

Open meeting on
“Countering terrorist narratives and
preventing the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes”

United Nations Headquarters, ECOSOC Chamber

Thursday, 19 October 2023, 10.00–1.00 p.m. EDT

Opening Statement of

Assistant Secretary-General Natalia Gherman

Executive Director

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Director (CTED)

Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We come together 18 months after the last meeting on this theme was held by the Counter-Terrorism Committee. There remains an increasing concern over the role that Internet and social media play in the context of terrorist recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism conducive to terrorism.

The Secretary-General's 17th report on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh), for example, which was issued last June, observed that the use of the Internet and social media by Da'esh to spread propaganda had become more sophisticated and prolific.

From our engagement with Member States, the Global Research Network, civil society, and the private sector, CTED has identified and is monitoring several trends related to terrorist narratives.

First, the **affiliations** of actors spreading terrorist narratives have changed.

Known terrorist organisations have previously been responsible for the majority of terrorist messages spreading online.

However, terrorist narratives are increasingly created and spread by their support networks, as well as informal groups or unaffiliated actors that draw inspiration from the propaganda of established terrorist groups.

At the same time, due to extensive time spent online, violent extremist actors, are increasingly connected with one another, even if not affiliated with terrorist organisations.

This poses complex challenges, including human rights challenges, for those working to prevent the communication of terrorist narratives.

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Second, the Internet and social media have become increasingly **decentralised**.

Terrorists and violent extremists are becoming highly adaptive in their efforts to decentralizing their activities across a range of alternative and less-monitored platforms, to include turning to self-operated websites.

They are also using decentralized applications and web-hosting software to distribute and host content.

This makes it increasingly difficult for platforms and law enforcement moderators to identify, track, and counter terrorist and violent extremist narratives online.

*Third, ideologies promoted by terrorist narratives **have begun to merge, overlap and even contradict.***

Content can focus on a converging mix of themes, including misogyny, threats of violence based on gender or sexual orientation, anti-establishment messaging, racism and conspiracy theories.

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Terrorist narratives, in other words, often do not stand alone, but are rather found in complicated discourse that brings together a wide range of contents and narratives of violent extremism conducive to terrorism.

Finally, while we know that governments, technology companies and communities are increasing their efforts to monitor and address the proliferation of those contents online, they face the additional challenge of doing so in a way that protects free expression and other human rights.

To restrict those fundamental freedoms can be counterproductive and further marginalize those who are already vulnerable.

We must also bear in mind that terrorist and violent extremist narratives are often symptoms of deeper issues, including social grievances, that serve as conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism leading to terrorism.

Our collective response requires considering the need to address these grievances and ensure the protection of the rights to freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion, including with respect to marginalized groups.

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These are not small challenges.

Successfully addressing these complex challenges requires strong partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector.

This is why I am so pleased that we have such a variety of experts with us today, both here in New York and online.

I look forward to hearing from our distinguished panellists on the evolving nature of the problem and approaches to addressing it.

Thank you.