



Launch of CTED global research network

I. Introduction

1. With a view to enhancing its analytical capacity and its engagement with the research community, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) launched a global research network at United Nations Headquarters, New York, on 19 February 2015.

2. CTED developed the research network in accordance with paragraph 19 of Security Council resolution 2129 (2013), in which the Council requests CTED to “further engage and enhance its partnerships with international, regional and subregional organizations, civil society, academia and other entities in conducting research and information-gathering, and identifying good practices, and in that context to support the CTC’s efforts to promote the implementation of resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1624 (2005). . .” In the same resolution, the Council requests CTED to identify emerging issues, trends and developments related to the implementation of Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001) and 1624 (2005).

3. The new network currently consists of 28 leading think tanks and research institutions from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas and Oceania. Twelve partners were represented at the launch.¹

4. CTED intends to engage with its research partners on their assessment of current trends and challenges in the areas of terrorism and counter-terrorism, including developments on the ground.

5. The objectives of the launch event were:

- i. To provide a forum for the discussion and exchange of information by CTED and its research partners on trends and developments in the implementation of Security Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2004) and 2178 (2014), including gaps and best practices in addressing the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon;
- ii. To discuss the modalities of future cooperation between CTED and its research partners;

¹ The participating institutions were: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT); Real Instituto Elcano; Bangladesh Institute of International & Strategic Studies (BISS); Law School and College for Criminal Science of Beijing Normal University; Global Center on Cooperative Security; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism - START, University of Maryland; Soufan Group; Institute for Security Studies (ISS); Centro Brasileiro de Relacoes Internacionais (CEBRI); International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR); Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS); Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM).

- iii. To raise awareness of the work of the Counter-Terrorism Committee and CTED to engage with the academic and research communities on the implementation of the above resolutions;
- iv. To encourage further research on key issues relevant to the work of the Committee and CTED.

6. The discussions focused on the FTF phenomenon. The participating institutions provided their insights and analysis, not only on the nature of the threat but, more importantly, on key vulnerabilities and shortcomings in Member States' responses. They also recommended possible best practices.

7. The outcomes of the meeting will inform the Executive Directorate's work in support of the Committee pursuant to paragraph 24 of resolution 2178 (2014) on identifying principal gaps that may hinder States' abilities to stem the flow of FTFs, as well as good practices in stemming their flow.

II. Main recommendations

8. The participants made the following recommendations:
 - **Early-warning indicators:** Develop indicators of FTF radicalization to enhance early-warning mechanisms (including family, community and State authorities).
 - **Tailored CVE approaches:** Develop more tailored, context-specific approaches to CVE, including tailored counter-messages, de-radicalization, and reintegration programmes, to take into account both the broad spectrum of FTF profiles, differing national and local contexts, and the various stages of the radicalization process.
 - **Gender-sensitive approaches:** Encourage further research into the reasons why terrorist propaganda resonated with certain individuals, including women, and develop targeted responses and counter-narratives.
 - **De-radicalization of returnees:** Policies and programmes aimed at returning FTFs should pursue the following objectives, as appropriate: (i) intelligence-gathering; (ii) de-radicalization and reintegration; (iii) provision of support to victims of crime; (iv) provision of support to those suffering from trauma and other mental health issues.
 - **Evaluation of best practices:** Increase evidence-based research and evaluation of best practices in order to assess the impact of counter-terrorism measures and inform the design of future policies.
 - **Information-sharing:** Improve the sharing of information among research institutions, State authorities, and international and regional organizations to generate more accurate data to be fed into research and analysis.
 - **Role of the Committee and CTED:** The Committee and CTED can support researchers in their work by providing a forum for dialogue and for the collection of research intended to inform policymaking. Decisions about funding and support for training and capacity-building projects should take into account research findings on the quality and effectiveness of such programmes.

III. Summary of discussions

Motivations and drivers

9. Participants noted that research and analysis of the FTF phenomenon continued to be hindered by a scarcity of reliable information on, inter alia, demographics, radicalization and mobilization pathways, and the number of returnees. Moreover, information-sharing by Government agencies and researchers remained limited. Some data had been collected for specific studies, but small sample sizes made it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions about the motivations and drivers of FTFs. A further problem in analysing drivers was that there were multiple levels from which variables could be derived and it was difficult to combine them into a single explanatory framework.

10. **At the individual level**, it was not possible to develop a profile of a “typical FTF”. A wide range of factors could contribute to radicalization at the individual level, including social and kinship relationships, socio-economic grievances, lack of a national identity and belonging, feelings of alienation, marginalization and discrimination, low levels of education, and the lure of Jihadist ideology. Some individuals appeared to have been motivated by genuine humanitarian concerns, especially concerning the current situation in Syria. A further complicating factor was that motivations often changed over time.

11. **At the community level**, resilience to radicalization and violent extremism depended on a wide range of factors. For example, second- and third-generation Muslim immigrants living in the West were particularly susceptible to the process of radicalization. Differences in radicalization patterns between first-generation Muslim immigrants, on the one hand, and second- and third-generation Muslim immigrants, on the other, appeared to explain much of the variation in the number of FTFs across European countries.

12. **At the State level**, social inequality, political exclusion, injustice, and corruption played important roles. However, the conditions conducive to radicalization at the State level varied across case studies. In certain countries, economic grievances played an important role. Salaries paid by terrorist groups were therefore an important incentive for potential recruits. Other country case studies, however, had found that the economic and financial dimension played no significant role. A State’s response to terrorism could itself have a radicalizing impact (e.g., disproportionate use of force by security forces during counter-terrorism operations or perceived discrimination through the profiling of certain religious minorities by the authorities). States were obliged to respect human rights in the enforcement of counter-terrorism measures. Repressive measures such as sanctions, criminalization, the enhancement of security forces’ powers and resources, etc., could have adverse effects if they were perceived as disproportionate. The legitimacy and credibility of such measures were undermined in consequence. Certain repressive measures were necessary, but such measures tended to address symptoms, rather than root causes.

13. In light of the above, it was concluded that the drivers of violent extremism and radicalization were multiple and context-specific. Researchers should therefore isolate causes by breaking down the radicalization process into smaller conceptual elements in order to

gain a better understanding of the dynamic processes that might lead to violent extremism and terrorism. This would also facilitate the development of recommendations for tailored interventions at various stages of the radicalization process. In order to carry out such nuanced analysis, researchers required better access to data. The reluctance of Government agencies to share information constituted an obstacle in that regard.

Female FTFs

14. The reasons for the increase in the number of **female FTFs** remained unclear. There was a need for more analysis of the threat they posed and the importance of targeting them in de-radicalization and countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes. Female FTFs might be attracted by the call for the creation of a “caliphate”. The creation of a caliphate had not been a factor in previous conflicts (e.g., Afghanistan, the Balkans and Somalia), which had not attracted a significant number of women. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) lured individuals by offering them the opportunity to participate in a new society in which they could gain a sense of belonging and purpose. The promise of “blessings” to “caliphate mothers” (young women willing to marry a mujahidin and produce a child) was an example in that context. It was crucial to gain a greater understanding of the motivations and role of women so that **tailored counter-narratives for a female audience could be developed**.

Recruitment

15. Even though ISIL had proven extremely adept at using social media and other modern communications technologies, the precise causal role of the Internet in the radicalization of vulnerable individuals and, in some cases, the recruitment of new members had not yet been established. The Internet might facilitate the process of radicalization, but was not the sole driver of the process. In most cases, recruitment occurred through face-to-face interaction, following an initial encounter online. Moreover, many countries that had produced large numbers of FTFs offered limited Internet connectivity.

16. Not only were new social media platforms and “apps” a communications tool, they could also, under certain circumstances, constitute material support for terrorism, raising new challenges for existing legal frameworks.

17. Former veteran fighters were thought to play an important role in inspiring new recruits and facilitating their recruitment. Disengaged FTFs might not necessarily be de-radicalized. They might continue to be involved in non-violent terrorist activities, whether in their home countries or in third countries. They might “lie low” for many years in the aftermath of one conflict, but then become “re-engaged” in a subsequent conflict, including by recruiting and facilitating the travel of new fighters. **There was therefore an important distinction to be made between disengagement and de-radicalization of FTFs.**

Returnees

18. Much of the debate around the threat posed by FTFs focused on their return to their countries of origin. Yet, little was known about returnees and their probable behaviour. It

was unclear how many were likely to return to their home countries (as opposed to remaining in conflict zones or travelling to third countries) and how likely they were to engage in terrorist activity upon their return.

19. Although much attention was currently being devoted to returnees in Europe, the available data on FTF numbers showed that most originated in States of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It was therefore important to consider scenarios in which large numbers of FTFs returned to these countries of origin or elected to go to third countries, including potentially other conflict zones, bringing with them their skills and networks and thus potentially changing the dynamics of those conflicts.

19. In order to strengthen the design and further development of de-radicalization projects and programming, it would be necessary to conduct empirical research aimed at understanding why individuals voluntarily disengaged from terrorist organizations.

21. It was important to develop robust and transparent partnerships with at-risk communities in order to be able to identify returnees, make accurate risk assessments, and prevent returnees from relapsing into extremism. Most FTFs who returned to their countries of origin would not become involved in domestic attacks. **Returnees were a valuable source of knowledge and information.** Programmes and policies concerning returnees must therefore take into account their importance as “intelligence assets”. Another aim of cultivating a relationship with returnees, including through reintegration and rehabilitation programmes, was to **utilize their experience and credibility to persuade others not to become involved in terrorism.**

22. **Returnees might themselves have been victims of crimes** committed by terrorist groups in conflict zones. A clear example of this were teenage girls married off to fighters. It was therefore important to ensure that such sensitive scenarios are taken into account when developing policies regarding the treatment of returnees.

23. States responded to returning FTFs in accordance with their respective national legal frameworks and specific contexts. In one example, the Government handled returning FTFs and their reintegration not as a separate terrorism issue, but within the framework of existing crime-prevention policies. That model was based on a close partnership between the national security apparatus and civil society actors, and required a high level of trust. The returnees were vetted by the security services and informed that they were known to the Government. That approach had not only made the returnees a potential source of information, but also provided an opportunity to determine whether sufficient evidence was available to build a criminal case against the returnees (under the jurisdiction of the country concerned, travel to Syria did not in itself constitute a criminal offence).

Legal challenges in the prosecution of FTFs

24. The prosecution of individuals who had taken part in, or were planning to take part in a conflict in a third country was a complex issue. It was extremely difficult to collect evidence showing that FTFs had fought alongside banned terrorist groups. Consequently, it

was difficult to prove that any returnee had committed a crime. There was a need for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to strengthen exchange of information on criminal investigations, interdictions and prosecutions. States should also improve bilateral judicial cooperation in order to find, deny safe haven to, and bring to justice FTFs, on the basis of the principle of “extradite or prosecute”, in accordance with international law.

Role of civil society

25. Civil society played an important role in preventing and countering violent extremism. Local actors were often better placed than centralized Government actors to identify the risks related to FTFs, provide “early-warning mechanisms”, and take preventive action. However, Governments should avoid “securitizing” civil society and “outsourcing” their tasks to civil society actors. To do so was to delegitimize them, turn them into targets, and task them with duties for which they lacked the training, skills and resources.

Evaluating best practices

26. Recommendations on good practices (e.g., those developed by the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the Radicalization Awareness Network of the European Commission) provided valuable, albeit general, guidelines to policymakers. However, much more work was necessary to develop the right methodology and establish criteria for evaluating best practices and scrutinizing the impact and effectiveness of counter-terrorism measures, including counter-narratives.

27. States used a wide range of good practices in addressing the problem of returnees. In making recommendations on ways to address the FTF phenomenon, it was important to bear in mind that, even though States could certainly learn lessons from one another, many measures were context-specific and might not be equally suitable (or indeed equally effective) when applied in a different country or context. Some measures that had proven particularly effective were suitable only in a context where there was a high level of trust in the security authorities, based on their democratic accountability and respect for the rule of law. The same was true of mental health care. Many returnees suffered from post-traumatic-stress syndrome and other mental health conditions, yet not all States were in a position to provide them with adequate care.

IV. Conclusions

28. The discussions not only provided new insights and perspectives on the FTF phenomenon, but also strengthened participants’ understanding of knowledge gaps and areas in which further research was needed on this complex issue. CTED and its partner institutions agreed on a range of modalities for taking their cooperation forward. There will be regular information exchange, including within the framework of follow-up meetings between CTED and its research partners on other relevant counter-terrorism topics. The exchange of information will aim in particular to identify emerging terrorism trends and developments and promote the development of country and subregional counter-terrorism

profiles to assist the Committee in its assessment visits and analysis. CTED will bring relevant research outcomes and analysis, as well as other issues raised by its research partners, to the attention of the Committee.