



Terrorism and Communication

Copenhagen

PET Conference on 22nd and 23rd April 2009

REPORT



TERRORISM AND COMMUNICATION

FIGHTING TERRORISM, MILITANT MESSAGES AND AL-QAIDA

Terrorists fight not only a violent fight but also a fight on words – about a certain world view. Groups like e.g. Al-Qaida often use linguistic means in their attempt to gain support. The heart of the matter of many groups' messages is that Muslims are constantly being oppressed and humiliated in and by the Western world. In their communication, the Muslims put forward simplified world views that see a conspiracy against Islam and seek to justify terrorism in the name of Islam.

Al-Qaida and Al-Qaida-inspired groups demonstrate an increasing professionalism in their ways and means of communication and propaganda. The message is spread through an escalating number of channels in more and more languages and wrapped up more and more professionally.

On the other hand, governments and civil organisations all over the world increasingly focus on how to counter and fight the manifesto of the militant Islamism. The initiatives embrace from “public diplomacy” and dialogue to anti-propaganda and psychological warfare.

The PET conference “Terrorism and Communication” on 22nd and 23rd April 2009 focused on the arguments, methods and techniques that militant Islamism use when communicating and on how governments and society in general can respond. Below are some of the main points from the individual presentations and debates as well as a number of ideas and proposals for countering extremist propaganda. The attendees at the conference represented a broad range of views and consequently the ideas and proposals do not necessarily represent a consensus among the participants.

Communication and the fight against terrorism, by Mr Jakob Scharf, Director General at PET

Early prevention is a vital element of the fight against terrorism as it cuts off the influx of new terrorists. PET cannot solve this task on its own. What are required are wide-ranging efforts from all corners of society. Communication is an essential tool for the terrorists as it promotes the recruitment and financing of their ideological goals. For the very same reason, we need a targeted communication that does not support the messages of the terrorists. Terrorists and their actions must be described as what they are: criminal. This is not a matter of political correctness but common sense to avoid polarisation that could strengthen the terrorists. PET is not the “Thought Police”, however, PET is obliged to convey what is the role of language and communication to terrorists and the fight against terrorism. PET would like to strengthen the dialogue with all ethnic minorities in Denmark and with all parts of Danish society. This also applies to the people with whom PET not necessarily agrees. The “disagreeing dialogue” is important as it provides us with the opportunity to speak with some of the actors who stand the best chance of reaching the young persons who might be on their way into a radicalisation process. It is also necessary to increase the understanding of the motivation factors of radicalisation. The sense of marginalisation is important in this respect and, therefore, it is necessary that Denmark supports any effort towards inclusion into society.



The focus of Al-Qaida and related groups on Denmark and the cartoon case, by the Centre for Terror Analysis, PET

Al-Qaida reacted relatively late on the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2006 and not until there were some public reactions in the Middle East. On the other hand, Al-Qaida led the way in the reactions following the reprint of the cartoons in February 2008. The cartoons fit perfectly well into Al-Qaida's message that Islam is being attacked. At the same time, Al-Qaida needed a new case in 2008 because of increasing criticism of among other things the many Muslim victims of the Al-Qaida attacks, the weakening of Al-Qaida in Iraq and the lack of success of attacks in the West. The focus of Al-Qaida on Denmark following the cartoons and the knock-on effect it has had on other Al-Qaida-related groups has shifted Denmark from being a potential terror target to being a strategic and high-priority target. This was, among other things, illustrated by the attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad on 02 June 2008.

The communication and propaganda of militant Islamism: Why is it so appealing? Where are the weak spots? – Brynjar Lia, professor at FFI (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment), Norway

The general message of Al-Qaida that Islam is being attacked is simple and is based on the many worries that many Muslims have regarding e.g. the Western military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Al-Qaida has acquired a strong image through deliberate use of the Internet. Al-Qaida appeals globally as everyone who accepts the messages of Al-Qaida may become part of the movement irrespective of ethnicity and nationality. The weaknesses of Al-Qaida are: The killings of civilians, the increasing criticism from Islamic experts and, in the long run, the lack of political strategy. The increasing popularity of the United States due to President Barack Obama and a possible peace agreement with Taliban in Afghanistan may pose major problems to Al-Qaida. The Gaza Strip conflict in January 2009, however, pepped Al-Qaida up.

Terrorism, communication and propaganda five years from now – a future perspective – Lars Erslev Andersen, Senior researcher at DIIS

It is uncertain what influence communication has on the fight against terrorism, however, it is important to discuss communication and use of language in order to increase the awareness of notions and how these are used. It is right to focus on Al-Qaida as the primary threat. In the negative future perspective, the fight against terrorism is focusing on a few key concepts like radicalisation of young people born and bred in the West and on counter-communication, thereby there is a risk that focus is being shifted from Pakistan and Kashmir where the major challenges are. In the positive future perspective, increased focus will be given to finding solutions to Pakistan and Kashmir, which might undermine Al-Qaida and the organisation's basis of existence. There are positive signs that the United States will be supporting the efforts in the South East Asia.



Language, spin and militant extremism – Maajid Nawaz, (former member of Hizb ut-Tahrir) Quilliam Foundation

We must avoid taking other people's reference points as starting points and avoid making generalisations. In the world view of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), Islam is the truth and everything else is false. HuT argues that Islam, democracy and freedom are mutually incompatible. If in an attempt to argue against the HuT approach, we apply the same language, we shall risk supporting the HuT message. On the contrary, we shall call the attention to the spin that HuT and other extremists use in order to adapt their message to the benefit of their world view. At the same time, it is important to separate political and militant Islamism. The forces which only argue politically and are non-violent should be accepted and committed to a dialogue with the purpose of avoiding that they become militant. It is important to acknowledge that people in modern society have many identities and there is no contradiction between being a Muslim, British, democrat, family man, etc.

When propaganda meets reality – radicalisation and de-radicalisation: a personal story – Hanif Qadir, Active Change Foundation, UK

On the basis of his own experience from a radicalisation process that brought him to Afghanistan as a potential suicide bomber, Hanif Qadir now carries out de-radicalisation by applying the same methods that Al-Qaida recruits use, in twisting the methods up side down: Identify the persons, commitment, relate them to family, friends and surroundings, challenge their way of viewing the world and creating a new world view as well as reconstruct them personally and support their return to a normal life. It is necessary to eliminate the apparent radicalisers and to localise the hidden recruiters who compose a more important problem than so far considered. This requires a higher degree of self-awareness within the Muslim circles that are usually peaceful and should be treated as such in order to avoid increased radicalisation.

Counter-communication: An American perspective – Irfan A. Saeed, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (OCRCL)

The OCRCL works for preventing the problems to the Americans who experience that they have been innocently hit by measures implemented after the 9/11-2001 terror attacks. Initiatives in this respect include giving advice in connection with the preparation of legislation, ensuring equal ethnic representation in DHS as well as a number of outreach programmes. Among other things, a number of "Community Roundtables" have been established in key cities where local representatives of ethnic minority groups meet with OCRCL representatives and other relevant public authorities, e.g. the FBI, to have a dialogue, exchange ideas, present worries and concerns etc. Furthermore, the OCRCL prepares training material for public employees with the purpose of increasing their cultural understanding. The police officers, in particular, need training as they have the most direct and frequent contact with the citizens. Finally, on the basis of dialogue with Muslim local communities, the OCRCL has prepared a paper on the most appropriate language to be used. This paper has been rather controversial and has been criticised for being an expression of political correctness by parts of the American society.



SHOULD WE IGNORE,
CONTAIN OR COUNTER
THE MILITANT MESSAGE?
HOW? BY WHOM?

Counter-communication: An Egyptian perspective by Dr. Ashraf Mohnsen, Deputy Assistant Foreign Minister, Counter Terrorism Co-ordinator, Arab Republic of Egypt

Al-Qaida is not Islamic. Al-Qaida aims to recruit persons without religious insight which makes it easier to Al-Qaida to interpret Islam to its own advantage. Following a first – and unsuccessful – attempt at de-radicalisation through e.g. “exposure”, the Egyptian authorities now attempt to reach the radicalised and recruited persons through among other things dialogue with Islamic experts also by using former terrorists in order to eliminate the ammunition from the Al-Qaida arguments. This does not imply that the persons who have committed acts of terrorism will be exempted from punishment; however, the dialogue is a vital element in the de-radicalisation process.

Panel debate by Tøger Seidenfaden, Editor-in-chief of Politiken, and Søren Espersen, Member of Parliament for the Danish People’s Party

Seidenfaden emphasised that language matters and that it is very essential just how we communicate. We must live up to our own values, respect each other and show consideration. In short, we must show decency. To adapt one’s own language is not an expression of fear but rather common sense.

Espersen did not find it necessary to change one’s own language. People should stop being so sensitive. It is quite alright to react when you do not agree with a point of view, however, there are different ways of reacting. The Danish People’s Party has tried to be the object of severe criticism but has not reacted violently as was seen by the young people who in the spring of 2008 burnt down cars in the streets. This violence has resulted in that we are now talking about language. We risk ending up being silenced by fear. Islam poses a democratic problem.

Counter-communication: Politics and freedom of expression by Uffe Ellemann-Jensen, former Minister of Foreign Affairs

We must acknowledge the world as it is. It is necessary to talk with people – also the people with whom you disagree – and provide them the right to use their freedom of expression. The concept “the Muslim world” is nonsense as it does not exist and unintentionally support the description of Al-Qaida that claims to represent the Muslim world. We must focus on nations instead of cultures and we must approach the individual countries with subjects that are relevant to them. Self-censorship is the same as considering what to say – any normal individual would do so. The cartoon case became a demonstration of some rights and as such ended as a provocation. If you want to criticise other people you should focus on the basic rights – e.g. the equal rights of women – and not on symbols. Generally, the tone of voice in Denmark has developed in the wrong direction. Things are being said today which would have been quite unacceptable previously – also in the Danish Parliament. It is necessary that the public react to this of which there seems to be an increasing acknowledgement.



Counter-communication: Which role does the media in civil society play in terms of countering the message of militant Islamism?

Panel debate: **Michael Jalving**, author and commentator at the Danish newspaper, Berlingske Tidende, **Imran Hussein**, co-founder of the Muslim network “the Network”, **Kathrine Lilleør**, local vicar and permanent commentator at the Danish newspaper, Berlingske Tidende, and **Michael Ehrenreich**, co-editor at the Danish newspaper, Kristeligt Dagblad

Jalving did not find that the media has a specific role to play in countering the message of militant Islamism. He believes that it is the task of the authorities. The media should not be political correct as this would be dangerous to democracy and to the freedom of expression. The role of the media is to describe the reality. There is no guarantee against offences in a democratic society that can be a brutal system.

Lilleør preferred to speak about generalisations rather than political correctness. It is essential to avoid inaccurate generalisations. The new and good thing about this acknowledgement is that there are some extreme attitudes that we should be able to include. We should not be so uniform in Denmark – it is boring but also dangerous. By accepting the extreme, we might steer clear of these people becoming violent extremist. The media generates prejudices but hopefully, this general idea is turning when it comes to Danes of another origin than Danish.

Ehrenreich underlined the need to consider what exactly is being imparted to the public as we have no obligation to print in Denmark. Media representatives must use their general education to choose. However, the media serves as a mediator that should not only focus on the positive aspects. There is a huge challenge to the media to avoid creating stereotyped images.

Hussein expressed that the media should be more critical of what is being printed and at the same time be better at investigating whether some points are factual and faithful. We live in a globalised world and a lot of concern to other people is taken in other contexts, e.g. handicapped. Many Muslims are born and bred in Denmark and join in the discussions because they are concerned of the development and the tone of voice. It is a positive sign that there seems to be a beginning self-awareness in the media. Militant extremism must be countered by authorities, by civil society, including the media, and by the Muslims themselves. The Muslims even have an obligation to act when the message is untrue.

Counter-communication: What roles do the authorities play in terms of countering the message of militant Islamism? Public Diplomacy by Klavs A. Holm, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Among other things, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs aims at spreading the knowledge of Denmark in Muslim countries, including the values that Denmark represents and propagates internationally. In this connection, support is granted to e.g. students and journalists exchange visits to which purpose Danish Muslims could assist. Additionally, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs seeks to spread the knowledge of the Danish foreign policy in Denmark, by for example visiting the Danish residential area of Vollsrose and would also like

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COUNTER THE MILITANT
MESSAGE?



to visit other residential areas like Mjølnerparken and Gjellerupparken. These residential areas have a majority of inhabitants with another ethnic origin than Danish. Furthermore, other minor projects serve to represent Denmark abroad, be it in the form of establishing children's play grounds, distributing LEGO bricks etc.

Language use and fighting terrorism by Director Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, PET

It is **not** the object of PET to counter the political and theological contents of militant extremists' propaganda. On the contrary, through openness and dialogue, PET seeks to build up trust between the intelligence service and a number of resource persons in Denmark who have the insight into and influence on the circles that may become a target of recruitment. More likely, these persons would be able to counter the extremist propaganda and be considered more reliable than an authority like PET. PET also gladly offers to give presentations to groups and circles that seem concerned about how PET handles its authority. In such circles, it is not a question of converting individuals who are already too far into a radicalisation process. It is a matter of complicating the extremists' attempts at recruitment and polarisation. The message is: PET is the intelligence service of all Danes.

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In a number of small groups, the conference participants discussed the issue about the militant message, its weaknesses and strengths and what could and should be done in order to counter this. The discussions were summoned up into the following considerations and proposals:

Need for dialogue about the worries and frustrations that Muslims experience in Denmark. The initiative of the Council for Ethnic Minorities to discuss the Gaza-strip conflict in the local residential area of Vollsmose at the end of February 2009 was a good example of need of dialogue. The dialogue must be led with everyone and should be led by all Danish authorities.

Avoid inaccurate generalisations – also in the media. Focus should be given to an objective and balanced description and use of language. Integration is an important element of providing the young people with the required robustness. Muslims should to a higher degree reject militant statements.

Inclusion should be promoted in the Danish society – also in respect of language use in order to reduce the sense of marginalisation.

Radicalisation is a common challenge that requires wide-ranging efforts from all parts of the Danish society – authorities, media, religious communities and other private organisations.

In addition to the group discussions, a number of proposals and ideas were advanced during the panel debates. The conference participants represented a wide range of views and therefore the below presented ideas and proposals are not necessarily expressions of consensus among the participants.



General and specific communication

It naturally follows that the majority of the communication deriving from authorities and civil society does not have the characteristics of “counter-communication” which is more specifically directed towards the communication of militant Islamism. Nevertheless, various institutions’ activities and general communication about Denmark as a community founded on the rule of law and welfare society with positive relations to the world around us as well as duties, rights and possibilities for all citizens may act as a “story telling” that provides an alternative to the simple enemy picture drawn up by extremists. In this connection, a number of participants mentioned that it is possible to increase focus on explaining the background of specific and potentially controversial political decisions and policies in Denmark. Such increased focus can be made through increased dialogue about ideas and concerns etc. in line with the “Community Roundtables” established by the Department of Homeland Security in the United States. Furthermore, like the US Homeland Security, some training material could be prepared for public employees with the purpose of increasing their cultural understanding.

Requirements for good communication

A number of the conference participants stated that when planning any communication effort it should be considered who is the target group, which assumptions and reasons do this target group have as well as what type of channels and methods can be used in relation with this target group, including in particular defining which messages are central in order for the communication to create the required effect.

Target group of the communication

The primary target group of a specific counter-communication in relation to the propaganda of the militant Islamism is identical to the primary target group of the propaganda: the vast majority of persons of Muslim background in Europe as well as in the rest of the world – particularly the young Muslims. Additionally, there is the more general communication about the relationship between citizens and society, international relations, etc. that aims at other more broad purposes and target groups and which nevertheless may contribute to obstructing the growth climate of extremism.



Focus on the notions of fairness and justice

Hanif Qadir of the Active Change Foundation, among others, stated that fairness and justice are values that appeal greatly to Muslims and which are fundamental to de-radicalisation as well as early prevention of radicalisation. At the same time, these values can be called Danish as well as universal values. One of the conference participants indicated that there are plenty of reasons for operating with the notions of fairness and justice in respect of counter-communication to the militant Islamist communication – also in a Danish context. It is not a question of using these notions explicitly but rather to explain the various aspects and considerations that are included in the different policies and events, etc. thereby being able to define and set up a communication that appeals to the individual's sense of fairness.

Call a spade a spade and avoid imprecise generalisations

A number of speakers and participants at the conference pointed out that imprecise generalisations and links between Islam and terrorism are problematic. Designations like “Muslim” or “Islamic” terror support the picture of conflict of interest between the two claimed blocs: the West against Islam. The majority of Muslims do not support terrorism. On the contrary. The designation “militant Islamist” terror serves – contrary to the name “Muslim terror” to delimit and specify which type of group and ideology is behind the terror and as such there is a distinction between the religion Islam and the ideology Islamism.

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PET and the Centre for Terror Analysis have, among other things, prepared a number of analyses about the use of language, radicalisation and the role of the Internet in relation to radicalisation. These analyses are available (only in Danish) at the website of PET <http://www.pet.dk/CTA/Publikationer.aspx>

Additional material regarding the communication of the authorities and the role of communication in relation to handling and countering extremism as part of implementing the action plan “A common and safe future”. Further material (also in English) is available at the website (new to Denmark) of the Danish Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs <http://www.nyidanmark.dk>