

THE CARTER CENTER



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Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism *PHASE 1 WORKSHOP OUTCOMES*

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Introduction

The political vacuum created in the wake of the Syrian civil war presented an opportunity for violent extremist groups to flourish, resulting in the creation of Daesh. Daesh's innovative and tailored use of social media has enabled the terrorist organization to lure and recruit young people on a global scale. Daesh communicates their cyber propaganda directly to disaffected young men and women. The Center recognized that any sustainable peace process in Syria at the political level must be complemented by grassroots efforts to prevent the growth and spread of violent extremism. In 2015, the Center launched a project to counter Daesh recruitment propaganda and Islamophobia through the mobilization of Muslim religious and community leaders across ideological and political divides. The Center's efforts have contributed to preventing violent extremism (PVE) and bringing a holistic approach to building community resilience. From September 2016 through March 2017, the Center convened four reiterative workshops with religious and community leaders from Morocco, Tunisia, France, and Belgium who are on the frontlines of efforts to prevent violent extremism in their local communities. These workshops were informed by the Center's action-oriented research into Daesh's recruitment propaganda. The Center analyzed over 600 Daesh propaganda videos, using a detailed qualitative and quantitative methodology, coded all issues of Daesh's e-magazines Dabiq and Rumiya, and conducted more than 50 structured interviews with families whose children have joined Daesh, ex-foreign fighters, journalists, and members of insular Salafi communities. As a result of our trainings, workshop participants developed and launched over 60 projects across multiple sectors, including media initiatives, religious outreach, youth engagement, and gender programming.

Grassroots Action for Sustainable Peace Building

Any approach to PVE that relies solely on an aggressive security framework has the potential to further marginalize at-risk communities and increase the threat of violent extremism. Effective programs must be community-led and designed to respond to the strengths and challenges of local contexts. With this framework in mind, the Center, for its Phase I workshops, engaged with grassroots religious and community leaders that hold significant social capital within their local communities. Through a meticulous selection process based on prior research, pre-existing contacts in the four countries, and connections forged during field visits, the Center identified and recruited participants with the following attributes: a) significant credibility among their constituents; b) outreach and power to influence public discourse; and c) insight into the nuances of the political and social climate of their countries.

Unlike traditional attempts to PVE that have focused only superficially on community engagement, an effort was made to avoid “embassy” imams and institutions that have limited legitimacy in their local communities. Too often, these leaders articulate views that are aligned with official government policies and are disconnected from their communities. Program staff conducted field interviews in the four target countries with prospective participants that yielded further contacts; additional screening interviews to judge commitment and outreach potential were held before participants were invited to join the series of workshops. This selection process yielded 23 participants with extensive outreach potential, including a French imam with two YouTube channels and dozens of videos on religious topics, many with 200,000+ views; a Moroccan *mourchida* (female imam) who runs a religious school for girls and is connected to over 100 charities and religious organizations throughout northern Morocco; a Tunisian imam with a congregation of over 5,000 who is being relocated to a larger mosque in Tunis to hold all of his followers; and a Belgian imam from Molenbeek affiliated with multiple youth organizations and local religious schools. The Center met extensively with potential participants to answer questions, clarify misunderstandings, and invite critical input. This approach built trust and enabled the Center to convene participants from across ideological divides, many of whom would not have otherwise engaged with each other. Forty percent of the participants were women, all of whom possess ample social capital and who proved to be among the most vocal and constructive participants.

Country Projects

As a corollary to workshop participation, each participant was asked to plan and implement individual and collective projects designed to prevent violent extremism in local communities.

Tunisian participants have collaborated with various domestic and international civil society organizations, such as Enda inter-arabe, Ertiqa Association, and Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE), to arrange workshops on the following: 1) Daesh’s recruitment of youth and women, 2) the role of religious discourse in countering Daesh propaganda, 3) women’s role in sustainable peace building, and 4) rehabilitation of individuals already exposed to violent ideology,

especially youth and women. One participant, a highly influential Salafi imam with an extensive presence in local media, is building networks to promote sermons across Tunisian mosques that oppose extremist ideology and promote principles-based reading of the Quran. The Tunisian team also has been involved with the Rescue Association for Tunisians Abroad (RATTA), lobbying for the formation of a parliamentary investigation committee into recruitment networks in Tunisia. In the media, Tunisian participants have livestreamed programs on different media channels, published magazine articles, and issued online sermons that deconstruct and delegitimize Daesh's propaganda while offering empowering alternatives.

Moroccan participants have formed alliances with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, official religious institutions, domestic and international NGOs, and various media outlets. One Moroccan imam, who is also the editor-in-chief of an online magazine, released a special issue dedicated solely to opposing violent extremism. Another workshop participant, a well-known youth leader from Morocco, will be launching a project that will provide vulnerable and disaffected youth with training on entrepreneurship, audiovisual expertise, self-marketing, resume building, and thematic summer camps geared toward immunizing youth against extremism. These youth camps are projected to reach approximately 250,000 Moroccan youth across the country in 2017. This youth leader also has created guidebooks, conducted training seminars, and launched an anti-extremism and youth empowerment website. Moroccan participants of different political and religious orientations have combined efforts and sent a formal proposal to the government requesting to launch the first community-led reintegration and rehabilitation center in Morocco. Several female religious leaders have begun giving sermons in Moroccan colloquial rather than classical Arabic, hoping to appeal to a larger cross-section of Moroccan society.

French participants have published high tech counter-messaging videos, released online sermons, and organized e-conferences debunking Daesh's theological positions. One French participant, an influential Salafi imam with a large social media following, launched an online crowdsourcing campaign to raise funds to publish an interfaith booklet on Islamic teachings on respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. During the fourth Carter Center workshop, this imam live-streamed a Facebook video where he and a mainstream imam from Belgium recited religious hymns; their video garnered over 15,000 views in 15 minutes. One of the biggest challenges faced by French participants is the rising tide of Islamophobia and far-right extremism across Europe. Islamophobia, and discrimination against Muslims, serves as a recruitment tool for Daesh. The participants realize that any substantive strategy to prevent Daesh recruitment must include efforts to counter all forms of extremism. To this end, one French participant, a very active female community leader, participated for the first time in a televised panel discussion on Islamophobia and its role in reinforcing Daesh propaganda, which garnered thousands of views on YouTube. Additionally, another French imam, a convert to Islam, raised the issue of converts trying to reconcile their identity with a new faith. Driven by the discussions on this subject during the third Carter Center workshop, he launched a mentor-mentee project to provide psychosocial support and care for

Muslims converts in collaboration with human rights lawyers, psychologists, and community leaders. In June 2017, he organized an event that brought 150 converts to discuss various issues that affect new French Muslim, including Daesh and Islamophobia.

Belgian participants have been involved with various domestic and international human rights groups to combat both Daesh and far-right ultra-nationalist groups. They have partnered with institutions like Amnesty International and the EU Parliament to discuss deep-rooted causes of extremism and ways to overcome them. On a more grassroots level, Belgian participants are engaging with local imams in community mosques to promote peaceful existence. The Belgian participants also showed concern regarding the increasing impact of Islamophobia and right-wing hatred on the marginalization of already at-risk Muslim communities; Belgian participants mobilized the Muslim community in Brussels on the birthday of Prophet Muhammad and distributed to passersby roses and small cards with sayings of the Prophet promoting love, peace, and solidarity. As a direct response to workshop discussions, the Belgian participants also partook in a collective march against hatred and terror on March 22, 2017. Like French, Moroccan, and Tunisian participants, the Belgian participants also have invested resources in projects for youth that include sport activities, excursions, and human-rights based religious lessons.

Participant Engagement and Evolution

While each participant had his or her own expertise and had previously worked independently in their own countries, the workshop series motivated participants to collaborate on several intra- and intercountry projects. Furthermore, debates among mainstream and conservative religious leaders paved the way for cooperation and joint initiatives within local communities. For instance, one mainstream Tunisian imam hosted another conservative Salafi imam on his radio show, giving the latter more visibility and a platform to reach out to a wider audience. Given the longstanding history of uncompromising ideological schism between mainstream and conservative religious leaders in Tunisia, this milestone is the beginning of a constructive dialogue across ideological divides. In terms of transnational initiatives, one of the Moroccan youth leaders invited all workshop colleagues to participate in a fully sponsored summer camp in Morocco to strengthen this newly created network and foster future collaboration. The Center is also devising a secure online space where the participants can continue conversations on the opportunities and challenges of their individual projects and learn from each other's experience.

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