CTED Analytical Brief: Countering terrorist narratives online and offline

CTED

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL
COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

BACKGROUND

The present *Analytical Brief* was prepared by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) in accordance with Security Council resolution 2395 (2017), which directs CTED to conduct analytical work on emerging issues, trends and developments and to make its analytical products available throughout the United Nations system.[1]

CTED Analytical Briefs aim to provide the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, United Nations agencies, and policymakers with a concise analysis of specific issues, trends or developments, as identified through CTED's engagement with Member States on their implementation of the relevant Security Council resolutions. The *Analytical Briefs* also include relevant data gathered by CTED, including through engagement with its United Nations partners; international, regional and subregional organizations; civil society organizations; and members of the CTED Global Research Network (GRN).[2]

INTRODUCTION

Terrorist groups have always sought to radicalize others (especially young people) to violence. However, over the past decade, their propaganda and radicalization efforts have occurred at greater speed and with a bigger range, a process facilitated by the fastest, broadest expansion of mass communications in human history. As a consequence, Member States have been forced to expand their efforts to combat terrorist communications beyond merely blocking or removing online terrorist propaganda and have increasingly emphasized *countering terrorist narratives*.

In May 2017, the Security Council adopted its resolution 2354 (2017), which welcomed the Counter-Terrorism Committee's "Comprehensive International Framework to Counter Terrorist Narratives."[3] In accordance with the Framework, Member States and other stakeholders should not only emphasize terrorists' inhumanity and the flaws in their arguments, but also develop positive or alternative narratives that promote a holistic worldview and encourage non-violent pathways to address grievances and feelings of powerlessness and alienation.

[1] The present *Analytical Brief* has been prepared in support of S/RES/2354 (2017), which directs the Counter-Terrorism Committee to, inter alia, identify and compile existing good practices in countering terrorist narratives and contribute to United Nations efforts to develop models for effectively countering terrorist narratives, both online and offline, and as a follow-up to the open meeting of the Committee on "Countering terrorist narratives and preventing the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes", held at United Nations Headquarters, New York, on 28 January 2020.

[2] See GRN newsletter for more information.

[3] See S/2017/375 for more information.

DEFINITIONS

Terrorist narratives are designed to achieve multiple strategic communications objectives and target several types of audience, which range from those unaware of the underlying terrorist ideology to devout ideological adherents seeking avenues for engagement in violent activity.

Terrorist narratives reflect a system of stories that purport to provide a coherent worldview supporting individuals or groups in their illicit violence and incitement to violence.[4] Transmission of terrorist propaganda takes place online and offline. Although no widely accepted definition of **counter-narratives** or counter-messages exists, they typically:

- Challenge, or offer a positive alternative to, terrorist or violent extremist messages
- Aim to deconstruct, discredit, and demystify violent extremist messaging, whether through ideology, logic, fact, or humour [5]
- Are reactive, and have a confrontational intent [6]
- Are an intentional, direct communications strategy within a political, policy, or military context[7]
- Vary in their scope, purpose, and target audiences
- Fall on a **"counter-messaging spectrum"** consisting of government strategic communications, alternative narratives, and counter-narratives.[8]

[4] Beutel, A., Weine, S. M., Saeed, A., Mihajlovic, A.S., Stone, A., Beahrs, J. O. and Shanfield, S. B., 2016. Guiding Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives. *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations*, 7(3), pp. 35–49. According to the authors, this definition draws on Ruston, S. (2009) in "Understand What Narrative Is and Does".
[5] Briggs, R. and Feve, S., 2013. Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism. What Works and What Are the Implications for Government?
[6] Ferguson, K., 2016. Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies. A review of the evidence.
[7] See http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf.
[8] This classification first appeared in Briggs, R. and Feve, S., 2013. *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*.

KEY TRENDS

CTED's analysis of existing strategic communication efforts has identified four distinct phases of audience engagement: (i) "Pre-radicalization to violence" phase; (ii) "Radicalization to violence" phase; (iii) "Engagement with terrorism/violent extremism" phase; and (iv) "Disengagement" phase.[9]

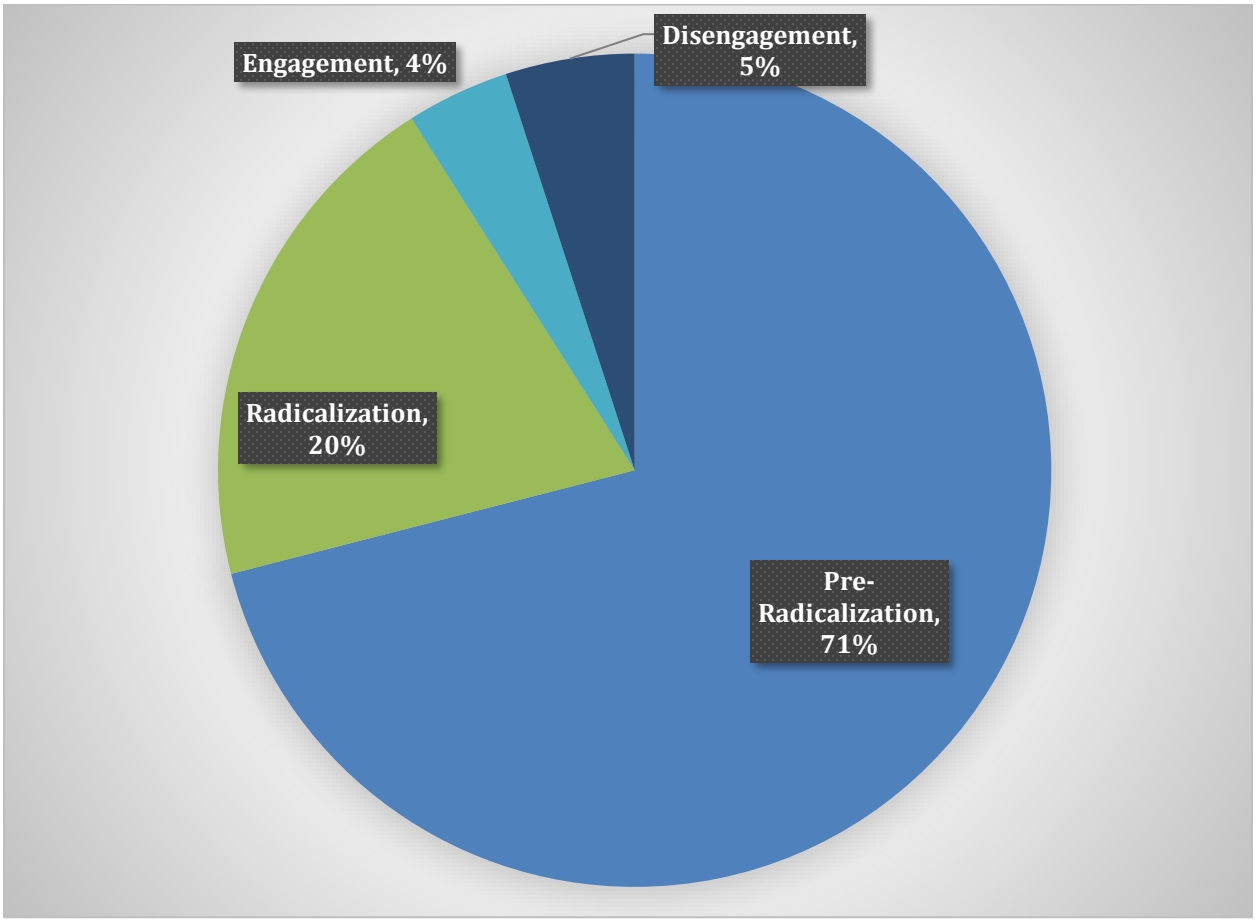

Fig. 1: Relative prevalence of efforts to counter terrorist narratives (delineated by target audience's phase of involvement).

"Pre-radicalization" programmes *(phase (i))* target individuals who either have no knowledge of the terrorist ideology or associated narratives, are aware of the terrorist ideology but have never come into contact with narratives, or have otherwise never engaged in support of a terrorist organization. According to the preliminary findings of a United Nations-contracted expert analyst,[10] these programmes comprise the **majority of efforts to combat terrorist narratives.**

[9] John Horgan and Max Taylor, "Disengagement, De-Radicalization, and the Arc of Terrorism: Future Directions for Research." In Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge: European and American Experiences, edited by Rik Coolsaet (London: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 173-186.

[10] Dr. Kurt Braddock was engaged through the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact Working Group on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism to conduct a review of counter-narrative initiatives. His preliminary findings (covering 45 Member States) were delivered at the Committee's open meeting of 28 January 2020. The full report will be submitted later in 2020. A summary of the meeting, a webcast recording, and a copy of the presentations can be found on the Committee's website.

They are intended to "get there first" and challenge the appeal of terrorist narratives before audiences are persuaded by them. Civil society and academia have raised significant concerns about the potential for "profiling" of communities in this phase, noting that audience selection is often based on assumptions regarding their potential risk of radicalization to violence.

Programmes targeting individuals believed to be radicalizing to violence *(phase (ii))* aim to prevent those who support a terrorist ideology from engaging in violence. Because the implementation of such programmes requires the identification of individuals who are sympathetic to a terrorist ideology, many involve "frontline" workers (e.g., teachers, parents, security forces) in regular contact with those individuals. They can then be referred to a programme that challenges these narratives. Prominent programmes containing elements that challenge terrorist narratives include Denmark's Aarhus Model and the United Kingdom's Channel Programme.[11]

Governments, non-governmental organizations, and civil society appear hesitant to engage with those who have actively engaged with terrorist groups, including through violence ("Engagement with terrorism/violent extremism" *(phase (iii)).* The relative lack of programmes *(see figure 1, above)* that focus on those already engaged in terrorism (beyond those implemented in the criminal-justice system) suggests that hard-line approaches (including arrests) to deal with terrorists remain the norm, although some programmes do support those affected by family members' violent engagement with terrorist organizations.

A small number of counter-narrative programmes target those who have previously engaged in terrorist activity *("Disengagement" phase (iv))*, including those who seek to leave terrorist groups, those who have disengaged from violence but still adhere to terrorist ideologies, and those who have disengaged from violence and seek to speak out against their former group(s). These efforts often use "formers," individuals who were previously engaged in terrorist activity but have renounced violence.

Technology trends

Analysis suggests that due to increasing difficulties in posting content on larger platforms, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant **(ISIL, also known as Da'esh) continues to experiment with smaller platforms and decentralized web (DWeb) services.**[12] Even though smaller platforms do not have the same reach as larger platforms, they can be attractive to ISIL as they generally lack the resources required to remove and stifle terrorist content.

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Terrorists of different ideologies continue to learn from each other and to use the Internet to maximize the online virality of their attacks. During and after the March 2019 Christchurch attack, the online activity of sympathizers resembled that of ISIL and Al-Qaida supporters. Smaller file-

[11] Preven Bertelsen, "Danish Preventative Measures and De-radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model," *Panorama* (01/2015), pp. 241-253; HM Government, *Channel Duty Guidance: Protecting Vulnerable People from Being Drawn into Terrorism* (London: Crown Copyright, 2015).

[12] DWeb refers to the third iteration of web technology, as a place where services are distributed rather than localized and where users own and control their own data. Examples of decentralized web services include Riot, ZeroNet, and Minds.

sharing platforms were used together with large platforms as "beacons", guiding users to outbound URLs, even as "supporter networks" amplified terrorist propaganda by re-sharing and re-uploading material across an increasingly broad and fragmented range of smaller platforms.[13]

According to the CTED-initiated public-private partnership *Tech Against Terrorism*, successful implementation of this approach by pro-ISIL supporters would make it difficult to tackle ISIL's presence on those services. A quantitative analysis of more than 45,000 URLs used since 2014 across more than 330 platforms shows that **ISIL exploits smaller platforms (half of the top 50 platforms used were small and micro platforms)**.

CHALLENGES

Deciding whether and how to engage in countering terrorist narratives involves numerous challenges. There is increasing criticism of the lack of robust monitoring & evaluation (M&E) of counter-narrative initiatives in the area of countering violent extremism (CVE). The effectiveness of such initiatives is also often brought into question.[14] Although private firms and NGOs often use M&E more than Governments, they rarely use controlled experiments to gauge their effectiveness relative to other available practices.

> *As with all counter-terrorism measures, it is essential to ensure that government counter-narrative strategies are consistent with their obligations pursuant to international human rights law. Measures aimed at censoring or removing online content must comply with the right to freedom of expression. All measures, including those taken offline, must ensure respect for the rights to freedom of expression, association, conscience, religion and related rights.*

In many cases, programming appears to be based on untested assumptions, rather than on a sound evidence base. Those assumptions include: (i) consuming violent words will result in violent deeds; (ii) if propaganda is crucial to violent extremism, counter-propaganda is needed to tackle it; and (iii) the violent extremist threat can be addressed (at least partly) by removing online violent extremist content.[15] The first two assumptions lack a clear evidence base, and the causal relationship is unproven; the third assumption might be considered as overly simplistic and as ignoring the significance of offline contact in the radicalization-to-violence process.

[13] Tech Against Terrorism Analysis: New Zealand attack and the terrorist use of the Internet.
[14] e.g., Eric Rosand and Emily Winterbotham. "Do counter-narratives actually reduce violent extremism?" (Brookings, 2019).
[15] Ferguson, K., 2016. Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies. A review of the evidence.

The assumption that violent extremist narratives can be countered by a specifically designed counter-narrative fails to address the appeal of violent extremist narratives (which includes their ability to **tap into and seemingly confirm *existing* beliefs)**. Whether the target group tends to believe the claim that "Islam is under attack" or the claim that "the West is under attack", those claims can integrate several grievances of that particular group into one meta-narrative.[16] Further, **some critiques hold that some counter-narratives risk making the problem *worse.*** Examples of such counter-narratives include broad-brush counter-narratives that ask European Muslims to condemn terrorism, which can serve to entrench the perceived Islamization of the problem.[17]

Many government programmes do not sufficiently take into account audience perceptions of their credibility. In these cases, audiences may dismiss the counter-narratives altogether, particularly in States where human rights are violated in the context of countering terrorism or where government actions are not matched by words, thereby leading to a decline in credibility and trust.

An additional challenge is determining audience "location" (i.e., whether counter-narratives should target large parts of the population ("inoculation" model) or only already-radicalized individuals who require one-to-one interventions).[18] Many government programmes do not sufficiently take into account audience perceptions of their credibility. In these cases, audiences may dismiss the counter-narratives altogether, particularly in States where human rights are violated in the context of countering terrorism or where government actions are not matched by words, thereby leading to a decline in credibility and trust.[19]

Governments can benefit from partnering with outside organizations, but the perceived credibility, legitimacy and relevance of such "messengers" can dictate the level of trust audiences will have in the messenger, in where they source their information, and in the information itself.[20]

Even though it might appear logical to involve "formers" in counter-narrative initiatives, their involvement raises ethical considerations. There is limited data indicating their effectiveness, and they may be perceived as traitors by those who remain adherent to terrorist ideologies. **It is possible that only those "formers" who have already begun the disengagement phase can be effectively involved in countering terrorist narratives.**

[16] Ibid.
[17] Paul 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.
[18] Radicalisation Awareness Network, "Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives", RAN Issue Paper 1/10/2015.
[19] Ferguson, K., 2016. Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies. A review of the evidence.
[20] In terms of predominantly religious narratives, the Cairo-based Observatory for Combatting Extremism at Al-Azhar has already supported the Counter-Terrorism Committee's/CTED's efforts in this area. The Observatory employs round 100 researchers, covering 11 languages, who counter propaganda by publishing corrections of false statements using a broad range of publications and tools. The Observatory delivered a presentation at the first open meeting held in accordance with Security Council resolution 2354 (2017), on 29 May 2018. More information is available here.

Few counter-narrative programmes include a gender perspective, even though terrorist groups themselves use tailored, gendered messaging to appeal to men and women. ISIL's gendered messages targeting men tend to use pejorative and submissive notions of womanhood to reinforce their ideas about masculinity.[21] Groups such as ISIL also understand that they can appeal to women by speaking to their specific grievances and needs and can exploit them by conveying a message of false empowerment. Counter-narrative efforts have not been equally skilful at tapping into gender dynamics or addressing gendered needs.

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Few government programmes in this area are part of a broader attempt to address conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism. This enables terrorists to exploit vulnerabilities and grievances relating to human rights violations, poor governance, and exclusion. A further challenge is the scalability of counter-narrative initiatives. Experience suggests that one-on-one intervention has a high degree of success but is resource-intensive, a particular challenge for low-capacity States.

Because the use of technology for terrorist purposes is a threat that affects the entire technology eco-system, and because technology platforms are often used in combination, it is essential to ensure that **disruption operations avoid "like-for-like" displacement of activity from one platform to another or lead to unwanted consequences**, such as migration to the DWeb (which is inherently more difficult to understand, influence, and disrupt).[22]

As with all counter-terrorism measures, it is essential to ensure that government counter-narrative strategies are consistent with their obligations pursuant to international human rights law. Measures aimed at censoring or removing online content must comply with the right to freedom of expression. All measures, including those taken offline, must ensure respect for the rights to freedom of expression, association, conscience, religion and related rights.

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[21] "Empowerment or Subjugation: A Gendered Analysis of ISIL Messaging". UN-Women, June 2018.
[22] Tech Against Terrorism Analysis: ISIS' use of smaller platforms and the DWeb to share terrorist content.

RESPONSES

Member States; international, regional and subregional organizations; civil society; and the private sector have all taken significant steps to counter terrorist narratives and to offer alternative or positive messages. Those responses have varied in nature - given the need for tailored, context specific approaches – and in some cases have included:

- The adoption of "whole-of-society" and "whole-of-Government" approaches
- Addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, including human rights violations, poor governance, and socio-economic factors
- Ensuring a meaningful commitment to, and the delivery of, transformed material conditions on the ground,[23] thereby closing or diminishing the "say-do gap"
- Factoring in both the gender dimension and age sensitivities when identifying the target audience(s)
- Engaging in offline efforts to lawfully prevent incitement from occurring in religious, cultural or educational settings, including radio broadcasts
- Ensuring that online and offline efforts are coordinated
- Fostering critical thinking and digital resilience through education
- Engaging with religious authorities, community leaders, women's groups and other civil society actors with relevant expertise in crafting and delivering effective counter-narratives
- Complying with international human rights law, including the right to freedom of expression
- Guaranteeing the participation and leadership of women
- Integrating research on the factors that drive and mitigate terrorist and violent extremist threats, in combination with other preventive efforts
- Taking into account the specific circumstances of different contexts at all levels (there is no such thing as "one-size-fits-all" approach)
- Establishing baseline data and robust M&E elements at the programme-development stage
- Incorporating lessons learned from the field of narrative persuasion and social identity theory (behavioural change)
- Ensuring sustainable funding, which can be "seeded" or facilitated by Government.

[23] See Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism (A/HRC/43/46).

FURTHER GUIDANCE AND INITIATIVES

Several ongoing initiatives seek to raise awareness of the importance of, and provide guidance for, countering terrorist narratives, amplifying positive messages, and providing credible alternatives.

International level

The Security Council has adopted a number of resolutions containing measures relevant to this area, as well as specific guidance pertaining to their effective implementation:

- The Counter-Terrorism Committee's Comprehensive International Framework to Counter Terrorist Narratives (S/2017/375), referenced in Security Council resolution 2354 (2017), includes a number of guidelines pertaining to countering terrorist narratives.

- Security Council resolution 1624 (2005) encourages Member States to engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative that can incite terrorist acts.

- In its resolution 2178 (2014), the Council emphasizes the important role to be played by States in promoting peaceful alternatives to violent narratives espoused by foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and underscores the role that education can play in countering terrorist narratives.

- In its resolution 2396 (2017), the Council encourages Member States to collaborate in developing and implementing effective counter-narrative strategies and also encourages States and international, regional, and subregional entities to ensure the participation and leadership of women in those efforts.

- The Counter-Terrorism Committee's *Addendum to the guiding principles on foreign terrorist fighters (2018)* – notably its Guiding Principle 39 – provides guidance for Member States in this area.[24] In May 2018 and in January 2020, the Committee held open meetings on countering terrorist narratives and preventing use of the Internet for terrorist purposes.[25]

- The Technical Guide to the implementation of Security Council resolution 1373 (2001) and other relevant resolutions includes requirements relating to prohibiting and preventing incitement and recruitment to commit terrorist acts and countering violent extremism and terrorist narratives. In early 2020, the Technical Guide was updated and approved by the Counter-Terrorism Committee and will be made available in all United Nations languages in mid-2020 on the Committee's website.

The following internationally recognized guidance on this issue is also available:

[24] See S/2018/1177 for more information.

[25] For more information, see Counter-Terrorism Committee's website (May 2018 and January 2020).

- The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy - last reviewed in June 2018 - encourages Member States to engage with relevant local communities and non-governmental actors (where appropriate) in developing tailored strategies to counter violent extremist narratives that can incite recruitment to terrorist groups. It also stresses that counter-narratives should aim not only to rebut terrorists' messages but also amplify positive narratives, provide credible alternatives and address issues of concern to vulnerable audiences.[26]

- In 2019, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) issued *The Zurich-London Recommendations on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online*, a set of non-binding good practices covering content-based and communications-based responses.[27]

- In 2016, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) published *The Counter-Narrative Handbook*. Focused on civil society, youth and NGO-led online counter-narrative campaigns, the handbook seeks to assist those seeking to create, launch, and evaluate an effective counter-terrorism campaign.[28] It can be used alongside the ISD Counter-Narrative Toolkit.[29]

- *Tech Against Terrorism (TaT)* is a 2016 CTED-initiated public-private partnership that works with the global technology industry to tackle use of the Internet for terrorist purposes, while also respecting human rights. TaT recently launched its Terrorist Content Analytics Platform (TCAP), which is designed to assist companies to quickly address terrorist use of their platforms through an "alert" function and securely examine verified terrorist content.[30]

- *The Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)* was established in 2017 as an industry-led initiative dedicated to disrupting terrorist abuse of its members' digital platforms. Founded by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube, the GIFCT manages knowledge-sharing, technical collaboration, and shared research.[31]

- *The Hedayah International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)*, which is associated with the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), is engaged in a comprehensive range of global initiatives aimed at countering terrorist narratives. Hedayah's Counter-Narrative Library provides recognized academics and practitioners (including civil society organizations) working in the area of alternative and counter-narratives with password-protected access to guidance on preventing and countering violent extremism.[32]

[26] See A/RES/72/284 for more information.

[27] Policy Toolkit. The GCTF Zurich-London Recommendations on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online (2019).

[28] The Counter-Narrative Handbook.

[29] Available at http://www.counternarratives.org.

[30] For more information, see https://www.techagainstterrorism.org.

[31] For more information, see https://www.gifct.org.

[32] More information is available here.

Regional level

- In 2017, the European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs issued a report on *Countering Terrorist Narratives*.[33] The European Commission Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Communications and Narratives Working Group has also produced a wide range of relevant guidance.[34]

- In 2018, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) issued *A practical guide to the first rule of CT-CVE messaging. Do violent extremists no favours*, which explores disruption, re-direction, and counter-narratives and recommends that strategic communications campaigns deploy Persuasive, Simple, Positive, Short (PS-PS) messaging cycles, with messaging augmented by Thematically Accumulated, Narrative-Driven, Emotion Motivators (TANDEM).[35]

- In 2018, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) published a guidebook for South-Eastern Europe on *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism*. It describes civil society's role in diffusing tensions between Governments and communities and challenging violent extremist narratives and countering efforts by violent groups to leverage community grievances for recruitment purposes.[36]

- In 2018, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) published its *Regional Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in East Africa*, which emphasizes the importance of devising alternative narratives to resist radicalization to violence and calls on IGAD agencies to support civil society organizations and faith-based institutions in their efforts to generate counter narratives.

Local and civil society level

- The Strong Cities Network (SCN), launched by the ISD in 2015, is a global network of mayors, policymakers, and practitioners, which aims to support city governments and their communities in their efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. In 2019, it launched a Campaign Toolkit, which is a free, multilingual resource for activists and organizations working to promote social good and counter polarization in their communities. Developed with the support of the GIFCT, the Campaign Toolkit can help counter the threat of hateful, divisive, and extremist content online and offline.[37]

- The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), established in 2014, is a public-private partnership fund that awards grants to civil society organizations

[33] European Parliament: Countering Terrorist Narratives.
[34] For more information, see the RAN website.
[35] Europol. https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/practical-guide-to-first-rule-of-ctcve.
[36] OSCE. The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism. A Guidebook for South-East Europe.
[37] ISD Strong Cities Network.

working to counter terrorism (including to counter terrorist narratives), helping to build their capacity and connecting them to Governments, foundations, and businesses.[38]

CTED will continue to engage with these and other partners to further develop and share expertise in countering terrorist narratives and amplifying positive and credible alternatives, acting in partnership with Member States; other United Nations entities; international, regional and subregional organizations; local authorities; civil society organizations; the private sector; and the research community (through the GRN).

[38] Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund.