

C R T G

Statement	Published
By Cecilia Polizzi President & CEO, CRTG Working Group	CRTG Working Group five-year anniversary

On 14 March, 2019, the CRTG Working Group commemorated its first five year anniversary. In this message, Founding President & CEO Cecilia Polizzi, delves into the organization’s trajectory, and lays her vision and goals for the next cycle.

On March 14, 2019, when the CRTG Working Group first convened, we acknowledged that our work was commencing at a challenging time.

At that juncture, the formal ending of the caliphate territorial claim in Syria and Iraq had yet to take place. In the preceding years, we bore witness to the profound ramifications of the group’s brutality against children, with hundreds of thousands forcefully indoctrinated into a dystopian ideology and displayed as executioners and eulogized martyrs in violent propaganda campaigns. The influx of foreign fighters, including minors, into the region had alerted us to the pervasive influence of violent extremism within the digital sphere and the reach of these actors to influence, entice, mobilize and radicalize, highlighting the need for heightened awareness and strategic responses.

Our work, aimed at creating a heightened focus on addressing the involvement of children with terrorism and violent extremism, had never felt more necessary.

During its inaugural year, the CRTG Working Group served as a platform for civil society engagement and cooperation on children affected by terrorism and violent extremism. It identified knowledge and intervention gaps, and developed strategies for civil society to make a tangible contribution to United Nations efforts in preventing and responding to violence against children at the hands of terrorist actors, based on comparative advantage.

In 2020, we evolved into the world’s first organization dedicated to addressing the involvement of children with terrorism and violent extremism.

Building upon an expanded focus encompassing actors beyond al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and associated groups, and spanning the ideological spectrum of violent extremism, we adopted a multi-

layered programmatic strategy to devise and facilitate solutions that are both impactful and sustainable. This approach enables us to offer specialized insights and evidence-based analysis to inform decision-making, interventions, and responses, help shape policies that accommodate both child protection and security concerns, and build capacity.

In line with our conviction that bolstering efficient coordination across diverse sectors is crucial when threats to children's safety and broader collective security are especially serious and require coherent and integrated intervention efforts, through a three-year-long Institutional Membership Program, we cultivated a community of practice on the issue of child association with terrorism and violent extremism.

Throughout our tenure, we have convened fifty technical sessions covering a diverse range of critical topics that span the breadth of our mission. These exchanges have explored pressing issues such as the repatriation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters and their families in Europe with the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network, as well as delved into the dynamics of trauma and social connection affecting child returnees from Northeast Syria, in collaboration with the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism and Boston Children's Hospital. We illustrated the complexities of child recruitment and exploitation by the Islamic State with the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). We fostered the identification of appropriate justice responses for children associated with terrorist violent extremist organizations in cooperation with the Council of Europe, the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, and the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Council (JJWC) of the Department of Social Welfare and Development of the Philippines. Our engagement has extended to high-level advocacy on the cycle of victimization for children affected by terrorism and violent extremism. This was evidenced by our Ancillary Meeting on the margins of the 14th United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice alongside the United Nations Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict and the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations.

Through holistic research endeavors, we expounded on the gendered patterns that drive the replication of the caliphate's ideology in the al-Hol camp, as well as the centrality of child recruitment and radicalization within the broader context of Islamic State affiliates in West and Central Africa as a part of a fast and metastizing evolution of the terrorism threat on the African continent.

Recognizing the diverse strategies employed by violent extremist organizations in recruiting and radicalizing children, we also designed an analytical framework that engenders a full-scale understanding of the multifaceted drivers leading children and youth into the fold of terrorist and violent extremist organizations, the context in which this issue emerges, and its methods, thereby providing the necessary foundation for the formulation of informed policies, strategies, and intervention measures. These efforts have significantly informed our flagship 2024 PREVENT initiative. Through PREVENT, the CRTG Working Group closes critical knowledge gaps and informs responses, as underlined by the Global Counter Terrorism Forum's Life Cycle Initiative and the Neuchâtel Memorandum. This helps to ensure awareness of the terrorist threat, and violence against

children at the hands of terrorist and violent extremist actors, allowing for better discussion, approaches to prevention and resource allocation.

We produced policy recommendations to provide critical insights for decision-making processes and guide the efforts of practitioners across various domains. These include designing and implementing comprehensive responses to address the heightened scale of child radicalization and association with violent right-wing extremism, legal status, investigation, and prosecution of children in a counter-terrorism context, and working towards addressing the prolonged child protection and security crisis stemming from the issue of foreign fighters through our 2-year long Children Affected by the Foreign Fighter Phenomenon (CAFF) Series.

The CAFF is an undertaking by the CRTG Working Group expounding the trajectory of child involvement with the Islamic State in relation to the foreign fighter phenomenon and offering solutions across sectors and disciplines. To date, in the context of the CAFF Series, we have produced two sets of guidelines focused on the prevention of radicalization in the digital environment, and the humanitarian and security conditions of children in Northeast Syria camps, respectively. These will be integrated with the dissemination of best practices compendiums relating to child repatriation and rehabilitation measures, formally concluding the CAFF Series in 2024.

In our commitment to facilitating access to valuable information, promote learning, and empowering both specialized and non-professional audiences to navigate the multifaceted aspects of our complex subject matter, we built the largest information hub on children's with terrorist and violent extremist organizations. The Resource Center, hosts a diverse collection of over 200 meticulously curated documents sourced from academic institutions, think tanks, government, and multilateral organizations.

The rapid advancement of technology presents unprecedented opportunities for enhancing crisis prevention efforts, aligning with the exponential growth in data accessibility and information dissemination. Within this dynamic landscape, the CRTG Working Group assumes a pivotal role in spearheading the utilization of technological innovations for violence prevention initiatives. Since our inception, we curated a data repository on children in conflict and near conflict zones that present elements of terrorism and violent insurgency. Our objective extends beyond mere data aggregation; rather, it is rooted in leveraging artificial intelligence to facilitate nuanced trend analysis, foster information sharing, bolster risk communication, and issue early warnings.

As we mark our first five-year milestone, it is important to acknowledge how far we have come but also to recognize how much work remains to be done. The recruitment and radicalization of children is an increasingly pressing issue.

Child association with terrorism and violent extremism in conflict and near-conflict zones is of high concern across security and human rights dimensions. In 2024, tens of thousands of children remain housed in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in northeastern Syria. The al-

Hol and Roj camps present monumental humanitarian challenges and significant security concerns, with children enduring exceedingly severe living conditions, exposure to violence, vulnerability to exploitation, and radicalization risks. This chronic crisis raises a strong set of legal, political, and national security considerations, challenging decision-making processes and hindering opportunities for urgent and integrated intervention measures. In the Sahel, terrorism threats are escalating, and the interplay between youth bulges and deprivations compounds radicalization risks. Despite constituting the predominant demographic cohort in the region, children and young people face restricted social and political standing, along with limited access to education and economic prospects. Conflict, precarious living conditions, marginalization and a lack of socioeconomic opportunities are not only fundamentally destabilizing but also create a complex system of insecurities that violent extremist actors exploit to attract pools of young recruits, deepen their presence on the territory, and advance their agenda.

The threat landscape has also widened in recent years through an online ecosystem that provides jihadists and right-wing extremists with fertile ground for propagating violent narratives and exploiting polarization to radicalize and mobilize children and youth on a large scale. The acute surge in cases of homegrown terrorism with adolescents engaging in the dissemination of terrorist content, planning, and carrying out attacks sheds light on the nature of extremist engagement and the risks posed by the involvement of increasingly young demographics.

Appealing to children and young people is arguably among a terrorist group's most important priorities, as it becomes apparent from the long-term strategic planning, scale, and systematicity that disengagement, reintegration, and prevention efforts are not yet prerogatives in our strategies. The protraction of the current asymmetry will likely lead to continuing instability, ideological proliferation, large-scale violence, and the emergence of new waves of terrorism. The ramifications of inaction, as evidenced by the current manifestations of child involvement with terrorism and violent extremism, carry weight and substance.

Looking ahead, as we continue to navigate this complex landscape, the CRTG Working Group is poised to exert a leading role, spearheading innovation and fostering adaptability in response to evolving terrorism and violent extremism challenges. In the next cycle, I envisage a growing organization, at the top of its game preventing and mitigating the impacts of children's involvement with terrorism and violent extremism. I will cultivate the CRTG Working Group's position as the first port of call for assistance and the top source of information and knowledge in our specialist area. After taking stock of our efforts to date, we will craft a path forward to deepen this important work, based always on demand, a spirit of inclusivity, friendliness and cooperation, and a clear sense of our added value.

I end with a message to our governance and advisory bodies, our growing team, partners, friends and the many brilliant professionals with whom we have so far crossed paths and joined hands with: vision, resilience, strategic thinking, empathy, and commitment to excellence are qualities that propelled CRTG Working Group throughout its first five years and which will continue to inspire us as we blaze new trails and rise to new heights.

Thank you for your role in fostering innovative approaches to address terrorism challenges, for your collaboration behind the scenes, and for your integral contribution to our shared purpose.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cecilia Polizzi', with a long horizontal line extending to the right and a vertical line intersecting it.

Cecilia Polizzi
Founding President & CEO
CRTG Working Group