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"We don't need a counter-narrative, *they* are the counter-narrative!"

It is commonly assumed in policy circles that Islamic leaders need to develop more effective counters to the misguided narratives propagated by Muslim extremists (or, said differently, to develop more effective messaging for discrediting their problematic beliefs). Typically, such "counter-narratives" have been developed in a vacuum by elites, often working through a Western cultural lens, who then wonder why their efforts fail to attract community-level support. They fail because they are too removed from the everyday lives and experiences of the young people who are the most susceptible to extremist influence.

Recognizing that such narratives will only gain traction if they are informed by local realities, ICRD has organized a number of structured dialogues in Pakistan that have brought together more than 50 religious and civil society leaders to develop *a living narrative*, which elevates core values of coexistence and tolerance. The goal is to challenge the misperceptions and intolerance that are inspiring sectarian tensions across the country and to defuse these tensions before they erupt into conflict.

This participant-led process has already facilitated a meaningful degree of local buy-in and helped identify a set of shared values between the disparate sects. Further, in an article published by a recent ICRD workshop graduate, he noted that apart from whatever narrative ultimately emerges, the social interaction that is taking place between sects in the workshops will be indispensable to promoting sectarian harmony in Pakistan.

> At the White House and State Department's Ministerial Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in 2015, a North African religious scholar argued that instead of an effective "counter-narrative", Islamic leaders should embrace the true "narrative" of Islam, which honors peaceful coexistence over extremism.

With best wishes,

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