



UNGA SIDE EVENT

‘New Partnerships for Countering Violent Extremist Narratives’

On Thursday 27th September, the European Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark with support from M&C Saatchi, came together to hold the high-level event ‘New Partnerships for Countering Violent Extremist Narratives’, on the margins of the opening of 2018 UN General Assembly in New York. This event brought together around 100 experts and practitioners, including law enforcement and security practitioners, policy makers, civil society organisations, tech companies, and academics to examine the challenges of countering terrorist influence. The discussions will feed into the development of new public-private partnerships and innovative approaches to tackling terrorist propaganda online and offline.

Opening remarks were delivered by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, H.E. Anders Samuelsen, followed by Mrs Henriette Geiger (Director, European Commission) and Mrs. Rubina Abu Zeinab, National Coordinator for Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) in Lebanon. **H.E. Samuelsen**, stressed that in spite of recent progress the fight against terrorism was far from won. The online and offline media remained an important battlefield. It was paramount to work with the private sector to make sure that technology was a force for good and not evil. This quest had led Denmark to appoint the world’s first Tech Ambassador. The tech industry had to take responsibilities that matched its global reach, size and influence. This included preventing terrorists from abusing its platforms, while respecting fundamental rights of citizens. According to the Minister, this should be coupled with broad based local early prevention as the best form of defence, to stop radicalisation in the first place. **Mrs Geiger**, highlighted that terrorism is an issue that concerns us all, and we needed to amplify the voices of inclusion and peace, over those of hate and division, and ensure that we have a trustworthy messenger. Moreover, the victims of terrorism had to be heard. EU Internet Forum was a useful instrument for dialogue with the tech industry, including on speedy take down of terrorist content. However, free speech had to be protected. **Mrs. Abu Zeinab** spoke about the ‘Lebanese Model for PVE’, as outlined in the National Strategy for Prevention of Violent Extremism, adopted unanimously by the Council Ministers earlier in the year. The Lebanese definition of violent extremism had three elements: (i) the rejection of diversity and the non-acceptance of the other, and the use of violence as a means of expression and influence; (ii) the spread of individual and collective hatred that may lead to social violence; and (iii) a behaviour that threatens societal values ensuring social stability. Mrs. Abu Zeinab highlighted how violent extremists in Lebanon had chosen Lebanon’s human values, state institutions and social unity as main targets for their propaganda war. Violent extremists had launched their communication weapons loaded with an immense reserve of narratives to be used against the Lebanese state, Lebanese families, and Lebanese individuals. Hence it was a key principle for the National PVE Strategy to give proper attention to strategic communication, online de-radicalization, and the various interventions, which would make the main narratives and values of society immune from distortion or falsification. Since the inception of the strategy process, it had been a clear vision for the Lebanese Government that the strategy should be nationally-owned, governmental, societal and community-based, evidence-based; and based on international standards and partnerships. Mrs. Abu Zeinab highlighted the ongoing partnership between Lebanon, Denmark, and the European Union, including support to a soon to be initiated nationwide consultation process leading to a National Action Plan as the programmatic and policy-based interpretation of the strategy.



The event was divided into two panels, the first was moderated by Director John Gatt, EEAS. It addressed the current influence of terrorism online and offline. The second panel was moderated by Denmark's Tech Ambassador Casper Klynge. Its focus was the importance of public-private partnerships in countering violent extremist narratives. Both panels included subject matter experts, representatives from tech companies, private companies, civil society and international organisations.

Panel 1: What influence does Terrorism have online and offline?

On the first panel experts discussed **the current state of influence that terrorism has both online and offline**. The point was made that too often we artificially separate the online and the offline worlds, when in reality they represent a continuum of information. Radicalisation occurs within an ecosystem of the on- and off-line worlds, with the role of human connection in the off-line world being particularly important. The experts argued that off-line world is probably more important than the on-line in the radicalisation process. In designing projects to counter the influence of violent extremists (VE), it is crucial that we take a holistic view and do not focus on one dimension alone. There has been a tendency to focus on online propaganda by itself, whilst we need to develop approaches that combine addressing both the on- and off-line worlds together.

Further, when we address online propaganda we should not focus on individual platforms, as in practise terrorist activity online is spread across multiple inter-linked platforms to form an online ecosystem. If we focus on one individual platform, terrorist activity moves elsewhere. Similarly, if content is taken down from one platform, it is simply re-posted from another. The work of the big tech companies to tackle VE material on their platforms may potentially shift the threat to smaller platforms who are less equipped to deal with the threat. In tackling terrorist content online, we should not think in terms of individual platforms but rather of an ecosystem of inter-linked platforms.

However, online take downs by itself is not enough, and it is important to also effectively counter terrorist propaganda through counter/alternative narrative projects.

Ms Farah Souhail, from ZINC Network, presented the work of the Humanity Lost project, funded by the EU, which addresses the issue of dehumanisation and the role this plays in radicalisation. The project provided a platform to amplify voices of victims, as a means of countering dehumanisation narratives. Farah argued that violent extremist content has become mainstream online, and to counter this we need to make messages of inclusion louder.

The ability of Da'esh to influence online and offline, has been degraded as they lost territory and also as they lost key propaganda personal. In addition, tech companies are having increasing success in taking down content. Google noted that it has worked hard to improve take downs of VE material and so far in 2018, 50% of the material they have taken down had been viewed less than 10 times. Facebook, similarly noted their improved take down rates: in the first quarter of 2018, Facebook took down 1.25 million pieces of VE content – 99% of which Facebook found themselves. Despite these successes against Da'esh, and their loss of territory, it was argued that Da'esh propaganda still poses the greatest threat. To them propaganda space is more important than territory. In confronting Da'esh propaganda we need to highlight to the media the responsibility they have in not replicating or amplifying Da'esh propaganda / narratives, unintentionally in their reporting.

Panel 2: Fighting Terrorist influence – the importance of new public-private partnerships to counter violent extremist narratives.

The second panel addressed the **importance of new public-private partnerships to counter violent extremist narratives**. There has been a sea change in the approach of tech companies to tackling VE content online over the last few years. Facebook for instance now has 200 people who work on tackling



terrorism and over 10,000 content reviewers. In a year, the number of reviewers would double. Part of this change has been that Tech companies realise that they need to work together, and not stay in their own silos. As terrorist work across an ecosystem of platforms, the platforms needed to work together to tackle terrorism. This has led to the creation of the GIFCT – Global Internet Forum for Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Originally started by Google, Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft, but now involving 17 tech companies. One key success has been the creation of a ‘Hashtag’ database of VE material that is maintained by GIFCT and shared with members, the hashtags assists in the identification and takedown of VE material across platforms. This makes it far easier to take VE material down from across multiple platforms, rather than previously removing it from one platform only for it to emerge on a different one. Another important aspect is that through GIFCT it has allowed big tech companies to share expertise and experience with many smaller platforms that do not have the same resources. This is particularly important, because as the big tech companies increasing tackle the issue of violent extremism on their platforms, violent extremists could potentially move to smaller less prepared platforms. However, it is important to realise that confronting violent extremism is not just about take downs, as ultimately they are a symptom and not a cause. It was agreed that beyond take-downs and counter-narrative campaigns, there needs to be a wider infra-structure to provide individuals with pathways to disengage.

In all of this work, it is important to maintain privacy and freedom of expression. However, it is often a difficult balancing act for the tech companies between removing VE content and not infringing on human rights. VE content is not like, for example, child exploitation content, which has no legitimate uses and should always be removed. VE content does have some legitimate uses such as in news coverage. It is paramount in removing VE material, that this does not inadvertently curb freedom of expression.

Public/private partnerships are crucial to tackling terrorism, however this is a new area for collaboration. There is much that could be learned from other areas of public-private partnerships, such as in the public health sector in which communication companies have, for example, worked successfully with health experts on campaigns to promote healthier lifestyles from reducing smoking and drinking etc. We need to learn the lessons from these collaborations and to build on them in working together to confront violent extremism. Research on terrorism and violent extremism, could also benefit from more sharing of knowledge from across different disciplines, bringing for example psychologists, neuro scientist, anthropologist and political scientist together, each bringing their unique perspective. The Tech companies have realised the importance of engaging with academic researchers, and have as part of GIFCT set up a research network to fund research on counter-terrorism.

Concluding Remarks

Mr Stefano Manservigi (Director General, European Commission), brought the event to a close with some concluding remarks. He highlighted how terrorism and communications are completely inter-linked, pointing out that for a terrorist communicating an act of violence is as important as the act of violence itself. The international community had been able to confront violent extremism online through a combination of Disruption and Counter Narratives approaches. Da'esh was losing capacity as it lost territory. Since 2015 a 50% reduction in the number of videos. Still, Daesh had a strong medial presence. The psychology of manipulation of the terrorist messages had to be understood better. He stressed that the international community's counter messages must be close to the ground to respond credibly to Daesh's propaganda. In his view, the struggle for democracy was both relevant for countering populism and radicalization. He lamented that the international community was suffering from an acute lack of trust in institutions and fear of the future. He suggested to counter fear with solidarity.



The event was very well attended, with a full room of over 100 attendees for the entire duration of the event. The organisers received much positive feedback following the event from both speakers and attendees. The event and the partnership between the EU, Lebanon and Denmark was covered by Lebanese media. Below is a snapshot of some of the social media coverage of the event.

Social Media Coverage

