Tabletop exercise takes whole of society approach to foreign terrorist fighter threat

Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany (August 3, 2015) – In response to a growing Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) threat, 80 practitioners and researchers from over 40 countries conducted a tabletop exercise (TTX) from 29-30 July at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. The exercise was designed to train participants and develop actionable recommendations regarding FTF recruitment, travel, and return.

The exercise, co-sponsored by the Partnership for Peace Consortium (PiPC) Combating Terrorism Working Group (CTWG) and the London-based Asia Pacific Foundation, featured a diverse cross section from government, academia, law enforcement, business, religious, civic society, and NGO communities, and featured role playing to several realistic foreign fighter
scenarios. The TTX format utilized was based on the Global Counterterrorism Forums’ (GCTF) Hague-Marrakech Memorandum, which according to the U.S. State Department is “intended to inform and guide interested governments as they develop comprehensive policies, programs, and approaches to address the FTF phenomenon.”

Exercise participants role-played various government and civil society characters in three fictitious foreign fighter scenarios, each revealing different motivations, backgrounds, and triggers to radicalization. The first scenario introduced a young woman lured by the prospect of marriage to a Da’esh warrior. The second scenario involved a depressed, disillusioned young male adult taken under the wings of local radicalized Muslims, drawn by the promises of the “Caliphate”. The last scenario involved a young male adult, seduced into radicalization by online teachings eventually leading to joining extremist fighters in Syria and then returning home. According to Dr. Raphael Perl, Executive Director of the PfPC, “the three scenarios, while fictitious, are a representative cross section of real world case studies, and fostered the very sort of critical thinking that is needed to address the FTF problem.”

Such scenarios enabled participants to consider the FTF threat through the lenses of three phases of the foreign fighter phenomenon: 1) Prevention – steps to prevent radicalization in the first place, through positive engagement, 2) Intervention – the mobilization of a radicalized person, with plans to support violent extremist causes, and 3) Mitigation – actions to take upon the return of a foreign fighter to their home country.

Professor Alex Schmid, the Director of the Terrorism Research Initiative in Vienna, noted that “the exercise brought together a variety of organizations, resulting in synergies across related research efforts, whereby the end result is greater than the constituent parts”.

Mr. C Holland Taylor, co-founder, chairman and CEO of the LibForAll Foundation - a leading NGO developing counter-extremism strategies worldwide - remarked on the PfPC’s unique ability to “assemble people from a diverse set of backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and religions,” and that “the PfPC succeeded at facilitating a frank and honest discussion about the threat posed by violent extremism and did so in a manner that is conducive to developing a societal consensus necessary to meet this threat.”

The CWTG TTX led to consensus on several ways to prevent, intervene and mitigate the FTF threat. In particular, participants were united in articulating the need to carry out more effective counter-propaganda campaigns. Professor Schmid emphasized that we need “dialogue with returning fighters, some of whom did not engage in fighting, but instead returned on their own accord, shocked by the brutal reality they faced upon arrival abroad. By capturing their stories and propagating them as part of a broad counter propaganda effort, we can dispel the Utopian promises that are at the heart of Da’esh and other violent extremist messaging.”

Other participant’s echoed Professor Schmid’s emphasis on developing counter narratives. Professor Peter Forster, Associate Dean of the College of Information Sciences and Technology at The Pennsylvania State University, and co-chairperson of the CTWG, expressed the need to
“erode the message of Da’esh by communicating the corrupted, unauthentic version of Islam that Da’esh espouses.”

Developing counter narratives alone is not sufficient to turn the tide on extremist propaganda. How the narratives are conveyed is also an important consideration. Mr. Zahed Amanullah from the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) said “Da’esh uses emotions in their stories, and so we have to use emotions in ours.” Towards this end, ISD has partnered with filmmakers in order to convey stories compellingly.

In addition to the emphasis on counter narratives, participants highlighted the role of women as well as the need for interfaith dialogues. Dr. Edit Schlaffer, founder of the Vienna-based NGO Women without Borders, emphasized that “mothers play an especially important role in understanding the FTF phenomena, as they have unique insight into nearly all aspects of their children’s lives”. Dr. Schlaffer spoke of the importance of trust when mothers seek to prevent or undo radicalization of their children. According to Dr. Schlaffer, based on a poll assessing where mothers place trust, 94% of respondents place the most trust in other mothers, while only 39% and 29% trust governments and law enforcement, respectively. As such, Dr. Schlaffer calls upon local governments and law enforcement to recognize and engage mothers in their unique role as key security allies.

Interfaith dialogues are increasingly important in helping communities address underlying factors and drivers that promote radicalization to violence. Several religious leaders participated in the TTX, emphasizing the need for communities to identify and partner with trusted religious leaders, as opposed to self-professed, un-credentialed preachers, who may seek to corrupt a religion's true tenets for hateful purposes. Some participants spoke of programs whereby local governments and religious leaders cooperate on the establishment of certification criteria for religious leaders. Other leaders advocated for reciprocal youth exchange programs through which people of different faiths would have opportunities to live in one another's cultural and religious environments, thereby developing mutual respect for one another's faith.

Exercise participants furthermore agreed that interfaith dialogue not only promotes tolerance and respect among religions, but opens the doorway to a future of constructive interfaith cooperation on the basis of shared interests, thereby undoing an “us” versus “them” mindset. Additionally, interfaith dialogues promote the roles of education, gender, and youth, as well as use the stories of disillusioned former fighters to create positive strategic messages to counter FTF radicalization.

The CTWG TTX showed variety in the backgrounds of its participants as well as in the age groups represented, a quality of the exercise that Dr. Sajjan Gohel, Director for International Security at the Asia Pacific Foundation, and Visiting Teacher at the London School of Economics and Political Science, views as critical to countering radicalization of foreign fighters. Dr. Gohel noted that “the youth of today's generation understand the dynamics of social media and we need to consult with them in order to understand the methods and processes used to indoctrinate young, impressionable people.”

Participation by recent graduates in fields such as International Relations and International History facilitated the very sort of youth engagement advocated for by Dr. Gohel. Tyler Zurisko, a graduate from The Pennsylvania State University, and Jacqueline Sutherland and Charlotte Jordan, both graduates of the London School of Economics and Political Science, were unanimous in their appreciation for the genuine interest that exercise participants expressed in better understanding youth perspectives.

This week’s TTX was the first in what is anticipated to be an ongoing series of exercises designed to help drive towards consensus on the FTF problem. According to Professor Forster, “This was
the first time that I am aware of that such an exercise has been conducted, and we are looking forward to conducting similar exercises, which we will refine based on this week’s valuable experience.”

Richard Prosen, co-chairperson of the CTWG, observed that “Addressing FTF threats remains a difficult, generational challenge, but not an insurmountable one. We can only achieve success if we stand united to confront these pressing and complex threats by partnering through our governments and regional institutions and engaging with local communities, civil society, women, youth, and the private sector.”

The CTWG is currently producing a report, summarizing the exercise’s key recommendations in the areas of strategic messaging, policies, and community programs, which will be made available to the general public in the upcoming weeks.
