

Executive Summary

Policy Question. Using the Truth Initiative as a case study, which counter-marketing and organizational best practices should the Global Engagement Center (GEC) use to diminish the recruiting influence of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)?

Recommendation. I recommend the GEC use a “Truth-like” counter-marketing methodology to discourage youth from joining FTOs. As a component of a long-term U.S. counter-terrorism (CT) strategy, the GEC should target the 200 million Arab youth currently under the age of 25, use a brand-based approach to unify partner efforts, and establish a digital repository of incriminating FTO and counter-marketing material that can be shared with global partners. The GEC should consider, but not recommend to Congress, a revision of the domestic audience prohibition in Section 1287 of the FY17 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). While this option has merit, it needs to be further evaluated for legal standing. Moreover, the current political climate will likely reject this option. The public outcry may generate negative publicity for the GEC and could erode political support for the other recommended options.

Background. Over the last sixteen years, the U.S. government executed a military-centric CT strategy in the Middle East and Africa, absent an integrated and synchronized information component in what is now recognized as a generational “War of Ideas.” The void of information alternatives enabled the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 to acquire prolific brand recognition and global market share, which in turn, fueled the organization’s unprecedented foreign fighter recruiting efforts. U.S. government and partner efforts to counter-messaging and propaganda from ISIS, al Qaeda (AQ), and other FTOs, continue to face criticism. Opinions from CT experts, practitioners, and policy makers range from saying that the U.S is not doing enough to the argument that the U.S. government has no business and no credibility with the audiences we are attempting to influence. While both arguments have merit, previous U.S. government efforts were not only ineffective, but in some instances, were likely counterproductive.

This project identifies a number of counter-marketing best practices from America’s largest non-profit anti-tobacco organization, the Truth Initiative, which could improve the GEC’s counter-messaging mission against FTOs. It is important to acknowledge that the counter-marketing of tobacco and terrorism are not perfect comparisons, and this paper does not intend to imply that they are. This project recognizes a counter-marketing approach to CT messaging will not be a panacea, as a media campaign will not fix poor governance, or address legitimate grievances that lead individuals and FTOs to commit violence. This project consists of a policy problem assessment, a case study of the Truth Initiative and Campaign, a comparative analysis of other U.S. government activities, and a series of policy recommendations.

Truth Initiative. The Truth Initiative (known as the American Legacy Foundation until 2015) funded the creation of the Truth Campaign in 2000. The Truth Initiative is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization based in Washington D.C. The Truth Initiative employs a multi-disciplined staff of approximately 110 employees and has an annual FY16 operating budget of \$116 million, of which \$79 million funds the Truth Campaign. The Truth Campaign was named one of the top ten best advertising campaigns of the 21st Century, in addition to receiving over 400 awards for reducing the prevalence of youth smoking in the U.S. from 23% in 2000 to 6% in 2016.

Truth Campaign. The idea of the Truth Campaign was to “un-market tobacco” at a time when the tobacco industry was spending \$13 billion a year on advertising and controlled the most powerful brands in the world. The approach the Truth campaign pursued was to out-brand tobacco and acquire market share by creating a “cooler” brand than tobacco, exposing industry lies and manipulation, fulfill youth psychological needs state, and keep the campaign as far away from adults and authority figures as possible to retain message authenticity. The Truth used tobacco industry documents to create a fact-based counter-marketing campaign. They also pioneered grassroots experiential-marketing techniques to connect youth at popular events with television and radio based advertising. Truth-branded “experiences” became an alternative for youth to rebel against the tobacco industry and were not simply counternarratives teenagers watched on television or heard on the radio.

The original Truth Campaign targeted “rebellious, high-sensation seeking teenagers,” who were generally unaware of the deceptive tobacco industry advertising directed against them. Due to successful counter-marketing campaigns since 2000, youth today are largely aware of the harmful effects of tobacco use, the manipulative tobacco industry practices, and have greater access to information through social media and the internet. Given this data, the Truth Initiative currently targets youth between the ages of 15 to 21 years old and spends approximately 40 percent of its annual marketing budget on “empowering participatory engagement” through social media. The Truth Campaign employs well-known internet and social media “influencers” who add credibility to messages and help propagate content across youth-centric audiences.

Policy Options. The Truth Initiative identifies three best practices contributing to the success of the campaign: (1) the youth-centric, peer-to-peer messaging strategy, (2) the use of branding, (3) and the authentic, fact-based, anti-tobacco industry theme. This project developed and analyzed four policy options based on these, and other best practices from the Truth Initiative:

- Option 1: Pursue a strategic messaging approach targeting susceptible global youth.
- Option 2: Seek private sector assistance to create a “truth-like” brand to counter-market Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Utilize brand and advertising awareness modeling to measure the effectiveness of FTO messaging and GEC counter-marketing campaigns.
- Option 3: Establish a digital repository of incriminating foreign terrorist material and counter-marketing content.
- Option 4: Recommend that Congress revise Section 1287 (FY17 NDAA) to explicitly allow the GEC to promote fact-based narratives to relevant audiences inside of the U.S.

Criteria. The four policy options are assessed against the following four criteria:

- Reduce the number of individuals who favorably view Foreign Terrorist Organizations.
- Uphold Executive Order 13721 and Section 1287 of the FY17 NDAA.
- Ensure political acceptability within the Legislative and Executive branches.
- Ensure organizational feasibility within the GEC.