



# Mastering the Narrative

Counterterrorism Strategic Communication  
and the United Nations

BY NAUREEN CHOWDHURY FINK AND JACK BARCLAY



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## MASTERING THE NARRATIVE:

### COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND THE UNITED NATIONS

By Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Jack Barclay

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
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## Acronyms

<b>AQAP</b>	Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula
<b>AQIM</b>	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb
<b>CGCC</b>	Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation
<b>CSCC</b>	Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (U.S. Department of State)
<b>CTC</b>	Counter-Terrorism Committee (UN Security Council)
<b>CTED</b>	Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UN Security Council)
<b>CTITF</b>	UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
<b>DPA</b>	UN Department of Political Affairs
<b>DPI</b>	UN Department of Public Information
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>NGO</b>	Nongovernmental organization
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	UN Development Programme
<b>UNIC</b>	UN Information Center
<b>UNPOS</b>	UN Political Office for Somalia
<b>UNSSC</b>	UN System Staff College
<b>USAID</b>	U.S. Agency for International Development
<b>WRAP</b>	Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent

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## Executive Summary

Terrorism has always been a battle of ideas, reflecting a desire for violent and immediate political transformation. The technologies available in a globalized world today, however, have expanded the theater of conflict into a broader swath of spaces—governed, less governed, virtual—than ever. Groups such as al-Qaida understand that they can now wield influence as effectively with a video camera and an Internet connection as with an improvised explosive device. Such groups also invest heavily in their marketing capabilities. They have articulated a clear mission statement and excelled at this form of strategic communication, crafting messages based on audience perceptions and including actions as well as words. Al-Qaida’s call to arms, for example, is a globally resonant expression of its outlook, grievances, agenda, and demands and has a proven ability to turn passive observers into active participants in violent extremism.

Yet, extremists do not constitute a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas. States and international organizations provide their own narratives that shape identities, relationships, and interactions among peoples and states, but they have often struggled to challenge extremist messages and draw on their own compelling stories.

This should not be the case. The United Nations is the only international organization to boast universal membership and has spent more than six decades promoting sustainable development, promoting human rights and the rule of law, strengthening governance, and supporting representative government. Member states have worked together to mitigate violent conflict, support humanitarian assistance, and address threats to human security. The organization has a good story to tell, a powerful counternarrative to that proclaimed by extremist groups. Yet, does the story get out and reach key audiences outside and inside the United Nations?

This report is the result of a study, undertaken as part of a broader effort on the part of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation to enhance multilateral capacities to prevent terrorism and violent extremism, that aims to examine how this message has been perceived and received by three key stakeholder communities around the United Nations: its own staff (at headquarters, in specialized agencies, and in the field); member states; and the broader public, collectively considered the “UN community.” Three main objectives underpin this project.

1. To identify the core message of the United Nations on countering terrorism and violent extremism and how this message shapes counterterrorism policy and practice
2. To examine whether and how this message informs and impacts three key audiences: (a) the UN system, including field missions and specialized agencies; (b) UN member states; and (c) the broader public
3. To explore how strategic communication can be used to enhance UN efforts to prevent terrorism and violent extremism and contribute to national and regional efforts to address terrorism and diminish radicalization and recruitment that bolster extremist groups

This report presents a qualitative analysis of how strategic communication tools can amplify and enhance UN efforts to prevent terrorism and violent extremism, through the United Nations’ own initiatives as well as by supporting member states. The first two sections offer an overview of counterterrorism practice and the shift toward prevention, as well as the parallel shift at the United Nations, where the focus on preventive diplomacy, mediation, and conflict prevention has increased over the past decade. Section three examines the evaluation of

strategic communication in practice and how it has been adopted by governments, civil society, and extremist groups. Sections four and five offer an analysis of UN counterterrorism communication and how it is perceived by internal and external audiences. Section six sets out some key lessons learned regarding the practice of strategic communication; although this study focuses on the United Nations, these principles may also be applicable to national and civil society actors. The last section offers a set of practical recommendations for consideration by UN actors, ranging from the macro to the micro level, in many instances considering how these ideas may be initiated within the existing counterterrorism architecture at the United Nations. These are listed below in brief.

- 1. Get the message right.** Developing and refining a “master narrative” on terrorism, one that resonates globally but can be applied locally, is essential for the United Nations. This can be based on the UN Charter and the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which reiterate that terrorism, in using violence to resolve disputes, especially against noncombatants, is an assault on core UN principles and values.
- 2. Know the audience.** The research suggests that the United Nations did not undertake much systematic audience analysis to maintain awareness of what people thought about the world body itself in the online space or in communities where its agencies are operating. The United Nations should develop and use a simple system of audience analytics that allow it to monitor changing attitudes toward the United Nations and its activities.
- 3. Get strategic about strategic communication.** In developing a more strategic approach to communication, the United Nations would benefit from an audit of existing communication activities by UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) entities in order to establish what is working well, what is not, and what might be more effective if adjustments were made. Although a strategic communication audit could be performed internally, many large organizations, particularly in the commercial sector, use external auditors who are expected to provide greater objectivity in their assessments. Having surveyed and evaluated existing strategic communication efforts, the CTITF could develop a strategic communication tool kit for its members.
- 4. Keep it local, keep it relevant.** As some of the case studies presented in this report show, the most successful strategic communication campaigns are often those that consider local conditions with respect to the message and its delivery. The United Nations should ensure it engages local audiences more closely in the development of context-specific materials. Part of this “localization” strategy should include greater use of local credible voices as conduits for strategic messaging.
- 5. Integrate communication at the outset of program design and policy development.** All project proposals going through the CTITF, as well as the UN Centre for Counter-Terrorism within it, should include a communication component that outlines how this initiative will be portrayed, what needs it serves, and how it contributes to broader UN goals and a plan to disseminate the outcome products and measure their effectiveness. Regular meetings of a Communication Group on Counterterrorism that includes representatives of the UN Department of Public Information (DPI), the CTITF, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, and, for example, public information officers or counterterrorism focal points in the peacekeeping and political affairs departments could help in the development of consistent system-wide messaging.

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- 6. Close the “say-do” gap.** UN credibility suffers from a “say-do” gap, whereby some audiences feel that UN rhetoric is not supported by action. The best communication will be compromised by actions or words that are contrary to the values it upholds or encourages others to follow. Actions and policies must be closely aligned with objectives and communicated as such. Also, drawing attention to the say-do gap of one’s adversaries can be a powerful strategy for challenging their purported legitimacy and their ability to sustain support for their cause.
  - 7. Improve message dissemination.** The CTITF should make greater use of new technologies in disseminating information about its work. Following its member state briefings and other events, the CTITF should circulate a brief summary electronically and consider providing a complementary webcast of the briefing, so that diplomats unable to attend the events can nonetheless benefit from the discussions.
  - 8. Increase training and sensitization for UN staff at headquarters and in the field.** The DPI, in cooperation with the CTITF, could run a series of training workshops with media and strategic communication professionals to acquaint UN personnel more broadly with the Strategy and could adapt the workshops for web-based distribution. Training materials might also be provided for UN staff through a series of webinars that would make the information and tools available to a broader range of personnel across New York, Vienna, and Geneva headquarters, as well as field offices. Senior officials and professionals working on regions or themes relating to terrorism should be given access to a media training workshop to make them communication ready.
  - 9. Provide communication guidelines for staff to use at headquarters and in the field.** The United Nations and its counterterrorism apparatus should build on existing work to provide more assistance to senior headquarters officials and field missions on communicating the UN message on terrorism and counterterrorism more effectively. At the very least, officials should be provided with an information package that provides the UN master narrative on terrorism and counterterrorism, along with other basic talking points concerning counterterrorism programs and initiatives conducted by UN bodies.
  - 10. Develop existing communication.** Greater investments should be made in making existing communication tools, such as *The Beam*, which is used at the UN, responsive to the needs of the audience. This requires a better understanding of target demographics. More-nuanced analytical content and improved dissemination can assist in this effort.

Strategic communication involves taking a more proactive role in shaping perceptions and effecting behavioral change. For the United Nations, communication is a powerful tool in shaping perceptions regarding the value and capacities of the world body. These in turn affect the political space in which it can operate and the resources it can generate for its work. The United Nations benefits unquestionably from global recognition of its brand. It should not hesitate to employ all available tools to ensure that it provides a powerful message to counter the rhetoric and recruiting power of extremists and mobilize support among its own officers, its member states, and the broader global audience.





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# Introduction

*“It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90 percent of the total preparation for the battles.”<sup>1</sup>*

— OSAMA BIN LADEN, AL-QAIDA

*“Back in America, I knew the media jihad was important to the mujahidin; but I just wasn’t able to put my finger on how important it was to them. Just then a brother intervened and confirmed, ‘A powerful media production is as hard hitting as an operation in America.’”<sup>2</sup>*

— SAMIR KHAN, CREATOR, AL-QAIDA’S INSPIRE MAGAZINE

**T**ERRORISM HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BATTLE OF IDEAS, reflecting a desire for violent and immediate political transformation. The technologies available in a globalized world today, however, have expanded the theater of conflict into a broader swath of spaces—governed, less governed, virtual—than ever. A terrorist act is intended to affect an audience often distant from the physical stage of conflict, and today, that audience is ubiquitous. The audience for a terrorist act is not only in the political establishment that terrorists hope to change, but also in the broader public from which terrorist groups derive ideological, material, and logistical support. Their hearts and minds need to be persuaded by the terrorist message, and terrorist movements have grown increasingly sophisticated in their approach to influencing target audiences. Increasingly, they are placing information at the heart of their strategy, selectively sharing it to support their “master narrative” of a societal conflict that can be resolved only through violence.

Groups such as al-Qaida understand that they can now wield influence as effectively with a video camera and an Internet connection as with an improvised explosive device. This changing paradigm was noted in 2005 by Ayman al-Zawahiri, deputy emir of al-Qaida, when he claimed his organization was locked in a conflict with the United States and its Western allies in which messaging and the media played as influential a role as military force. Samir Khan, creator of the al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) magazine *Inspire*, echoed that statement, quoting Tony Blair and saying,

Tony Blair rightfully described that in his interview with the BBC when discussing the war against the mujahidin. “We have learned how to fight it but we haven’t destroyed its ideology,” he said. “We haven’t destroyed, which I think is the far bigger problem now; this is where I would view things differently now than

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<sup>1</sup> Combating Terrorism Center, translation of letter from Osama bin Laden to Mullah Mohammed ‘Omar, AFGP-2002-600321, 5 June 2002, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AFGP-2002-600321-Trans.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Samir Khan, “The Media Conflict,” *Inspire*, no. 7 (Fall 1432 [2011]), p. 8, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/inspire-magazine-7.pdf>.

*Groups such as al-Qaida understand that they can now wield influence as effectively with a video camera and an Internet connection as with an improvised explosive device.*

ten years ago; I think the problem that we have is that the narrative that they have, the story about Islam and its relations with the West, and the role of religion in society; that narrative has far greater reach and scope than we thought.” The credible ideas that we bring is what intimidates them the most.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Bergen, an American journalist and long-standing analyst of the global al-Qaida movement, has argued that the kinds of terrorist movements represented by al-Qaida are more akin to multinational organizations, where supplies, operations, and materials can be outsourced and material, money, and ideas easily moved across borders.<sup>4</sup> To continue this analogy, such groups also invested heavily in their marketing capabilities. They have articulated a clear mission statement and excelled at this form of strategic communication, crafting messages based on audience perceptions and including actions as well as words. Al-Qaida’s call to arms, for example, is a globally resonant expression of its outlook, grievances, agenda, and demands and has a proven ability to turn passive observers into active participants in violent extremism. Yet, extremists do not constitute a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas. States and international organizations provide their own narratives that shape identities, relationships, and interactions among peoples and states, but they have often struggled to challenge extremist messages and draw on their own compelling stories.

This should not be the case. The United Nations is the only international organization to boast universal

membership and has spent more than six decades promoting sustainable development, promoting human rights and the rule of law, strengthening governance, and supporting representative government. Its mission statement, articulated in the UN Charter, offers a compelling vision of saving future generations from the scourge of war and preventing threats to international peace and security that have been wreaking the kind of global havoc seen since the early 20th century. Member states have worked together to mitigate violent conflict, support humanitarian assistance, and address threats to human security. The organization has a good story to tell, a powerful counternarrative to that proclaimed by extremist groups. Yet, does the story get out and reach key audiences outside and inside the United Nations?

In 2002, Secretary-General Kofi Annan convened the Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism to consider the organization’s role in addressing transnational terrorism. The group outlined five ways in which the United Nations could bring added value to international counterterrorism efforts.

1. **Dissuade** disaffected groups from choosing terrorism as a tactic to achieve their goals
2. **Deny** terrorists the means to carry out their attacks
3. **Deter** states from supporting terrorists
4. **Develop** state capacity to prevent terrorism
5. **Defend** human rights in the struggle against terrorism

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

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The working group, composed of senior academics and policymakers, did not believe that the world body was well placed to play an active operational role in efforts to suppress terrorist groups. Yet, it recognized that terrorism challenges the core principles and mandate of the world body, as exemplified in the charter. “Terrorism is, and is intended to be, an assault on the principles of law, order, human rights and peaceful settlement of disputes on which the world body was founded.”<sup>5</sup> The working group’s outcome report recommended that, “[i]n its public pronouncements, the United Nations should project a clear and principled message, underscoring the unacceptability of terrorism, highlighting the [UN] role in addressing and preventing it, and ensuring that the fight against terrorism does not obscure the core work of the United Nations. These messages must be targeted to key audiences—particularly to achieve a greater impact in dissuading would-be supporters of terrorist acts.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the recommendations of the working group, in particular recommendations 7–12, set out a very clear framework for internal and external UN messaging and communication on terrorism. These recommendations contain key elements of what should be the UN master narrative on terrorism and have therefore been reproduced in full (see annex) for the consideration of policymakers and practitioners.

Among the “conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism” outlined by the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by consensus in the UN General Assembly in 2006, are prolonged unresolved conflicts; dehumanization of victims of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations; lack of rule of law and violations of human rights; ethnic, national, and religious discrimination; political exclusion; socioeconomic marginalization; and lack of good governance.<sup>7</sup> The United Nations has been actively working on these issues for more than 60 years, giving the

organization an important role in efforts to prevent terrorism and violent extremism.

This report is the result of a study, undertaken as part of a broader effort on the part of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) to enhance multilateral capacities to prevent terrorism and violent extremism, that aims to examine how this message has been perceived and received by three key stakeholder communities around the United Nations: its own staff (at headquarters, in specialized agencies, and in the field); member states; and the broader public, collectively considered the “UN community.” Three main objectives underpin this project.

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This report presents a qualitative analysis of how strategic communication tools can amplify and enhance UN efforts to prevent terrorism and violent extremism, through its own initiatives as well as by supporting member states. The first two sections offer an overview of counterterrorism practice and the shift toward prevention, as well as the parallel shift at the United

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<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Identical Letters Dated 1 August 2002 From the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and President of the Security Council, A/57/273-S/2002/875*, 6 August 2002, annex (*Report of the Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism*).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> UN General Assembly, A/RES/60/288, 20 September 2006.

Nations, where the focus on preventive diplomacy, mediation, and conflict prevention has increased over the past decade. Section three examines the evaluation of strategic communication in practice and how it has been adopted by governments, civil society, and extremist groups. Sections four and five offer an analysis of UN counterterrorism communication and how it is perceived by internal and external audiences. Section six sets out some key lessons learned regarding the practice of strategic communication; although this study focuses on the United Nations, these principles may also be applicable to national and civil society actors. The last section offers a set of practical recommendations for consideration by UN actors, ranging from the macro to the micro level, in many instances considering how these ideas may be initiated within the existing counterterrorism architecture at the United Nations.

## **Research Methodology**

These findings are informed by very close engagement with the United Nations and key stakeholders. CGCC convened two focus groups to elicit inputs on the key questions. CGCC designed a related survey that was sent out to UN officials at headquarters and in the field, diplomats in New York and in capitals, and experts and practitioners who work or have worked closely with the United Nations. In addition to desk research and an extensive literature review, the analysis and recommendations presented in this report draw on more than 50 survey responses and interviews (structured and semistructured) that explored how the United Nations creates and disseminates its message on terrorism and how this message is received by its target audiences. Moreover, the study explores how the strength and credibility of the “UN brand” impacted its capacity to support member state initiatives to prevent and counter violent extremism and terrorism. These discussions and survey responses then formed the basis of this report.

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# The Evolving Focus on Prevention and the Emergence of New Actors in Counterterrorism

**T**HE FIELD OF COUNTERTERRORISM HAS EXPANDED over the last decade from a traditional focus on covert investigation, law enforcement, and interdiction to encompass a more preventive approach that reduces the appeal of extremists' messages and the capacities of extremist groups to drum up support, incite violence, and recruit new members. As part of this effort, there have been greater investments in exploring the relationships between grievances that may fuel radicalization and prompt support for terrorism.

## Addressing Drivers of Violent Extremism

Research on drivers of violent extremism has shown that structural factors, such as those recognized by the Strategy as “conditions conducive to the spread of ter-

rorism,” can serve as “push” factors that propel individuals to join extremist groups. These were underscored by a 2009 U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) study in which experts identified seven drivers of violent extremism: (1) denial of basic political rights and civil liberties, (2) gross violations of human rights and government repression, (3) widespread corruption and perceived impunity for elites, (4) poorly governed areas, (5) protracted violent conflicts, (6) governments perceived as illegitimate, and (7) previous support for violent extremist groups to serve national strategic interests.<sup>8</sup> Although no single factor has been determined to have a direct causal relationship with terrorism, many of these conditions provide extremists with direct or vicarious grievances justifying their violent acts on behalf of populations and communities with whom they feel an emotive, psychological, or social bond.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, “Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism,” February 2009, [http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan\\_africa/publications/docs/guide\\_to\\_drivers\\_of\\_ve.pdf](http://transition.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/publications/docs/guide_to_drivers_of_ve.pdf). Although the report acknowledges that poverty may contribute to violent extremism, it notes that this is more likely on a macro than a micro level. Most terrorists have not been poor themselves, but the report argues that “national poverty increases a country’s propensity to produce terrorism.” It adds that if low-, middle-, and high-income countries are examined together, per capita income does not correlate with terrorism, “but if low-income countries are examined by themselves ... increases in per capita income diminish vulnerability to terrorism.” Consequently, in the long run, economic development can contribute to reducing the appeal of terrorism.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, “Education, Poverty, and Terrorism: Is there a Causal Connection?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 119–144. See Denoeux and Carter, “Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism.”

The USAID report and others have also highlighted the importance of “pull” factors—those that make violent extremist ideas and groups appealing. Among these factors are social networks and personal relationships, the material and social benefits of belonging to a violent extremist group, and charismatic leaders or attractive ideas and causes.<sup>10</sup> Traumatic events or tragedies, experienced directly by an individual, family, or friends or indirectly by a community with which they share an emotive bond, can also create powerful cognitive openings to prompt participation in violent activities. Many Chechen or Palestinian women, for example, are thought to have been radicalized by the experience of violence to themselves or a family member. Similarly, powerful familial ties or events may prompt individuals to reconsider violent extremist ideas and activities.

As terrorism has grown increasingly transnational over the past 15 years, prevention efforts have also had to encompass initiatives to address more broadly systemic factors that can create an enabling environment for extremist groups.<sup>11</sup> These include poorly governed spaces and borders, partnerships between illicit networks, constrained law enforcement, and regulatory loopholes. Consequently, efforts to address this broad spectrum of drivers and prevent violent extremism and terrorism have grown increasingly multidisciplinary.

Another consequence of the broadening arena of counterterrorism efforts is the entrance of new actors: educators, prison officials, social workers, bankers, conflict prevention and resolution practitioners, and peace-builders. This also means that practitioners in these policy areas have become increasingly relevant to the counterterrorism and countering violent extremism discourse, especially as the only possible outcome

of violent extremism is not terrorism; it can fuel ethnic and sectarian tensions, threaten fragile societies, and drive political violence and armed conflict. Although there are concerns about development or humanitarian work being instrumentalized for security purposes, the complex nature of the challenge has prompted increasing efforts at national and multilateral levels to develop more-effective mechanisms for communication and coordination among practitioners in these fields.

### **The Need for New and Innovative Tools to Address Terrorism**

The evolving nature of terrorism and terrorist groups has prompted greater focus on prevention and the consideration of new and innovative tools to address them. The first reason for this shift is the success of law enforcement operations, which freed up resources to investigate patterns of radicalization, recruitment, and support that sustained terrorist networks. The second reason is the realization that countering an ideological and decentralized movement required a more preventive and holistic approach. The initial priority of many governments following the emergence of a transnational terrorist threat, as exemplified by al-Qaida, was on detection and disruption. Yet, the extent to which disrupted terrorist plots suggested the existence of supporting networks of facilitators, fundraisers, and operators shocked many in the counterterrorism community. Moreover, al-Qaida’s densely networked structure called for a different approach from that used to address the more traditional hierarchical and cell-based structures of the revolutionary or nationalist groups with which counterterrorism practitioners were more familiar.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> The term “systemic” is derived from the conflict prevention lexicon, where “systemic prevention” refers to “measures to address global risk factors, which stem from transnational actions that adversely affect conflict risks in multiple world regions,” such as “illegal exploitation of and trafficking in natural resources, flows of illegal narcotics, money laundering, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and environmental degradation and climate change.” Christoph Mikulaschek and Paul Romita, “Conflict Prevention: Toward More Effective Multilateral Strategies,” International Peace Institute, December 2011, [http://www.ipinst.org/media/pdf/publications/epub\\_conflictprevention\\_dec2011.pdf](http://www.ipinst.org/media/pdf/publications/epub_conflictprevention_dec2011.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Peter R. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2009).

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Consequently, a growing consensus emerged among practitioners and policymakers that the ideologies, support structures, conditions, and legitimizing narratives of groups such as al-Qaida needed to be effectively challenged in order for their recruiting and operating capacities to be diminished. Recognizing that terrorist groups can leverage grievances related to social and economic issues, governments have made efforts to work more closely with local partners and communities to address ongoing issues of concern and preempt efforts by extremists to develop a narrative that leverages these challenges.

To that end, states have adopted a wide range of approaches to help prevent the radicalization of vulnerable populations and curtail recruitment and support for violent extremist groups. These programs may include citizenship classes, funding of interfaith dialogue and social events aimed at breaking down perceived religious and cultural barriers within communities, and so-called safe space debates where community members can ask questions and share concerns and ideas about everything from foreign policy to local issues. These sometimes involve local law enforcement or counterterrorism personnel acting in an overt capacity. In many cases, however, local authorities lead such events in partnership with community groups.

This newer, “softer” form of counterterrorism has often been likened to social work, far removed from the largely covert nature of traditional counterterrorism activities. It has also brought a new range of actors into the counterterrorism or countering violent extremism field, such as social services, local governments, and civil society—partners not historically considered intrinsic to the successful prevention of terrorism. Trust and a common objective to which all stakeholders subscribe is essential to the success of such partnerships, making the role of strategic communication essential to efforts to reach the right audiences, convey the desired message, and derive feedback to shape successful policies and programs.





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# Prevention Efforts at the United Nations

**T**HE MOVEMENT TOWARD A PREVENTIVE APPROACH to countering terrorism mirrors the broader shift that has been occurring over the last 20 years in multilateral approaches to addressing violence and conflict, reflected in the increased interest and investment in building preventive capacities. Prevention is not new to the United Nations' work but is a core element of its founding charter, which mandates the organization to maintain international peace and security and, "to that end, to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace."<sup>13</sup> Ten years ago, Secretary-General Annan said that "the time has come to intensify our efforts to move from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention."<sup>14</sup> More recently, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has paid considerable attention to reenergizing the United Nations' preventive capacities, highlighting the quiet successes derived from early engagement along with the cost of failure to prevent deadly conflict.

Since its creation, the United Nations has invested in developing mechanisms and resources to address a broad spectrum of challenges that are considered potential

drivers of extremism through its work to promote sustainable development, human rights, the rule of law, and nonviolent conflict resolution. Most visibly, the United Nations has invested heavily in strengthening its mediation and conflict prevention capacities, developed the institutional and political architecture to address postconflict peace-building and state fragility, and promoted the role of women in conflict mitigation. At UN headquarters in New York, for example, the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) was strengthened through the addition of staff and the establishment of the Mediation Support Unit. The DPA also offers the Security Council "horizon scanning" sessions to apprise members of imminent threats requiring their attention, and there is increased use of "good offices."

In his 2011 report on preventive diplomacy, Secretary-General Ban affirmed that "political missions are increasingly being used." In 2010 the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Organization of American States "deployed almost 50 such missions in the field, many with a preventive diplomacy and good offices mandate."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice," 1945, 1 UNTS XVI, <http://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CTC/uncharter-all-lang.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Prevention of Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/55/985-S/2001/574, 7 June 2001, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> UN General Assembly, *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Activities of the United Nations System in Implementing the Strategy*; Report of the Secretary General, A/66/762, 4 April 2012, <http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/A%2066%20762%20English.pdf>.

In the field, UN entities such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP); the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; UN Women; country teams; and special political missions are engaged in daily efforts to assist states in meeting their development goals, preventing the outbreak or relapse of conflict, and strengthening government institutions to be responsive to citizens' needs. Many of these efforts contribute to strengthening the resilience of communities and address some of the structural and systemic challenges that can contribute to grievances fuelling social fragmentation and support for violent extremism. For example, the UN Mission in Nepal was called to support nascent democratic processes, help a transitional government consolidate political authority, and assist efforts to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate Maoist rebel fighters.

Although these efforts have important implications for international terrorism prevention efforts in addressing possible sources of tension and conflict, it appears that “the house” continues to be divided, with the United Nations' counterterrorism work remaining insulated from broader peace and security (including conflict prevention) and development efforts. This is not surprising given the tremendous challenges confronted in each issue area, the large number of actors involved, and the inflexible nature of bureaucracies. Not having a universally agreed definition of terrorism further complicates institutional cooperation and coordination.

Moreover, there apparently is a disconnect between official documents and statements that may integrate terrorism into a host of development and security challenges confronted by the international community and officials and practitioners who remain reluctant to consider the relationships between their work and terrorism. This appeared, however, due to limited knowledge or understanding of the Strategy and the framework it provides for a more comprehensive approach to terrorism.

Yet, new and innovative bureaucratic configurations, such as the interagency assessment mission to the Sahel region in the winter of 2011–2012 and the subsequent task force, which addresses a spectrum of challenges facing the region, including a food crisis, proliferation of arms, and porous borders, provide a possible model for more-integrated threat assessments and program delivery and a possible model for developing future assessment and implementation capacities.<sup>16</sup>

The Strategy encourages a more holistic approach by outlining a comprehensive framework for states to implement. Its four pillars of action bring together “hard” and “soft” counterterrorism approaches. Pillar 1 is aimed at addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism; Pillar 2 on preventing and combating terrorism, including by denying terrorists safe haven and financial support; Pillar 3 on developing state capacities; and Pillar 4 on upholding human rights while countering terrorism and as a counterterrorism measure in itself. Taken as a whole, the Strategy reflects the comparative advantages first outlined by the working group but signals recognition by all member states that a successful counterterrorism policy is not determined by kill-or-capture statistics but that success in the long term requires a sustained and multifaceted approach and one that highlights the importance of prevention.

The UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF), made up of 31 entities including development, political, and security actors in the UN system, was established in 2008 to support states in Strategy implementation. Through the CTITF Office, which coordinates constituent members, the CTITF has undertaken a broad range of activities to build national capacities, promote greater awareness and understanding of the Strategy, and inform policy and programming on counterterrorism at the national and regional levels. As a product of the Strategy, the CTITF is backed by the UN General Assembly and currently headed at the level of Director.

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<sup>16</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Preventing Terrorism and Conflict in Libya: An Innovative Role for the United Nations?” *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 2 (February 2012): 16–21.

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Following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1373, the Security Council established the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) to bolster the ability of UN member states “to prevent terrorist acts both within their borders and across regions.”<sup>17</sup> A team of experts, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), carries out the policy decisions of the CTC and promotes implementation of Resolution 1373 through country visits, identifying capacity-building needs, facilitating technical assistance, and addressing specific challenges such as border control, law enforcement training, and legislative gaps that can be exploited by terrorist groups. It is headed by an Executive Director at the Assistant Secretary-General level.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime Terrorism Prevention Branch assists states in the legal and related aspects of counterterrorism, especially for ratifying and implementing the 14 international legal instruments against terrorism that have been adopted to address varying aspects of the challenge since 1963. These include the 1970 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft, the 1979 International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages, the 1997 International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings, and the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.<sup>18</sup>

These entities, along with the al-Qaida and Taliban sanctions committees,<sup>19</sup> constitute the main vehicles through which UN efforts to prevent terrorism are conducted. For external and, often, even internal audiences, this proliferation in counterterrorism bodies has been problematic in leaving open the questions of

leadership and function. The discrepancy in rank between leadership of the CTITF and CTED has prompted confusion about who speaks on behalf of the United Nations on counterterrorism issues, and a lack of clarity about the specific functions of and relationship among counterterrorism actors in the United Nations prevents the world body from being seen or heard as speaking with a single voice.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> UN Security Council, S/RES/1373, 28 September 2001.

<sup>18</sup> “Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft,” 860 U.N.T.S. 105, 14 October 1971; UN General Assembly, “International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages,” A/52/653 (1997); UN General Assembly, “International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings,” A/52/49 (1998); “International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism,” 39 I.L.M. 270 (2000). For a complete list of the international legal instruments, including conventions and relevant additional protocols, see <http://www.un.org/terrorism>.

<sup>19</sup> The al-Qaida and Taliban sanctions committees were formerly a single committee created under Security Council Resolution 1267. They were disaggregated by Resolutions 1988 and 1989 in 2011. See <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1988/list.shtml>; [http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/information\\_package\\_english.pdf](http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/information_package_english.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> For more details on the role and activities of CTITF entities, see Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Meeting the Challenge: A Guide to the United Nations Counterterrorism Activities,” International Peace Institute, June 2012, [http://www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/e-book\\_guide-to-un-counterterrorism.pdf](http://www.ipinst.org/images/pdfs/e-book_guide-to-un-counterterrorism.pdf). For a detailed assessment of the UN counterterrorism architecture to date, see James Cockayne et al., “Reshaping United Nations Counterterrorism Efforts: Blue-Sky Thinking for Global Counterterrorism Cooperation 10 Years After 9/11,” CGCC, 2012, [http://www.globalct.org/images/content/pdf/reports/Reshaping\\_UNCTEfforts\\_Blue-Sky-Thinking.pdf](http://www.globalct.org/images/content/pdf/reports/Reshaping_UNCTEfforts_Blue-Sky-Thinking.pdf).



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# Strategic Communication in Practice

*Strategic communication differs from merely communicating information in that it aims to change not only belief but also behavior.*

## What Is Strategic Communication?

The term “strategic communication” describes a relatively new and often poorly understood field, particularly by those approaching it from the counterterrorism profession. Broadly speaking, strategic communication refers to the use of messaging to affect behavior change. A more detailed working definition increasingly in use among practitioners is a “systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational, and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behavior.”<sup>21</sup>

This section first explores the practice of strategic communication and how it differs from communication, public diplomacy, and public affairs. Subsequent sections examine how both governments and extremist groups have adopted strategic communication and offer a selection of case studies to illustrate the arguments.

The long-term survival and success of terrorist organizations depend on their ability to project a legitimizing narrative. International terrorist groups such as al-Qaida seek to create and spread such a narrative to

project a transnational presence and even spur individuals or groups, so-called lone wolf terrorists or self-starter cells, to independent action. Their messages are designed to resonate locally but also to apply globally, not only radicalizing but ultimately mobilizing an audience in support of the movement’s ideology and objectives, wherever that audience may be located.

Fundamentally, the movement will not prevail unless it is able to move a certain number of passive supporters to become active participants. Al-Qaida and its affiliates have excelled in this kind of strategic communication. They have combined traditional approaches, including developing tightly knit familial and social networks, and exploited innovative technologies to reach the broadest possible audiences. To date, it has been difficult for international actors, including governments and the United Nations, to compete.

Consequently, strategic communication differs from merely communicating information in that it aims to change not only belief but also behavior. It incorporates elements of psychology, social science, marketing, and other disciplines to develop a more nuanced understanding of an audience—their values, attitudes, and beliefs; motivations; normative affiliations; propensity for change; and a host of other factors. This

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<sup>21</sup> Steve A. Tatham, “Strategic Communication: A Primer,” Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008, <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/special/08%2828%29ST.pdf>.

### BOX 1. CASE STUDY: FACEBOOK REBELS

A rebel group in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) involved in fighting that has reportedly displaced more than 500,000 people from the country's Kivu province has extended its campaign to cyberspace.

The M23 group, named after a failed 29 March 2009 peace agreement, has established a Facebook page<sup>a</sup> and a website<sup>b</sup> containing statements, interviews with its leaders, and political commentary.

The website contains photos of fighting between the rebels and the Congolese military, but much of the content appears aimed at softening the image of a group in an effort to counter accusations by the United Nations that it is a Rwandan-backed proxy force whose main aim is to establish control over mineral-rich territories of the DRC.<sup>c</sup>

A report in the *Washington Post* in October 2012 expressed surprise that

“now even developing world guerrilla groups have social media campaigns.”<sup>d</sup> M23's online presence may also have been an acknowledgment by the group of communication opportunities created by the rapidly rising rates of Internet penetration in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as a need to communicate effectively with external audiences in order to project the image of a legitimate rebel movement.

<sup>a</sup> M23 Congo RDC page, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/M23CongoRdc> (accessed 9 November 2012).

<sup>b</sup> Congo DRC News, <http://congodrcnews.com/> (accessed 9 November 2012).

<sup>c</sup> “UN Accuses Rwanda of Aiding DRC Congo Rebels,” Al-Jazeera, 17 October 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news//africa/2012/10/2012101755814154.html>.

<sup>d</sup> Max Fisher, “Of Course This Congolese Rebel Group Has a Fan Page,” *Washington Post*, 19 October 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/10/19/of-course-this-congolese-rebel-group-has-a-facebook-fan-page/>.

can inform campaign design by helping strategic communication practitioners develop narratives and messages that aim to compel a target audience to adopt a desired behavior or to divert them from undesirable behavior.

An analogy used to illustrate this has been that of an orchestra, where the conductor is the main policy-forming body that sets a strategic objective, such as a government; the score is the strategic communication plan; and the orchestra itself represents the diversity of practitioners involved. Depending on the outcome sought, different sections of the orchestra will be used at different times; the tempo of the music will vary, under the leadership of the conductor.<sup>22</sup>

A recent article highlights the still evolving nature of the practice and the lingering confusion about how it differs from the traditional practice of public diplomacy or, simply, communication. As author Rosa

Brooks, a former Pentagon official, explains, “Strategic communication’ refers to the thoughtful integration of issues of stakeholder perception and response into policymaking, planning, and operations at every level.” She notes that although the practice bears similarities to the concepts of “public affairs,” “information operations,” or “public diplomacy,” strategic communication “is less about what we have to say than it is about considering how others may interpret our words and actions.”<sup>23</sup>

As such, although correlation exists between disciplines such as marketing and strategic communication, the latter has to be far more sophisticated, first, in identifying its audience and, second, in crafting its message. A report of the Defense Science Board, within the U.S. Department of Defense, called strategic communication an “interactive” *process* that includes (1) understanding the identities, attitudes, and cultures

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Rosa Brooks, “Confessions of a Strategic Communicator,” *Foreign Policy*, 6 December 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/06/confessions\\_of\\_a\\_strategic\\_communicator?page=0,0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/06/confessions_of_a_strategic_communicator?page=0,0).

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*Strategic communication practitioners have to presume that audiences view and interpret messages in many different ways and through many different frames, whereas advertisers usually assume the audience is passive and understands the message to be conveyed exactly as it was intended.*

of the audience; (2) advising policymakers on the communication implications of policies and actions; (3) engaging in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions with common interests; (4) influencing attitudes and behavior; and (5) measuring the impact of activities over time.<sup>24</sup>

Strategic communication practitioners have to presume that audiences view and interpret messages in many different ways and through many different frames, whereas advertisers usually assume the audience is passive and understands the message to be conveyed exactly as it was intended. This is a critical point

## **BOX 2. CASE STUDY: “PEACE BOMBING”**

In December 2004, authorities battling an escalating insurgency by Islamist separatists in southern Thailand air-dropped an estimated 100 million paper origami birds in what the BBC described as “an unusual peace bid.”<sup>a</sup>

Citizens from across the country were invited by the government to write peace messages on the paper cranes, considered by many Thais to be a sign of peace and reconciliation, which were then dropped across communities in the Muslim-majority provinces that had been worst hit by insurgent violence.

According to reports by the BBC, CBS News, and other media organizations, this

generated some excitement among local children who were encouraged to set up catch nets to see how many birds they could collect. Beyond local youth, however, the reports suggested the “peace bombing” was poorly received in some cases.

Some local citizens were bemused by the campaign and said the government could have communicated a far more powerful message of peace had it demonstrated a willingness to fully pursue meaningful political negotiations to end the conflict. Others reportedly objected to having paper birds dropped on their heads on the basis that their Islamic beliefs dictated that the representation of anything created by God was *haram*. Worse still, in an effort to undermine the campaign, the insurgents

quickly fielded their own counternarrative, distributing leaflets in the same communities and claiming authorities were trying to murder Muslims by impregnating the paper cranes with avian influenza.

The debatable success of the peace-bombing campaign underscores the importance of strategic communication practitioners appreciating the cultural, political, and religious landscape in which they are trying to operate, not to mention the current attitudes and perceptions of the target audience. It also serves as a reminder that a strategic communication campaign may have to compete for influence with other potentially persuasive narratives deployed by an adversary.

<sup>a</sup> Kylie Morris, “Thais Drop Origami ‘Peace Bombs,’” BBC, 5 December 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4069471.stm>.

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<sup>24</sup> Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force on Strategic Communication, U.S. Department of Defense, “Final Report,” January 2008, <http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/ADA476331.pdf> (hereinafter DSB task force final report) (emphasis added).



for the United Nations, given the global audience with which it is communicating. The Internet's centrality as a means of communication now also means that messages crafted for one particular audience often end up being viewed by many other audiences as well, which adds an additional layer of complexity to the development of strategic communication campaigns. In other words, in an increasingly interconnected world, a series of messages intended for a specific audience can have a positive impact on that audience but inadvertently have a negative impact on another, unintended audience.

As the case studies in this section demonstrate, the most effective strategic communication is based on in-depth knowledge of the target audience. Audience analysis leverages decades-old proven social science and psychology methods to profile the range of different factors that can influence the behavior of an individual or group. This approach helps distinguish strategic communication from other forms of communication, such as public relations or public affairs. Audience analysis can equip strategic communication campaign planners with options that offer the greatest possible chance of success; when conducted thoroughly, it examines a range of factors affecting the design and delivery of a messaging campaign. Ideally, audience analysis can

- establish behavioral characteristics of the target audience;
- identify how attitudes are shaped and at what point they are shaped as information flows through a community;
- identify characteristics of messages that successfully shape attitudes;
- identify the formal and informal power structures that can influence attitudes, opinions, and actions;
- identify beliefs, attitudes, and motives and incentives that drive the behavior of the target audience;
- identify issues, influences, and messages that are competing for the target audience's attention, for example, extremist messaging;

- identify the thresholds that must be overcome in order to prompt a change in behavior;
- analyze the available channels for communication and make recommendations based on the reach and credibility of the channel;
- ask questions such as how the message can reach the audience in a form and via a route that gives it the greatest "stickiness" and ability to influence; and
- develop and analyze options, not limited to media or other traditional means such as leafleting, for achieving the campaign objectives, i.e., whatever behavior change is desired in the target audience.

The desired outcome of methodologically rigorous audience analysis is an understanding of the human and behavioral dynamics of the target audience and the best manner in which to influence that audience toward desired behavioral change. Many states that engage in countering violent extremism issues recognize that strategic communication has a role to play both in challenging the message of the extremists and promoting alternative, more compelling narratives to compete with the extremists for influence in the marketplace of ideas. Consequently, as part of their countering violent extremism initiatives, many states have reviewed the suitability of their strategic communication capabilities to challenging the narrative of al-Qaida and violent extremists more generally.

In some cases, this has resulted in the creation of specialist agencies such as the Research, Information, and Communications Unit within the UK Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism or the U.S. Department of State Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC). These agencies work directly and indirectly to counter extremist messaging and undertake a range of activities, including

- monitoring strategic communication activities of the adversary, analyzing their narratives and methods, and identifying potentially exploitable vulnerabilities;



### BOX 3. CASE STUDY: PERCEPTION SOMETIMES EQUALS REALITY

In July 2012, some Egyptian newspapers printed a story alleging that the country's new president, Mohammed Morsi, was secretly plotting with fellow Muslim Brotherhood members to demolish the ancient Egyptian pyramids in Giza and other artifacts of the Pharaonic period. The article suggested that the nature of the Brotherhood's Islamist ideology would compel them to destroy landmarks they considered to be *taghout* (false idols).

The story was widely disseminated on the Internet and found notable traction among some online constituencies in the West, where it received coverage reminiscent of the Taliban's destruction

of the giant Buddhist statues at Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001 or more recently the reported demolition of Sufi religious sites in Mali by the Islamist militant group Ansar Dine. The level of interest in the story was surprising given that it was quickly exposed as complete fabrication by the *New York Times* and other publications. According to an analysis by the Center for Strategic Communication at Arizona State University, the fake story played directly into an existing and popular frame, at least for a minority in the West, that Islamism is a monolithic movement that represents an existential threat to other civilizations.<sup>a</sup>

The story demonstrates that messages can resonate strongly if, whether intentionally or otherwise, they are capable of integration into a preexisting "master narrative" that an audience finds credible. The story draws attention to the importance of strategic communication practitioners understanding preexisting perceptions of an audience and the various frames through which that audience may interpret a message. If messages are designed to interlock with these master frames, they will resonate more strongly.

<sup>a</sup> Jeffrey R. Halverson, "Narratives Behind the False Pyramid Destruction Story," ASU Center for Strategic Communication, 25 July 2012, <http://csc.asu.edu/2012/07/25/narratives-behind-the-false-pyramid-destruction-story/>.

- equipping public figures in government with an understanding of how to communicate on issues relating to extremism by developing narratives and talking points for use by public officials;
- supporting work by other government agencies in communities where efforts are underway to counter extremist radicalization and challenge extremist recruitment and messaging; and
- engaging in online strategic communication campaigning directly and in some cases indirectly.

### Government Use of Strategic Communication

Below are specific examples of various UN member states attempting to use strategic communication for terrorism prevention. Their efforts have embraced a wide range of programs, some involving partnerships with local authorities or volunteers from at-risk commu-

nities targeted by extremist propagators and others focusing on challenging extremist messaging in cyberspace.

In the United Kingdom, the government's national counterterrorism strategy CONTEST includes a component known as Prevent, designed specifically to address the challenge of violent radicalization. Under Prevent, authorities have sponsored public events to raise awareness of radicalization that can lead to terrorism and of efforts to counter it. Workshops to Raise Awareness of Prevent (WRAPs) involve showing community members videos explaining radicalization processes. The showings are normally followed by group discussion of the issues raised in the films. The latest iteration of WRAP training videos highlights a spectrum of violent extremism and avoids focusing on a single group or ideology.

For example, an important case study used during the workshops is based on an excerpt from the British

feature film *This Is England*, in which a far-right extremist activist attempts to recruit a number of friends to participate in campaigns of intimidation against local ethnic minorities. The footage presents the audience with a case study on how extremists influence vulnerable youth. In the context of Prevent, for which the UK Home Office has been criticized for stigmatizing Muslim communities, this is significant precisely because it focuses on the risks of violent extremist radicalization by the far right. The video conveys an implicit message that the Home Office is concerned about violent extremism in all its forms and that violent radicalization is a concern for society in general, not just specific communities.

The United States is one of the few countries to have an articulated national policy strategy to address violent extremism, “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” as well as an interagency strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communication. The State and Defense departments lead on much of the counterterrorism strategic communication, but the broader effort engages nearly 64 government agencies.<sup>25</sup> To address the emerging challenge online, the State Department’s Digital Outreach Team conducts overt cyberengagement among online communities in multiple countries, to correct rumor and misconception about U.S. foreign policy or provide factual information to counter what extremist groups publish. Indirect programs take many forms.<sup>26</sup> One example is a training program for citizen bloggers to compete with extremists for influence among contested online constituencies. Known as Viral Peace, it primes volunteers to use logic,

satire, or religious discourse in order to “annoy, frustrate, and humiliate denizens of online extremist forums.”<sup>27</sup> Shahed Amanullah, a senior technology adviser to the State Department and Viral Peace’s creator, says he wants to use “logic, humor, satire, [and] religious arguments, not just to confront [extremists], but to undermine and demoralize them.”<sup>28</sup> The project also showcases the value of public-private partnerships, where governments can work together with individuals and groups in the private sector.

Another example is a series of videos that the CSCC has produced that draw attention to the widely perceived irrelevance of al-Qaida to the 2011 democratization movement in the Middle East. Other initiatives support local efforts on the ground in priority countries to exploit the messaging weaknesses of militant groups, for example, by highlighting that the majority of their victims reside in their own communities.<sup>29</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, counterradicalization and deradicalization programs are premised on the idea that extremists, particularly those with no blood on their hands, are mistaken in their interpretation of Islam and that the response needed is one that corrects these ideas. In that country, the Sakina program, which is run by a nongovernmental organization (NGO) supported by the interior, education, and Islamic affairs ministries, includes an online intervention initiative designed to persuade radically inclined youth to adopt more moderate views. Trained experts with Sakina not only respond to religious or social queries, but they are also proactive in challenging online extremist sympathizers about their views.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The White House, “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” August 2011, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering\\_local\\_partners.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf); The White House, “National Framework for Strategic Communication,” 2009, <http://www.fas.org/man/eprint/pubdip.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> DSB task force final report.

<sup>27</sup> Spencer Ackerman, “Newest U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy: Trolling,” *Wired*, 18 July 2012, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/07/counterterrorism-trolls/all/>.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> CSCC officials, interviews with authors, Washington, D.C., June 2012; CSCC officials, interviews with authors, Brussels, November 2012.

<sup>30</sup> See Naef bin Ahmed al-Saud, “The Evolution of Saudi Security and Enforcement Policies on Communication,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 65 (April 2012), [http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/jfq-65/JFQ-65\\_38-43\\_Al-Saud.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/jfq-65/JFQ-65_38-43_Al-Saud.pdf); Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Ellie B. Hearne, “Beyond Terrorism: Deradicalization and Disengagement From Violent Extremism,” International Peace Institute, October 2008, <http://www.ipinst.org/media/pdf/publications/beter.pdf>.

The above strategic communication campaigns occur in communities in the physical and virtual space and have encompassed the written word and audio-visual media, and in each of these instances, the master narrative has been set by a national strategy that shapes the messaging campaign.

## Civil Society Use of Strategic Communication

Nongovernmental actors also have made innovative use of strategic communication opportunities to counter violent extremism. For such groups, reaching key target audiences through novel messaging is key, especially as

many participants in violent extremist groups fear for their own security or that of their families, should the groups become aware of their desire to leave. A close understanding of the target demographic helps in the development of creative communication approaches.

In Germany, for example, Exit Deutschland, an organization established to assist individuals who wish to leave right-wing extremist groups, undertook what has been dubbed the “Trojan T-shirt” project.<sup>31</sup> Some 250 T-shirts bearing National Socialist logos and messages were distributed at a right-wing extremist rock festival and eagerly received. Once the shirts were washed at home, the right-wing message disappeared and was replaced with “If your T-shirt can do it, so can you.

### BOX 4. CASE STUDY: INSPIRED? CRAFTING A MESSAGE FROM THE AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE

The focus of much of al-Qaida’s strategic communication is on turning radicalization of an audience into mobilization. A noteworthy recent example of this can be seen in its first official English language publication, *Inspire*. This full-color online magazine produced by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula first appeared in June 2010. Since then, a total of nine issues have been published.

The aim of the magazine is to move its readership from the position of passive sympathizers to active participants in al-Qaida-inspired acts of terrorism on Western soil. To achieve this, *Inspire*’s content takes aim at a number of key psychological barriers that might otherwise prevent readers attempting even the simplest acts

of violence. These include concerns over lack of technical skills, the possibility that the attack will go unrecognized by the wider al-Qaida movement, or the contentious theological justification for such an attack.

*Inspire* has attempted to address these barriers to direct participation comprehensively through cleverly constructed packages of content, including interviews with al-Qaida leaders, essays, theological tracts, accessible tradecraft tutorials, and poetry. This combination of content constitutes a potent cocktail of incitement to violence greater than the sum of its parts and gives *Inspire* its motivational potential. The magazine was launched by an al-Qaida sympathizer, Samir Khan, who grew up in the United States and who ap-

preciated the barriers to action because he had considered them himself. He knew his audience and their “lived reality,” their values, attitudes, and beliefs, concerns, and propensity to change behavior if presented with an interlocking combination of the right messages.

Although Khan was assassinated along with Anwar al-Awlaki in April 2012, *Inspire* has offered Islamist extremist supporters a potentially effective template for stimulating grassroots jihadist mobilization.<sup>a</sup>

*Inspire* is a potentially effective tool for mobilization of individuals to extremist violence in part because it is designed from the perspective of the audience rather than the messenger.

<sup>a</sup> See Jack Barclay, “Mobilize and Inspire: Assessing AQAP’s English-Language Strategic Communications Capabilities,” IHS Security and Risk Consulting, March 2012 (copy on file with authors).

<sup>31</sup> “Right-Wing Extremists Tricked by Trojan Shirts,” Spiegel Online International, 10 August 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/tee-d-off-right-wing-extremists-tricked-by-trojan-shirts-a-779446.html>.

We'll help to free you from right-wing extremism" and included the contact information for Exit Deutschland. These shirts may not have swayed hard-core believers, but Exit Deutschland reported nearly triple the requests for assistance made to their program, and the discussion and publicity generated by the act prompted greater public awareness of their group and mission.<sup>32</sup>

### Extremist and Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication

Terrorism is itself a form of strategic communication, a theater of violence in which the primary target audience lies far beyond the stage or the seats but in a position to affect sociopolitical changes. The dramatic act of violence pressures an adversary to change behavior

and communicates a lasting message. Yet, terrorists intrinsically understand that they must master the use of strategic communication to mobilize their target audience as well as potential supporters. This is especially important as terrorist groups have become increasingly decentralized and dependent either on national or regional "franchises," such as AQAP or al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), or self-starters who can act without the necessity of contact with larger networks or groups.

Some stark examples of the mobilizing power of al-Qaida messaging can be seen in the cases of individual sympathizers who, despite lacking substantive connections to wider extremist networks, nonetheless become sufficiently affected by the movement's message to attempt terrorist attacks on their own initiative. In the

#### BOX 5. CASE STUDY: COMMANDER'S INTENT<sup>a</sup>

The last decade has seen the development of al-Qaida from a terrorist vanguard into a global movement, parts of which are in some cases connected only by a shared ideology and a legitimizing narrative. In spite of this, the movement demonstrates a surprising degree of coherence in its messaging. This achievement offers lessons for strategic communication practitioners and national or institutional actors engaged in countering terrorism and extremist narratives.

Within al-Qaida, innovation in strategic communication is increasingly driven not by the senior leadership but by its regional franchises and ideological fellow

travelers, for example, activists on the outer edges of the movement. Strategic communication by al-Qaida now occurs according to what the military refers as commander's intent; master narratives are set by the leadership and communicated by key media outlets such as As-Sahab Foundation. Franchises and supporters use their local knowledge and the skills at their immediate disposal to independently produce communication campaigns that appeal specifically to a local audience but integrate the master narratives.

How could the United Nations use such an approach? Strategic communication specialists might start by developing a

series of simple master narratives that communicate messages about terrorism and the United Nations that the organization would like to disseminate globally, for example, that terrorism, however defined, is a violent crime or that terrorism in all its forms is a violation of human rights. If these master narratives can be clearly communicated to field missions and other agencies of the UN family, it can be left to individual entities to develop and deploy their own messaging initiatives that support these narratives but be more effectively nuanced to suit local conditions and priorities. This approach is decentralized, flexible, and inexpensive and lends itself to sustainable campaigning.

<sup>a</sup> For a definition of "commander's intent," see U.S. Department of the Army, "Operations," FM 3-0 (February 2008), para. 5-30, <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-0.pdf> ("Commanders summarize their visualization in their initial intent statement. The initial commander's intent aims to facilitate planning while focusing the overall operations process. Commanders develop this statement. It succinctly describes the commander's visualization of the entire operation listing what the commander wants to accomplish. The initial commander's intent links the operation's purpose with the conditions that define the desired end state. Usually the intent statement evolves as planning progresses and more information becomes available.")

<sup>32</sup> Exit Deutschland officials, discussions with authors, October 2012.

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United Kingdom, for instance, in 2010 a young Muslim student angered by the British government's decision to join the U.S. invasion of Iraq attempted to stab to death Steven Timms, a member of Parliament who had voted in favor of the war. Timms survived the attack, and his assailant, Roshonara Choudary, was arrested and later convicted of attempted murder. During questioning by detectives shortly after her arrest, Choudary claimed to have been motivated primarily by lectures she had found on YouTube featuring the extremist ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki.

Notably, Choudary's situation appears to have been a genuine case of so-called autoradicalization, in which there was little if any substantive contact with like-minded extremists and where the primary radicalizing influence was extremist strategic messaging and discourse.

The transnational nature of terrorism makes it crucial that leaders communicate a master narrative to which all subsequent activities can be linked. Al-Qaida has taken strategic communication so seriously that its senior leadership has increasingly been likened to a media organization that does terrorism, rather than a terrorist organization that does media. They have shown expertise in audience analysis and segmentation, producing audience-specific messages and an understanding of how to create cognitive openings that make an audience more receptive to their narrative.

New media and innovative technologies or platforms permit terrorist groups to project their messages more widely and farther than ever. Groups such as al-Qaida have ensured that their messages appear in an unadulterated form that maximizes their impact. Along with the use of sophisticated media postproduction tools and the official branding of content, they aim to project an image of source credibility. The effectiveness of al-Qaida's global strategic communication efforts has been magnified by the presence of ideologically aligned groups and supporters who have become adept at repackaging the group's master narratives for consump-

tion by local audiences, what is referred to as the "globalization" of al-Qaida messaging. To that end, al-Qaida and like-minded groups have been able to leverage opportunities presented by outrage against, for example, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; the Danish cartoons perceived as mocking the Prophet Muhammad; and in the summer of 2012, the Internet film "Innocence of Muslims," and to create a narrative of a West that is in conflict not with extremists but Muslims around the world.

### **What Do Extremists Think of the United Nations?**

Extremists reportedly view the United Nations as synonymous with the permanent members of the Security Council, particularly the United States. As one interviewee noted, extremists view the United Nations, the United States, and the United Kingdom as "basically all being part of one force—even NATO, it's seen as all the same to them. Ironically, there's often confusion among extremists between the [United Nations] and NATO."

The perception that the United Nations is a puppet of Western powers, particularly the United States, is prominent in the narratives of al-Qaida and its supporters. For example, one Islamist extremist activist in the United Kingdom, discussing the perceived failures of the United Nations in the conflict in Syria in 2012, stated that the United Nations "says it supports international human rights—and what is the [United Nations]? It came out of the League of Nations, which came from the [United States]. And we wonder why it's doing nothing while Muslims are being massacred in Sham [Levant]."<sup>33</sup>

This narrative of a world body controlled by the United States and allied Western powers has been cited by al-Qaida and its affiliates as justification for attacks on UN field offices since 2001, for example, the 2007 suicide vehicle bomb attack in Algiers by AQIM that

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<sup>33</sup> "Lessons From Syria Abu Waleed," YouTube.com, 28 June 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66y8o2t8VwQ>.

killed 17 UN staff members. In a statement claiming responsibility, AQIM said the UN offices were “an international infidels’ den” and were attacked on behalf of the “wounded nation of Islam.”<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, some extremists decry the United Nations’ ability to pass legislation that is binding on all states under Chapter VII of its charter and thereby theoretically impose man-made law on those subscribing to a theocratic state in which only divine law is recognized. These views are fueled by resentment regarding the composition and opaque working methods of the Security Council and perceptions that the permanent members determine the agenda of the world body.<sup>35</sup>

These views were underscored by the recent statement made by al-Zawahiri, the current al-Qaida leader, urging supporters to use only Sharia (Islamic law) to resolve disputes and explicitly directing them to “refuse judgment by any other principles, beliefs, and laws,” including the United Nations. The world body, he said, was controlled by the five permanent members of its Security Council. Al-Zawahiri called on Muslims to work to set up a caliphate that “does not recognize nation-state, national links, or the borders imposed by the occupiers, but establishes a rightly guided caliphate following in the footsteps” of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>36</sup>

One expert on terrorist communication pointed out that some groups, particularly those with nationalist political agendas,

don’t always harbor positive views about the [United Nations], but there’s something there in terms of almost a grudging acceptance of the role the [United Nations] plays. They don’t recognize it as an objective force, but they’d still

like it to give them some sort of recognition and would lobby in support of any policies they think might benefit them. So it’s where you start to look at the discourse of the more nationalistic groups that you start to see a difference in terms of how they look at the [United Nations] and its legitimacy.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Al Qaeda Takes Credit for Algerian Attacks,” CBS News and Associated Press, 11 February 2009, [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202\\_162-3605123.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202_162-3605123.html).

<sup>35</sup> Former combatant, interview with authors, New York, September 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Sami Aboudi, “Qaeda Chief Rejects Nation States, U.N. as Conflict Mediator,” Reuters, 14 November 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/14/us-qaeda-zawahiri-idUSBRE8AD0L920121114>.

<sup>37</sup> Terrorist communication expert, interview with authors, New York, August 2012.



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# UN Counterterrorism Communication

## Communicating the UN Message

The UN role in developing a messaging campaign to counter extremist narratives and promote countering violent extremism efforts is complicated by a fundamental disagreement about its purpose. Using the analogy of theater, the UN functions for some as an actor in its own right; for others, it serves as a stage on which member state dynamics are played out. For the most part, there has been some equilibrium between those two roles, in that the United Nations primarily serves as a platform for the advancement of policy priorities agreed by states, although the Secretary-General and some senior officials responsible for policy implementation retain some space to carve out a voice for the United Nations itself and reiterate its founding values. Article 99 of the UN Charter grants the Secretary-General the right to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.” Recently, too, at a meeting on human rights, Secretary-General Ban asserted that the United Nations is “impartial but not neutral” in standing up for what is right, giving the United Nations a voice in defending the values of the founding charter.<sup>38</sup>

The complexity of the United Nations’ role vis-à-vis its membership affects its role and abilities as a communicator; a lack of clarity about the United Nations’ future role and activities on countering terrorism made the development of a communication strategy difficult. That became apparent soon after 2001, when the United Nations took on a classic “public information” approach to communication about terrorism. Consequently, the initial focus was on the dissemination of speeches that condemned acts of terrorism, on highlighting the principles advocated by the Secretary-General (the “5 Ds”), and on UN reporting activities.

As one UN official explained, the development of a strong strategic communication campaign was hampered by a disagreement among UN personnel about the appropriateness of UN messages not authorized by the whole membership. They cautioned that as the United Nations itself is not a policymaking body, it would be out of place or seen to be out of place to take a leading role in developing a “UN message” on terrorism and strategic communication materials. Others argued that the United Nations “should not be seen speaking for or endorsing the policy approaches of certain member states but should rather have its own, well thought-out and formulated approach to this issue.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Clive Leviev-Sawyer, “‘New Age of Responsibility’ Against Human Rights Violations, UN Chief Says,” 6 May 2011, [http://sofiaecho.com/2011/05/06/1085646\\_new-age-of-responsibility-against-human-rights-violations-un-chief-says](http://sofiaecho.com/2011/05/06/1085646_new-age-of-responsibility-against-human-rights-violations-un-chief-says).

<sup>39</sup> UN officials, interviews with authors, New York and Vienna, July 2012.

Moreover, the sensitivity surrounding counterterrorism work also meant that states were not always willing to authorize public access to information regarding their national activities or capacities or the extent or even fact of their cooperation with the United Nations. As such, UN entities are not able to develop communication material that compromises the relationship of trust with partner governments.<sup>40</sup>

As a result, UN communication largely focuses on reporting policy decisions agreed by its membership, activities, or key statements and are mostly reactive, following a terrorist incident or commemorating a tragedy. One interviewee cynically noted that there is a “very inefficient delivering of the message. They focus more on justifying their own existence and activities, but do not deliver a clear message about terrorism.”<sup>41</sup>

## Counterterrorism Communication Tools at the United Nations

Despite these challenges, there has been a significant improvement over the past decade in the communication tools on counterterrorism developed by the United Nations. In large part, this is thanks to the adoption of the Strategy, which, as a consensus document, offers a broadly agreed framework for UN counterterrorism activities and communication.

UN websites have become more informative and user friendly, and entities such as the CTC, as well as the al-Qaida and Taliban sanctions committees, have developed informative websites that have been responsive to demands for information on the part of non-member states and the broader public.

The *Beam*, an electronic newsletter that covers the activities of states and CTITF entities, has been a welcome

development, and several interlocutors stated that it is a useful tool for keeping capitals apprised of the United Nations’ counterterrorism work. It has come out approximately three times a year and offers readers information regarding the most recent activities of CTITF members.

Opinions were offered, however, that generating fresh and analytical content that might interest external audiences and counterterrorism practitioners in UN member states was difficult given the sensitive political environment. One UN official noted that it is difficult “to write interesting and substantive stories when every word, every comma, has to be vetted.”<sup>42</sup> Relatedly, one external media professional said that the language of the United Nations is “too defensive” and that it “explains itself very badly, full stop.”<sup>43</sup> This is reflective of many challenges in creating and communicating UN counterterrorism messages widely, which include a fragmented bureaucracy, limited resources, and difficulties in integrating terrorism into the United Nations’ broader work on peace and security.

The research indicated that, for many officials, counterterrorism communication was seen as more of an administrative afterthought than a strategic political tool, in part because the administrative architecture for counterterrorism communication is largely disaggregated and poorly resourced. For example, although CTED and the CTITF each have a dedicated Public Information Officer, the UN Department of Public Information (DPI) has the overall responsibility for coordinating and disseminating information about the United Nations. More specifically, the Peace and Security Section “promotes UN work on priority peace and security-related issues, including conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacekeeping, peace-building, disarmament, and counterterrorism. It designs and manages the implementation of global communication strategies on those issues, produces and dissem-

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<sup>40</sup> Senior UN official, interview with authors, August 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Survey response from UN member state diplomat, New York, July 2012.

<sup>42</sup> UN official, interview with authors, July 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Media and international affairs professional, interview with authors, New York, June 2012.



## BOX 6. CASE STUDY: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO POLICY AND COMMUNICATION BY THE UNITED NATIONS IN SOMALIA?

Many interviewees said that the UN counterterrorism mandate was often poorly integrated into the world body's other political and developmental activities, particularly in the field.

In light of this observation, the work of the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS), based in Nairobi, is particularly interesting. UNPOS is mandated to “advance the cause of peace and reconciliation” through contacts with Somali leaders, civic organizations, and the relevant states and organizations.<sup>a</sup> Reportedly, a task force managed out of the UN Department of Political Affairs in New York coordinates political, security, and development work as it relates to UNPOS.<sup>b</sup> Such a platform for coordination and information sharing provides a valuable mechanism for the development of counterterrorism strategic communication, as it creates a space for the articulation of common objectives, aligning actions to policy and engaging with key stakeholders at headquarters and in the field.

In 2008 the UN Country Team for Somalia undertook a study to examine perceptions of the United Nations among their target audience and develop a joint communication strategy for Somalia in 2009–2010. The study surveyed perceptions of the United Nations among the Somali public, diaspora, and donor community, as well

as UN staff and international media, and offered a menu of suggested mechanisms and tools to address the communication needs of those groups. The report presents a valuable data set and captures some interesting challenges and opportunities to develop a more strategic approach to communication, but it is unclear to what extent follow-up was undertaken.<sup>c</sup>

At present, much of UNPOS's communication appears to be of the more linear public relations kind, focusing on reporting of key statements and political developments in Somalia. Communication via the UNPOS website is in Somali and English and appears mainly aimed at an international audience, including the Somali diaspora, for example, a downloadable guidebook on the draft Somali constitution produced in Somali and English editions.

The 1.5 million-strong Somali diaspora is an influential community; much of the nation's intelligentsia and many important opinion-formers still live outside the country, and the diaspora contributes an estimated \$2 billion annually to Somalia's economy.<sup>d</sup> As such, effective strategic communication with this constituency is a critical element in countering the appeal of nonstate extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, who recruit, propagandize, and fundraise among the

diaspora in East Africa and the West.

UNPOS also communicates via Twitter,<sup>e</sup> the photo site Flickr,<sup>f</sup> and Tumblr,<sup>g</sup> a blogging site hosting contributions in Somali and English from UNPOS leaders. UNPOS has used its blog to condemn acts of terrorism and piracy and to publicize its work supporting efforts to reduce crime and disorder and improve security, for instance, through the provision of nonlethal equipment to the Somali police force.

Despite the significant political and development challenges confronting Somalia, it is a nation that remains truly connected through the Internet. The development of online material that promotes inclusivity and interaction is encouraging. The use of multiple social media platforms allows for entry into different audiences. Although the communication produced to date by UNPOS is interesting, more could be done to ensure its messaging intersects with online diaspora communities, for example, through efforts to “push” its message to influential Somali language websites, blogs, and online social networks. In addition, it will be important to consider how such information and access can be broadened to include communities that may not have ready access to the Internet or the literacy levels required to benefit from such communication products.

<sup>a</sup> UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS), “UNPOS Mandate,” n.d., <http://unpos.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9706&language=en-U.S.> (accessed 27 November 2012).

<sup>b</sup> UN official, interviews with authors, New York, October 2012.

<sup>c</sup> United Nations Somalia, *UN Communications Strategy 2009–2010*, n.d., <http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&docId=1104083>. This report was adopted by the UN Country Team for Somalia on 24 October 2008.

<sup>d</sup> Laura Hammond, “What Role for the Diaspora in Somalia's Future,” *Guardian*, 20 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/feb/20/what-role-somalia-diaspora-rebuilding>.

<sup>e</sup> UNPOS account, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/UNPOSomalia> (accessed 27 November 2012). The account had 1,635 followers as of 27 November 2012.

<sup>f</sup> UNPOS page, Flickr, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/unpos/sets/> (accessed 27 November 2012).

<sup>g</sup> UNPOS page, Tumblr, <http://unposomalia.tumblr.com/> (accessed 27 November 2012).

inates public information materials, and undertakes promotional and outreach activities.” Terrorism is addressed but only as one issue within this cluster, in which a single desk officer may be assigned to several regions or thematic portfolios at once.

It appears there are not only few opportunities for communication personnel who are working on counterterrorism issues to get together, there are few opportunities for consultation and interaction among officers who may be working on the same region or country across a number of different offices, making it difficult to craft a message about the United Nations that is informed by the political analysis and country or regional expertise or that of its counterterrorism officers and communication staff. This is in part due to concerns regarding the political sensitivities about the counterterrorism label.

Decisions such as the 2011 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Holder vs. Humanitarian Law Project*, which criminalized “material support” to designated terrorist groups, have contributed to concerns that counterterrorism activities can be counterproductive to preventive diplomacy and conflict prevention efforts. The law is problematic for its broad definition of material support, which includes training, legal advice, or advocacy, even by private individuals and even if directed at persuading violent groups to adopt nonviolent means or appeal to the United Nations.<sup>44</sup>

It has raised concerns that even an act as simple as providing a party to conflict with literature on international human rights protocols may constitute a criminal act. Consequently, field personnel working in conflict or postconflict zones or in mediation or peace processes are likely to be especially reluctant to raise the issue of terrorism or counterterrorism, limiting their ability to communicate externally on this subject or relay relevant information back to communication personnel at headquarters.

Importantly, the United Nations, as well as many member states, has made an effort to be an active presence on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, with individual agencies, entities, and officials maintaining active accounts and offering unprecedented access to the activities of the United Nations and its membership. Given political and security concerns, however, the “tweets” rarely offer more than an official statement or activity update. Nonetheless, the use of social media platforms and the development of a proactive approach to communication on the part of UN entities is a positive step toward enhancing strategic communication.

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<sup>44</sup> “What Counts as Abetting Terrorists?” *New York Times*, 21 June 2010, <http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/21/what-counts-as-abetting-terrorists/>.

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# Impact and Perceptions of UN Counterterrorism Communication

## At the United Nations

Assessing the impact of UN counterterrorism communication is difficult in large part because there is no declared strategic objective; no mechanisms are in place to undertake audience analysis or evaluate the effects of individual communication initiatives. Even for products such as the *Beam*, there is no way to track dissemination or receive feedback from the target demographic.

At UN headquarters, there continues to be a limited awareness about the Strategy, particularly among those who may not directly cover counterterrorism issues but may cover relevant countries or regions or related issues. Moreover, several UN officials working in areas such as political affairs or peace-building were unclear about how their work related to terrorism prevention efforts or contributed to Strategy implementation in some instances, even though their department or office was a constituent member of the CTITE. Consequently, they were not initially persuaded that the United Nations had a role at all in terrorism prevention or that their efforts had any contribution to make.

The relationship between the United Nations' broader development and peace and security work was articu-

lated more often by officials working directly on counterterrorism issues and who were more familiar with the framework of the Strategy, recognizing that, "in some situations, counterterrorism measures (particularly enforcement operations as well as the lack of respect for human rights on the part of law enforcement officials) could complicate peace processes and counterterrorism efforts. Counterterrorism measures need to be developed and applied in a nuanced way."<sup>45</sup> Those working on counterterrorism issues directly were well aware of UN policies and programs, but there was space for greater interaction and information sharing among the relevant actors. As one UN counterterrorism official noted, "It's confusing. There are a lot of crisscrossing mandates and responsibilities. [The role currently played by the United Nations in counterterrorism] is usually too quiet, and when it tries to speak, the message is too complicated for outsiders to comprehend."<sup>46</sup>

UN counterterrorism officials appreciated the extent to which they could draw on the moral authority and credibility of the organization derived from its historical efforts to address conflict and insecurity. For example, as one UN official working on efforts to counter the appeal of terrorism noted, the United Nations "is taking advantage of the moral authority that it

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<sup>45</sup> Survey response from UN official in Vienna, July 2012.

<sup>46</sup> UN official, interview with authors, New York, July 2012.

(somehow still) possesses in doing work with governments to reform and critique their own laws around such issues [as the rule of law and human rights] to ensure that they accord with international rights, principles, and standards.”<sup>47</sup> For others, however, this is precisely where the world body falls short.

One official was concerned that the United Nations still favors too strongly a security-centric approach to terrorism, saying, “I believe it could be argued that the [United Nations] is overly focused on the repressive side of counterterrorism for understandable reasons and insufficiently focused on the importance of a rights-based approach to countering terrorism, which is especially pertinent in view of our UN Charter obligations.”<sup>48</sup> This was reiterated by a human rights official at an international NGO, who argued that, “[d]espite notable reforms, the [United Nations]’ counterterrorism efforts remain focused on maintaining security, paying only lip-service to the UN principle that such efforts must not be at the expense of human rights.”<sup>49</sup>

In the field, respondents appeared to view “counterterrorism” as something of a toxic brand, raising concerns that their work in other core areas of UN business might be adversely affected were the United Nations to be perceived as more actively promoting its role in counterterrorism. Specifically, they expressed fears that their image as impartial providers of humanitarian and development assistance might be open to question by the populations among whom they were operating. Indeed, some expressed worries that their own security and that of their colleagues in field missions might be placed at greater risk were the United Nations to communicate more strongly on counterterrorism issues.

One respondent cited the example of the 2007 suicide bomb attack by AQIM on the UNDP offices in Algiers to underscore concerns that violent extremists already viewed the United Nations as serving a Western

agenda. Perceptions of promoting a counterterrorism agenda would only support that narrative, the respondent argued. Few respondents suggested that measures to prevent terrorism or radicalization leading to terrorism would de facto strengthen ongoing UN work in other areas, for example, supporting the creation of strong, stable democracies; counterterrorism did not seem to be viewed as intrinsically linked with other core UN missions.

As an example, one UN Information Center (UNIC) reportedly refused to hold a counterterrorism-related event even though there was a UN workshop on that topic taking place in the same city. They felt their long-standing presence in the country would be jeopardized by the association and make their offices a potential target.<sup>50</sup> For similar reasons, development actors and entities engaged in peace-building efforts reported concern about the impact of counterterrorism efforts on their field operations and personnel and, as a result, have been hesitant to actively engage in the policy discourse, even at headquarters.

## Among Member States

Among member state representatives, largely diplomats following counterterrorism issues in New York or in capitals, there was a range of responses regarding the efficacy of UN counterterrorism communication. Several diplomats underscored the importance of the Strategy in reinforcing a UN message that counterterrorism efforts could not come at the expense of human rights and the rule of law and that a short-term security-centric approach had to be balanced by mid- to long-term efforts to address some underlying drivers of extremism. There was widespread agreement among diplomats that among the United Nations’ key comparative advantages in countering terrorism was its

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<sup>47</sup> Survey response from UN official in New York, August 2012.

<sup>48</sup> UN official, interview with authors, New York, August 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Survey response from nongovernmental organization (NGO) official working on human rights issues in New York, July 2012.

<sup>50</sup> UN official, interview with authors, New York, July 2012.

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ability to set international norms and standards and to provide an important forum for exchanging good practices and lessons learned and for being a trusted vehicle for the delivery of capacity-building assistance. As one diplomat explained, “As a donor, [we] prefer to go via the [United Nations] because of the credibility associated with it and because it provides a stable and predictable framework for the delivery of assistance. . . . Also, the comprehensive agenda of the [United Nations] means that [counterterrorism] efforts can be connected to others, for example, human rights.”<sup>51</sup>

This point was reinforced by another diplomat, who said, “In my opinion, the [United Nations] is so valuable because it represents the whole international community. Through it, we speak with one voice. . . . [Also,] it provides member states a platform for cooperation.”<sup>52</sup>

Although there was general agreement that the Strategy provided a valuable component of a UN message, some argued that it got lost in transmission because, on a practical level, information did not reach the target audiences and diplomats had little access to analytical resources to put UN efforts into context. The creation of the *Beam* was appreciated, and some diplomats noted that it was a valuable document to send back to capitals. Others, however, felt that the information in it was often out of date when it appeared and did not offer any value added for readers already well informed about UN counterterrorism developments. One diplomat admitted, “I don’t really read the *Beam*. I need something more, other than the official information that comes in the *Beam*, which takes so long to come out that the information is outdated and we’ve seen it elsewhere.” Some other diplomats were less subtle in dismissing the *Beam* as a source of useful information or as a messaging tool.

Diplomats were irritated at not receiving e-mail notifications of important counterterrorism-related events

or publications or products that were produced by CTITF entities. To some extent, many diplomats said that they were often responsible for multiple substantive portfolios, leaving little time for them to proactively seek information and to develop a deep understanding of the complex institutional counterterrorism architecture at the United Nations.

For some diplomats, UN messaging on counterterrorism issues was not unrelated to perceptions about its work more broadly; its perceived role in counterterrorism was therefore positively or negatively impacted by perceived shortcomings in other areas, in particular, relating to service delivery or political dynamics among members. One diplomat explained, “The problem is not communications, but politics.”<sup>53</sup> Another recognized that the United Nations contributes on counterterrorism issues “to the extent possible and limited by the interests of different member states.”<sup>54</sup> Perceptions that the Security Council was not sufficiently transparent, that there remained concerns about the respect for human rights in its counterterrorism protocols and activities, and that there remained an unjust inequality between the council’s permanent members and the rest of the membership led to negative perceptions of its counterterrorism work.

Moreover, although helpful for some states, these same tools—sanctions—represented negative messaging for some who believed these were problematic measures adopted by the council, because they represented not only potential human rights infringements but also reflected the power of the permanent members over others, which was met with some resentment.

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<sup>51</sup> UN member state diplomat, interview with authors, New York, August 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Survey response from UN member state diplomat, June 2012.

<sup>53</sup> UN member state diplomat, interview with authors, New York, July 2012.

<sup>54</sup> UN member state diplomat, interview with authors, New York, July 2012.

*“Spokespersons must be knowledgeable and flexible when speaking to reporters. They face problems when they retreat behind statements,” which makes the United Nations “impenetrable.”*

### **Beyond UN Headquarters**

For the broader public and even government officials sitting in capitals away from UN headquarters, there appeared to be little if any understanding or even awareness about UN counterterrorism work. As one national counterterrorism practitioner explained, “I can certainly see how the [United Nations] would want to contribute to terrorism prevention, considering their mandate, but I do not have a sense [of] how they do so. My job is to monitor how my government acts and reacts to the terrorist threat, and because the [United Nations] is not an arm of my government, I have less knowledge and understanding of its role.”<sup>55</sup>

Some even expressed surprise that the United Nations was so active on the issue. Several respondents echoed the view of some diplomats and argued that the United Nations’ success as a communicator was first and foremost determined by perceptions of its efficacy in delivery. One former diplomat currently working with an international NGO admitted, “At this time, I am skeptical of how much of an effect the UN work is having. It may be that parts of the secretariat are making more progress, but in terms of the [Security] Council and the General Assembly, it seems to be more about rhetoric.”

For some respondents, the real value and message of the United Nations was reflected in the practical counterterrorism tools it offered, such as the sanctions lists. For others, these very same tools represented what

they believed were problematic measures adopted by the council because they not only represented potential human rights infringements but were also emblematic of the influence of the permanent members of the Security Council over other member states.

For some government practitioners, it was such practical tools rather than broader norms that assisted member states in furthering their efforts to address terrorism and gave the United Nations a firm voice. Yet, the same respondents expressed skepticism that when articulating its own position, a multilateral organization such as the United Nations would be able to enact messaging campaigns that were sufficiently focused to be effective. They pointed out that the organization was hamstrung by the differing opinions of member states as to what constituted “terrorism” and that this was clearly visible in the lack of focus in many of their products. “From our perspective, their targeted [counterterrorism] stuff is not really targeted in a way that we can engage with here, because of the definition of terrorism issue and the fact that the [United Nations] can’t agree on a definition of what terrorism is ... and it’s apparent in some of their product; it’s so caveated there’s not really all that much there of use to us... [I]t doesn’t come to any strong recommendations that, to me, are really practical and something I can say, ‘I can translate that into actions I can take forward.’”<sup>56</sup>

A senior media and international affairs professional with long experience with the United Nations explained the relationship between perceptions of the

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<sup>55</sup> Government counterterrorism official, interview with authors, July 2012.

<sup>56</sup> UN member state counterterrorism official, interview with authors, July 2012.



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*The most valuable contribution of the United Nations “is that it represents the whole international community” and, through it, “all member states speak with one voice.”*

United Nations and its communication capacity and underscored that, from the perspective of the media, UN communication could only be effective if the United Nations was believed to be a credible, trustworthy, and transparent actor and if the interlocutor was perceived as such. Moreover, confusion regarding the complex UN counterterrorism architecture and its use of highly technical jargon made information regarding its activities indigestible to the public and unattractive to journalists. “Spokespersons must be knowledgeable and flexible when speaking to reporters. They face problems when they retreat behind statements,” which makes the United Nations “impenetrable.”<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, most interlocutors agreed that the UN brand is still a strong one and that one of the primary roles of the world body is providing an internationally recognized normative standard. This was in large part ascribed to its universal membership and the legitimacy accrued through the values enshrined in the UN Charter and in internationally agreed counterterrorism instruments. One diplomat opined that the most valuable contribution of the United Nations “is that it represents the whole international community” and, through it, “all member states speak with one voice.”

Another member state government agency respondent agreed, saying that the United Nations is not a nation

saying, “‘We’re going in here, and we’re going to do this because we know what’s best.’ It sits above all that, which is what the [United Nations] has that smaller multilaterals don’t. They have a view that the [United Nations] is much more inclusive and less politically motivated, that it’s operating in a capacity that is about improving humanity as a whole, whereas individual states are open to the criticism that ‘Oh, you’re not doing this for us; you’re doing this because you’re worried about the impact on your own countries.’”<sup>58</sup>

This finding is underscored by international public opinion polls that favor the United Nations despite the erosion of public trust and confidence in an institution that has been considerably challenged by, for example, failures to stop mass atrocities in Rwanda and Srebrenica, scandals implicating peacekeepers in sexual exploitation and abuse of local women, or the Iraq Oil-for-Food Programme. A 2009 Pew survey found that, in 25 countries, views of the United Nations were largely positive and had improved significantly in about half of them.<sup>59</sup> A 2011 poll found that even in the United States, where public discourse is often wary of the United Nations, 85 percent of voters felt it was important that the United States maintain an active role within the United Nations and that approximately 60 percent, including both Republicans and Democrats, favored the United States paying its dues in full and on time.<sup>60</sup> A poll of seven Muslim

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<sup>57</sup> Senior media and international affairs professional, interview with authors, New York, June 2012.

<sup>58</sup> UN member state government official, interview with authors, August 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Wike and Jacob Poushter, “Obama Addresses More Popular U.N.,” Pew Global Attitudes Project, 21 September 2009, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1348/united-nations-global-opinion-more-popular>.

<sup>60</sup> “Poll Shows Overwhelming Voter Support for the United Nations,” Better World Campaign, 24 May 2011, <http://www.betterworldcampaign.org/news-room/press-releases/poll-shows-overwhelming-voter.html>.

nations prior to the Arab Spring found there was widespread support for a more active United Nations with broader powers than what it has, although there were also equivalent concerns that the world body was dominated by the United States.<sup>61</sup> These kinds of results underscore that the United Nations is perceived by many as an actor in its own right and that the credibility of the organization is assessed independently from that of its membership.

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<sup>61</sup> "People in Muslim Nations Conflicted About UN," World Public Opinion.org, 2 December 2008, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/btunitednationsra/575.php?lb=btun&pnt=575&nid=&id>.



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# Lessons Learned on Strategic Counterterrorism Communication

## Know Your Audience

Understanding the audience is a critical aspect of strategic communication. Several states have sought to bring greater analytical rigor to the practice of audience analysis to understand (1) how information reaches and flows through communities, (2) how the credibility of the information is determined, (3) whether formal or informal power structures are of greater importance in disseminating the message and shaping its interpretation, and (4) which individuals or groups have the greatest potential to influence the behavior of the campaign target group. Many states and organizations, however, may find it difficult to dedicate the resources necessary for the development of such analytical tools.

At the United Nations, there were reportedly few resources or means of analyzing the audience for or impact of communication materials. The CTITF has produced several films on the rehabilitation and reintegration of former combatants, which have been distributed via UNTV; yet there was no way to really track their dissemination and viewing, much less impact. The *Beam* goes out via e-mail, but hard copies are also sent to UNICs globally. UNIC managers have discretion regarding distribution, and at headquarters, there was reportedly no way of knowing its circulation

or getting any feedback on its content. Knowing who and where the United Nations' key audience for counterterrorism material is would allow for more-targeted messaging and communication materials to be developed.

## Credibility of Messengers Is Key

Source credibility is critical to the delivery of a successful strategic communication campaign. Cultural, religious, and local authorities provide powerful, organic voices that can delegitimize extremist groups purporting to fight for and protect their constituencies. They are key figures in educating people about alternative histories, narratives, and practices to those expounded by extremists. For many local partners, however, working on counterterrorism issues with governments or international partners risks compromising their relationships with their communities and eroding trust, thereby jeopardizing future efforts to reach vulnerable groups. When local leaders engage in government-backed efforts, discretion is integral to the sustainability of such partnerships, but the necessary partnerships and relationships of considerable trust between parties can take long periods to develop and require careful management.

### BOX 7. CASE STUDY: THE RADICAL MIDDLE WAY

In 2006 an English language website called Radical Middle Way was launched with the aim of promoting “a mainstream, moderate understanding of Islam that young people can relate to.” The site challenged extremist interpretations of Islam through videos, essays, and lectures featuring prominent Islamic scholars. Radical Middle Way also challenged extremism by promoting discourse on fundamental Islamic concepts such as jihad and offered “a safe place for people to ask difficult questions and explore challenging issues.”<sup>a</sup> The site’s potential impact was damaged because it publicly acknowledged at the outset that it received financial support from the UK Home Office and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Several participants immediately highlighted these connections, leading to debate among members of Islamic web forums. Some concluded that Radical Middle Way was an attempt by the UK government to distort the religion. Scholars featured on the site were characterized as “scholars of *baatil*” (falsehood) seeking to turn Muslim youth toward a pacifist, pro-government interpretation of Islam. Some leaders advised fellow Muslims to avoid the site and the scholars featured on it. Then, in 2008 the launch of a new “Muslim-friendly” Internet tool bar caused some controversy on English-language Islamic web forums when participants noticed the Radical Middle Way website was on a list of default “quick links.” Forum members had not forgotten, two years later, that Radical Middle Way was a government-sponsored initiative. The new

site’s developers responded to complaints by removing the link.

The Radical Middle Way site has since been significantly rebranded. Although visitor statistics are not available, its content is now widely cited on many English-language Islamic Internet forums. Yet, the aforementioned controversy associated with the site’s original release demonstrates that whatever the message, source credibility can be a critical ingredient in a source’s ability to gain traction with its intended audience. Although some audiences may retain sufficient objectivity to give government-sponsored content or overt digital engagement some consideration, to others, association with government funding will be sufficient to destroy credibility and the ability to influence.

<sup>a</sup> For information about Radical Middle Way, see <http://www.radicalmiddleway.co.uk>.

In other cases, governments in the West in particular have had difficulties balancing the need to respond to extremist narratives while avoiding being painted as the “thought police” or attempting to interfere in their citizens’ interpretation and practice of their religion. The need for balance between freedom of speech and expression with the need to protect citizens against hate speech and incitement to violence is one many governments confront. This is particularly difficult when decades of dictatorship and state control over the media make citizens skeptical that controversial materials may be produced without government approval.

The importance of the United Nations’ credibility to the efficacy of its counterterrorism work was underscored by a senior official in an NGO dedicated to

addressing conflict and violence, who said, “Responsible entities [for counterterrorism] seem to be communicating mainly with each other, their impact on the ground is weak. Implementation of Security Council resolutions relating to countering terrorism through capacity-building workshops and working conferences are not followed through properly.”<sup>62</sup>

This challenge was not lost on practitioners within the United Nations. One senior official said, “Terrorism is not a [New York City]–based problem, it’s based in capitals.... People in capitals understand it’s a global issue even if it is also a national concern. When [UN personnel] visit, they are obviously encouraged by their foreign ministries to meet with us, and you go in with a proposal about how talking to you can help

<sup>62</sup> Survey response from European NGO official in the Netherlands, July 2012.

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them. But you can pull that trick only for so long. These are practical people, and if they don't see a benefit, then frankly they've got other things to do.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Adaptation to New Communication Tools Used by Target Audience**

Communication needs to be adapted to the tools being used by the target demographic. Over this past decade, the Internet has been claimed to be a driver of development, education, and political transparency, a tool to increase access to information and other resources. Others have bemoaned its role as a platform for radicalization and recruitment, a means by which fringe groups can form stronger “in-group” bonds, harden their beliefs, and incite violence.<sup>64</sup> There is a debate about whether those countering extremism online should seek to police the Internet or compete for influence in cyberspace with extremists. Initiatives such as those undertaken by the CSCC and the Sakina program illustrate the kinds of roles governments can play online.

A key question remains: who should be considered the most important target group for such campaigns? On one hand, campaigns might attempt to directly challenge those individuals or communities already self-identifying with extremist ideology. Alternatively, some practitioners have argued the focus should be on those further upstream, online communities who are still sufficiently tolerant of a plurality of opinion as to be potentially more easily influenced. A range of communication practitioners and counterterrorism officials have variously advocated one or both approaches for this report. Many, however, appear to consider that the effort and expense necessary to sustain a messaging campaign directed at already committed extremists will offer insignificant returns and that a more worthwhile return on investment could be achieved by in-

stead targeting the “swing voters” active in cyberspace. These are usually constituencies of politically aware contributors to blogs, forums, and social media networks who demonstrate a degree of empathy with the grievances typically leveraged by extremists, but whose discourse suggests are unresolved as to how these grievances should be addressed. Some authorities pursuing engagement with such constituencies reason that they can be persuaded to seek redress through participation in politics or nonviolent activism instead of support for violent extremism.

There has been admirable improvement in the United Nations' presence on the Internet, but for reasons discussed above, its substantive material remains rather staid and passive. Although CTITF entities post material on their websites, there is little effort to ensure that relevant audiences are notified of available information or to develop means for understanding how, where, and by whom the information is being accessed so that more-targeted material can be developed. Furthermore, there is some conflict between the more traditional and bureaucratic protocols regarding communication at the United Nations and the need or interest to be active and accessible on the Internet.

### **Evaluation Is Essential**

Lord Leverhulme, founder of Unilever, once famously pronounced that “[h]alf of my advertising money is wasted. The problem is that I don't know which half.” Measuring the success of a preventive program where the desired outcome is a nonevent is extremely difficult; measuring the impact of communication when each individual is conditioned by a different set of social, cultural, political, or physical elements seems nearly impossible. Nonetheless, during fiscal austerity, governments and citizens increasingly demand to assess the effectiveness of terrorism prevention efforts.

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<sup>63</sup> UN counterterrorism official, interview with authors, New York, August 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Marc Sageman, discussions with authors, New York, 2009–2010.

Current thinking includes the use of quantitative and qualitative measurement, the use of informative anecdotal results, the design of indicators into a campaign at the outset, and the selective adoption of best practices from other related policy domains where practitioners have grappled with the challenge of “measuring the negative.” A report published by CGCC offers some key principles to guide the development of evaluations for preventive programs, which can be applied across a range of programs undertaken by states or international organizations such as the United Nations.<sup>65</sup>

Increasingly, the counterterrorism community realizes that measuring the effectiveness of strategic communication campaigns or terrorism prevention efforts more generally requires a balance between methodological rigor and the pragmatism associated with the understanding that not all successes can be subject to precise measurement. Although some member states have struggled to develop or implement reliable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, the United Nations and its agencies, through their presence on the ground and high degrees of connectivity with local populations, are ideally placed to develop and conduct useful assessments that might provide indications of the extent to which a strategic campaign has influenced public opinion, if not actual behavior.

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<sup>65</sup> Peter Romaniuk and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “From Input to Impact: Evaluating Terrorism Prevention Programs,” CGCC, 2012, [http://www.globalct.org/images/content/pdf/reports/CGCC\\_EvaluatingTerrorismPrevention.pdf](http://www.globalct.org/images/content/pdf/reports/CGCC_EvaluatingTerrorismPrevention.pdf).

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# Recommendations

**T**HE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS OFFER some practical suggestions for how the UN system can harness existing assets and apply strategic communication principles to its internal and external interactions. A better understood and received United Nations will strengthen the brand and enhance the United Nations' ability to support member states in their efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism. Respondents said that UN communication on counterterrorism could not be wholly disaggregated from other communication and actions by the organization. Therefore, in considering improvements to strategic counterterrorism communication, senior UN communicators should consider how some of the findings of this study and the recommendations offered can enhance UN communication in other fields.

**Get the message right.** Developing and refining a master narrative on terrorism, one that resonates globally but can be applied locally, is essential for the United Nations. This can be based on the UN Charter and the Strategy, which reiterates that terrorism, in using violence to resolve disputes, especially against non-combatants, is an assault on core UN principles and values. Both of these crucial UN documents create a narrative framework for the message that terrorism is an attack on the universal rights of individuals and communities, specifically, their right to live in

freedom, peace, and dignity. Therefore, the United Nations and the international community condemn such violence.

The language should underscore the negative impact of violent extremism on community resilience and tenuous intrasocietal and state-society relationships, particularly in a postconflict or fragile setting, and reflect Secretary-General Annan's 2005 declaration that, "[i]n an increasingly interconnected world, progress in the areas of development, security, and human rights must go hand in hand. There will be no development without security and no security without development."<sup>66</sup> This does not presume a causal relationship between security and development or, more accurately, the lack thereof but underscores that successful long-term efforts to prevent terrorism and counter violent extremism need to be aligned with broader efforts to address conflict and instability.

The second part of the narrative concerns the United Nations' response to terrorism and its role in empowering member states to fight it effectively but with due regard for international law and human rights. Given concerns among some member states that multilateral counterterrorism work has been too closely aligned with the reaction of the United States following 9/11, the UN narrative should highlight that its mandate to prevent terrorism is derived from the UN Charter

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<sup>66</sup> UN General Assembly, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All; Report of the Secretary-General*, A/59/2005, 21 March 2005, annex, <http://www.un.org/largerfreedom/contents.htm>.

itself, which predates the U.S.-led “Global War on Terror,” and reinforced by adoption of the Strategy by the General Assembly. This approach allows for the development of language regarding the challenges posed by terrorism that focus more on nonstate actors with the capacity to generate a transnational security threat than on a single group or ideology.

**Know the audience.** The research suggests that the United Nations did not undertake much systematic audience analysis to maintain awareness of what people thought about the world body itself in the online space or in communities where its agencies are operating. The United Nations should develop and use a simple system of audience analytics that allow it to monitor changing attitudes toward the United Nations and its activities, for example, a hardening of attitudes toward given policies or programs or changing attitudes to terrorism-related issues that might offer opportunities for timely and effective counterterrorism strategic communication programming. This should involve a system of straightforward but rigorously conducted public opinion sampling, supplemented by more focused in-depth interviews with members of communities whose insights are identified by the initial polling to be of particular importance to the United Nations if it is to understand how best to accomplish its mission. These may be undertaken in relation to internal and external audiences.

In cyberspace, the DPI should work with the CTITF and its constituent entities to develop a set of indicators and metrics to analyze readership and usage of communication materials. For example, five basic web pages could be selected—the main pages of UN action to counter terrorism, CTED, the Strategy, the *Beam*, and the Secretary-General—and usage tracked over regular periods. This would help the DPI and CTITF identify where their audience is and what kinds of information gain the greatest attention and paint a clearer picture of what material is generating the greatest levels of interest, which could then be developed accordingly.

The release of signature reports, such as the Secretary-General’s report on efforts on Strategy implementation, offer an opportunity to reach out to key stakeholders, highlight UN achievements, and underscore its message. Such messaging can be reinforced by continuing common elements of the narrative through key speeches and public declarations on the part of senior UN officials who engage with the media.

**Get strategic about strategic communication.** In developing a more strategic approach to communication, the United Nations would benefit from an audit of existing communication activities by CTITF entities in order to establish what is working well, what is not, and what might be more effective if adjustments were made. Although a strategic communication audit could be performed internally, many large organizations, particularly in the commercial sector, use external auditors who are expected to provide greater objectivity in their assessments.

One potentially useful audit framework is produced by the U.S. Communications Consortium Media Center.<sup>67</sup> Intended primarily for use by the charitable sector, it nevertheless has some applicability to CTITF activities. The framework calls for an assessment of an organization’s strategic communication capabilities in 16 key areas, grouped into three categories.

1. **Strategy**—core tasks of strategic communication planning and development, including the selection of well-defined goals and outcomes; target audience selection, i.e., specific target groups within the general population, and analysis; identification of credible messengers; development of clear and persuasive messages; and choice of the means of delivery, i.e., an ability to access the target audience
2. **Implementation**—a range of tasks associated with “getting the message to market,” including training those likely to be delivering and disseminating the message, building effective partnerships with

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<sup>67</sup> Julia Coffman, “Strategic Communications Audits,” Strategic Communication Media Center, October 2004, <http://www.ccmc.org/sites/default/files/WorkingPaper1.pdf>.

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*Developing and refining a master narrative on terrorism, one that resonates globally but can be applied locally, is essential for the United Nations. This can be based on the UN Charter and the Strategy, which reiterates that terrorism, in using violence to resolve disputes, especially against noncombatants, is an assault on core UN principles and values.*

individuals or groups in the communities targeted, and ensuring that messaging is sufficiently sustained in order to be effective

3. **Support and integration**—issues including ensuring sufficient resources and political or organizational will are being devoted to sustaining a strategic communication campaign

Having surveyed and evaluated existing strategic communication efforts, the CTITF could develop a strategic communication tool kit for its members. This should establish basic principles of effective strategic communication, leveraging examples of good practice from within the UN system, including key dos and don'ts of message development and delivery; frameworks for basic target audience identification and analysis, as well as identification of potential local credible voices who could be co-opted to deliver the UN message; and simple methodologies to help practitioners develop messages from the audience backward, i.e., crafting messages through the frames the target audience might itself view the messages it receives. The tool kit should provide a consolidated resource of UN materials on terrorism and counterterrorism, for example, statistics on global terrorism trends, the key points of the Strategy, Security Council resolutions concerning terrorism, and a contemporaneous collection of statements by the Secretary-General on terrorism and the effects of terrorism. The tool kit should be subject to regular updates to take account of the latest statements from the United Na-

tions and any fresh examples of good practice emerging from CTITF departments.

**Keep it local, keep it relevant.** As some of the case studies presented in this report show, the most successful strategic communication campaigns are often those that consider local conditions with respect to the message and its delivery. The United Nations should ensure it engages local audiences more closely in the development of context-specific materials.

For example, field missions reluctant to adopt the terminology of terrorism or violent extremism or to be perceived directly addressing issues relating to terrorism might initiate projects that approach the subject indirectly, for example, an arts project with youth groups to focus on cultural heritage monuments that celebrate diversity or the commissioning of an essay competition on the impact of violence on a local community, initiatives that address the fallout of terrorism or counterterrorism without using those terms. These will allow for a clearer identification of the perspectives and priorities of local audiences, and communication strategies can be developed and adapted accordingly.

Part of this “localization” strategy should include greater use of local credible voices as conduits for strategic messaging. Although sustained and effective dissemination of strong messages from UN headquarters and the Secretary-General concerning terrorism is important, they may not always resonate at the local level. In some situations, condemnation of terrorism or



*The UN narrative should highlight that its mandate to prevent terrorism is derived from the UN Charter itself, which predates the U.S.-led “Global War on Terror,” and reinforced by adoption of the Strategy by the General Assembly.*

violent extremism may resonate more strongly with a local audience if the voices of condemnation are from the communities affected, although this may not be possible in some situations, as opposed to UN officials who may not even be known to the target audience.

**Integrate communication at the outset of program design and policy development.** All project proposals going through the CTITF, as well as the UN Centre for Counter-Terrorism, should include a communication component that outlines how this initiative will be portrayed, what needs it serves, and how it contributes to broader UN goals and a plan to disseminate the outcome products and measure their effectiveness.

Communication staff should be consulted in the development phase of a project or in the planning of an event. Such staff will be well placed to advise on relevant op-eds, media appearances, and the like or incorporate some of the main themes or issues into a written product for the *Beam*, the website, or social media platforms, i.e., status updates, comments, and links for entities’ or individual pages.

Regular meetings of a Communication Group on Counterterrorism that includes representatives of the DPI, CTITF, CTED, and, for example, public information officers or counterterrorism focal points in the peacekeeping and political affairs departments could help in the development of consistent system-wide messaging.

**Close the “say-do” gap.** UN credibility suffers from a “say-do” gap, whereby some audiences feel that UN rhetoric is not supported by action. The best commu-

nication will be compromised by actions or words that are contrary to the values it upholds or encourages others to follow. Actions and policies must be closely aligned with objectives and communicated as such.

Drawing attention to the say-do gap of one’s adversaries can be a powerful strategy for challenging their purported legitimacy and their ability to sustain support for their cause. The United Nations should consider strategic communication campaigns that draw attention to the say-do gap of those groups that threaten efforts by the world body and member states to promote peace, security, and development. For the sake of political expediency, this can be restricted to reactive campaigns involving senior UN officials or those in the field, leveraging the impact of incidents that may have a negative effect on an armed group’s public image. For example, UN member states such as the United States and Saudi Arabia have delivered strategic communication campaigns that contrast al-Qaida’s frequent involvement in attacks resulting in the deaths of Muslim civilians with the group’s claims to be acting in defense of Islam and Muslims. The United Nations pursues such campaigns only infrequently at present.

**Improve message dissemination.** The CTITF should make greater use of new technologies in disseminating information about its work. Following its member state briefings and other events, the CTITF should circulate a brief summary electronically and consider providing a complementary webcast of the briefing, so that diplomats unable to attend the events can nonetheless benefit from the discussions. Materials should be downloadable in multiple formats, including low-resolution, small file-size versions to ensure accessibil-

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ity by UN staff operating in field conditions or communities living in areas where Internet access is slow or unreliable.

General press releases on the UN multimedia news website are already being made available via an elective service. Yet, the sheer quantity of content available via the UN website and UN News Service can hamper quick access to thematic content, such as that concerning terrorism and counterterrorism. It is currently difficult for diplomats, practitioners, and the public to know when there is relevant terrorism-related news on the website or to check it regularly amid other responsibilities. The United Nations should take further steps to ensure this information is more easily accessible, for example, by coding stories according to topic and allowing subscribers to select notifications on themes of specific interest.

Dissemination of the *Beam* could be greatly improved. Rather than disseminate the publication to generic e-mail addresses, member states should be invited to nominate recipients of the *Beam*, including headquarters- and capital-based diplomats and officials. Dissemination of the *Beam* also can be more systematic through e-mail subscription requests, tracking where they are most regularly used and adapting distribution following consultations with the DPI, UNICs, and member states.

In using the Internet, the United Nations should consider other means of targeted dissemination. A target audience should not have to decide to visit a UN website to find out more about UN activities. The United Nations should ensure it is proactively delivering its message to locations on the Internet frequented by those audiences and that, as well as posting information on its websites or other social media, its communication staff are placing the same content or links to the content on relevant Internet forums, blogs, and other social media.

Additionally, direct UN distribution can be supported by more indirect methods, for example, in online communities where the credibility of the UN brand might be less favorably viewed. In such cases, the United Nations should consider training and supporting “citizen journalists” to blog, tweet, post, or otherwise distribute or comment on UN statements and programs. The U.S.-funded Viral Peace initiative adopted this approach, which is a potentially cost-effective amplifier of the UN voice in cyberspace. The initiative “seeks to occupy the virtual space that extremists fill, one thread or Twitter exchange at a time.”<sup>68</sup>

**Increase training and sensitization for UN staff at headquarters and in the field.** The DPI, in cooperation with the CTITF, could run a series of training workshops with media and strategic communication professionals to acquaint UN personnel more broadly with the Strategy and could adapt the workshops for web-based distribution. The workshops might be targeted at specific professional and administrative levels or addressed to particular departments. The CTITF also might work with the DPI and trainers to develop a course module for use at the UN System Staff College (UNSSC) in Turin, Italy. The UNSSC provides a variety of learning tools to promote “interagency collaboration [and] a cohesive management culture and support continuous learning and staff development” in the United Nations.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to providing attendees with a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Strategy, the training could aim to raise levels of knowledge and understanding of strategic communication, explaining its principles and differentiating it from activities such as press and public relations. Training should use case studies to illustrate the fundamental dos and don’ts of communicating strategically. Crucially, it should encourage all staff involved in counterterrorism strategic communication at the United Nations to begin to

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<sup>68</sup> Ackerman, “Newest U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy.”

<sup>69</sup> UN System Staff College, “About UNSSC,” n.d., <http://www.unssc.org/home/about-unssc> (accessed 26 November 2012).

*The most successful strategic communication campaigns are often those that consider local conditions with respect to the message and its delivery.*

consider strategic communication as more than writing a culturally sensitive press release. It is whatever words or actions or combination of both that will change an audience's behavior in fulfillment of UN objectives.

Training materials might be provided for UN staff through a series of webinars that would make the information and tools available to a broader range of personnel across New York, Vienna, and Geneva headquarters, as well as field offices. These might be provided as standard to newly arrived diplomatic staff at headquarters as an introduction to the United Nations' work on counterterrorism.

Senior officials and professionals working on regions or themes relating to terrorism should be given access to a media training workshop to make them communication ready. Statements of key personnel reportedly are attractive to the media and help grant the United Nations and its activities greater public visibility. Senior managers and expert officers should be ready to engage the media proactively or reactively to highlight the value of UN engagement in areas being covered.

**Provide communication guidelines for staff to use at headquarters and in the field.** The United Nations and its counterterrorism apparatus should build on existing work to provide more assistance to senior headquarters officials and field missions on communicating the UN message on terrorism and counterterrorism more effectively. At the very least, officials should be provided with an information package that provides the UN master narrative on terrorism and counterterrorism, along with other basic talking points concerning counterterrorism programs and initiatives conducted by UN bodies.

There should be some differentiation between the United Nations' own work that can contribute to preventing terrorism, which includes a vast array of programming conducted by CTITF entities and others, and UN efforts to assist member states. This will have to be adapted on a case-by-case basis, but to counter the impression that the United Nations favors a particular state, greater prominence should be given to the United Nations' own approach to counterterrorism, which underscores the importance of the rule of law, human rights, and development. The UN approach should be clearly differentiated from a purely security-centric approach by emphasizing how all other efforts such as development of the apparatus of civil society also contribute to security.

**Develop existing communication.** *Greater investments should be made in making existing communication tools, such as *The Beam*, which is used at the UN, responsive to the needs of the audience. This requires a better understanding of target demographics. More-nuanced analytical content and improved dissemination can assist in this effort.*

The *Beam* might serve as one outlet for CTITF work, to collect and collate examples of good practice in counterextremism and counterterrorism, not to mention sharing examples of innovation in the use of counterterrorism strategic communication. This should not be confined to initiatives such as practical, direct counterterrorism assistance. The newsletter might adopt a somewhat broader focus, highlighting activities of CTITF entities that may contribute indirectly to efforts to address terrorism, such as education or youth engagement initiatives, consideration of ad-

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*The best communication will be compromised by actions or words that are contrary to the values it upholds or encourages others to follow. Actions and policies must be closely aligned with objectives and communicated as such.*

dressings incitement on the Internet, and promotion of police reform and the rule of law. Submissions may be more actively invited from CTITF entities and other key stakeholders in order to generate fresh and innovative content, such as reviews about relevant books, articles, and films or notes from field missions. The CTITF might serve as a “columnist” in making such commentaries a regular feature of the publication.



Strategic communication involves taking a more proactive role in shaping perceptions and effecting behavioral change. For the United Nations, communication is a powerful tool in shaping perceptions regarding the value and capacities of the world body. These in turn affect the political space in which it can operate and the resources it can generate for its work. States who become more familiar with UN counterterrorism work will be more likely to provide financial and political support; citizens unsure of its added value will encourage governments to be active partners if they are able to see more clearly the value the United Nations provides in this field. Personnel who fully understand the UN message and initiatives to address terrorism will be better able to communicate and implement them when engaging with target communities.

The United Nations benefits unquestionably from global recognition of its brand. In itself, its work to promote development, prevent and resolve violent conflict, uphold human rights and the rule of law, and maintain international peace and security constitutes a powerful narrative that can contribute to efforts to counter violent extremism. Over the past decade, even

when there have been disagreements regarding the need for UN authorization for national actions, there has been widespread desire for the UN imprimatur on international actions. The United Nations has many valuable assets to contribute to the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism, and it has a good story to tell. It should not hesitate to employ all available tools to ensure that it provides a powerful message to counter the rhetoric and recruiting power of extremists and mobilize support among its own officers, its member states, and the broader global audience.



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# ANNEX:

## Selected Recommendations of the UN Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism

**Recommendation 7:** The United Nations system, under the leadership of the Secretary-General, should deliver a consistent, clear, principled message when addressing the issue of terrorism, as follows:

- (a) The targeting of unarmed civilians is wrong in all circumstances;
- (b) Governments must ensure that there are avenues to enable citizens to express concerns and grievances;
- (c) Military force should be used only in strict adherence with the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. Such use of force must be exercised in accordance with the international laws of war. The targeting of civilians and the disproportionate use of force beyond legitimate military objectives violate international humanitarian law;
- (d) Security cannot be achieved by sacrificing human rights.

**Recommendation 8:** The Department of Public Information should initiate a review of how the United Nations can reach local populations that support

terrorist aims, in a form that is designed to be “heard” by those communities. Country teams should be used to the greatest extent possible to determine the best means of conveying messages to target audiences.

**Recommendation 9:** Review and enhance the outreach of the United Nations information centres to civil society, including the growing number of institutes and think-tanks in Arabic-speaking countries.

**Recommendation 10:** The activities of the United Nations related to the fight against terrorism should be promoted through, inter alia:

- (a) Public information regarding the work of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, including the dissemination of positive examples of its work such as the assistance provided by the Committee and donors, and advances in regional cooperation;
- (b) Dissemination of the work of United Nations agencies on the broad range of problems that relate to terrorism, including giving greater prominence to the work undertaken by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

and other organizations of the United Nations system in respect of educational initiatives, such as curricula reform, that aim to increase understanding, [and] encourage tolerance and respect for human dignity, while reducing mutual mistrust between communities in conflict. Elements of the United Nations system which address the issue of education should meet to determine how best to mount a coherent worldwide programme to assist countries in which the educational systems need support or that are under the control of groups advocating terror;

- (c) Promotion of the role of international law in combating terrorism.

**Recommendation 11:** Continue emphasizing the importance to the fight against terrorism of existing United Nations work in the areas of human rights, democratic capacity-building, and social and economic justice.

**Recommendation 12:** Ensure better internal communication within the United Nations system, so as to allow all departments, agencies and programmes to be well informed of the activities under way in this field of activity.

Source: UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Identical Letters Dated 1 August 2002 From the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and President of the Security Council*, A/57/273-S/2002/875, 6 August 2002, annex (*Report of the Policy Working Group on the United Nations and Terrorism*).





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