



INSTITUTE *for*
STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

POLICY BRIEFING:

FOREIGN FIGHTERS, THE CHALLENGE OF
COUNTER-NARRATIVES

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Cover photo

The cover image was uploaded to twitter by a foreign fighter currently in Syria, access here: <https://twitter.com/Fulan2weet/status/366618197211885569/photo/1>

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POLICY REPORT:
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About the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent think tank based in London, working with leaders in government, media and the private sector to challenge the major threats to international and communal peace, and to enhance Europe's capacity to act strategically with other key players in the global arena. ISD runs a groundbreaking international programme on extremism. It seeks to enhance understanding of the drivers of extremism and polarisation; advocate for solutions, at the strategic, political, policy and practical levels; improve understanding of what works by providing a platform for sharing good practices and lessons learned and developing effective evaluation methodologies; fill institutional and structural gaps by fostering new partnerships, transformative networks or fledgling organisations; and develop new narratives that underpin a long-term and sustainable response to extremism and social polarisation.

Foreign Fighters: The nature and scale of the problem

There are growing fears among western governments about the threat posed by so-called ‘foreign fighters’ whose western citizens travel to far off conflict zones in order to participate as combatants. Although this process has a long and varied history in the West, stretching as far back as the Spanish civil war, in recent decades it has become an almost entirely Muslim phenomenon.

The on-going Syrian conflict has greatly amplified this problem and brought it to the forefront of policy makers’ attention. While there is no reliable data, the numbers estimated to be entering Syria alone are already on par with those during the Afghan-Soviet war, when foreign fighter numbers last peaked. Estimates range from 6-10,000 per year, of these roughly 10% are thought to be Europeans. To place this in context, at the zenith of the Iraq war approximately 600 fighters of all types entered the country each year. Add to this the trickle of westerners choosing to travel to countries such as Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Algeria, Kenya and Mali and the scale of the phenomenon becomes clear. Nearly all western countries are being affected by this problem, including some without large established Muslim minorities that have not traditionally had issues with Islamist extremism, such as Ireland.

Although many of those traveling to Syria, in particular, are not joining Al-Qaeda linked groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, the chaos of conflict makes it almost impossible to verify who has been fighting for what group. Outside Syria, western foreign fighters have often been at the forefront of some of the most violent and effective attacks carried out by

extremist groups, such as the recent Westgate Mall and In Amenas gas plant attacks.

The nature of the threat posed to the West by foreign fighters is still somewhat theoretical, as the Syrian conflict is ongoing and a majority of those that have travelled (over 80% by some estimates) have not yet returned home. Given the low level of suicide bombings being carried out by foreign fighters, sooner or later many of these fighters will return home; based on past experiences there are a number of distinct dangers posed by this:

- *Recruitment:* foreign fighters are inspirational figures who have given up the comforts of western life to fight for their beliefs, whether political or religious. For some, they are modern day heroes. These returning fighters are often effective recruiting sergeants, inspiring and guiding others to fight overseas. Given the increasing dominance of Islamists in Syria, even those recruiting westerners for more liberal outfits, such as the Free Syrian Army, risk inadvertently sending young men into the arms of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. There is already evidence of this happening.
- *Radicalisation:* Those foreign fighters that are radicals and wish the West harm will be effective at radicalising and recruiting those susceptible to their messages to attack western targets. Who is more credible at recruiting others to fight than someone who has been on the frontline?
- *Post-traumatic stress:* Many of the returning foreign fighters, even those that fought for moderate organisations, will return to the West traumatised from their experiences

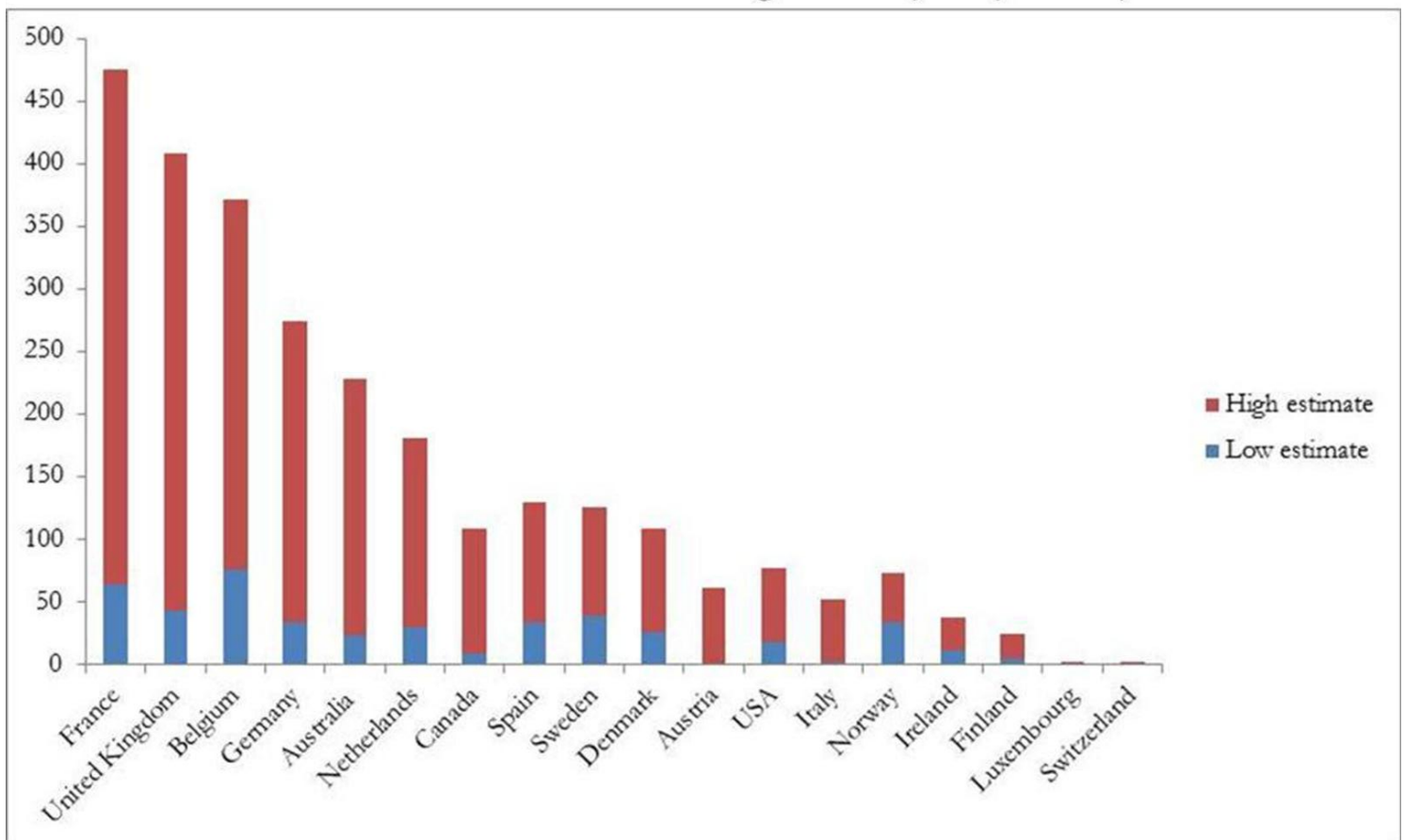
and possibly disenchanted with the lack of support their groups received from the West. This makes returning fighters from all groups particularly susceptible to radicalisation upon their return.

- *Operational competency*: Not all those who travel overseas to be foreign fighters reach the frontline, but those who have received training or have engaged in military activities will bring back invaluable operational competency and experience to mount an effective attack should they wish to do so.

This threat is made more potent by their deep understanding of western targets and the ability of those with western passports to travel across the West without a visa.

- *Networks*: With a truly international cast in most foreign fighter conflict theatres, individuals will come back with global contacts. The last time this kind of networking occurred, Al Qaeda was formed.

Estimated number of Western fighters in Syria by country



Source: ICSR Insight: *Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans*, access here: <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>

Dominant Motivations and Narratives for Foreign Fighters

MOTIVATIONS FOR BECOMING A FOREIGN FIGHTER

Just as there is no single profile of violent extremists, there is no one discernible ‘type’ of foreign fighter. From ignorant novices who view the trips as a rite of passage, die-hard militants looking for combat and martyrdom, and individuals who go for humanitarian reasons but get drawn into conflict, individuals become foreign fighters for a range of reasons: boredom; intergenerational tensions; the search for greater meaning in life; perceived adventure; attempts to impress the local community or the opposite sex; a desire for increased credibility; to belong or gain peer acceptance; revenge; or misguided conflict experience expectations.

CHOICE OF LOCATION AND TRAVEL ROUTE

For those who decide to go, there are multiple factors guiding their choice of location and route of travel. These help to explain why Syria has become such a popular destination for foreign fighters as opposed to Mali:

- *Ideological frame:* Foreign fighters are a heterogeneous group, ranging from those who wish to establish a democracy, to moderate Islamists right through to Jihadists, not to mention the Sunni/Shia divide. By their nature, different conflict zones have different groups active, so there will be a limited number of conflicts for foreign fighters to join depending on their ideological drivers.
- *Logistical issues:* Put simply, certain conflict zones are easier to get to than others. While a young Muslim in Denmark may be angered at the treatment of Muslims in Burma, finding your way there is rather difficult compared to Iraq or Syria, which are both bordered by stable NATO members and holiday destinations (Turkey).
- *Family, cultural and linguistic ties:* Linked to the above, the ease with which foreign fighters can access a country, and operate effectively when there, will depend largely on their ability to speak the language and whether they have family connections. Despite some high profile exceptions, this is why most foreign fighters traveling to Somalia are of Somali origin; likewise with fighters traveling to Libya to topple Gaddafi.
- *Risks and chances of success:* The danger of a particular conflict zone and probability of success can also have an impact on the willingness of foreign fighters to travel there. In the case of training camps in Pakistan, the increased use of drones in the tribal areas had a cooling effect on those westerners traveling. Likewise in Mali, in the early stages of the conflict many Jihadist social spaces were filled with calls to travel to the short-lived ‘Islamic state’ carved out in the north, these calls died down once the French intervened. This may also have been influenced by the realisation of the harsh climate in the Sahara.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES

There are many different narratives being deployed to appeal to young Muslims in the West, whether to

encourage them to fight or to offer other kinds of support. Most are tailored to the specifics of an individual conflict and/or the target audience (age, gender, language, context). Nevertheless, it is possible to identify three main types of narratives

that can help us to understand the types of counter-narrative messages that need to be crafted and disseminated that, in some instances, overlap:

Narrative	Messages / Calls to Action	Examples
Humanitarian	Brutality of the regime They are attacking civilians They are seeking to starve their foes They are deliberately killing children They are raping women They are mutilating the bodies of the fallen They are desecrating holy places Heroism of the fighters They are protecting the venerable They are welcomed as liberators	Al-Qaeda linked group Jabhat al-Nusra have posted videos of their fighters rescuing civilians from Assad regime snipers ² . Foreign fighters in Syria regularly post graphic images of dead children allegedly killed by the regime. ³ In addition some also post images of children in 'liberated zones' welcoming foreign fighters. ⁴
Ideological	Islam is under attack There is a vast global war on Islam and all true Muslims Islam is being attacked by the 'near enemy' (apostate regimes) Islam is under attack from the 'far enemy' (the West) Most regimes and leaders that claim to be Muslims are in fact tools in the hands of the enemy Islam is the path to peace Only Islamic societies are truly just Democracy is a sham and is incompatible with Islam Duty to fight It is the religious duty of all who claim to be Muslims to defend Islam and fight to bring about this just society.	This narrative is regularly pushed by groups such as al-Shabaab. Most recently in an almost hour long video which threatened British Muslim leaders, encouraged individuals to travel overseas and to carry out terrorist attacks at home. ⁵
Identity	Denigrating those unwilling to travel What you're doing now is pointless Those that stay behind are cowards, using excuses not to fight This will make you a better person	Examples of foreign fighters who have started families and had children while fighting are sized upon and posted on sites and social media usually reserved for martyrdom notices. ⁶

² See here for example: <https://twitter.com/JbhatALNusra/status/281128122538143744>

³ See here for example [WARNING, GRAPHIC]: <https://twitter.com/Fulan2weet/status/367941134971965440>

⁴ See here for example: <https://twitter.com/Fulan2weet/status/380355207923646465>

⁵ Gardham, Duncan, *Prominent UK Muslims under police protection after al-Shabaab threats*, Guardian, 17 October 2013

⁶ See here for example: http://www.shaghor.com/index.php?s=23&cat=7&id=339#.Um18_K6bIhw.facebook

	<p>You will go there a boy and come back a man</p> <p>You will gain the respect of your peers as a hero or become a martyr</p> <p>You could have a family while there</p> <p>Camaraderie</p> <p>There is no friendship like that found in war</p> <p>On the battlefield, all Muslims are brothers</p> <p>You will have an adventure</p> <p>War is exciting</p> <p>War is cool, a real life computer game</p>	<p>British born foreign fighter Ibrahim al Mazwagi married a Swedish Muslim in Syria before he was killed.⁷</p> <p>The masculinity of fighting is often seized upon, with some foreign fighters comparing those that travel to those that don't.⁸ 'Males vs men'</p> <p>Much propaganda plays on popular culture, esp relating to video games. Go-pro cameras, which provide the viewer with a point of view vision of what the fighter is doing, match almost exactly that shown in popular video games such as Call of Duty.⁹ Jihadists have mocked up video game covers mimicking 'Call of Duty' Game.¹⁰</p> <p>Some videos of foreign fighters highlight the acceptance that family members have shown.¹¹</p>
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⁷ See here for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=b70HXdWZ1iM#t=247

⁸ See here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=b70HXdWZ1iM#t=247

⁹ See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XvmGAPP6d4>

¹⁰ See here: <https://twitter.com/Fulan2weet/status/368128887756050432>

¹¹ See here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=b70HXdWZ1iM#t=247

While some groups which employ foreign fighters such as the Al-Nusra front¹² and Al-Shabbab¹³ are heavily active on twitter and social media, others such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb operating in Mali have a lighter footprint. The social media content encouraging individuals to travel overseas and fight emanates from three sources:

- *The groups themselves:* The formal propaganda wings of the armed movements will engage with potential supporters, produce propaganda and provide justification for their actions.
- *Their supporters:* There are many groups, pages, twitter accounts and others providing support and encouragement to groups that employ foreign fighters. These groups will glorify the actions of the group, celebrate its martyrs¹⁴ and produce large quantities of propaganda.
- *Individual fighters:* Some foreign fighters are tweeting their experiences and building up a personal following separate from the leadership of the organisations they are fighting for, the most famous of these is the late Omar Hammami,¹⁵ the American Jihadist in Somalia. Others, such as Abu Fulan al-Muhajir, are tweeting their experiences from Syria in English giving their followers a sense of the day life of a fighter; rations, weapons cleaning, morning coffee, phone charging points, computers to

allow them check in at home, dear diary twitter accounts, etc.¹⁶

As with all online activity, there are varying levels of professionalism - from highly edited and storyboarded films to a large volume of amateur footage showing combat operations¹⁷. That said, the most compelling propaganda by those encouraging others to fight shares a number of key attributes: It tends to use video rather than text, takes full advantage of the linguistic skills of members (sometimes even translating suras used to European languages), makes good use of music and resonates with western youth culture.¹⁸ In addition to this, the importance of a call to action cannot be underestimated; stressing inadequacies of those that don't go; an enemy; that it is fun; or that it will make you a better / more compelling person.

While the online is increasingly important, offline traditional recruitment methods such as writing letters to prisoners¹⁹ and organising at or around mosques are also being used, often hand in hand with social media campaigns.

¹² See here: <https://twitter.com/JbhatALnusra>

¹³ Alexander, Harriet, *Tweeting terrorism: How al Shabaab live blogged the Nairobi attacks*, Telegraph, 22nd September 2013

¹⁴ See here for example [WARNING, GRAPHIC]: : <https://www.facebook.com/Strangers.sy4/posts/217508368420191> and here <http://www.flickr.com/photos/93647787@N07>

¹⁵ See his Twitter account here: <https://twitter.com/abumamerican>

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¹⁶ See Twitter account here: <https://twitter.com/Fulan2tweet>

¹⁷ See here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoFRXks2X68> and here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evPh6jDXqSA>

¹⁸ There are many examples of this, see here for an example of the Adidas logo being adjusted to read Al-Qaida <http://www.laciudaddeportiva.com/usan-logo-de-adidas-en-playeras-a-favor-de-al-qaeda> and here for an example of the Call of Duty game cover being adopted.

¹⁹ *Concern over letters sent to Muslim inmates*, Copenhagen Post, October 4th 2013

Opportunities for Counter-Narrative Initiatives

COUNTER-NARRATIVE AUDIENCES IN RELATION TO FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Counter-narrative campaigns need to be finely tuned to their specific target audience according to personal characteristics, individual motivations, and the nature of the geography and conflict in question. In broad terms, however, there are two groups with different counter-narrative needs:

- Potential and returned foreign fighters (including those who have been in conflict zones on humanitarian grounds but who might be susceptible to radicalisation on their return)
- Those that could stop potential recruits from going or support them when they get back

COUNTER-NARRATIVES FOR POTENTIAL AND RETURNED FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Given the known drivers of, and motivations for, travel outlined in previous sections, there are a number of messages that could form the basis of counter-narrative campaigns:

- *You are being duped – don't be taken in by their propaganda:* the idea of betrayal is an especially strong and compelling one for young people. This message could focus on how potential recruits are being misled by propaganda for example, images of dead children taken from other places and presented as happening in the theatre of conflict or stories about al-Shabaab's extensive use of the forced recruitment of children.

- *We are not all in this together - there are as many divisions as bonds between different Islamic factions.* As noted above, the idea of camaraderie and unity is one stressed very often by those groups that utilise foreign fighters. Highlighting the vicious infighting between and within groups could go a long way towards countering this message. This could consist of examples of foreign fighters finding themselves under fire from other Islamic groups rather than the 'enemy', or even examples of foreign fighters who were betrayed and murdered in the conflict zone by the very groups they traveled to join. The most famous and powerful example of this is the American foreign fighter, Omar Hammam,²⁰ who even live tweeted one attempt on his life.²¹
- *This is not an Islamic struggle - you do not have a 'duty' to fight.* This could include messages about why fighting is not justified within Islam, why it is not a 'just war', and therefore bringing into question the Islamic duty to fight.
- *You are useless and you'll get in the way - do something more constructive instead:* This message could be unpacked in a number of ways: local fighters explaining that foreign fighters will be a liability on the frontline, and may not be allowed to fight anyway; citizens explaining that their need to protect foreigners will put them in danger; refugees

²⁰ US-born 'jihadist rapper' Omar Hammami reportedly killed in Somalia, Guardian, 12 September 2013

²¹ See Twitter conversation here: <https://twitter.com/abumamerican/status/327478460891156480>

on the indulgence of foreigners wanting to have adventure when there are women and children starving in refugee camps. This message could also give very clear ‘calls to action’: collect money, raise awareness, work for political dialogue, lobby your political representatives, etc.

- *Conditions on the frontline are terrible - it is not the adventure you are expecting.* This message could focus on the reality of poor conditions in these conflict zones, including testimonies from returned foreign fighters, and accounts from journalists or locals on the ground. It could include a ‘call to action’ linked to the adventure motivation, such as volunteering in other Islamic/Muslim majority countries or regions.

These core messages can be interpreted to fit the specifics of an individual conflict and target audience, and there will be additional narratives specific to a particular place.

In devising and disseminating counter-narrative initiatives, there are a number of principles that need to be observed:

- Counter-narratives can and will be turned around and used by the other side. It is important to factor this in and avoid any obvious own goals, but remember that it is inevitable.
- Messaging that is laboured will come across as propaganda – because it is. Those engaged in counter-narrative should avoid the temptation to engage in heavy messaging and instead identify authentic voices (such as former fighters calling for others to stay home) to tell their stories in their own words. The opposite will at best be ineffective, and at worst be used to reinforce conspiracy theories.
- One of the reasons that extremist messages are compelling is because they contain a ‘call to action’. It is not always possible for counter-narratives to do this, but those designing them should try to find ways to make their messages action-orientated. The ask might not always be literal, but needs to give a sense of urgency and ask them what they can do instead or point to the futility of their intended course of action.
- However, young people - especially those with firm views - do not like being told what to do; any attempts to do this are more likely to have the opposite effect. Counter-narratives should sow seeds of doubt that leave the target audience wanting to find out more or be inquisitive to question further.
- Counter-narratives are not intended to win the argument - they can help people gradually along the road to changed thinking or action, but no individual initiative will bring about wholesale change. Campaigns need to be realistic about their parameters and intended outcomes.
- Counter-narrative is more about emotions than evidence. Simply answering the extremist message point by point will play into the extremist narrative and reinforce its legitimacy.
- It is vital that counter-narrative campaigns are timely and responsive to events. Groups calling for young people to travel take the initiative in this way, and it is important that there is not a void in terms of response.

How can technology assist with counter-narratives

There are a number of ways that technology can assist with counter-narrative efforts:

- *Audience identification and targeting:* analytics tools can help to pinpoint who to target, where to find them online, who they are connected to, their trusted sources of information and the keywords they are searching for. Combining this with intervention programmes could allow one-to-one follow up with individuals deemed to have worrying patterns of online behaviour and contacts.
- *Direct targeting:* Many young people are open about their support for foreign fighters, either because there are wider sympathies within communities which means there is less stigma attached than for other forms of conflict, or because they are habitually and unwittingly sharing these views as they would any other positions via their public or semi-public social media profiles. This provides an opportunity for governments and activists to find and target individuals who may be at risk of recruitment for one-to-one messaging or mentoring. This information would also allow activists to alert families and communities of their concerns.
- *Content targeting:* there are a plethora of tools that can be used to highlight and promote counter-narrative content and can be tailored to target those who are searching for and accessing extremist content,

including Google, YouTube and Facebook ads, and targeted ads on gaming platforms.

- *Capacity building:* young people themselves are both the target audience and the message – building their capacity to create and share counter-narrative content online is essential. While it is important to have professionally produced content (videos, photos, memes, etc.), there is more power and greater scale from user-generated content being shared via social networks, but this requires funding for both training and then projects to create and disseminate this counter-narrative content.

Information for those that could stop potential recruits from going or help them when they get back

Additional to the core counter-narrative efforts aimed at preventing recruitment, there is also messaging, information and outreach that needs to target those in contact with, or with influence over, at risk individuals:

- *Families and communities:* There are examples of family and community members hiding the passports of those they suspect of intending to travel overseas to fight, and community members have spoken out against young people going. It will therefore be important to ensure that such individuals have clear information to allow them to interpret intentions and spot preparatory activities. They also need to know where to go with their concerns. This might involve outreach with community organisations, schools, after-school clubs, for example or wider media campaigns. These efforts could

also enlist the help of former foreign fighters and former extremists who will have street credibility with those considering travelling to fight.

- *Frontline workers:* Professionals, such as teachers, health/mental health workers, social workers, and youth/community workers come into contact with young people and may spot signs of radicalisation or the intention to travel. They need information about the risks, warning signs and what to do about their concerns. This could be coordinated through municipalities or local police forces. Frontline workers would also benefit from information about the kinds of narratives that organisations employing foreign fighters are using and how to counter them to young people should they use them.

Capacity building for credible counter-messengers

While there is much that government can do in the area of counter-narratives, it is not the best placed actor to be the primary messenger. One of the areas where governments can make the greatest contribution is in helping to build capacity among credible messengers, such as former violent extremists, former foreign fighters, the victims of violent extremism, those from conflict zones or individuals with influence over at risk youth, including young people themselves. There are four key capacity gaps:

- *Technical:* many of the most credible messengers have poor online technical skills so they are not able to use social media platforms, do not understand how to use

analytical tools, and are not making best use of even basic tools, such as email and websites

- *Production:* films and images are now central to foreign fighter extremist propaganda, but many counter-messengers do not even have basic skills to allow them to take and upload photos or create and share basic videos using smart phones
- *Communications:* many counter-narrative films to date are long monologues to camera, which do not appeal to target audiences. There is a basic lack of understanding about effective communication of the key messages.
- *Campaigning:* counter-narrative is not just communication but campaigns because it needs to be sustained over the long-term, but few of the most effective counter-messengers understand the basics of campaigning.

Recommendations for Western Governments

While governments are often not the best placed counter-messengers, there is much they can do in relation to counter-narratives for foreign fighters:

- In many cases, western governments are central to extremist narratives. Government strategic communications in relation to certain issues - such as Syrian intervention, aid to key countries and regions and political processes - can play into the hands of those calling on young people to travel so should be handled with caution.
- Governments should work together to form a monitoring function of extremist narratives in relation to foreign fighters to create a systematic resource and a granular understanding of the full range of narratives being used for whom and in what contexts.
- Governments should use online analytical tools and polling data to understand which extremist narratives have the greatest impact to better inform their own counter-narrative campaigns.
- Governments should work together to map out the full range of potential counter-narrative messages for each target group, location, call to action and type of motivation. This would provide a useful 'menu of options' to be deployed when fast reactions are needed in response to events.
- Governments should use their convening power to bring together the full range of actors needed to work together on effective counter-narrative campaigns. This includes government itself (policy and political), tech sector, communications specialists, campaigners, former foreign fighters and violent extremists, with representatives from the potential target groups themselves. Clear strategies are needed that are systematic and can be sustained over time.
- Tech sector participation is essential - governments should prioritise this partnership building.
- Governments should create economies of scale in terms of data gathering and analytics, which can then be disseminated to those delivering campaigns. This might include information on target audiences and their online preferences and behaviour, analytical tools, and analysis of what works.
- Governments have a critical role to play in building capacity with those best placed to deliver counter-narrative campaigns. The key capacity gaps are in the areas of technology, production, communications and campaigning and could be organised through schools, youth organisations, professional bodies, umbrella community and religious groups.
- Governments should work with tech sector partners to investigate the potential to use social media and gaming platforms to identify at risk individuals and groups and target them for ads, information and interventions.
- Governments should roll out outreach, information and counter-narrative programmes for families, communities and frontline workers via schools, professional bodies, RAN networks, unions, and potentially via a wider media campaign.

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