The Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project[1]

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Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, many around the world wondered how a non-state, terrorist actor could emerge, abruptly take control of large swaths of territories in Iraq and Syria—overtaking up to a third of the territory of Iraq—and establish itself as a state of sorts. The past years have also seen unprecedented inflow of jihadists, both in terms of volume and pace, to the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria. Like no other terrorist group before, ISIS has managed to attract over 40,000 foreign recruits

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from over 110 countries (United Nations, 2017; as cited in Speckhard, Shajkovci & Yayla, 2018).

How were they able to do this?

While ISIS became known for its mastery of high-end video productions and sophistication in social media outreach, other Islamist extremist groups that predate ISIS have also used slick videos and memes to generate publicity and garner social support. For instance, Hezbollah and Hamas both made videos, and even produced video games. Arguably, the success of ISIS, in part, came from their timing in arriving on the world stage. Namely, they emerged during a full-blown civil war and humanitarian crisis in Syria. The magnitude of suffering and the culture of impunity that rose as a consequence of Bashar al Assad's actions in Syria went unanswered. Moreover, as ISIS continued to battle Assad and other opponents, including conquering new areas in Syria, and later in Iraq, its needs for additional personnel and manpower on the ground grew as well. To meet such needs, it started relying more on social media, which was a game changer in mobilizing new recruits, primarily because social media platforms at the time had developed to the point of offering immediate feedback mechanisms for those calling over the Internet for foreign fighters to join the battle—making it simple to hone in, swarm and groom those who responded to their calls.

ISIS, and al Nusra for that matter, simply had to blanket the Internet with their videos and then wait and watch to see who responded. For those who showed interest via likes, retweeting, and sharing, they could then move in and begin a grooming process to lure these recruits deeper into the movement—some to travel to Syria and Iraq, and, as evidenced recently, to stay in place and attack at home.

At the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) we have learned from over 20 years of interviewing over 500 terrorists and violent extremists—and in the case of suicide bombers, their family members, close associates, and even hostages—that terrorism nearly always is a function of the four following factors: 1) The group, which is by definition political and violent in nature, 2) an ideology, which convinces adherents to jump over normal moral barriers to justify attacking innocents—the argument often being made that terrorist actions are exceptional, in defense of those being attacked, or that it is necessary to defend sacred values and one's religion itself, 3) Social support, which these days is found over the Internet and is always as close as one's phone. We are social creatures and rely on social mirroring to tell us that joining a movement and enacting violence—especially against innocent civilians—is appropriate behavior. For example, ISIS was able to form small cells with individuals in Raqqa, Syria, encouraging and plotting with individuals as far away and in as diverse locations as Canada, Belgium, Kenya, Malaysia, and Australia, 4) Lastly, these three interact with the motivations and vulnerabilities existing on the level of the individual, and usually break down according to conflict and non-conflict zones. These are many. Inside a conflict zone, motivations tend to be trauma and revenge driven but may also

have to do with frustrated aspirations, loss of resources, and constricted alternatives in life. Outside conflict zones they have more to do with feelings of marginalization, discrimination, lack of opportunities, frustration, group dynamics related to belonging, escaping life's problems, falling in love, or seeking significance and purpose (Speckhard, 2012; Speckhard, 2016).

In the last year, Iraqi military and anti-ISIS coalition forces took the lead in defeating ISIS on the ground. As a result, ISIS was defeated territorially in Iraq, while various troops are still routing out ISIS in Syria. Yet, the group carries on, and we continue to see attacks around the world—sometimes on a weekly basis (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018a). While the military defeat of ISIS is important, how do we defeat the *idea* of ISIS? They are successfully selling the dream of a terrorist Caliphate and of an alternative world governance, purportedly run by Islamic ideals for which many are willing to give their lives. How can we successfully fight against and defeat this idea? Ideally, the best answer would be good governance, justice, dignity, religious freedoms, opportunity, and prosperity for all, but in the absence of those fixes, how can we defeat the dream that ISIS and groups like ISIS are selling?

One way to defeat the idea of ISIS and similar extremist groups is to continue to document and prosecute crimes committed by such groups. Chiefly, ISIS has carried out a number of serious human rights abuses and what many legal experts would argue to be serious international crimes (e.g. genocide and crimes against humanity with respect to the Yazidis). The research indicates that upwards of 10, 000 Yazidis were killed or kidnapped by the group (Dearden, 2017). Courts, both national and international, have the right and legal obligations to establish necessary jurisdiction to prosecute crimes that have occurred in Syria and Iraq, including those that fall under the category of more serious international crimes (e.g. genocide, crimes against humanity, etc.) mentioned above. Some have even argued for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate ISIS' crimes, including genocide in Syria and Iraq (McFadden, Whitman & Rappleye, 2017). Moreover, national governments (e.g. France, Austria, etc.) must make every effort to investigate crimes committed by their own nationals in Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately, to this day, the number of prosecutions and the nature of cases brought before many national courts does not reflect the true gravity of the crimes that are known to have been committed in Iraq and Syria.

While the task of brining perpetrators of such crimes to justice remains a complex and daunting task, such efforts are needed to shed light on ISIS' twisted and un-Islamic ideological arguments rooted in persecution and victimization of other religious and ethnic minorities in the so-called Islamic State. In addition, from a legal standpoint, placing such perpetrators behind bars is necessary to strengthen the international community's efforts and accountability to fight terrorism, though to defeat the extremist ideas of groups like ISIS will also require a resolve and determination to prosecute crimes committed by *all* parties in the conflict and to resolve the underlying political persecutions and grievances that led to the rise of it in the first place.

Alternatively, at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), we firmly believe that insiders (i.e. those who have experienced life under ISIS rule and lived under ISIS controlled territory) are best positioned to speak against the group. We also believe that effective counter narratives must be as emotionally evocative as the propaganda materials used by terrorist groups to effectively fight against them. Over the past two and a half years, we have in-depth interviewed 79 ISIS defectors, returnees, and ISIS cadre prisoners, including over 17 parents, siblings, and close associates of ISIS members, in Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East—most captured on video.

In the case of ISIS defectors and ISIS cadre prisoners, we want to know who they were before joining ISIS, how they learned of ISIS, and what attracted them to the group. We also ask them how they joined—and if they traveled to ISIS, how they did it—whether they took shariah and weapons training, and what their role was in ISIS. We ask them to describe their experiences in ISIS, and if they defected, we want to know why and how. If they are imprisoned, we ask how they were caught and how they feel now. For those facing death sentences, we ask what they expect in the afterlife. Most denounce ISIS as being corrupt, extremely brutal, and utterly un-Islamic. They also speak of their disappointments and horror serving in the group. In the end, we ask them to give advice to others about joining. Most warn against joining ISIS and list the ill consequences that will likely occur as a result (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Yayla, 2018; Speckhard & Yayla, 2015, 2016).

We then take these hours long videos and edit them into short counter narrative videos of two to four minutes, which are then then placed on our ICSVE YouTube channel and websites and directed out on Facebook using Facebook ads. We also search out ISIS supporters online and tag them with our videos, as well as drop them into ISIS chatrooms on Facebook and Telegram. We track the results of our interventions, as well as publish them in academic journals and our ICSVE website (Speckhard, Shajkovci, Bodo, Fazliu, 2018; Speckhard, Shajkovci & Bodo, 2018; Speckhard, Shajkovci, Wooster & Izadi, 2018). Some such studies are discussed in the ensuing sections.

The ICSVE Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative videos are currently being used on five continents by law enforcement, counselors, teachers, prison workers and other P/CVE professionals. As one measure of our success, we learned about a thirteen-year-old boy from London, UK, who, hell-bent on going to Raqqa, Syria, was turned back by viewing one of our videos. The account was documented by a UK Prevent counselor who worked closely with the boy. Similarly, after viewing two of our counter-narrative videos, an ISIS emir (ISIS superior) we interviewed in Iraq, hung his head in shame, admitting, “We were wrong. We argued over some of these in the group [as presented in our counternarratives]. We gave a bad face to Islam” (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018b). In focus groups in Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Balkans we learned how the emotionally evocative nature of our counter narrative videos opened up lively

discussions in which we could understand how youth view ISIS and what their vulnerabilities are in potentially being recruited into it. In this regard, we have promising evidence to suggest that our counter-narratives may work both for prevention and intervention purposes.

Recently, ICSVE researchers took part in a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime(UNODC) conference in Central Asia, where the prison officials representing Central Asian countries expressed great enthusiasm in using these products in their prison prevention and intervention work. We have also trained law enforcement and intelligence officers around the world on their use and applications, and we have worked with teachers as well. In fact, the U.S. Embassy in Copenhagen is making them available in Danish subtitles, which are also accompanied with study guides in Danish for teachers to use as a prevention and intervention tool in their respective classrooms.

The ICSVE-produced counter-narratives are subtitled in more than 20 languages to reach the same people ISIS is successfully reaching. Our researchers also send them out on Facebook and Telegram in attempts to reach and influence ISIS supporters and sympathizers online. For instance, in 2017, ICSVE researchers successfully identified 50 English and77 Albanian speaking Facebook profiles that were identified as highly radicalized based on their endorsements of ISIS materials and association with ISIS-related networks online (Speckhard, Shajkovci & Bodo, 2017;Speckhard, Shajkovci, Bodo & Fazliu, 2018). In conducting our online intervention we learned that 1) we could identify and reach ISIS endorsing and promoting Facebook profiles and 2) we could infect them with counter narrative materials. We were also able to elicit responses from our target audience—sometimes including anger—but also follow how in some cases they inadvertently shared and distributed our counter-narratives to their circle of friends, which greatly widened our potential influence and provided an opportunity to expand on our safety and awareness promoting activities.

ICSVE researchers also conducted over 19 ad campaigns over Facebook, resulting in over 1.7 million views in Iraq alone. Considerable discussion was generated in these campaigns as well, which serves as a testament to a growing engagement with our counter narrative videos. We also continue to analyze the interaction over YouTube with our counter narrative videos. Currently, our research team is building a new website, which will be used not only for measuring the efficacy of our interventions online (e.g. tracing conversions, landing page counts, etc.) but also offering redirection to more tolerant interpretations of Islam, referrals for psychological support, and support for walking away from extremism. We hope that the website will also lead the viewer into a deeper engagement with our counter narrative materials.

Conclusion

ISIS has managed to attract hundreds of thousands of followers and activate over 30, 000 from all over the world into traveling to join the so-called Islamic State. Following its

territorial defeat in Iraq and much of Syria, bringing ISIS members to justice must remain a priority, as it will bring more closure to its victims and their families and also demonstrate the utter ideological depravity of the group. It is equally important to allow for prosecution of all responsible parties in the conflict so as to commence a reconciliation process. The ICSVE researchers have been dedicated to counter the ideological call of the group using well understood psychological and mass marketing attempts at similarly influencing the same group of vulnerable persons ISIS aims to ensnare. While our attempts have shown success, there is still much to accomplish.

About the Authors:

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D.**,** is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) and serves as an Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine. She has interviewed over 600 terrorists, their family members and supporters in various parts of the world including in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Former Soviet Union and the Middle East. In the past two years, she and ICSVE staff have been collecting interviews (n=78) with ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners, studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism, their experiences inside ISIS, as well as developing the Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project materials from these interviews. She has also been training key stakeholders in law enforcement, intelligence, educators, and other countering violent extremism professionals on the use of counter-narrative messaging materials produced by ICSVE both locally and internationally as well as studying the use of children as violent actors by groups such as ISIS and consulting on how to rehabilitate them. In 2007, she was responsible for designing the psychological and Islamic challenge aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000 + detainees and 800 juveniles. She is a sought-after counterterrorism experts and has consulted to NATO, OSCE, foreign governments and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, CIA and FBI and CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, and in Time, The New York Times, The Washington Post, London Times and many other publications. She regularly speaks and publishes on the topics of the psychology of radicalization and terrorism and is the author of several books, including Talking to Terrorists, Bride of ISIS, Undercover Jihadi and ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate. Her publications are found here: https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhardWebsite: and on the ICSVE website http://www.icsve.org
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