International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism

Confronting an ISIS Emir: ICSVE's *Breaking the ISIS Brand* Counter-Narrative Videos

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Most experts agree that the most successful counter-messaging campaigns against ISIS are the ones that utilize the voices of insiders: the voices of ISIS victims and ISIS cadres themselves who have first-hand knowledge of the group's brutality, corruption, religious manipulation, and deception. In this regard, we at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) have spent the last two years interviewing ISIS defectors, ISIS prisoners, and returnees from the Syrian and the Iraq conflict in Western Europe, Turkey, Iraq, Central Asia, and the Balkans. Their stories are captured on video and edited down to short clips, interspersed with actual ISIS video footage and pictures, illustrating their stories to turn back against ISIS.

Using formers to talk back to terrorism is a well-established practice. Mubin Shaikh is a good example of someone who nearly joined al-Qaeda and imbibed deeply of the *jihadist* ideology before turning away and infiltrating a Canadian terrorist cell to help take it down.[1] Usama Hasan, a former radical Salafi extremist and mujahidin in the Afghan jihad against the country's communist government in the early 90s, is another example of someone who has turned against Salafi-jihadi ideology and is dedicated to fighting violent extremism in the United Kingdom. [2]

Using formers is rife with problems, however. Those returned from ISIS were often psychologically unhealthy before they joined and are deeply traumatized upon their return. Some do not want to speak about their experiences while others fear retribution from ISIS if they speak out against the group. Some of them fear further prosecution and social stigma. Others are unstable, reverse their positions frequently, or are not good role models. Often, they are not easily accessible and reachable.

In April of 2017, we spoke to an ISIS "emir" (high in military command) in a prison in Sulaymaniyah, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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Dressed in an orange jumpsuit and wearing a black mask over his face, Abu Islam is brought into the faux wood-paneled room of the Special Forces Security compound in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. His hands are cuffed and feet shackled together.

There are five of us in the room: me, Ardian, Alice, a Kurdish handler, and our Peshmerga interpreter, Alaz.[3] I am seated at the front corner of the desk with my laptop

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[1] Anne Speckhard and Mubin Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18-Al Qaeda Inspired, Homegrown Terrorism in the West* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, 2014) and Morten Storm, Tim Lister, and Paul Cruickshank, *Agent Storm: My Life Inside al Qaeda and the CIA* (New York City, NY: Grove Press, 2015).

[2] See Quilliam, "Usama Hasan," URL: https://www.quilliaminternational.com/about/staff/usama-hasan/

[3]The names of participants other than the authors' and Abu Islam have been changed to protect them.

unfolded. Ardian is seated to my side. Alice and our handler sit behind the desk. Alaz takes the hooded Abu Islam from the prison guards and guides him gently to the center chair in front of the desk next to me, where he gently lifts the mask from his face as he takes his seat as well. Abu Islam's dark, wavy hair and medium length curly beard and burning brown eyes are revealed as his eyes dart quickly around the room taking everyone in. His dark eyes focus briefly on me, burning momentarily into mine and then dart back again to Alaz, as he waits to begin. They know each other. Alaz has already repeatedly interrogated him.

Only in his mid-twenties, Abu Islam has been heavily hunted for two years by the Peshmerga forces who credit him with running a network of cells of suicide bombers, sending some as young as twelve to explode themselves in suicide missions. He is credited with either directly or indirectly organizing attacks that killed over 250 victims, although some of the high-ranking Peshmerga counterterrorism officials we spoke to believe that number to be at 500. "He's a guy we chased for more than two years," stated the head of Kurdistan's Zanyari intelligence service in a recent interview with journalist Robin Wright. "To pick him up and realize that we finally got him, it was a big catch for us," he explained. [4]

Born as Mazan Nazhan Ahmed al-Obeidi, Abu Islam is the second oldest in his family. He is the oldest male and has eight siblings. His father served in Saddam's army. He describes his childhood as both "safe" and "nice." Growing up in the oil-rich area of Kirkuk, Iraq, Abu Islam first finished high school and then pursued university studies in *shariah* (Islamic law) at the local university. With only one year left to go before graduation, in 2014 Abu Islam abruptly left his studies to join the so-called "Islamic State."

"I wasn't Salafi growing up," Abu Islam explains. The legs of his orange jumpsuit are rolled up to mid-calf—Salafi style—to match the dress worn by the Companions of the Prophet Muhammed. He is also bearded. "I got that mentality in university when I read the book *Tawhid* by Wahhab. It convinced me," he adds.

Abu Islam is referring to *Kitab at-Tawhid* (*The Book of the Unity of God*) by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an 18th century Saudi religious reformer who worked to purify Islam by turning back to following the original practices of the Prophet and his Companions. The violent followers of Wahhab, including al-Qaeda and ISIS, interpret his teachings to justify killing those who do not follow their strict interpretation of Islam. ISIS, and groups like ISIS, practice of *Takfir*—that is, an extreme extension of Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine that sanctions violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims who are deemed as *infidels* (non-believers). This is the type of Islam and ideology that Abu Islam had already

[4] Robin Wright, "Face to Face with the Ghost of ISIS," The New Yorker, March 24, 2017; URL: http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/face-to-face-with-the-ghost-of-isis

embraced in his university studies, thus he was ready for ISIS when they came to Iraq and established their so-called Islamic State.

"I got into the brotherhood at the mosque," Abu Islam explains. "They were against Islamic State, but for me I saw that the Islamic State was living by shariah law. They were throwing homosexual people from high buildings. If you steal, they cut your hand. They are really living it."

When asked where he saw this, Abu Islam answers, "It was on social media, YouTube. It made sense for me. I watched a lot of their videos." As we listen to him speak, we become aware of ISIS' powerful online presence and online propaganda machine that recruits youth via the Internet here in Iraq as well. Even in Iraq, ISIS propaganda videos reached a university student, persuading him of their righteousness, "I was convinced and made up my mind."

"They were on the streets also. They had a territory twice the size of Great Britain. At the time I joined, I was 22 or 23. A lot of my relatives were in the area they [ISIS] took over, and some of my cousins and family members were already in [ISIS]. It was easy to join. I got a recommendation," Abu Islam explains, referring to the ISIS practice of trusting their potential recruits based on the recommendation of another ISIS member. "They knew I don't drink or smoke and that I'm a shariah student. That made my CV look really good," he explains while smiling enthusiastically.

"I didn't take shariah training," Abu Islam answers proudly when asked about ISIS' known practice of putting new recruits through two weeks of sharia training to learn the basics of Islam as they preach it and to take on their "hear and obey" philosophy.[5] "I became the teacher because of my background," he continues. He also bypassed military training since they needed shariah teachers to train the others, "They didn't teach me weapons. In the beginning, they asked me if I knew how to use an AK, and of course, I did." The knowledge of assault rifles is common among Iraqis, notes our Peshmerga interpreter.

"I gave lessons in shariah." This is how Abu Islam initially describes his role in the Islamic State.

Compared to Syria, it appears there are not large camps for the *Cubs of the Caliphate* in Iraq, where hundreds of youth are gathered, trained, and taught to fight—with some being trained and prepared to become suicide bombers—after they graduate.[6] In Iraq, it

[5] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, LLC, 2016).
[6] Ibid.

seems the Cubs are gathered into smaller groups. Individuals like Abu Islam appear to serve as their itinerate preachers, traveling from one group to another.

"Sometimes there were four to five or six to seven [individuals]. It depended. I'd go to the villages and teach them. I moved from place to place to give shariah lessons," Abu Islam explains. "It was mostly *fiqh* [Principles and understanding of Islamic practices]. How to pray properly. How to fast. How to help other Muslims, how to pay *zakat* [obligatory charity], and about the Islamic State."

In Syria, ISIS defectors interviewed in our *ISIS Defectors Interview Project* described their shariah trainers as "shining charismatics" and were heartened by learning "true Islam" from them.[7] I ask if the Iraqis already knew their religion or were also gladdened by these teachings. His answer, "They didn't know the right way. We taught them the right ways. We talked about what it could [Islamic State] be. Hopefully, we'll expand our territory. According to our beliefs, we can't say we are definitely doing it. Instead, we say, *inshallah* [by God's will] we will expand our territory. Open the walls. Take down Europe."

Abu Islam tells us that there were "young fighters from foreign places," in his classes, but "they didn't understand much Arabic," which reminds us of an Albanian I interviewed in Kosovo who also recalled taking ISIS shariah training in Arabic—it all went over his head.

We are in Iraq this trip having just spoken at the Prime Minister's conference titled, "Education in Iraq Post Daesh-ISIL Territory." The conference brought together both local and international experts to address the issue of the 250,000-500,000 youth that the government of Iraq estimates lived and served under ISIS over the past three years in the Nineveh and the Mosul regions of Iraq. Universities were closed under ISIS. Libraries were burnt to the ground. Textbooks, even for the very young, were replaced by texts that taught them how to behead and indoctrinated them from the earliest of ages into Islamic State's barbarity and refusal to recognize anyone else's views as legitimate but their own. At the conference, we viewed the exhibit of some of these captured ISIS textbooks. Picking them up and handling them gave each of us a chill down the spine—touching the same books ISIS cadres had handed out to children under their control.

The schools in the area continued to run even when ISIS took over, Abu Islam explains, adding, "They used to study English. It was good for us—knowing English—but we denied books that we didn't like. After a while, we denied all the existing books. We changed all the books over to our mentality."

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[7] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, LLC, 2016).

"How did you talk to the kids who are going on suicide missions?" I ask, going back to his role as a shariah trainer. "What did you teach them to persuade them to go on suicide missions?" I ask, already knowing from our interviews with Syrian ISIS defectors that ISIS leaders fill the children's minds with bright visions of *Paradise* and promise them they will feel pain when they push the button to explode themselves—that they go instantly to Paradise. The feint-hearted ones are even offered a sedative, and in many cases, the youngest do not even realize they are about to die. All this I already know from our Syrian defector interviews.[8]

"We used to tell them," Abu Islam begins but then quickly detours into denial. "It was not my job exactly." He hesitates and then continues, "Study and learn your future. We want to expand our territories and put shariah over the whole earth. Most of the time they came as volunteers, self- motivated." Remembering how the kids chose themselves as "martyrs," he gains confidence again, "They have read the book. We make the way for them. We never told anyone they have to go. It's voluntary. It's never forced. I didn't see anyone forced, ever."

So, when you prepared young children to take "martyrdom" missions—driving explosive-laden cars or wearing vests into enemy lines or checkpoints—what did you teach them? How did you prepare them?" I ask, having already learned from Peshmerga counterterrorism officials that he sent them as young as 12-years-old on suicide missions.

Abu Islam exudes disagreement with how the question was asked and explains that ISIS never takes children into its ranks: "In Iraq, you have to be 18 to sign up for the Army. We [ISIS] don't have any age limit. Instead we believe that when a man's semen develops, then he's considered a grown-up man. We only take them when they get to that point. They were never children. They were men."

Cynical about how he answered the question, I further probe: "How old were these *men* according to your criteria?"

"A fully-grown man has to have his semen," Abu Islam reiterates. "This is according to sharia." The translator interjects by explaining that, according to Abu Islam's definition, a young boy who begins with wet dreams is already a man ready for battle and mature enough to sign his life over for a "martyrdom" mission.

While Abu Islam denies there was any pressure in ISIS for children to become "martyrs," we know from ISIS defector interviews that in the Syrian training camps youth are heavily pressured into driving explosive-laden cars into enemy lines and lied to about the painfulness of their deaths—sometimes failing to even tell them their mission

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[8] Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, LLC, 2016).

involves death. “There is an office. If anyone volunteers… ‘I want to my give my *bayat* [pledge] then he signs up for a martyrdom mission at the same time. It’s like a regular recruiting process, ”Abu Islam explains.

He is further asked about the training camps and how they have a steady stream of explosive-rigged cars being made to put the children in and send them to their deaths at checkpoints and the frontlines.

“There is a training camp they take them to and teach then how to set up and use these cars,” he explains. “It’s a regular camp they tell them…” he hesitates again. “The car manufacturing is in a different place,” he detours.

“But what do they tell these children?” I push.

“They instruct them. They know what will happen. They’re happy. It’s like a kid on Christmas. You know how happy they are? Calmly happy, knowing something good is going to happen,” Abu Islam explains as we realize he truly embraces this sickness.

“Is there any ritual to go with this?” I further ask, wondering exactly how they send a kid off to his horrific death.

“They [the ISIS senders] have a list of serial numbers and names. If I'm set to go next, then I’m next. If something changes the order and they aren’t sent, they start crying. If they are the next one, they actually cry and get angry, and even complain, ‘My name is set to go!’ I’ve seen this with my own eyes,” Abu Islam explains, as his eyes appear to shine in admiration for their zeal.

“What happens right before you go?” I ask again.

“There is nothing special they do.”

“Pray? Wash? Celebrate? Make a video?” I press as in the past I have sat with relatives of bombers who have seen the videos of their children wrapped up in explosive vests or jammed into explosive-laden vehicles, with some crying and others seemingly jubilant about going as “martyrs.”

“There is nothing special. They wash up to be clean. Everyone prays. Everyone says goodbye. There are tears of joy. We make a video,” he admits but again adds a denial, which is possibly self-protective given he is in prison and does not want to incriminate himself. “I didn’t make the videos. I sent them to Kirkuk,” he explains.

“Do they receive a sedative?”

“No sedative, ever.”

“What’s the usual way to go? Car or belt?”

“Both,” he answers. “They wear the belt wear in the car just in case one goes down,” he adds.

“What are their instructions?” I further ask. “Kill as many as possible?”

“Yes.”

“Any special conditions? What if there are women and children at a checkpoint?” I probe.

“In the front line, everyone is an enemy. Everyone is a target,” Abu Islam intones, but quickly adds, “In cities, we tell them to try avoid targeting the markets and civilians, and they have specific targets—military and government targets.”

“And you?” I ask about his recent arrest in which he was wearing, but did not detonate, his suicide vest. “I didn’t sign up to be one. I did fight.” He goes on to say that he has fought in all three ISIS tactical military formations, including in the very front line where the fighters go in wearing vests and “martyr” themselves if overtaken, killing everyone around them to avoid capture. He was never one of those cadres, yet he states, “I always had my suicide belt on. We jump into the [Peshmerga] helicopters and explode ourselves. There is no surrender. No surrender. Just push the button.”

“But you did surrender?” I press. “You wore the belt. Did you have it in your mind, when captured?”

“You didn’t have time to detonate or didn’t want to do it?” inquires Alaz, our Peshmerga translator, while explaining to us how he never had the chance to ask him this question and would like to know the answer as well.

“I didn’t want to die. I wanted to live, so I didn’t do it,” Abu Islam states matter-of-factly, despite the fact that he has sent plenty of others to do just that. “I wanted to finish the project, spreading sharia,” he adds.

“Were you scared?” I ask.

“Yes,” he admits. “I was scared. Every human being is scared.”

I ask Abu Islam about ISIS’ policy toward captured women, a question that instantly grabs his attention. He is in his element spouting out shariah law on the rights of ISIS cadres with regards to captured women. “It becomes a right,” he says, while looking around the room in which three out of five present in the room are women, waving his

arm to bring us all into his sweeping gesture. “If I dominate everything in this room, then it becomes mine. I do as I want. It all becomes the property of the Islamic State,” he adds.

While we are usually capable of listening to anything without having much of a reaction during the interview, we felt suddenly sickened imagining how close to Mosul we have been in the past days—barely an hour’s drive—and how this mindset has been a harsh reality for so many captured women, whether they be Yazidis, Christians, Shia, or Sunni women alike.

Abu Islam denies that he had a *sabaya* [sex slave]. He also explains that very few Iraqis had them. He can think of only one man in their area of ISIS, Dr. Mahavia, who had one. This is likely similar to the Syrian experience where married Iraqis who served from home are not seen by ISIS leadership as needing to be supplied with a woman. Yet, we will hear next from an unmarried Iraqi who took full sexual advantage of the enslaved women held in this region of Iraq.

As we continue interviewing Abu Islam, though calm, I feel increasingly agitated and irritated at how he is able to justify the brutal and inhumane practices of ISIS and offer arguments in support of their activities. Just before my next question, I decide to show him one of our ICSVE-produced videos denouncing ISIS. I open my computer and ask if he would be willing to watch the video of another ISIS cadre (a defector) speaking on this subject. I inform him that it is a short video—only four minutes—and with his agreement, I begin to play it. Abu Islam watches intently as a Syrian former ISIS cadre explains his horror and posttraumatic stress after being the guard for 475 Yezidi, Shia, and Sunni sex slaves, including his role in taking part in organizing mass institutionalized rape.

Abu Islam’s eyes dart along the pictures in the video taken from ISIS, taking in faces and places he may recognize, just as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighter Huthaifa Azzam did when we showed him the same video.[9] “He is an Iraqi speaking,” Abu Islam comments. I tell him no, this is a Syrian, but he has got a similar accent as he is from Deir ez-Zor. The video plays as Ibn Ahmed (the ISIS defector in the video) paints a grim picture of rape and horror for young captured women separated from their men and children. As more horrifying images of Yazidi and other women abused by ISIS appear on the video, Abu Islam’s gaze falls to the floor. Suddenly, he is silent and stunned to see his version of his glorified ISIS described in this graphic manner.

“How do you feel watching this video?” I gently ask.

“I was against that idea,” he says. His voice appears flat by what he has just viewed. “It doesn’t matter. When I see this video…this is the outcome of this practice—this video.

[9] Huthaifa Azzam Interview, Amman, Jordan, 2016.

It's not the proper way to turn you to Islam. It's not a good way to spread our beliefs." Referring back to the rapes, he adds, "Not everyone listens [to objections]. They just go with it. There are more that like it [raping of captured women] than are against it."

"How about the beheadings?" I ask.

"It was a law," he answers. We cannot help but see discomfort in his face as he patiently awaits his next question.

"Is it not it the same thing? Does it not also spread a negative view of Islam?" I further push.

"I got convinced," Abu Islam answers defensively.

"How do you feel now?"

"It's not right," he says gazing down at his hands, and adds, "We were wrong."

"Is there a way to get there without all this violence?" I ask softly, knowing he harbors the dream of spreading shariah and making a utopian world where Islam reigns above all else.

"Yes, of course." a decade of sectarian killings that ISIS was born and embraced by the Sunni population in Anbar province.

"Why did you sign up to violence?" I ask, although I know that the U.S. and the U.S.-led coalition security blunder in Iraq that led to the ousting of Saddam Hussein's senior military and intelligence officials, coupled with more than a decade of sectarian killings, gave birth to ISIS.

"I believed back in that time," Abu Islam explains. "I got convinced," he adds..He explains about how ISIS appeared as a righteous and Islamic answer to sectarian power struggles and security issues: "I didn't know it was going to be that way."

We ask Abu Islam if he is willing to watch another ICSVE-produced video. When he agrees, we show him our four-minute video clip of a fifteen-year-old Syrian boy describing his time in the *Cubs of the Caliphate* and how the leaders sent children as young as six-years-old in explosive-laden vehicles to their deaths—many having no idea they were about to die. There are pictures of children younger than eight in the film. Abu Islam watches this clip intently as well, again studying everything in it. At the end, the boy denounces ISIS, calling them *kafirs* [unbelievers] and infidels.

"He [the boy] is calling you the *kafir*. How do you feel about that?" I ask after we view the clip. "These are little kids. Do these children have their semen? Are they men?" I challenge feeling angry with his denials.

Abu Islam is stunned into silence as he again begins to stare at the floor.

"How do you make this right between you and Allah?" I ask softly, wondering if he will open up more.

"Allah will accept everything—If you admit it," he answers back, and continues to stare at the floor.

"Did you make a mistake?" I ask.

"Yes." "We were mistaken," are his last words.

We end our interview. The guards come into the room, and Abu Islam's black mask is once again placed back over his face as he lets them guide him blindly out of the room.

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Abu Islam is by no means rehabilitated from watching two counter-narrative videos. That being said, capture, interrogation, and imprisonment have all begun to work on him. After being challenged with the harsh realities of ISIS and other ISIS cadres denouncing the group, he admits to not knowing whether ISIS was right. After all, joining ISIS has not worked out that well for him. Arguably, once confronted with other former ISIS cadres telling the truth, he is unable to keep up his false bravado and unquestioned beliefs in ISIS' interpretation of shariah law. His arguments fall flat. He is backed into submission, as evidenced through his responses after watching the videos.

We have focus tested the *Breaking the ISIS Brand* videos in the Balkans, Central Asia, Western Europe, and the Middle East, and overwhelmingly they have hit their mark. No one we spoke to questioned their authenticity or viewed the message as being wrong. Many are sobered by them, including the ISIS emir we discussed in this article.

If you want to support ISCVE's *Breaking the ISIS Brand—ISIS Defectors Counter-Narratives Project,* please contact us at info@ICSVE.org or donate on our webpage www.icsve.org.

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