

EU strategic communication with the Arab world

SUMMARY

Good relations with the Arab world have been one of the EU's main objectives ever since the Barcelona Process was launched in 1995. Driven initially by security concerns and the need for stability, the dynamics between the two sides of the Mediterranean have increasingly shifted towards support for democracy, human rights, and promotion of economic and social development. However, this relationship has never been an easy one, and the European Union has struggled to communicate its vision for the region effectively.

At the same time, instability in the Middle East and North Africa has become a source of insecurity in the EU and has challenged some of the basic assumptions of EU policies – both internal and external. As recent terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, Tunisia and Egypt have shown, the rise of violent extremism and the threat of radicalisation know no borders. Therefore, countering terrorist propaganda and the jihadi narrative plays a key role.

Against this background, the European Union has taken several steps aimed at designing a more strategic vision for engaging with stakeholders in the Arab world – including governments and civil society – and countering radicalisation propaganda. Concrete initiatives to this effect are the establishment of the Task Force for Outreach and Communication in the Arab world and the Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team, among others.



In this briefing:

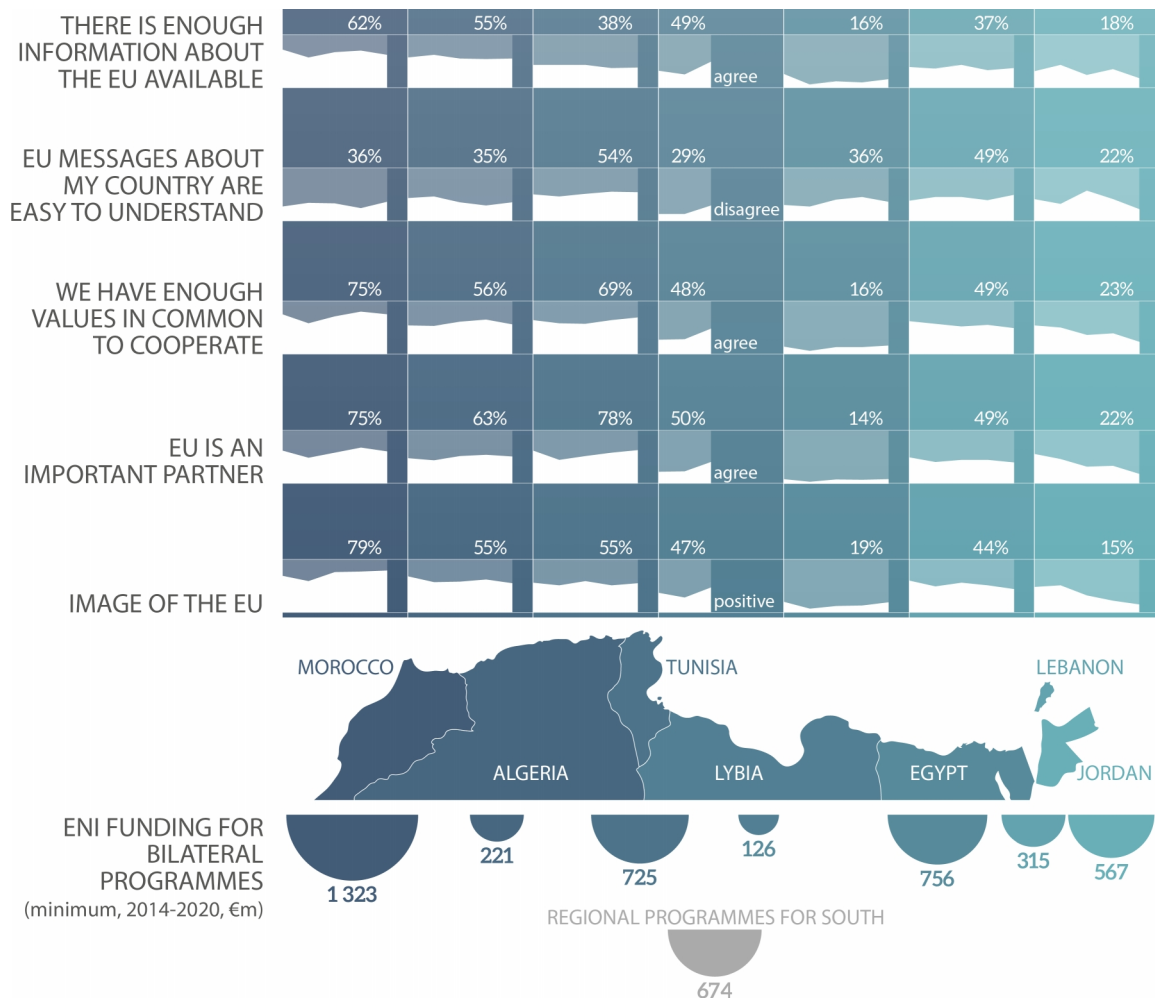
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EU as a pole of attraction

The EU's relationship with the Arab countries in the Mediterranean has been in constant flux ever since the Barcelona Process was launched in 1995 and then-President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, floated the idea of a ['ring of friends'](#) surrounding the European Union in 2002. A series of events – including the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, and the controversy over cartoons depicting Muhammad – [strained](#) relations between the West and the Muslim world. The wave of democratic protests in 2010 and ensuing political transformation in most of the countries to Europe's south has further redefined the web of existing relationships and dependencies. The end of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya has given the EU a new opportunity for more significant engagement with citizens of those countries, which then translated into the EU's increased support for reform and democratisation efforts undertaken by the governments and civil society. However, the 'Arab Spring' was not entirely a success story. Different governments across the region – including Egypt and Tunisia – have been criticised for the pace of reforms or their negative impact on civil liberties. Journalists and media outlets are increasingly under [pressure](#) from government and militants. Furthermore, conflicts in Libya and Syria have contributed to the emergence of a security vacuum in which criminal networks and terrorist organisations are able to thrive and operate unconstrained. The territorial expansion of the jihadi group 'Islamic State' (ISIL/Da'esh) and the civil war in Syria have adversely affected the civilian population across the region, causing deaths and displacement, or forcing them to live in war-torn areas. The ensuing humanitarian crisis and the flow of refugees have once again tested Europe's relationship with its Arab neighbours – a test which for many the European Union has failed. At the same time, the threat posed by terrorist groups like ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaeda, who have managed to attract over 30 000 foreign fighters from third countries – including [European](#) citizens – has brought the need to counter the jihadi narrative and violent extremism more broadly to the fore, including through more strategic outreach and communication with the Arab countries.

What is strategic communication?

Strategic communication is [not a new concept](#), but its significance for the European Union's foreign and security policy has increased, particularly following the [propaganda and disinformation](#) practices observed in relation to the conflict in Ukraine, and recruitment efforts by ISIL/Da'esh. The European Union [Action Plan](#) on Strategic Communication presented in June 2015, on the basis of the mandate from the [European Council](#) of March 2015, even though focused on the EU's eastern neighbourhood, provides an indication of the EU's broader objectives. The strategy recognised the importance of outreach and engagement as a tool in furthering the EU's overall policy goals, and highlighted the need to develop positive and effective messages regarding EU policies towards its neighbourhood. The overarching objectives of the strategy, also of relevance in the southern neighbourhood, have been defined as follows: effective communication and promotion of EU policies and values, strengthening of the overall media environment, and increased public awareness of disinformation activities by external actors; and improved EU capacity to anticipate and respond to such activities. Consequently, key common areas of action for the eastern and southern neighbourhood include public diplomacy; communication activities on EU-funded programmes and activities; capacity-building for journalists and media actors; and engagement with civil society.

Figure 1 – Perceptions of the EU in the Arab world

Source: [EU Neighbourhood Barometer](#) (Autumn 2012 - Autumn 2014); [European External Action Service](#).

Why is strategic communication needed with the Arab world?

There are at least three reasons why investing in more strategic outreach and communication in Europe's southern neighbourhood is an urgent matter. Firstly, the surge of refugees to the European Union and the increased [activity](#) of right-wing extremist groups across the EU, on the one hand, and terrorist attacks on European soil, on the other, have seriously harmed Europe's relationship with the Muslim community. Secondly, terrorist groups like ISIL/Da'esh, Boko Haram and Al Shabaab are not only the source of instability in the Arab world, but their aggressive ideology has resulted in [radicalisation](#) of many European citizens, as the attacks in Paris and Brussels have demonstrated. Therefore, countering terrorist propaganda and the jihadi narrative are key elements of the European response. Finally, as part of that effort, the EU needs to ensure that it also addresses the root-causes of radicalisation in third countries and communicates these efforts more effectively.¹

Improving relations with the Arab world – online and offline

The indicative EU [funding](#) planned for the Southern Neighbourhood region for 2014-2020 under the European Neighbourhood Instrument is between €7.5 and €9.2 billion, including for development of media cooperation, civil society, youth exchange programmes and intercultural dialogue. In addition, the EU and Member States have so far [committed](#) €8 billion for relief and recovery assistance for Syrians in their country, and for refugees and their host communities in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq,

Turkey and Egypt. However, despite this significant commitment towards the region for over two decades, citizens in Europe's southern neighbourhood are only vaguely [aware](#) of European cooperation programmes. The perception of the EU as an important partner and of the effectiveness of its communication in the region is rather critical. In addition, thanks to access to information facilitated by new technologies (e.g. more than 135 million individuals in the 22 Arab countries use [the internet](#) and more than 71 million are active users of social networks), views in the region are also shaped by internal developments in the EU. Lately, the EU's standing in the region has been influenced by the EU's alleged [anti-immigration](#) stance, growing [xenophobia](#), and international [criticism](#) over its narrow focus on the [economic](#) implications of the refugee crisis.

Countering Jihadi ideology and narrative

While the [vast majority](#) of Muslims around the world hold a negative opinion of religious extremism and jihadist organisations, the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIL/Da'esh has brought the term [jihad](#) into mainstream public debate on terrorism and radical Islam. Nonetheless, research [suggests](#) that significant parts of the population in some of the Arab countries support the call for a caliphate, do not recognise Shia as Muslim, or agree that there is a need to 'stand up to America and affirm the dignity of the Islamic people'. All these views and beliefs are currently exploited by ISIL/Da'esh in their propaganda. According to the jihadist narrative, Islam finds itself in an eternal confrontation with its enemies, who must be defeated by any means necessary. Jihadists distort Islamic religious principles to produce a violent version of jihad, which resorts to *takfir* (excommunication) in order to [justify](#) attacks in Muslim countries, wounding and killing Muslim civilians. In that fight, Arab governments are referred to as the '[Near Enemy](#)', as opposed to the '[Far Enemy](#)' usually understood to be Israel, the USA and other Western states. [Research](#) into ISIL/Da'esh recruitment narratives suggest three main pillars: a) existential threat: the fight against the Assad government who is responsible for atrocities committed against the Sunni Muslims in Syria; b) holy duty: an obligation for any Muslim to support the 'Islamic State' as a perfect Sharia-based state; and c) promised land: promises of food, luxury goods, cars, adventure, etc. The online portals like '[Jihodology](#)' – a clearing house for jihadi primary source material, and [Eye on ISIS in Libya](#), a repository of information about the origins, expansion, actions, and governance of ISIL/Da'esh in Libya – provide numerous examples of YouTube videos and online magazines that promote the jihadi narrative.

ISIL/Da'esh propaganda and the refugee crisis

The group's propaganda on the refugee crisis was [constructed](#) on two main pillars. Firstly, ISIL/Da'esh used religious references to [discourage](#) Muslims from travelling to Europe by describing it as a 'grave sin'. Instead, they [called](#) for all Muslims to join the 'Islamic State' where they would be provided with security, as opposed to humiliation and exposure to immoral lifestyles in Europe. Secondly, ISIL/Da'esh's sought to instil fear in EU citizens and governments, thus pushing them towards more hostile attitudes towards refugees, which would ultimately strengthen the image of the EU as an anti-Muslim society, to its discredit. To this end, ISIL/Da'esh fed tabloid newspapers in Member States with [information](#) that 4 000 of its fighters are hidden among refugees in Europe.

ISIL/Da'esh recruitment propaganda

ISIL/Da'esh propaganda against Europeans is constructed in a 'holy war' narrative, including chivalry and glory, whereby Westerners are depicted as 'crusaders', terrorists as 'knights' or 'martyrs', and places where attacks took place as 'battlegrounds' (e.g. the 'battleground of Belgium'). ISIL/Da'esh also relies on religious references to discredit Western Imams and de-radicalised individuals who cooperate with law enforcement authorities. The online magazine *Dabiq* calls them 'imams of *kufr*' (disbelievers) who are tools of *Shaytan* (devil) working against actual Muslims to alter their beliefs and aspirations. As such they are guilty of apostasy and should be punished.

Addressing the root-causes of radicalisation

Social and political factors allowing jihadist movements to recruit new followers also need to be addressed. In Iraq, traditional actors like tribes or ethnic groups join forces with jihadist actors like [ISIL/Da'esh](#) out of political and economic pragmatism. In Nigeria, [Boko Haram](#) has pledged its [allegiance](#) to ISIL/Da'esh in the hope of gaining additional funding. Polarisation along sectarian lines has been [exacerbated and exploited](#) by the *takfirist* orientation of the major jihadist groups, including in [Yemen](#). The domestic context in [Europe](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#) and [south and south-east Asia](#) also plays a role. In Europe, inequality and a sense of disenfranchisement among Muslim youths can [facilitate](#) identification with jihadist actors. Perceived Western double standards in approaching these problems also fuel sympathy for jihadist propaganda.

Framework for an EU response

The political guidelines and mandates for EU activities were provided in a number of policy documents. The [Foreign Affairs Council](#) conclusions (February 2015) – considered the political mandate for setting up the 'Arab Stratcom Task Force' – stressed the importance of mainstreaming counter-terrorism into EU foreign policy and offer a detailed 'roadmap' for cooperation with Arab countries, including through strengthening cooperation with third countries, capacity building, and initiatives aimed at countering radicalisation and violent extremism. The EU [regional strategy](#) (March 2015) for Syria and Iraq, as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat, listed among its objectives countering ISIL/Da'esh ideological influence (including countering violent extremism more broadly) and strengthening EU public diplomacy and the visibility of EU aid. To that end, the strategy proposes, among others, to: a) develop a joint internal and external security approach and related expert networks, to address evolving ISIL/Da'esh communication and propaganda methodologies; b) support communication campaigns carried out by partner countries with the objective of discrediting ISIL/Da'esh ideology and denouncing its human rights violations; c) enhance communication about EU humanitarian and development assistance, both in the region and in the EU. The [Agenda on Security](#) (April 2015) identified reducing the flow of foreign fighters as an urgent priority and highlighted the vital role of communications in undermining the appeal of radical

Western plot in jihadi propaganda

Jihadi groups have built part of their propaganda on exploitation of local grievances about Western military and political involvement across the Arab world. To that end they use a 'holy war' narrative and speak of 'crusaders' warplanes' and the need to 'burn the crusader armies'. Their propaganda also aims to cause instability in Muslim countries by discrediting their leaders as collaborators and agents who fight the West's wars. They also fuel sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims. They object to concepts promoted by the EU in the Arab world, including: democracy (as giving supreme authority to people rather than Allah), human rights (as giving right to apostasy, sodomy), and inter-faith dialogue (as undermining the obligation of *bara'ah* meaning innocence from infidels). In that sense, the efforts of some Arab governments to delay reforms contribute to strengthening the ISIL/Da'esh narrative.

The use of the internet for propaganda

In addition to the extensive use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, spreading a new version of 'do-it-yourself' terrorism also became possible thanks to the emergence of [media outlets](#) – such as the [al-Hayat Media Centre](#). Many jihadi groups – not only in the Arab world – have established online communication channels which feature *nashid* (chants), video messages (e.g. calling others to join the 'caliphate', or presenting life in ISIL/Da'esh territory), newsletters (*Al Naba*), and online newsletters and magazines in Arabic (*al-Masra*), English (*Dabiq*), French (*Dar al Islam*), Russian (*Istok*), and Turkish (*Constantinople*). An ISIL/Da'esh affiliated outlet, Al Hayat Media Centre serves as the main outlet for online jihadi propaganda.

groups like ISIL/Da'esh and the effectiveness of their messaging. Furthermore, the Review of the [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (November 2015), while acknowledging the importance of partnerships in tackling terrorism and preventing radicalisation, provides detailed guidelines on visibility, communication and outreach, aimed at better communicating and promoting EU policies. Finally, the [Joint Framework](#) on countering hybrid threats (April 2016) stresses the essential role of a 'sound' strategic communication strategy to respond to [hybrid threats](#). In practical terms, the EU's approach focuses on three main pillars: promoting information about EU support to Arab countries, countering communications that might contribute to radicalisation and terrorism, and curbing channels for ISIL/Da'esh propaganda.

Pillar I: Outreach and communication in third countries

The foundations for the establishment of the Task Force for Outreach and Communication in the Arab world (Arab StratCom Task Force) were laid down in the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions of 9 February 2015. The document lists a number of practical initiatives which became the building blocks of the Task Force's activities, in particular the support for international initiatives on countering radicalisation and terrorism (e.g. International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, in Abu Dhabi), building regional partnerships with the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network, improving strategic communication and outreach to the Arab world (e.g. developing counter-narratives to terrorist propaganda, promoting fundamental rights, engaging through social media and enhancing communication in Arabic), facilitating inter-faith dialogue, civil society dialogues and people-to-people contacts, and addressing the underlying factors of radicalisation.

Further policy guidance was offered in the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The primary aim of the revamped approach to outreach and communication spelled out in the document is to 'win the hearts and minds' of Arab societies by offering a better explanation of the aims and rationale behind EU policies and actions. Practical actions focus on: strengthening the capacities of all stakeholders, including governments, media and civil society, to improve their understanding of public opinion with a view to designing effective outreach campaigns; building partnerships to expose misinformation and responding decisively when it targets the EU; developing an appropriate mix of proactive strategic and tactical communication tools that will allow for better monitoring and analysis of the media to create a positive narrative about support and cooperation under the ENP; and engaging with young people by creating partnerships that will promote people-to-people contacts and networks among young people of all ages in the EU and neighbouring countries.

Functioning of the Arab StratCom Task Force

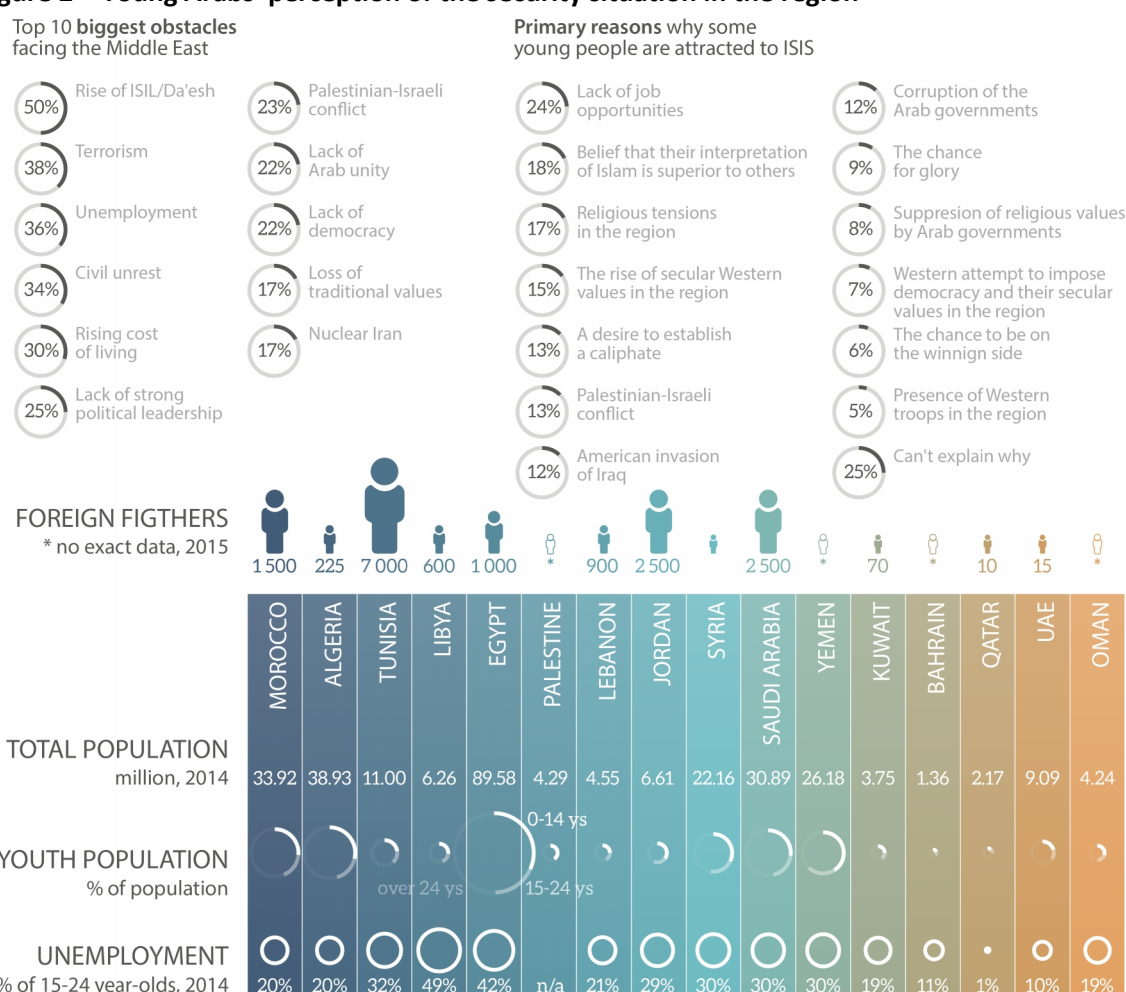
The Arab StratCom Task Force held its first meeting in April 2015. In contrast to its StratCom East counterparts, the Arab StratCom does not have a dedicated team of experts but instead relies fully on interinstitutional cooperation between the European External Action Service (including the EU Delegations in the region), European Commission staff (e.g. DG Near and DG Home) and the office of the EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator in the Council. The focus of ongoing efforts is not on generating counter-narratives per se, but rather on producing positive messages about the EU's involvement in the region. In practical terms, the work of the Task Force follows a bottom-up approach, whereby the main ownership of projects – including their conception and implementation – lies with the EU delegations in the region and their local partners. Currently, three EU delegations: in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco; are

running pilot projects in order to help the Arab StratCom Task Force streamline tools and messages. For instance, the project in Morocco polls young people to learn more about their attitudes, and which messages resonate with them, and what tools are the most effective means of communication. In addition, the Arab StratCom is involved in a number of outreach activities and programmes, including providing support to Arab journalists and bloggers; dialogue with young Arab leaders and future opinion formers (e.g. establishing 'Friends of Europe' clubs and 'youth ambassadors'); cultural diplomacy (e.g. support for film festivals); and building people-to-people dialogues (e.g. online student exchanges, better use of the [EU visitors programme](#)). To match these increasing tasks, the press and information budgets in the EU delegations have received a significant boost.²

European Endowment for Democracy (EED)

Even though formally [autonomous](#) from the EU, the Endowment has proven a valuable asset to the Member States, EU institutions, and countries in the EU's neighbourhood, in particular in their efforts to counter propaganda in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Gradually, EED activities have expanded to include support for local societies in regions affected by ISIL/Da'esh propaganda. Following [visits](#) to the region, the Endowment has identified and provides support to local partners, with the aim of reducing youth radicalisation and enabling citizen journalism by providing platforms to ensure that the voice of the local people is heard.

Figure 2 – Young Arabs' perception of the security situation in the region



Source: World Bank; [Brookings](#); [Soufan Group](#); [Arab Youth Survey](#).

The EU also needs to allocate more attention and resources to supporting local NGOs and civil society-based media outlets in Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Initiatives to this end might include scaling up programmes focused on civic education, citizen journalism, media literacy, culture, women's activism and other non-humanitarian assistance.³

Pillar II: Countering violent extremism

EU activities aimed at countering radicalisation and recruitment for terrorism go beyond the public diplomacy and communication characteristic of the [East StratCom](#) activities. Due to efforts aimed at criminalisation of certain activities that might lead to radicalisation and terrorism, law enforcement and judicial bodies became increasingly involved in developing strategic communications and counter-narrative policies to terrorist propaganda. The issue has been discussed regularly between Member States and the EU institutions and is reflected in a number of documents, including the [EU Strategy](#) for combating radicalisation and recruitment to terrorism and the EU Agenda on Security. A number of initiatives play a particularly important role.

Syria Strategic Communications Advisory Team (SSCAT)

In 2014, the EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, [proposed](#) the establishment of an 'advisory team' open to all Member States, modelled on the Research Information and Communications Unit ([RICU](#)) in the UK Home Office. The Syria Strategic Communication Advisory Team, attached to the Belgian Ministry of Interior with €1 million in financial support from the EU [Internal Security Fund](#), aims to develop and exchange best practices in the area of strategic communication, with a view to 'preventing and countering terrorist crime and violent extremism with a particular focus on that related to foreign terrorist fighters'. It is estimated that, as of March 2016, almost all Member States participate in SSCAT-related activities. As a member of the Steering Committee, the European Commission is monitoring the implementation of the project to ensure that the know-how acquired through the project feeds into other initiatives aimed at countering extremist and terrorist narratives. Given the SSCAT's contribution to the understanding of terrorism beyond counter-narrative actions, the Commission is looking into possibilities for continued support to this initiative.⁴

Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Centre of Excellence

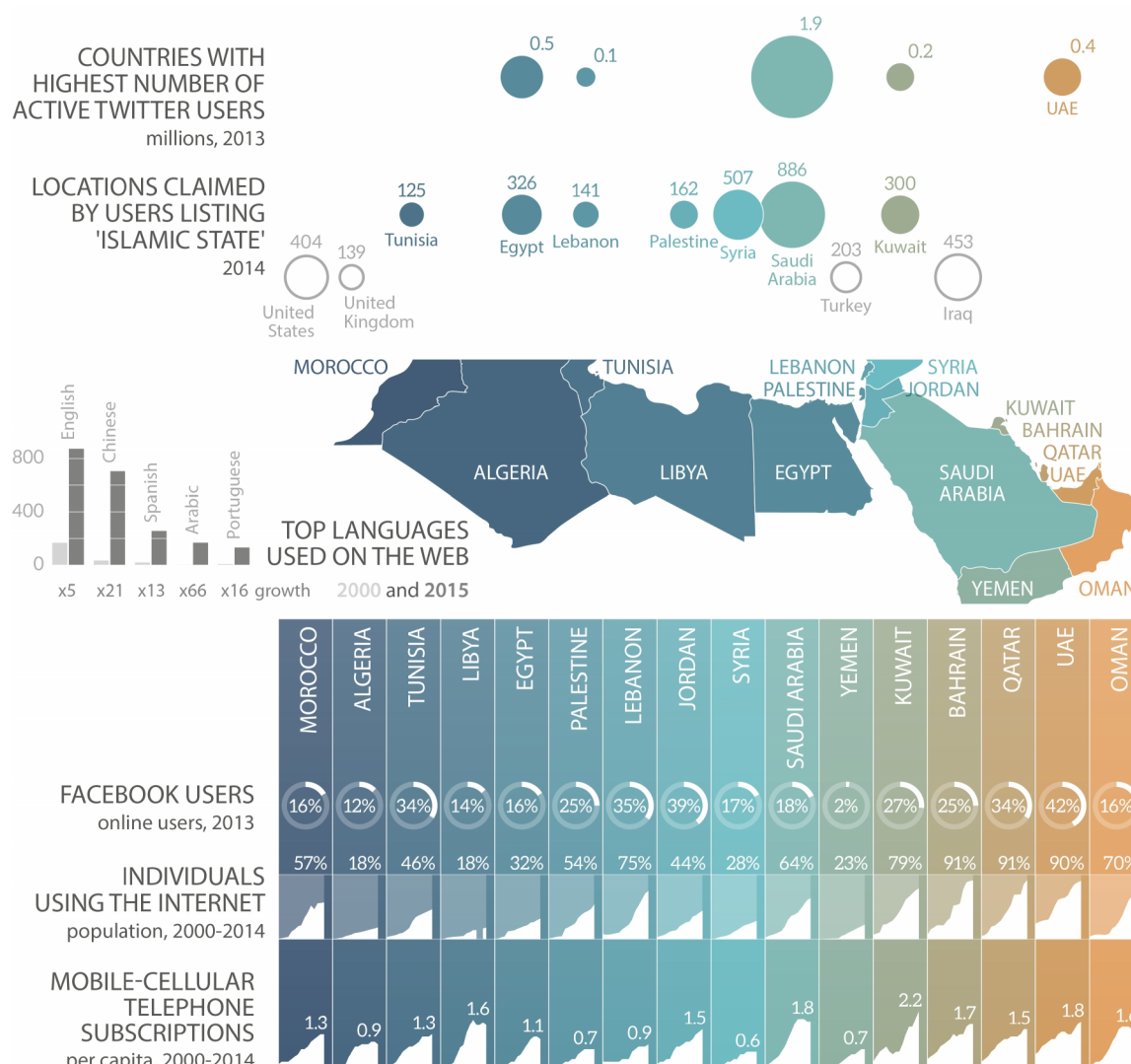
The RAN Centre of Excellence, which became fully functional in October 2015. It builds upon the work of the Radicalisation Awareness Network ([RAN](#)) established in 2011 to empower grassroots practitioners (i.e. police and prison authorities, teachers, youth workers, civil society representatives, and local authority representatives) to counter radicalisation. One of the nine RAN Working Groups focuses explicitly on communication and narratives ([RAN C&N](#)), including the delivery of alternative messaging to counter extremist propaganda and challenge extremist ideas. The new Centre of Excellence is [expected](#) to perform a 'think-tank' function by translating existing knowledge and data into tailor-made advice to Member States.

Pillar III: Curbing the use of the internet for propaganda

Although the [use](#) of the internet as a [platform](#) for terrorist propaganda is [not new](#), the ability of such movements to [spread their message](#) has accelerated in recent years. In 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri [referred](#) to the media as 'one of the battlefields', while Al-Qaeda openly [encouraged](#) cyber jihad as a sacred duty for every Muslim. The conflict in Syria provided a [fresh opportunity](#) to leverage the power of [social media](#) and attract support. The empirical research on specific [case studies](#) suggests that the internet acts

as an 'echo chamber', amplifying the opportunities for self-radicalisation, without physical contact. Even though most of that grassroots support is generated by a relatively small group of very active users, social media campaigns, like [AllEyesOnISIS](#), have allowed jihadist groups to replace their online forums with more dynamic engagement. The Syrian conflict has also produced a set of [new spiritual leaders](#) who use the internet to offer guidance and inspiration to Western foreign fighters. The international [response](#) to [cyber jihadism](#) is organised around three main pillars: constraining the use of the internet by jihadists, strengthening de-radicalisation efforts, and limiting their access to funding.⁵ As part of its objective to defeat jihadi groups, the EU [intends](#) to curb the use of the internet for terrorist recruitment and dissemination of terrorist practices. In December 2015, the EU launched the [EU Internet Forum](#) in which the European Parliament also participates. The Forum aims to counter terrorist content and hate speech online through, among other things, further engagement with internet companies.

Figure 3 – Technology and the social media landscape in the Arab world



Source: [ITU](#); [Arab Social Media Report](#); [Northwestern University](#).

In addition, in line with the mandate given to Europol by the Justice and Home Affairs Council, the EU Internet Referral Unit ([IRU](#)) was launched on 1 July 2015 to combat terrorist propaganda and related violent extremist activities on the internet. The new regulation on [Europol](#) lists referrals of material relating to online service providers as

one of the Europol tasks. The regulation also lays down rules on necessary exchanges of data with online service providers. In practical terms, EU IRU scans for and receives information from Member States relating to online terrorist material. The IRU assesses this material on the basis of Council [Framework Decision](#) 2008/919/JHA on combating terrorism and against the terms and conditions of the companies on whose sites the information is hosted. Europol can then inform the company of the website and request the content be reviewed against their own terms and conditions. However, given the entirely voluntary nature of the relationship between the private sector and Europol, it is for the company to decide whether to remove the material. The IRU team comprises 17 Europol officials, but the European Commission assesses that it will require an additional 12 people in 2017-2020. It draws upon existing relationships with law enforcement authorities, the private sector and the Europol Liaison Officers' network.

With regard to more traditional channels of information, one cannot ignore the influence of Arab state satellite [broadcasters](#) (for instance, 17% of all [news channels](#) available in Europe are in Arabic – the biggest language group, ahead of English and Turkish), which appear to attract a wide audience in Europe. The existing tools available to Member States to control their content are limited, as the Audiovisual media services without frontiers [Directive](#) limits their ability to prohibit satellite TV broadcasts from third countries on their territory when these broadcasts do not use the satellite capacity of a Member State.

European Parliament initiatives

The European Parliament has been directly or indirectly involved in several files related to strategic communication, including on relations with the Arab world, counter-terrorism, radicalisation, and intercultural dialogue. At the operational level, the European Parliament has the opportunity to pursue these objectives in a number of venues, including the Union for the Mediterranean's Parliamentary Assembly ([PA-UfM](#)) and through delegations for relations with the Arab Peninsula, Maghreb and Mashreq countries, and Palestine.

Foreign Affairs

The European Parliament has stressed the importance of good relations with the Arab world on numerous occasions. In July 2015, the EP adopted a [resolution](#) on review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, re-affirming the central role of support for democracy, the rule of law, good governance, state-building and human rights and fundamental freedoms in relations with the neighbourhood countries. The resolution also emphasises the need to strengthen the approach based on 'Partnership with Societies', developing a thriving and active civil society, and to develop policies in consultation with all stakeholders from the various societies, and not only with the authorities. It also sets concrete objectives with regard to visibility and countering misinformation about EU policies, by strengthening the EU's capacity to counter misinformation and propaganda campaigns, and promoting objective, independent and impartial information and freedom of the media. The resolution also acknowledges the need for strategic communication efforts – including through improved audiovisual and social media presence – and calls for the development of a comprehensive, effective and systematic communication strategy.

Also in July 2015, the EP passed a [resolution](#) on security challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and prospects for political stability, which emphasised the importance of cultural cooperation, diplomacy, academic cooperation (including

through the establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean Erasmus programme already [proposed](#) in 2011), and religious dialogue to combat terrorism and all forms of radicalism. With regard to combatting jihadist propaganda and home-grown radicalisation, the resolution stressed the need to develop an effective common European response by all Member States, using digital tools and involving stakeholders across Europe (e.g. local authorities, diasporas, etc.). The resolution also suggests that the EU's counter-narrative should aim at promoting positive messages about the EU's role in the region, discrediting the idea of a conflict between religions or civilisations, and be based on the promotion of common values.

Counter-terrorism and radicalisation

In February 2015, the Parliament adopted a resolution on [anti-terrorism measures](#) which focused, among other things, on combating the root causes of terrorism and radicalisation leading to violent extremism, and adopting an EU external strategy to combat international terrorism. The European Parliament resolution of 12 March 2015 on attacks and abductions by ISIL/Da'esh in the Middle East mentioned, among other things, the need 'to stop the spread of extremist and jihadist ideology worldwide'. In the [resolution](#) on systematic mass murder of religious minorities by ISIL/Da'esh, adopted on 4 February 2016, the EP urges the international community to work actively on fighting radicalisation and improve national legal and jurisdictional systems in order to prevent travel for terrorism and ensure swift prosecution, including for online incitement and support to commit those crimes. In the same resolution, the EP calls for the creation of the position of a permanent Special Representative for Freedom of Religion and Belief.

The European Parliament also adopted a [resolution](#) on prevention of radicalisation (November 2015) which acknowledged the global nature of this phenomenon. Concrete proposals made with regard to strategic communication include: a) improving cooperation between the internet service providers, Member State authorities and civil society to promote powerful and attractive narratives to counter hate speech and radicalisation online, which should be based on the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; b) encouraging the Commission and the Member States to develop counter-narratives online, and to work closely with civil society organisations; c) increasing support for initiatives such as the SSCAT and deployment and financing of similar projects in third countries, in particular in the MENA region; d) creating a special cooperation unit within Europol, with a view to sharing good practices in the Member States; and e) support from the Commission and Member States for the effective use of counter-narratives and mitigation measures via the internet.

Intercultural and inter-faith dialogue

In January 2016, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the role of intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and education, in promoting EU fundamental values, in which it suggests that the EU institutions should broaden their analysis of all forms of radicalisation and initiate a new reflection on the nature and the processes of political extremism and violence. The Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) has also been involved in organising hearings related to [intercultural dialogue](#) and the [prevention of radicalisation](#). Members of the European Parliament are also actively involved in [inter-religious dialogue](#), for instance through regular high-level events with religious community leaders.

Other actions and initiatives

In addition to law-making and agenda-setting, the European Parliament is involved in a number of outreach and engagement activities oriented towards promoting peace in the Middle East and inter-faith dialogue, especially through strengthening dialogue with young people. In 2016, building on previous [experiences](#) with Young Leaders' Fora, the Parliament is launching a new global **Young Political Leaders** (YPL) Programme. Under the political guidance of the Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (EDG), the YPL aims at strengthening dialogue with young leaders in third countries, and the overall reinforcement of the EU's image as a supporter of peace and democracy. The first Annual Programme for 2016 plans new initiatives with the countries of the Maghreb, Western Balkans and Turkey, as well as a new Israel-Palestine Dialogue. The European Parliament is also actively involved in promoting human rights in the region through the annual [Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought](#) and Sakharov Prize Network (SPN). Since its establishment in 1988, the prize for an exceptional contribution to the fight for human rights across the globe has been awarded to eight individuals from Arab countries, including from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia.

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Endnotes

¹ The examples in boxes are based on the analysis of the ISIL/Da'esh propaganda sources and media reports.

² Interview with a European External Action Service official, April 2016.

³ Interview with a European Endowment for Democracy official, April 2016.

⁴ A view expressed by a Commission representative at the Joint meeting of the Terrorism Working Party and COTER, October 2015.

⁵ The [military campaign](#) against ISIL/Da'esh has been supported by the [online coalition](#) including Egypt, France, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates since October 2014.

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