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## Counter-narratives to terrorism

### Report<sup>1</sup>

Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights

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### Summary

Countering terrorist narratives is a complicated task with no clear, easy solution.

The report points out the need to better understand the radicalisation process, exploring how and why individuals become terrorists. It also studies the difficulties faced by counter-narrative strategies, such as addressing the relevant audiences as well as measuring its constructive impact. It goes on to suggest factors to consider in creating effective counter-narrative initiatives. Lastly, the report discusses the concept of shared values and the importance of identifying overlap between values of the European Convention on Human Rights and core Islamic teaching, in order to develop effective positive alternatives based on this over-lapping consensus in ideals.

The report comes to the conclusion that reactive counter-narratives are not sufficient. It is necessary to develop credible community-based, positive, proactive alternative narratives, promoting shared values and facilitating conversation, encouraging awareness and dispelling misinformation.

The Committee of Ministers is invited to carry out an in-depth study of the actual experience of member States in developing counter-narratives to terrorism and on their impact. Based on the latter, the Council of Europe should define guidelines on devising narratives and messages countering terrorist propaganda, taking into account the need for such narratives to be based on factual information.

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1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 14032](#), Reference 4209 of 27 November 2016.



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## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. The Parliamentary Assembly reiterates in the strongest terms its condemnation of all acts of terrorism, recalling its previous resolutions in relation to terrorism, in particular [Resolution 2090 \(2016\)](#) on combating international terrorism while protecting Council of Europe standards and values, [Resolution 2091 \(2016\)](#) on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and [Resolution 2113 \(2016\)](#) “After the Brussels attacks, an urgent need to address security failures and step up counter-terrorism co-operation”. It also recalls its recent [Resolution 2190 \(2017\)](#) on prosecuting and punishing the crimes against humanity or even possible genocide committed by Daesh.
2. The Assembly notes that, to date, the international community’s response to terrorism has mainly taken the form of security-based counter-terrorism measures. But such measures have not been sufficient to prevent the phenomenon of “foreign fighters”, radicalisation or the spread of violent extremism. The development of new measures, in the form of positive alternative narratives to extremism, is necessary to combat this evolving threat.
3. The radicalisation process is changing as the terrorist threat evolves, and as technology advances. The Assembly stresses that “real world” exposure to violent extremist discourse continues to pose a threat and should not be overlooked. But the internet has transformed the way terrorist organisations reach and radicalise people, with terrorist narratives, used to convey violent extremist ideology, values and justifications, easily accessible to a large global audience through the use of expansive communication strategies.
4. The Assembly recalls its [Resolution 2091 \(2016\)](#) and the Action Plan for 2015-2017 on “The fight against violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism” adopted by the Committee of Ministers in May 2015, and reiterates the need to create positive alternative narratives to the misuse of religion, aimed at exposing extremist discourse and dissipating illusions about the real situation in the territories held by Daesh and the fate of its recruits.
5. Counter-narrative strategies are often criticised as being too removed from the everyday lives and experiences of those targeted. The Assembly emphasises the importance of creating effective positive alternative narratives, aimed at specific target audiences, which confront, challenge and contradict the themes intrinsic to the terrorist narrative through ideology, logic, fact or humour. Where possible, counter-narrative content should be developed in co-operation with the members of the target audience.
6. Merely reacting to terrorist narratives is not enough. Counter-narrative efforts should focus on creating proactive, positive and alternative narratives, including a positive call for action and a clear articulation of the “overlapping consensus” and ethical traditions which unite diverse communities that are committed to common values of non-violence, tolerance and democracy.
7. Given that many of the recent terrorist attacks which occurred in Council of Europe member States – Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom, but also in other countries – have been claimed by or may be attributed to the “Islamic State” or its followers, the concept of shared values, namely the shared ethical traditions common to both the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5, “the Convention”) and Islam, should be explored and actively promoted. The Assembly welcomes, at European Union level, the creation of a Strategic Communication Task Force to work with European Union delegations in Arab countries and with the Global Coalition to defeat Daesh to identify shared values and develop concrete actions; and, at the United Nations level, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which highlights the importance of fostering a global dialogue to unite countries, people and communities on the basis of universally shared values and principles.
8. The Assembly recognises that it is not possible to develop a single, overarching counter-narrative. A complex construction of a multitude of different types of messaging and media, articulated around local issues and narratives is required in the creation of effective counter-narratives.
9. The Assembly reiterates that all measures taken to combat terrorism must comply with States’ obligations under national and international law and the common values upheld by the Council of Europe of democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, avoiding disproportionate restrictions to fundamental freedoms. The Assembly strongly condemns all incidents of hate speech by heads of member States or government officials of member States that may lead to further radicalisation and propagate hate and violence.

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2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 14 March 2018.

10. The Assembly therefore calls on the Council of Europe member and observer States and the States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status with the Parliamentary Assembly to:

- 10.1. where they do not already exist, draw up national strategies for the prevention of radicalisation;
- 10.2. prioritise the creation of tailored, flexible positive alternative narratives to terrorist propaganda and violent extremism, to undermine and detract from the authority of terrorist leadership and expose the hypocrisy of the violent extremist narrative and the reality of life as a terrorist;
- 10.3. work in collaboration with communities and members of priority audiences, as well as civil society, religious leaders and community leaders, using credible messengers and a variety of media (including SMS, television, radio, print media, the internet) to dispel the terrorist narrative;
- 10.4. challenge all incidents of hate speech and strongly condemn all those who preach or propagate hate and violence;
- 10.5. take measures, including legislative measures, to counter violent extremism and hate speech on the internet and in social media that may lead individuals towards violent radicalisation;
- 10.6. explore and promote the concept of “shared values”, examining the ways in which the values that inspire both the Convention and Islam can create positive alternative narratives emphasising respect for the universal scope of rights and equality before the law, the right to life, the right to justice, the right to liberty and security, and the fundamental freedoms of plural societies, including the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9), freedom of expression (Article 10) and freedom of assembly and association (Article 11);
- 10.7. promote positive alternative narratives with local community outreach action, engaging with members of the target audience face-to-face;
- 10.8. establish monitoring and evaluation practices to assess the impact of counter and alternative narrative strategies;
- 10.9. strengthen international co-operation through the sharing of best practices and information exchange, evaluating the efforts of States and better co-ordinating approaches;
- 10.10. sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (CETS No. 196) and its Additional Protocol (CETS No. 217), along with other relevant Council of Europe legal instruments, if they have not already done so.

## **B. Draft recommendation<sup>3</sup>**

1. Referring to its Resolution ... (2018) on counter-narratives to terrorism, the Parliamentary Assembly welcomes the adoption by the Committee of Ministers of Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)6 on terrorists acting alone as well as the ongoing preparation of a Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy for the period 2018-2022.
2. In this context, the Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers to ask the Council of Europe Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT) to:
  - 2.1. carry out an in-depth study on the actual experience of member States in developing positive alternative narratives to violent extremism and on their impact and examining the radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes;
  - 2.2. based on the latter, draft guidelines on devising narratives and messages countering terrorist propaganda, taking into account the need for such narratives to be based on factual information as underlined in Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)6;
  - 2.3. consider initiating research and articulation of the “overlapping consensus” between the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and Islamic values, and in particular to consider convening a seminar, either in Strasbourg or organised by a member State, to share experience or best practice in this field;
  - 2.4. consider proposals for renewal of campaigns to combat hate speech which reflect these conclusions.

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3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 14 March 2018.

## C. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Liam Byrne, rapporteur

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Procedure

1. The motion for a resolution on “Counter-narratives to terrorism” ([Doc. 14032](#)) was referred to the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights for report on 25 November 2016.<sup>4</sup> I was appointed rapporteur by the committee at its meeting in Strasbourg on 23 January 2017. On 14 February 2018, I participated, in my capacity as rapporteur, in a Symposium on “Religious Values, Human Rights” (Birmingham, United Kingdom) which looked into the overlap between Islamic values and the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5, “the Convention”).

#### 1.2. Mandate

2. The motion for a resolution which I tabled with a number of other members of the Assembly, recalls that the Parliamentary Assembly has “discussed at length the crisis in the Middle East, its attraction to foreign fighters and the exodus of refugees it has provoked”. The motion goes on to state that “[d]efeating Daesh will require us to defeat its ideas and its promotion of the idea that Islam is under attack, that there is a clash of civilisations; that the ‘West’ and Islam are ‘at war’, and that it is the religious duty of Muslims to come to the defence of Islam by joining Daesh. We must stand united in exposing the truth and simultaneously defend the European Convention on Human Rights, including Article 9, which Daesh seeks to destroy”.

3. Hence, taking into account this specific mandate, the present report only addresses Daesh and Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism and not terrorism inspired by other ideologies. This should not leave the impression that I consider it as given that all terrorism is Daesh/Al-Qaeda-inspired, and that other acts of political violence are not terrorist in nature.

#### 1.3. Issues at stake

4. “Over the past two decades, the international community has sought to address violent extremism primarily within the context of security-based counter-terrorism measures.” However, “there is a growing international consensus that such counter-terrorism measures have not been sufficient to prevent the spread of violent extremism”.<sup>5</sup>

5. The Council of Europe has taken an important role in countering terrorism, by drafting the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism ([CETS No. 196](#)) in 2005 and its Additional Protocol ([CETS No. 217](#)) in 2015. The Committee of Ministers’ Action Plan for 2015-2017 on “The Fight against Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism” also identified a number of areas of key importance, including “providing a counter-narrative to the misuse of religion”, aiming to counteract the destructive messages of extremists with counter-narratives ([CM\(2015\)74](#), section 2.1.3). In its [Resolution 2091 \(2016\)](#) on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, the Parliamentary Assembly called for action “to spread counter-narratives aimed at exposing extremist discourse and dissipating illusions about the real situation in the territories held by Daesh and the fate of its recruits, in particular by using testimonies of returnees who have witnessed first-hand the nature of Daesh”. Furthermore, the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Terrorism ([CODEXTER](#)) approved in November 2017 a new draft recommendation on terrorists acting alone, which was adopted by the Committee of Ministers in March 2018, an element of which focuses on the development of counter-narratives and alternative messages.

6. The internet has transformed the way that terrorist organisations can influence and radicalise people, with terrorist narratives easily accessible to a large global audience. Nearly every terrorist group has its own website and some even maintain multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences. This has raised questions of how defenders of peaceful coexistence between persons having different religious or philosophical convictions can respond with their own media and communication strategies.

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4. Reference 4209 of 27 May 2016, as modified on 25 November 2016.

5. United Nations General Assembly, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, 24 December 2015, paragraph 4.

7. In the light of recent events, the development of counter-narratives, that is to say messages that offer a positive alternative to or deconstruct or delegitimise violent extremist narratives and challenge their ideologies, is growing increasingly necessary.<sup>6</sup> Defeating Daesh and other terrorist groups will require us to defeat their ideas, including the suggestion that Islam is under attack, that “the West” and Islam are “at war”, and that it is the religious duty of Muslims to come to the defence of Islam by joining these violent extremist groups.

8. In this report, I shall therefore highlight the need to better understand the radicalisation process, exploring how and why individuals become terrorists. I shall then address the difficulties faced by counter-narrative strategies in targeting these narratives towards relevant audiences and measuring constructive impact, and suggest factors to consider in creating effective counter-narrative initiatives. Lastly, I shall discuss the concept of shared values and the importance of identifying the overlap between Convention values and core Islamic teaching, in order to develop effective positive alternative narratives based on this over-lapping consensus in our ideals.

## 2. The radicalisation process

### 2.1. Current issues

9. Prior to the events of 11 September 2001, the causes of terrorism were considered within a three-level framework, “involving factors of: individual motivation and belief systems; decision-making and strategy within a terrorism movement; and the wider political and social context within which terrorist movements interact”.<sup>7</sup> But in recent years, the idea of a linear relationship between radicalisation and terrorism, also known as the “conveyor belt” theory, has gained ground as a policy framework for re-thinking strategies for prevention of violence. However, this theory is widely disputed<sup>8</sup> and has been discredited to some extent.<sup>9</sup> Some researchers argue that violent activity can also precede radicalisation; individuals can adopt a terrorist group’s ideology after engaging in terrorism to retroactively justify their violent action.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it has been shown that radicalisation does not necessarily lead to violence; it is therefore possible for individuals to hold extreme views without transgressing to violent extremism.<sup>11</sup>

10. There is currently no internationally accepted definition of “radicalisation” and no consensus on this complex and controversial issue, since “about the only thing radicalisation experts agree on is that radicalisation is a process”.<sup>12</sup> However, radicalisation cannot be effectively prevented without first better understanding its root causes.

### 2.2. Factors to consider

11. “There is no single path that leads people to violent extremism”,<sup>13</sup> every case is different, and men and women of all social origins may be affected. However, a number of possible contributory factors have been identified.

12. One definition of radicalisation presents the process as a “multifaceted combination of push-pull factors involving a combination of socio-psychological factors, political grievance, religious motivation and discourse, identity politics and triggering mechanisms that collectively move individuals towards extremism”.<sup>14</sup> “Push

6. H. Tuck and T. Silverman, “The Counter-Narrative Handbook”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2016), p. 1.

7. M. Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism” (1981), *Comparative Politics* 13:4, pp. 379-399 in A. Kundnani, *A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalisation and Extremism* (2015), p. 14.

8. See Faiza Patel, “Rethinking Radicalization”, Brennan Centre for Justice, 2011, p. 14.

9. See C. Walker and J. Rehman, “‘Prevent’ responses to jihadi extremism” in V. Ramraj et al. (eds.), *Global Anti-Terrorism Law and Policy*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2012), 242-268, p. 250; I. Cram, “The ‘war on terror’ on campus: some free speech issues around anti-radicalization law and policy in the United Kingdom” (2012), 6, *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1-34, p. 14; A. Pargeter, “North African immigrants in Europe and political violence” (2006), 29, *Studies on Conflict and Terrorism* 731, p. 737; J. Githens-Mazer and R. Lambert, “Why conventional wisdom on radicalization fails: the persistence of a failed discourse” (2010), 86, *International Affairs*, 889-901, p. 894; J. Bartlett et al., *The edge of violence: a radical approach to extremism* (London, 2010), p. 7.

10. See, for example, M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

11. J. Bartlett and C. Miller, “The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization”, 24, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1 (2012); USAID, *Guide to the drivers of violent extremism* (2009).

12. M. Nasser-Edine et al., *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)*, *Literature Review* (Canberra: Australian Government, Department of Defence, 2011), p. 13.

13. J. Evans interviewed by D. Gardham, “MI5 Chief Warns of Threat from Global Recession”, *Telegraph* (London), 7 January 2009, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/4144460/MI5-chief-warns-of-threat-from-global-recession.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/4144460/MI5-chief-warns-of-threat-from-global-recession.html).

factors” operate at a personal level. These might include a dysfunctional family setting or abuse<sup>15</sup> such as bullying, personal crises, plus a lack of integration, or an element of criminality.<sup>16</sup> These factors add up to the same psychological effect; removing the inhibitions that typically prevent a person becoming violent. The second stage, which may overlap with the first, involves the “pull” factors or “radicalising influences”. These might arise as a result of a family member or friend becoming associated with extremist influences or a radicaliser, who could be found in a university, a prison, a community setting, or online.

13. For online influences to work there is typically both an absence of obstacles, and a “switch”, such as some kind of “shock” or an “ideological opening” which might be a single event or exposure to a particular cause, which provides a connection to meaning. Thus, radical ideology then “battens on to the grievance and makes sense of the grievance and that makes sense of the person’s life”.<sup>17</sup> This journey could be described as a “fork in the road”.<sup>18</sup> A multiplicity of factors stoke an anger that take an individual to a critical junction; one path leads to the pursuit of a violent path to secure change; the second path, leads to the pursuit of change through peaceful, civil means. Many violent extremists exploit a “DIY-Islam” to persuade people to settle grievances not through peaceful strategies for change but through violence, motivating young people to seek, “renown, revenge, and reaction”.<sup>19</sup>

14. Recent studies have associated increases in online extremist language with increases in offline extremist or identity-based crimes. However, whilst “there is some evidence suggesting patterns of discourse and communication such as hate speech, dehumanisation, and identity-based narratives (or propaganda) can contribute to conditions where” violent extremism becomes more likely, “the causal relationship remains unproven”.<sup>20</sup>

15. The reasons why certain violent extremist narratives can be so appealing should therefore be further considered, alongside the reasons why individuals join terrorist organisations and why some have decided to leave. The differences in the radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes in different countries, and the ways in which the radicalisation process is changing require constant assessment. These comprehensive assessments, on all aspects of the radicalisation process, should be carried out in order to develop a shared understanding of the patterns of radicalisation.

### 3. Counter-narrative strategies

#### 3.1. Definition of counter-narratives

16. Although there is no single pathway to terrorism, terrorist groups’ extensive range of communicative strategies “are critical for promoting the adoption of beliefs and attitudes that place non-violent target audiences at greater risk for subsequent engagement in terrorism”.<sup>21</sup> The most persuasive of these strategies involves the use of narratives, the main function of which is to “convey ideology, values, justifications, or core concerns” to audiences including sympathisers, would-be members, and the wider public. Analysis reveals what has been termed the “5Ps of extremist messaging”.<sup>22</sup>

- **Piety.** Daesh and al Qaeda make a heretical claim to speak as the “true believers” of Islam, and crucially offer a religious justification for violence;<sup>23</sup>

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14. M. Ranstorp (ed.), *Understanding Violent Radicalisation: Terrorist and Jihadist Movements in Europe* (New York: 2010), 6.

15. UK House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point*, Eighth Report of Session 2016-2017, 25 August 2016, paragraph 11.

16. *Ibid.*, paragraph 12.

17. D. Anderson Q.C., UK Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, *A question of trust: Report of the Investigatory Powers Review*, June 2015, pp. 42-43.

18. Liam Byrne, *Black Flag Down: Counter-Extremism, Defeating ISIS and Winning the Battle of Ideas* (Biteback Book, 2016).

19. See Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (John Murray, 2006).

20. K. Ferguson, *Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies. A review of the evidence*, 1 March 2016, p. 3.

21. K. Braddock and J. Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:5 (2016), 381-404, p. 385.

22. Liam Byrne, *Black Flag Down*, op. cit.

23. Key to the Daesh theological argument is what is called the “prophetic methodology”: claiming to be the prophet’s successors; the idea of Tawhid, or the unity of god, in contrast to shirk, or polytheism; and the notion of Takfir, which is that killing of “apostates” is permissible.

- **Pride.** Daesh makes a strong appeal to a conjured sense of honour in service and sacrifice, with iconography which stresses the “nobility” of violent jihad;
- **Potency.** Both Daesh and al Qaeda have absorbed the lesson of Osama Bin Laden, who said in 2001: “When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse.”<sup>24</sup> So both promote a “winner’s narrative” of ever-expanding borders;
- **Perfectionism.** Daesh offers recruits a utopian vision of building a new caliphate in which the ideals of Muhammed’s life are revived and brought to life once more. One survey found that about half of ISIS propaganda depicts happy civilian life;
- **Provocation.** Daesh and Al Qaeda seek to create a powerful feeling of victimhood, offering graphic evidence of civilian casualties and framing the struggle with the West as a “defensive jihad”.

17. In order to address this issue, recent counter-terrorism discourse has tended towards confronting the underlying supportive narratives of terrorist groups through the creation of counter-narratives and, in turn, discouraging the support for terrorism that these narratives foster. Counter-narratives, in the context of countering violent extremism, have been defined as “intentional and direct efforts to deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging, whether through ideology, logic, fact or humour”.<sup>25</sup> Counter-narratives aim to challenge and contradict the themes intrinsic to the terrorist narrative.

18. As mentioned above, identifying those at risk of being radicalised and then attracted to extremist behaviour is very challenging, which makes the task of finding a solution for countering extreme, terrorist views a complicated and difficult one. Clearly, a single, overarching, counter-narrative cannot be developed. As will be seen, a complex construction of a multitude of different types of messaging and media should be used instead, in conjunction with local action on the ground.

### 3.2. Issues to consider

19. It is important to recognise the difficulties counter-narratives have faced in the past, so as to be able to create successful strategies for future use. Counter-narrative strategies have been criticised as being too removed from the everyday lives and experiences of the people, in particular young people, whom they target.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, some research proposes that counter-narrative strategies may, if they fail to gain traction, do more harm than good and prove to be counter-productive, reinforcing rather than contradicting the terrorist narrative. It has also been suggested that this issue “is compounded by an insistence that European Muslims condemn terrorism – which serves only to entrench the Islamisation of the problem”.<sup>27</sup>

20. Several academic reviews of national counter-narrative policy in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia (where most counter-narrative activity has taken place to date)<sup>28</sup> have criticised such policies and been unable to identify tangible positive outcomes.<sup>29</sup> It remains difficult, however, to determine the success of counter-narrative initiatives since methodologically robust monitoring and evaluation is currently lacking in this area, although more rigorous impact assessments are being developed.

### 3.3. Message

21. “There is still limited understanding about what makes an effective counter-narrative campaign.”<sup>30</sup> However, a number of important factors have been identified. It is essential to start with defining the objective of the campaign. It has been suggested that targeting counter-narratives “solely at those few who are on the

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24. The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State, issued by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, p. 86.

25. R. Briggs and S. Feve, “Review of Programs to Counter-Narratives of Violent Extremism: What works and what are the implications for government?”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2013), see Executive Summary.

26. D. Johnston, “We don’t need a counter-narrative, they are the counter-narrative!”, *International Center for Religion & Diplomacy Monthly Update*, 10 March 2017.

27. P. Bell, “ISIS and violent extremism: Is the West’s counter-narrative making the problem worse?” Influence, The Chartered Institute for Public Relations, 25 June 2015; see also [https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/eroding-trust-20161017\\_0.pdf](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/eroding-trust-20161017_0.pdf).

28. Although France, Finland, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Spain and Switzerland have also drafted national strategies to combat terrorism, with a particular focus on the prevention of violent extremism; see C. Nünlist, “The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism”, *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 183, December 2015, p. 2.

29. See S. Logan, “Grasping at thin air; countering terrorist narratives online” in A. Aly et al. (eds.), *Violent Extremism Online: New Perspectives on Terrorism and the Internet* (2016); A.P. Schmid, “Al-Qaeda’s ‘Single Narrative’ and Attempts to Develop Counter-Narratives: The State of Knowledge” (2014); R. Briggs and S. Feve, “Review of Programs to Counter-Narratives of Violent Extremism: What works and what are the implications for government?”, op. cit.

brink of being recruited" is far too restrictive an approach.<sup>31</sup> Target audiences could be geographically based (i.e. local projects) or globally based (i.e. online, through the use of social media), and may also include those who for different reasons feel connected to a war or conflict in a foreign country, regardless of their country of origin or nationality.<sup>32</sup> Where possible, counter-narrative content should be developed in co-operation with members of the target audience themselves to enhance the effectiveness of their reception. "More research is [also] needed to understand how a specific target audience responds to certain ideas."<sup>33</sup>

22. At an expert meeting in June 2014, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) identified a number of different types of counter-narratives. It was noted that the term "counter-narratives" implies responding and reacting to terrorist narratives. However, merely reacting is not enough. It was recommended, therefore, that counter-narrative efforts focus on creating proactive, positive and alternative narratives.<sup>34</sup> Other types of narratives suggested included strategic counter-narratives, condemning violent extremists and their efforts; ethical counter-narratives, pointing out that violent action is not a moral way of achieving aims and focussing on shared values, highlighting the commonalities between all humans and calling for a better co-operation between all nations and peoples; ideological and religious counter-narratives; tactical counter-narratives, emphasising that in the long term violence is often less effective than more peaceful methods (although it was noted that the main obstacle here is providing an alternative that still allows for the individual, group or organisation to potentially achieve their goals in a non-violent way). A positive call for action and a clear articulation of a shared identity and sense of belonging are also important components of a counter-narrative strategy.<sup>35</sup>

23. "Undermining terrorist and extremist leadership should constitute one part of the approach", creating messages that significantly detract from their authority and credibility.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, focussing on the hypocrisy of the ideology has also been suggested, demonstrating civilian and Muslim suffering at the hands of terrorists. Similarly, portraying terrorists as common criminals may also aid in highlighting the hypocrisy of the terrorist narrative. Counter-narratives should also convey the reality of life as a terrorist.

24. Hate speech should be challenged, through both regulation and legislation, but also by promoting media pluralism to ensure no communities are excluded.<sup>37</sup> IT companies, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Microsoft, have taken a first step towards assuming more responsibility for countering the spread of hate speech online. In May 2016, these IT companies have committed themselves to the European Commission "Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online", according to which they review notifications and remove illegal hate speech within 24 hours. A January 2018 [evaluation](#) of the Code of Conduct shows that the IT companies removed around 70% of illegal hate speech notified to them. While this percentage seems rather positive (especially in comparison with the 2016 and 2017 evaluations, 28% and 59% respectively), there is a growing debate around social media's responsibility for the content they disseminate and criticisms of their (relative) failure to remove violent and extremist material. The British Government is reportedly considering imposing a tax on IT companies for their failure to remove such content.<sup>38</sup> However, "tackling hate speech requires a far more comprehensive strategy than simply banning or blocking content".<sup>39</sup> Rather, the root causes of tension and division must also be addressed through counter-narratives to ensure that positive, alternative voices are heard on the internet.

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30. R. Briggs and S. Feve, "Review of Programs to Counter-Narratives of Violent Extremism: What works and what are the implications for government?", op. cit., see Executive Summary.

31. C. Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy", Quilliam Foundation (2015), pp. 43-44.

32. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism*, September 2014, p. 6.

33. R. Briggs and S. Feve, "Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?", op. cit., p. 12.

34. Ibid.; see also Dr. A. Reed, "IS Propaganda: Should We Counter the Narrative", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 17 March 2017.

35. Q. Asim, "Shared Values And Identity Can Help Us All Stand Up Against Terror", *The Huffington Post*, 28 March 2017.

36. M. Jacobson, "Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons from Cases of Terrorist Dropouts" in "Countering Violent Extremist Narratives", National Coordinator for Terrorism, 72-144, p. 75.

37. See, for example, the Parliamentary Assembly [#NoHateNoFear](#) initiative.

38. <https://techcrunch.com/2018/01/02/uk-eyeing-extremism-tax-on-social-media-giants/>.

39. K. Ferguson, *Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies. A review of the evidence*, op. cit., p. 24.

### 3.4. Messenger

25. The need for trust and credibility in those delivering the message is crucial. It is important to recognise that governments are not always the most effective messengers for presenting the counter-narrative, often lacking in perceived credibility. However, governments generally have a large degree of authority over the general population, and government action taken, by way of counter-terrorism measures and responses to a situation, can be considered an alternative or counter-narrative in itself.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, governments could remove legal barriers that could make repentant former terrorists or violent extremists reluctant to speak out,<sup>41</sup> taking inspiration as relevant from measures to encourage and protect collaborators with justice (*pentiti*),<sup>42</sup> Governments should therefore support community-led civil society organisations, which often lack funding, to develop effective counter-narrative programmes.

26. A better understanding of who can wield influence in different communities is required. Local messengers, for example civil society or religious leaders, can provide credible voices at the grassroots level. Former terrorists and violent extremists could also aid in presenting counter-narratives which resonate strongly with their target audience, providing particularly strong messages about the reality of life as a terrorist, utilising their own experiences and disillusionment with the cause to “de-glamourise” and delegitimise violent extremist narratives and disseminate a message of peace.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, it is argued that counter-narrative messages which come from people who are viewed by the younger generation, in particular, as “one of their own” are likely to be much more effective. However, it can prove difficult to find those who are willing to speak out and there are often legal obstacles to engaging with those who are incarcerated, for example. The families of terrorists can also play an important role, as can victims of terrorist attacks. Both can offer emotional reminders of the impact of terrorism and violent extremism. Finally, the importance of the protection of any messengers in alternative or counter-narrative campaigns must also be considered.

### 3.5. Medium

27. Using a variety of media can maximise the message’s reach, and media should also be adapted to fit the local context. The internet is an obviously effective tool; however, it should be borne in mind that SMS, television, radio and print media are still sometimes the main forms of communication in many countries. Using media to influence behaviour or attitudes within a development goals framework has been suggested as a credible counter-narrative strategy, and studies have demonstrated the power of drama or soap opera, for example, to effect social change and to advance the cause of peace and development.

28. The use of new communication technology and social media has facilitated the spread of misinformation through rumour, which can, in turn, lead to tensions and fear within communities. However, the same technology also presents the opportunity to provide accurate information and dispel rumour during times of tension. The use of SMS, as well as social media, to communicate messages of peace has been suggested since a large number of people can be reached. Counter-imaging, including the creation of alternative symbols, and online counter-videos are also potential counter-narrative media.

29. The importance of face-to-face interactions and community outreach activities is again stressed, even in a community where access to the internet is high,<sup>44</sup> to put into practice the ideas and options that the counter-narratives have brought to attention.

### 3.6. Impact

30. Assessing the impact of counter-narratives is extremely difficult. It is unlikely that a user who has violent views will proclaim a change of heart having watched a counter-narrative video, for example. However, counter-narrative campaigns can potentially foster critical thinking or plant a “seed of doubt”, and sustained engagements, i.e. individuals reaching out to counter-narrative campaigners for assistance, can provide a

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40. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism*, September 2014, p. 5.

41. UK House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point*, Eighth Report of Session 2016-2017, 25 August 2016, paragraph 108.

42. See Committee of Ministers Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2005\)9](#) on the protection of witnesses and collaborators.

43. See, for example, the Abdullah-X YouTube channel, where a series of cartoons has been created by a reformed extremist to prevent young British Muslims from joining jihadist groups.

44. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, *Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism*, September 2014, p. 4.

clear indication of the impact of online counter-narrative campaigns.<sup>45</sup> User engagement strategies are therefore an important element of any counter-narrative strategy, to provoke a reaction in the target audience and generate an interactive debate.

#### 4. Specific initiatives to counter terrorist narratives at international and European level

31. Various actors carry out initiatives to counter terrorist narratives at supranational, international or regional level. This section will present some of those initiatives in a non-exhaustive manner.

32. It is widely recognised that the United Nations “has established itself as a key player” in the field of counter-narratives.<sup>46</sup> A number of United Nations resolutions and action plans have been approved in the context of its [2006 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy](#). Amongst them, Security Council [Resolution 2178 \(2014\)](#) highlights that countering violent extremism is a key element to address the flow of foreign fighters. The United Nations 2016 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism asks not only member States to develop action plans to prevent violent extremism, but also argues for such plans to be developed at regional level. A comprehensive framework to counter terrorist narratives was also published by the United Nations Security Council in April 2017.

33. Other international initiatives include the 2011 Global Counterterrorism Forum, complemented since December 2012 with the Hedayah Center (an independent centre of excellence dedicated to countering violent extremism); the 2015 Coalition to Defeat Daesh; the 2010 Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications – replaced in 2016 by the Global Engagement Center. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) also runs important initiatives to counter terrorist narratives, in particular via two of its Centres of Excellence: its Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga (Latvia) and its Defence Against Terrorism Centre of Excellence in Ankara (Turkey). The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has adopted principles on countering terrorism (as part of the 2006 United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy) as well as a Consolidated Framework for the Fight Against Terrorism.

34. A number of initiatives have also been developed at European Union level, such as the 2015 EU Internet Forum (which attempts to stop abuse of the internet by international terrorist groups), the 2016 Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, the European Strategic Communication Network (which provides strategic communications advice and support to help stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters and violent extremism). Europol also plays a key role in identifying terrorist material on the internet and in informing internet service providers with a view to removing the illegal content. In 2011, the European Council also created the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN).

35. In January 2018, the Council of Europe CODEXTER was renamed Committee on Counter-Terrorism (CDCT). According to its terms of reference, one of the main tasks of the CDCT is to propose to the Committee of Ministers areas for action in the field of counter-terrorism and to co-ordinate Council of Europe activities in this field. The CDCT is also charged with elaborating and overseeing the implementation of a Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy for the period 2018-2022, focusing on prevention, prosecution and protection. It is also to organise a counter-terrorism conference on the roles of women and children in terrorism.

#### 5. The concept of “shared ideals”

36. “Extreme Islamists draw on the supposed incompatibility between liberal democracy and their interpretation of the Muslim faith to promote the idea of a “war on Islam” to create a “them and us” narrative and stoke division”.<sup>47</sup> Developing a widely understood, well articulated core of ideals and virtues that are common to both the European Convention on Human Rights and Islam is therefore essential in helping dismantle the core of the Daesh narrative that Islam and the West “are at war”.

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45. T. Silverman et al., “The Impact of Counter-Narratives”, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2016), p. 36.

46. Countering Terrorist Narratives, Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, DG for International Policies of the Union, PE 596.829 – November 2017, Study for the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE).

47. UK 2015 Counter Extremism Strategy.

### 5.1. Developing a common understanding

37. The European Court of Human Rights has held that Sharia law is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>48</sup> This does not, however, indicate an absolute incompatibility between Islamic values and those enshrined in the Convention.<sup>49</sup> Islam is itself a hugely diverse, pluralistic faith community. Indeed, it is this diversity within Islam that Daesh seeks to eliminate; “Islam entails a multitude of different voices, interpretations and positions on human rights, promoted by different actors in different historical, social, cultural and political contexts”,<sup>50</sup> but Islamic “intellectual outlook supports the existence of shared values”.<sup>51</sup> This concept of shared ideals should be explored and actively promoted in an exchange and dialogue between cultures in order to develop a common understanding.

### 5.2. Alternative narratives

38. In the United States of America, one month after 11 September 2001, the Bush administration hired an advertising executive, Charlotte Beers, as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Political Affairs. Ms Beers created a series of television, radio and print advertisements for distribution in countries with large Muslim populations under the “Shared Values Initiative”, intended to depict, *inter alia*, “images of an American Muslim and his family living comfortably at home, praying openly, and otherwise enjoying America while practising their religion freely”.<sup>52</sup> However, these advertisements proved controversial and, less than a month after its launch, the US State Department suspended the campaign. Nevertheless, it has been argued that these advertisements were more effective than people realised.<sup>53</sup>

39. The promotion of shared values and the idea of community cohesion have also been implemented in other domestic counter-terrorism strategies, for example in the United Kingdom’s *Prevent* Strategy and the Australian *Countering Violent Extremism* Strategy. Again, these policies have been surrounded by much controversy, and have even been labelled “counterproductive”, undermining, rather than promoting, social cohesion. These existing and historic counter-terrorism strategies should be considered and evaluated to determine how best to utilise the concept of shared values within the wider sphere of counter-narratives to terrorism.

40. Within the European Union, a Strategic Communication Task Force is working with European Union Delegations in Arab countries and with the Anti-ISIL Global Coalition to “identify shared values and develop concrete actions”.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the importance of fostering a global dialogue in order to unite “countries, people and communities on the basis of universally shared values and principles” is also set out in the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism.<sup>55</sup>

41. In May 2017, the US embassy in Belgium announced the allocation of a year-long US\$200 000 grant to be used in Europe by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or non-profit groups to create a programme, using digital platforms, to “dispel the narratives of extremist groups that incite violence and provide alternative narratives”, as well as to “provide positive narratives concerning refugees and immigrant populations”.<sup>56</sup>

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48. See *Refah Partisi and Others v. Turkey*, Application No. 41340/98, judgment of 13 February 2003 (Grand Chamber).

49. See Yannick Lécuyer, “L’Islam, la Turquie et la Cour européenne des droits de l’homme”, *Revue trimestrielle des droits de l’homme*, No. 67, 2006, p. 739. There exist both absolute and relative incompatibilities between Islam and the Convention as far as Sharia law is concerned.

50. M. Juul Petersen, “Islam and human rights: Clash or compatibility?”, London School of Economics and Political Science, 26 October 2016.

51. See Sheikh `Abd Allah b. Bayyih, “Shared Values”, *Islam Today*, 4 December 2007, e.g. “Islam establishes the idea of absolute equality between all human beings and that they are descended from a common ancestor”.

52. D. Byman, *The Five Front War* (2008), p. 174.

53. See J. Fullerton and A. Kendrick, *Advertising’s War on Terrorism: The Story of the U.S. State Department’s Shared Values Initiative* (2006); however, the validity of these findings has been criticised since the samples included a low percentage of Muslims, see for example L. Pintak, *Dangerous Delusions: Advertising Nonsense about Advertising America* (2004).

54. European Commission Communication, *Supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism*, 14 June 2016.

55. United Nations General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*. Report of the Secretary-General, 24 December 2015, paragraph 56.

56. See <http://dailycaller.com/2017/05/21/us-plans-to-spend-200k-in-europe-to-promote-positive-narratives-about-refugees/>; [www.breitbart.com/london/2017/05/24/us-reduce-terror-positive-migration/](http://www.breitbart.com/london/2017/05/24/us-reduce-terror-positive-migration/).

42. Positive alternative narratives to violent extremism therefore play an important role in countering the appeal of terrorism and should be considered as a viable type of counter-narrative. Alternative narratives do not tend to directly challenge extremist messaging, but “instead attempt to influence those who might be sympathetic towards (but not [necessarily] actively supportive of) extremist causes, or help to unite the silent majority against extremism by emphasising solidarity, common causes and shared values”.<sup>57</sup>

43. An effective positive alternative narrative strategy must include Muslim communities as equal partners. By developing a greater understanding of the ideals shared between the Convention and Islam, we can build positive alternative narratives in a way in which all communities can identify. Informed by a better understanding of the radicalisation process, shared ideals, and the terrorist narrative itself, an effective strategy to counter the terrorist narrative can be constructed.

### **5.3. Input from the Symposium on “Religious Values, Human Rights”**

44. A symposium hosted by the University of Birmingham (United Kingdom) on 14 February 2018 brought together a range of scholars and experts to examine the “overlapping consensus” between the European Convention on Human Rights and Islam. This discussion helpfully emphasised the shared ideals and virtues which the Convention and Islamic teaching have in common, including (but not limited to):

- **Universal scope of rights and equality before the law.** Article 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, underlines the universal scope of the application of human rights; the parties “shall secure to *everyone* (emphasis added) within their jurisdiction the rights and freedoms defined”. In addition, Article 14 provides for the “prohibition of discrimination”. This reflects the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 12 and 17) and finds echo in the universality of humanity emphasised in Islamic teaching set out clearly in 49:13 of the Qu’ran; “O People! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that *you may know each other* (not that you may despise (each other))” (my italics). Muhammed’s “Last Sermon” underlines: “An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over a white except by piety and good action”.
- **Life.** The right to life is an absolute core ideal of the Convention. Article 2 of the Convention sets out the right to life: “Everyone’s right to life shall be protected by law.” This is reflected in Islamic teaching, and underlined in a series of Islamic “divine names” which in Islam, “designate characteristics of the divine nature”,<sup>58</sup> namely: “the Living” (al-Hayy) and “the Protector” (al-Hafiz). This is underlined in many points in the Qu’ran, most famously in Sura 5:32, which reads “whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely”. Muhammed, in his Last Sermon, emphasised the right of individuals and sanctity for their blood: “O people, you have to respect each other’s life until the Resurrection Day.”
- **Liberty and Security.** The right to liberty and security is set out in the Convention’s Article 5, which states that “[e]veryone has the right to liberty and security of person”, and Article 4, which provides for the prohibition of slavery and forced labour. This finds an echo in Islam in the Qu’ranic concept of non-compulsion (la ikraha) set out in Sura 2.256, which states: “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.”
- **Fundamental freedoms of plural societies.** The Convention sets out a range of basic, vital freedoms which are integral to plural society, including the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9), freedom of expression (Article 10) and freedom of assembly and association (Article 11). These ideals resonate with a key text in Islam, which is the Madinah Charter, written by Muhammed to bring peace to a hitherto fractious city. Imam Asim Hafiz, Islamic religious advisor to the Chief of the British Defence Staff points out that at the time, Madinah was a “pluralistic, multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and multireligious” place and the Charter created a “Union of Free People” conveyed in Covenants with people of many faiths (including Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism) guaranteeing “freedom of movement, freedom of work, freedom of study, freedom of religion, and freedom of choice. These are the very freedoms that the Prophet granted in his Covenants”. This tolerance for diversity is of course an important characteristic of life in Council of Europe member States and its importance in Islam is underlined in the importance attached to the concept of “the Tolerant” (al-Halim). Shaykh Arif Hussain,

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57. R. Briggs and S. Feve, “Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?”, op. cit., p. 12.

58. Farhana Mayer, The Blasphemy in Blasphemy Laws, Quilliam Foundation, January 2017.

Director of the Al Mahdi Institute at Birmingham University, added: “Islamic identity is about devotion not contracts, and this is shown in the Qur’an, which says that Muslims and Christians have been given different Sharias; it accepts religious difference.”

- **Justice.** This concept of justice – al-Adl – is a core principle of Islamic thought and is set out very clearly in the Qu’ran in Sura 4:135, “O YOU who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in upholding equity and justice, bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against your own selves or your parents and kinsfolk”. Equally, justice is the central concept of the Convention; thus, Article 6 provides for the right to a fair trial and Article 13 (Right to an effective remedy) states that “[e]veryone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law”.
45. 45.1. Finally, and worth underlining, Islam underlines the obligations for Muslims to follow the laws of the land where they happen to reside. Thus, the Qu’ran states clearly: “O you who believe, **fulfil your obligations.**”

## 6. Conclusions and proposals

46. Countering terrorist narratives is a complicated task with no clear, easy solution. While reactive counter-narratives have a role to play, it is even more necessary to develop credible community-based, positive, proactive alternative narratives, promoting shared values and facilitating conversation, encouraging awareness and dispelling misinformation. Such alternative or counter-narratives must be flexible, tailored and spontaneous in order to appeal to a wide range of target audiences in a wide range of situations, both online and offline. Through international co-operation we should work towards building a collection of best practice and effective counter-narrative case studies, evaluating each member State’s efforts and better co-ordinating counter-narrative approaches. The reasons why violent extremist narratives can be appealing must also be addressed through the development of a shared understanding of the radicalisation process, since narratives cannot exist in a vacuum.

47. Hitherto, the “counter-narrative” approach has sometimes proved problematic when purely politicised, securitised and rooted purely in simplistic nationalistic traditions, I believe that there are significant opportunities in this space for the promotion of religiously and theologically focused alternative readings of the world, in particular focusing on the “overlapping consensus” between Islamic religious perspectives and Convention values. We should look into defining messages based on what unites us, not on what divides us. In the draft resolution, I propose to ask member States to explore and promote the concept of “shared ideals” and the overlapping consensus between traditions, examining the ways in which Convention values overlap with Islamic values to create positive alternatives narratives, emphasising universalism, the right to life, liberty and security, the fundamental freedoms of plural societies and justice.

48. The ongoing preparation of a Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Strategy for the period 2018-2022 is very much to be welcomed and provides an opportunity for the Organisation to take a more proactive and prominent role in the definition of common responses for countering terrorist narratives. The draft recommendation therefore asks the Committee of Ministers to carry out an in-depth study of the actual experience of member States in developing counter-narratives to terrorism and on their impact. Based on the latter, the Council of Europe should define guidelines on devising narratives and messages countering terrorist propaganda, taking into account the need for such narratives to be based on factual information.

49. One should not underestimate the importance of the communication issue in the fight against terrorism since, as was rightly underlined in a recently published study by the European Parliament, terrorism is, fundamentally, communication; “Acts of terror themselves are propaganda by the deed.”<sup>59</sup> Strategic communications are by essence a necessity in all efforts to counter terrorism.

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59. Countering Terrorist Narratives, Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, DG for International Policies of the Union, PE 596.829 – November 2017, Study for the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE).