns. While the worth of mass

media platforms was highlighted, participants encouraged counter-messaging developers to adopt a human-centered approach, listening to community grievances and connecting emotionally with vulnerable individuals. Finally, the workshop identified key cross-sectorial branding strategies that can be integrated into effective counter-messaging campaigns.