

International conference on preventing and countering radicalization and violent extremism as related to the Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) threat

**Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE)
Dates: 26-28 April 2016**

Participating countries: *Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.*

I. Background:

Over the past few years, it has become increasingly and even more broadly recognized that traditional, security-oriented approaches are insufficient to effectively address the threat of terrorism, particularly in the medium- and long-term. The threat posed by self-radicalization, terrorists acting alone and newly emerging terrorist groups, as well as the potential of the Internet to be utilized by recruiters and to promote violent extremist ideologies have prompted greater focus on prevention and on countering radicalization and violent extremism in a pre-emptive manner.

This context of evolving terrorist threats to international security as well as the development of new terrorist modus operandi and features, particularly regarding radicalization and recruitment, requires constant adaptability and efforts from Member States to strengthen their capacities to prevent and counter such phenomena. Among such threats, the increasing phenomenon of individuals involved, as Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF), in activities of terrorist groups have raised major concerns among Member States, and particularly in countries of origin, transit and destination, as also stressed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) adopted in September 2014, which calls upon Member States to enhance their cooperation and develop relevant measures in order to prevent and tackle this phenomenon. Current criminal justice procedures against returning FTF have had limited success, partly due to a lack of evidence for prosecution. Therefore, a non-coercive countering violent extremism (CVE) approach can play a complementary role to traditional counter-terrorism measures in developing a more sustainable strategy. Furthermore, an effective response to FTF should underscore the importance of safeguarding human rights and the rule of law as key strategy components.

II. The conference:

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in partnership with the Hedayah, The International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism co-hosted the third joint international conference on *Preventing and Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism as related to the Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) Threat* from 26-28 April 2016 in Abu Dhabi, UAE., Participants of the conference came from more than seventy participants including international experts together with practitioners from the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States and other countries of the broader Middle East, North Africa and South West Asia regions.

High-level criminal justice and law enforcement officers from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates were invited to discuss challenges and experiences related to preventing and countering violent extremism. Senior experts from UNODC, UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), 1267 Monitoring Team, Hedayah, Canada, Algeria, Morocco, France, Italy, United Kingdom and Facebook presented international and national legal frameworks, experiences and good practices in order to strengthen/expand the participants' understanding of the main legal and policy challenges in addressing CVE in the context of the FTF threat.

i. Objectives of the Conference

- Explore ways to strengthen regional and national capacity to prevent and fight violent extremism leading to terrorism, particularly taking into account the increasing flow of international recruits to terrorist organizations, including FTF, as also identified by the UN General Assembly resolution 68/276 and relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolutions 2170 (2014) and 2178 (2014).
- Discuss criminal justice strategies as well as policies and tools to prevent and counter radicalization and violent extremism related to the FTF phenomenon.
- Highlight good practices and relevant policy and programming options for Member States' review and consideration.
- Discuss ways to enhance international cooperation across relevant government ministries/agencies but also among national authorities and civil society actors in order to efficiently respond to the violent extremism and FTF phenomenon.
- Explore ways to strengthen the inclusion of rule of law and human rights standards into the development and implementation of effective and comprehensive preventative criminal justice strategies against violent extremism and FTF.

ii. Opening and introductory remarks

The international conference gathered investigative and prosecutorial authorities and senior representatives from beneficiary countries, as well as experts from a diversified range of backgrounds including the UN, government, civil society and private sector to discuss legal and policy challenges encountered in preventing and countering violent extremism as related to the FTF threat. The conference provided an opportunity for participants and experts to exchange multi-sector experiences, analyze concrete cases and share best practices and lessons learned from their countries and organizations.

The conference was inaugurated by the opening remarks of Dr. Hatem Aly, UNODC Representative for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Region who emphasized the strong commitment of the UN to assisting Member States in supporting national capacities against CVE and FTF threats in compliance with the relevant international legal instruments. His statement was followed by the speech of the Representative and Chief of Section of the Terrorism Prevention Branch (TPB) of the UNODC, Dr. Mauro Miedico, who pointed out the threats posed by the incitement to commit acts of terrorism, self-radicalization and terrorists acting alone, that have prompted greater focus on prevention and on countering radicalization and violent extremism in a pre-emptive manner. Dr. Miedico also presented the different challenges related to terrorism prevention strategies, in particular the necessity to criminalize prevention-related offences, the legal and procedural issues related to their investigation and prosecution, the importance of international cooperation in criminal matters related to terrorism and the challenging responses needed to address radicalization to violence in prison settings.

Mr. Maqsood Kruse, Executive Director of Hedayah, The International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism emphasized the need to strengthen regional and national capacity to prevent radicalization to violent extremism from both a criminal justice and policy perspective, taking into account the emerging and growing threat of the foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) phenomena. Mr. Kruse went on to highlight that violent extremism easily crosses borders and therefore countering violent extremism efforts must do the same, it should support international cooperation and sharing of wisdom between countries. Mr. Kruse also emphasized the importance of the meeting to share good practices, insights, approaches and challenges but most importantly to see how these exchanges can be used post conference once participants return to their home countries and are faced with fighting radicalization of FTFs

As a donor country, the Representative of the Government of Japan, Mr. Kotaro Suzuki, highlighted the strong involvement of Japan in supporting international efforts to combat terrorism and its strong commitment to assisting UN counter-terrorism initiatives. Mr. Suzuki also urged for a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach, acknowledging Hedayah's leading role in countering violent extremism globally.

iii. Key Themes

- Importance of developing National Strategies for CVE.

Increasingly, many Governments that face a threat from radicalization and violent extremism are looking to build more effective and strategic multi-agency responses. Commonly, this takes the form of a National CVE Strategy, which seeks to establish clear roles and responsibilities for different parts of Government to initiate evidence based policy and practice responses to the drivers of violent extremism.

Of course, this approach is not an alternative to more traditional Rule of Law approaches, but seeks to complement wider Counterterrorism practice and necessary elements, including investigation, prosecution and detention. It is therefore important to discuss the main elements of wider strategic responses to the threat and the main issues that should be considered when developing National CVE Strategies to complement effective criminal justice responses.

In discussing this theme, participants of the conference highlighted the need to understand the factors/drivers leading to violent extremism in order to be able to develop CVE strategies that are evidence based and tailored to the drivers and push and pull factors of radicalization. They also emphasized the importance for CVE strategies to be embedded in and compliant with the rule of law and human rights, both from a criminal justice and a policy approach. Moreover, the discussions outlined the need for a clear distribution of roles, the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, the introduction of accountability mechanisms and strong coordination between governmental and non-governmental entities to ensure that CVE strategies and action plans best complement existing counter-terrorism strategies and are not viewed in isolation but as part of the larger strategy to combat the threat. In order to develop effective CVE national strategies, experts agreed that these strategies must encompass a holistic and context specific approach that also; compliments both rule of law and CVE approaches, establishes an agreed understanding of the local drivers,) establishes clear priorities, roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders involved, engages with civil society and sets clear goals and ends. The key challenge experts and participants identified when adapting or creating a CVE national strategy is addressing how to plan a long-term strategy when threats are growing and immediate.

While cross government engagement when developing comprehensive national CVE strategies is crucial equally important is the involvement of communities and civil society actors in this process. To help promote and encourage engagement and open communication between governments and civil society, experts and participants suggested to create or use spaces (ie. town halls) that allow for communities and civil society to share their grievances. These spaces should allow for concerns to be addressed constructively and openly without one side accusing or blaming the other. In addition, a robust security and rule of law policy should support the work of communities and should allow civil society actors to not feel threatened by governments and authorities but included.

Given the experience and expertise in this topic specifically, Hedayah highlighted its joint training program with the Global Center on Cooperative Security on the development of National CVE Strategies. Hedayah and the Global Center have worked on the development of new strategies with a number of countries and will continue to expand the joint program. These bespoke bi-lateral engagements have ranged from scoping and assessment work to take initial

steps towards a national strategy; through the review of existing strategies and their revised action plans for implementation. In addition to the program, Hedayah has also produced the “National CVE Strategies: Guidelines and Good Practices” document offering guidance for national governments interested in developing, refining or implementing a national countering violent extremism strategy. The document includes good practices that have emerged from experiences in the field and draws on them to support future efforts.

Participants and experts acknowledged the key role organizations like The United Nations and Hedayah play in this space by identifying technical needs and good practices, promoting partnerships between governments, civil society and the private sector, and promoting regional and international cooperation.

- The Challenges of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters

The Foreign Terrorist Fighters phenomenon is one of the most important issues in international counterterrorism at present, with significant numbers travelling, mainly to Iraq and Syria, to join violent extremist groups. We are also faced with the challenge of Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters coming back to their home countries after engagement in extremist violence overseas. The massive flow of radicalized individuals returning from conflict areas, implicated to varying degrees in terrorist operations committed abroad, may make a systematic imprisonment response legally and operationally unsuitable. There is concern that at least some will return with intent on committing acts of terrorism and potentially with a perceived increased kudos that will enable them to radicalize others.

Participants during this session discussed the challenge for Rule of Law responses, such as the monitoring of returnees and how best to assess their risk but also addressed the need to look at CVE approaches such as rehabilitation and reintegration as way to reduce this threat. The rehabilitation and reintegration program in Saudi Arabia for example, presented concrete cases of the outcomes achieved through their programs. With an 85% success rate, the 3-stage program bases itself on providing counselling in prisons and preventative outreach programs, rehabilitation of prisons through means such as psychological, cultural, training programs, sports and recreation, and finally some follow-up care after released based within reintegration and social adjustment. The program highlights the importance of involving families of participants, showcases the importance of having different government ministries and leaders involved, and the importance of complimenting the broader; more comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy.

In addition to the model presented by Saudi Arabia, Hedayah also highlighted its joint program with the International Institute for Justice and Rule of Law (IJJ) on developing and implementing capacity building program to assist countries to pursue the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters (RFTF). The project objective is to encourage the adoption of an effective cross-disciplinary approach through inter-agency work to address the challenge posed by the FTF phenomenon with specific regard to those returning to the country of origin.

Also discussed was the challenges countries are faced with on an international scale when dealing with the returning foreign terrorist fighters’ threat which included the lack of a common definition, approach or goals for investigation and prosecution. This only continued to highlight

the need for regional cooperation where countries must ensure that political agendas do not conflict with international laws in place. A judicial approach must also be comprehensive and crucial for prosecution and should also have specific approaches or courts to deal with evolving violent extremism and terrorism crimes.

The various threats posed by returning foreign terrorist fighters needs to be distinguished in order to be able to assess and evaluate how to best engage and interact with them. In some cases returnees come back disillusioned and dangerous while in other cases they are deradicalizing and useful for programming. It is important to recognize the various roles a returnee performs and when and how to involve them in CVE programming. A key role returning foreign fighters can play is providing credible voices for online and offline counternarratives and countermessages.

Experts and participants of the conference recognized that while some violent extremists will be rehabilitated through some programs, others will not. It is important to emphasize that the failure of one should not be reflective of the whole program but instead serve as a lesson learned to evolve and improve the program.

- Challenges in investigating and prosecuting violent extremism and radicalization related cases in relation with the FTF threat

Preventing violent extremism and radicalization requires the early intervention of the judiciary and thus poses major specific investigation and prosecution challenges to the whole judiciary system, in particular vis-à-vis terrorist groups' emerging modus operandi. The sessions focused on current challenges for investigators and magistrates in the framework of ongoing FTFs related cases and also addressed administrative measures aiming to disrupt travels of radicalized individuals willing to join terrorist groups abroad.

The Moroccan experience in investigating and prosecuting returning FTFs was discussed as an example, through concrete cases and presentation of the Kingdom's related legal framework. Participants highlighted some specific challenges in addressing the issue of the returning FTF such as assessing the risk and threats they pose in order to be able to put in place a legal response tailored to each FTF profile, as well as difficulties in monitoring them. Furthermore, the panel members discussed the possibility of using former, deradicalized FTF during the development of CVE strategies, particularly to advise on the processes of radicalization and disengagement. The Moroccan experience in investigating and prosecuting returning FTFs was discussed as an example, through concrete cases and presentation of the Kingdom's related legal framework. Several options were proposed based on the Moroccan case which included: surveillance, sting operations, revoking citizenship, blocking travel, preventative detention, peace bonds, counselling and hotlines. There were also prevention and intervention programs which stressed the importance of being NGO-driven, but still maintain parallel monitoring by government security forces. While this could have the potential to hinder the programs developed by NGOs, the collaboration between practitioners and government security forces is necessary with the evolving online challenges of prosecution and electronic crimes and practices of the FTF threat.

The importance of international cooperation to share intelligence and information on suspected individuals is necessary with the evolving challenge of prosecution of electronic crimes and practices. Many existing legal frameworks have not yet been adapted to respond adequately to the threat as the level of approval in many countries and legal systems is difficult to acquire. It was suggested that in order to be proactive and successful in prosecution, there needs to be more international agreements and arrangements between governments to allow for the sharing of such information.

As preventing violent extremism and radicalization requires the early intervention of the judiciary, it poses very specific challenges to law enforcement and prosecutors. Experts and participants discussed those challenges, in particular through the exchange of national experiences from Morocco, Canada, France and Jordan. Panel members focused on the criminalization of preventative offences as well as clear legal and administrative frameworks that set limits to secure rule-of-law compliant procedures and interventions. Important issues related to surveillance and the collection of evidence were also raised, in particular for FTF travels and terrorist offences committed over the Internet. Both participants and experts agreed on the need for countries to establish or adapt their existing legal frameworks to ease the disruption of incitement to violent extremism, terrorist propaganda and recruitment.

- Preventing and countering the misuse of the Internet as a tool for radicalization, incitement and recruitment purposes in relation with FTFs threat

The Internet is an anonymous, fast, efficient, low-cost communication tool used widely by extremist groups for recruitment, radicalization and incitement purposes. To counter this, cooperation both between countries and with private sector is crucial.

Discussions on this topic during the conference, tackled the major challenges of investigating, but also detecting and gathering criminal evidence, particularly on the social media. UNODC presented some of the challenges identified in particular as related to human rights and rule of law, whilst panel members and participants addressed the importance of cooperation between law enforcement entities and the private sector, highlighting the difficulties and miscommunication with social media companies, such as Facebook. Social media and technology companies in this regard have the expertise and tools to provide support and develop joint projects with governments. Many social media companies also provide training to governments on their platforms and how to best create online strategies, campaigns, and messages that counter violent extremist messages online. A social media company present at the conference highlighted the need to approach CVE from a marketing perspective and stressed the need to destroy the violent extremist brand.

Although extremist and terrorist use of the internet poses many challenges for CVE, it is important to recognize that it is also advantageous for CVE at both the intelligence level for gathering information and for counter narratives. The internet provides an effective platform for counter-narratives, fighting for the hearts and minds of young people. The most effective campaigns appeal to youth are being communicated to them on their level, in their tone and appeal to their emotions. In order to counter this, messages and narratives created by governments and NGOs need to appeal and use the same criteria. Radicalization existed before

social media and in order to deradicalize and prevent individuals from radicalizing the root causes need to be solved at the core and not rely solely on the internet not only mitigate its presence online. Hedayah is also in the process of launching a counter narrative library to establish a comprehensive portal where governments, front-line workers and civil society can access information used to counter the narratives of all forms of violent extremism. This collection will be a unique source in training and capacity building activities in CVE. •The development of the Counter-Narrative Library will be completed through the integration of a number of regional sub-projects into the existing portal and collection to serve as one comprehensive tool.

Also addressed was the issue of policing the internet and how this is effective in countering recruitment online. While the issue of policing the internet was addressed it is important to stress that while online websites and platforms can be shut down and ideologies cannot. Policing the internet will only allow for other platforms and online websites to be created. From a Rule of law perspective, several challenges with regards to policing the internet exist particularly in balancing the right to security and rights to privacy and freedom of speech when it comes to prosecuting online acts. It is necessary to develop new mechanisms of judicial oversight to deal with these new challenges constructively. UNODC for example developed a capacity-building tool - “The use of the Internet for Terrorist purposes” that highlights good practices and concrete cases related to the criminal justice responses to threats and challenges posed by the misuse of the Internet by terrorist groups, including legislation, investigation, prosecution and international cooperation aspects.

- Rethinking and reinforcing international cooperation in criminal matters against individuals joining terrorist groups abroad

The vast increase in the number of police and judicial investigations in relation to the massive departures of FTFs constitutes a major challenge for practitioners and requires the development of new practices in order to make interstate cooperation faster and more efficient. The rapid sharing and exchange of information and intelligence needs to be improved and systematised at the national, regional and international levels, in particular in view of anticipating departures and dismantling delivery networks. Beyond the traditional cooperation at the investigation stage, it is appropriate to examine methods and good practices designed to improve formal and informal cooperation in order to curb the flow of FTFs to terrorist operations.

Experts and participants during this session asserted the need for international cooperation in criminal matters, and the need to rethink and reinforce it taking into consideration very specific challenges of radicalized individuals joining terrorist groups abroad. Country experiences have shown extensive networks and communication between violent extremists across the border for recruitment, training and attacks. Specifically in the FTF context, this is evident in the number of individuals traveling from their home countries and across borders to DA’ESH territory. It is clear that in order to combat this issue member states need to join efforts to face this threat by increasing cooperation on security, legislation and international agreements. In the ever expanding information age, the lack of information sharing today means the lack of intelligence and any control over individuals leaving to join extremist groups is lost. In order to minimize this, governments should find ways to share information, within their security and legal parameters.

Experts from Egypt, Lebanon and UNODC discussed the main challenges, in particular the importance of strengthening cooperation among Member States. This is crucial in CVE programming in order to ease the sharing of intelligence and information, to effectively disrupt travels to conflict zones where terrorist groups are operating.

To close the session, experts and participants highlighted the importance of providing training for those investigating potential violent extremist and ensuring that they abiding by international human rights standards.

- Importance of communities and civil society actors in overcoming the challenge of the FTF Threat

When planning CVE programs and responses related to the FTF threat, it is important that governments ensure communities and civil society actors are included from the start and that programming is implemented by civil society. There is a need to both increase the engagement of communities and civil society actors in CVE and improve the collaboration and cooperation between governments and civil society actors.

The session further emphasized the importance of tailor made approaches to fit the local society and context. Communities and civil society actors are best placed to identify the drivers and best practices but also have access, knowledge and on the ground insight that governments do not. While NGOs, communities and civil society actors have the access and insight, they require support from governments. Examples from different countries show NGOs leading initiatives to prevent FTFs have the access and insight necessary, but require support from their governments. This makes it necessary for governments to consider supporting NGOs and communities, rather than have local communities implement government programs.

Experts and participants agreed on the critical role played by civil society in the prevention of violent extremism and in preventing individuals, in particular youth, from travelling to join terrorist groups abroad. Community and civil society actors with the support of governments should empower youth to use social media platforms and encourage them to join global symposiums to advocate for peace and CVE.

As the FTF continues to grow, NGOs are increasingly working in the CVE space. In order to avoid duplication of efforts it is important to ensure that efforts are collaborative and coordinated. Experts working in their communities from participating civil society pointed out the need to focus on youth, women, inter/intra religious dialogue, training for those investigating potential violent extremists abiding by international human rights standards.

Hedayah through its Global Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) Program, supported by the European Union, focuses on building the capacity of state and non-state actors to effectively challenge radicalization and recruitment to terrorism while continuing to respect human rights and international law. The aim of the program is threefold; 1) to work with local partners to design, implement and develop approaches that have a demonstrable impact on the

threat posed by radicalization and recruitment to terrorism, 2) to promote effective non-coercive responses to terrorism with the understanding that traditional coercive approaches could be ineffective and even counter-productive and 3) to widen the pool of people who are involved in Prevent/CVE activity by raising the awareness of state and non-state actors; and building the capacity of credible voices within communities.

Participants and experts closed the session by emphasizing that events in specific countries are relevant for other regions as they may create a window of opportunity regionally for radicalization. In this regard, international events can also have a significant impact and international civil society is important and has a big role to play. In order to address this concern, concrete solutions are necessary to approach complex and multi-layered solutions.

- Radicalization to violence in prisons settings

With regards to the “Rehabilitation” aspect of CVE programming, the management of violent extremist prisoners and the prevention of radicalization to violence in prisons was showcased with the use of concrete cases, practical examples of interventions and lessons learned by experts from UNODC, Lebanon and Algeria.

Experts highlighted that the number of prisoners detained on terrorism-related charges is rising in many Member States; a development which challenges prison administrations in ensuring the humane, safe and secure custody of individuals under their care and to prepare them for their social reintegration upon release. Conclusive evidence and empirical research regarding the effective management of violent extremist prisoners (VEPs) remains scarce, including research on the benefits and risks involved in separating VEPs from or dispersing them within the general prison population; applying tailor-made assessments tools for VEPs with a view to ensure their proper categorisation and allocation; or the actual extent to which radicalisation to violence actually occurs in prisons. That being said, the psychological impact of imprisonment, which often involves individuals longing for “meaning” and a new sense of “identity”, may render prisoners vulnerable to radicalization to violence under certain circumstances, in particular if overall prison management and prison conditions do not adhere to international standards and norms.

Reference was also made to an up-coming UNODC Handbook on the Management of VEPs and the Prevention of Radicalisation to Violence in Prisons, which will provide practical guidance based on existing guidelines and lessons learned from numerous Member States worldwide (to be published in October 2016). Algeria and Lebanon shared their national experiences with violent extremist prisoners and stressed that in order to be sustainable, prison-based interventions related to VEPs not only need to be embedded in broader prison reform efforts, but should also be complemented by post-release support and supervision schemes..

III. Conclusion and follow-up:

The conference concluded by highlighting the necessity to share experiences and good practices as Member States face common CVE challenges that are for some of them new, and require innovative approaches that cannot be limited only to criminal justice responses. Experts and participants agreed on the need to develop context-specific CVE programmes that must address local drivers, be based on evidence and implemented in close cooperation with civil society. International cooperation was also identified as a major topic: preventing violent extremism as related to FTF threat cannot be achieved without easing/strengthening cooperation among Member States.

In response to the needs and priorities identified during the conference, UNODC and Hedayah are considering developing a tailor-made programme to enhance national capacities of selected countries from the Middle East and the Gulf in addressing CVE challenges.