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Anti-ISIS and Anti-Western: An Examination of Comments on ISIS Counter Narrative Facebook Videos

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Abstract

Despite territorial defeat, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] continues to recruit supporters and incite violence online. At its height, ISIS recruited 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters using professional, emotionally evocative propaganda videos promising employment, purpose, and dignity under the Caliphate. Now, their videos encourage supporters to hope for its return while punishing those who vanquished ISIS by mounting attacks at home. In an effort to disrupt ISIS's propaganda, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE] has created over 175 counter narrative videos featuring ISIS insiders denouncing the group, published in over 125 Facebook campaigns in multiple regions and languages. This article describes five campaigns run in December 2019, focusing on users' comments. The results show a high degree of anti-ISIS as well as anti-Western content, suggesting that ICSVE's content, like ISIS's, is effective in eliciting passionate reactions and can become more successful with format alterations.

Keywords: ISIS, online recruitment, counter narrative, anti-Western

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Introduction

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], a terrorist group whose very name invokes images of journalists being beheaded and young women being sold into sexual slavery, made a name for itself over the last decade as one of the cruellest and brutal terrorist organizations in history, as well as one of the most well-financed groups, at its peak having been estimated to have an annual income of approximately one billion USD (Pagliery, 2015). Additionally, ISIS became notorious for its slick and extremely effective online propaganda. While modest numbers of foreigners travelled to Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan early in the 21st century, having connected to the cause propagated by groups like al Qaeda and al Shabaab, over 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs] flocked to Syria from over 110 countries (The Defense Post, 2018). These people were moved by ISIS's online and face-to-face recruitment including their varied propaganda videos, which were designed to attract men and women of all ages and from all over the world. Some young men resonated to videos featuring smiling groups of men holding AK-47s in one hand and their raised index finger on the other, ISIS's sign for *Tawhid*, the oneness of God. Others saw videos of crying Syrian mothers and children after their communities had been gassed by Bashar Al-Assad's forces, and felt that it was their duty to help their fellow Muslims either by fighting on their behalf or by offering humanitarian aid. Others, still, were drawn to ISIS by promises of belonging, significance, purpose, dignity and living under shariah law and by Islamic standards, where men were strong and bearded, and supported their families, and where women could dress in *niqab* without fear of being insulted, harassed, or even assaulted, as they might have been in their home countries.

ISIS's media operation would blanket the Internet with videos, memes, and tweets, and then utilize the immediate feedback mechanisms available on social media to identify and target individuals vulnerable to recruitment to narrow in

upon and contact anyone who liked, shared, or positively commented on the post, establishing a personal connection. This personal connection was essential to the grooming process, not unlike that used in the last decades by sexual predators prowling chatrooms for potential victims. Similarly, ISIS recruiters asked questions of their followers, determining the needs, desires and gaps in these people's lives, then promising an individually tailored fix, whether it was tangible rewards like a salary, marriage, or powerful position or the more transcendent desires of dignity, significance, purpose and securing one's afterlife. Studies of ISIS's online recruitment show that ISIS members were often in contact with potential recruits around the clock, spending many more hours than parents could, paying careful attention to their potential recruits around the world, chatting in at least twenty-one languages.

As a result of this sophisticated process, recruits travelled to Syria to wage jihad, help build the Caliphate, find an escape from troubled circumstances, raise a family, or help their fellow Muslims in Syria with the knowledge that they might be killed in the process. They saw their journey as one of leaving behind current troubles and taking a noble quest to fight for the Muslim ummah (family of believers) and for their God, leaving a permanent mark on the world when they died and went to Paradise.

During the height of ISIS's reign of terror, ISIS-associated accounts, which at one point consisted in part of 46,000 Twitter accounts, produced an average of 1,000 online propaganda items. A combination of social media sites' monitoring and takedown policies along with the territorial defeat of ISIS over the past few years led to a significant decrease in propaganda production and dissemination, though those monitoring the group's online presence still noted spikes in activity around major ISIS-inspired attacks, such as the March 2017 attack on Parliament in London. ISIS adjusted its social media strategy in response to stricter online policies, such as embedding videos in non-

threatening photos and using encrypted platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. Law enforcement and intelligence professionals found themselves following certain accounts on Twitter or Facebook that suddenly ceased all activity when the user was led by the ISIS recruiter to move the conversation to an encrypted app, warning them to no longer leave a digital trail of their changes in beliefs and priorities on the mainstream platforms. ISIS was defeated territorially and with that came an even more significant decrease in their propaganda output, but they still manage to reuse years of product produced in their heyday as well as continue to produce videos and recruit online from hidden safe havens in Iraq and Syria. Thus, the logical next phase of fighting ISIS is not attacking militarily, but digitally (Speckhard, Shajkovci and Bodo, 2018).

Although ISIS's propaganda covers a myriad of topics, all of their videos are designed to appeal to the viewer's emotions. The strong evocative nature of their recruitment videos is perhaps why many governments' attempts to create counter narrative videos have failed. Many of the early government sponsored videos were designed to appeal to the viewer's logic, not their emotions, for example, by explaining the Islamic concepts of the greater and less jihad in a dry fashion, telling them the legal consequences of joining ISIS or the benefits of living in a secular democracy. These early counter narrative attempts were certainly educational, but they appealed to cognitions and did nothing to drive passions and evoke emotions like ISIS's videos are capable of doing. With that in mind, four key features of effective counter narratives have since been identified: "Revealing incongruities and contradictions in the terrorist narratives and how terrorists act, disrupting analogies between the target narrative and real-world events, disrupting binary themes of the group's ideology, and advocating an alternative view of the terrorist narrative's target" (Braddock and Horgan, 2015). We would add that a strong counter narrative

should also be as capable of evoking strong emotions as those it is trying to counter, and that insider stories carry the most credibility.

Many efforts to produce counter narratives against ISIS as well as al Qaeda, often produced by government entities, have proven ineffective due to their inability to resonate with viewers in the same deep-seated way that the terrorist propaganda does. This is precisely because the emotional element of the counter narrative which is just as important as the aforementioned four criteria was not taken into account. In this vein, the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE] has created over 175 counter narrative videos, taken from a collection of interviews with 239 ISIS cadres and defectors, translated and subtitled in 27 languages, each of which features a speaker who actually lived in ISIS and either returned to their home countries, defected from ISIS, or were imprisoned. These speakers' stories mirror the poignant nature of ISIS's propaganda, telling, sometimes with tears in their eyes, of believing the ISIS recruitment lies, but then ending up watching their families die, seeing innocent people being executed, or being tortured themselves for breaking the most minor and arbitrary rule. The speakers focus on the way that ISIS lied to them and manipulated their deepest desires to serve Islam while twisting and misusing sacred Islamic scriptures, and eventually ruined their lives. ICSVE's project, called *Breaking the ISIS Brand – the ISIS Defectors Interviews Project*, focuses on capturing the voices and emotions of credible defectors and imprisoned cadres. The footage used in the videos, other than the film of the speakers themselves, is taken from actual ISIS propaganda to illustrate the speaker's story which makes a direct contradiction to the terrorist narrative, effectively turning ISIS propaganda back on itself. At the end of the videos, which are titled with pro-ISIS names in order to capture the attention of viewers seeking ISIS videos, the speakers give advice to others who may be thinking of joining ISIS, forcefully denouncing the group. Viewers are then

directed to the ICSVE-run TheRealJihad.org, which, while still under construction, provides additional resources for deradicalization, translated into English, Albanian, and Arabic. ICSVE's counter narrative videos have been used by law enforcement professionals, religious leaders, and non-governmental organizations in face-to-face interactions in Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Belgium, Jordan, and elsewhere as part of robust countering violent extremism programs. Likewise, participants in ICSVE-led focus groups as well as one imprisoned ISIS terrorist emir in Iraq have also reported (or in the case of the emir, was observed) being deeply moved by the content of the videos (Speckhard, Shajkovci and Bodo, 2018).

Previous studies of ICSVE's Facebook ad campaigns featuring these counter narrative videos have explored the reach and immediate feedback responses to the videos, namely the numbers of reactions (e.g., "like," "love," "sad," "haha"), shares, and comments, some of which give a suggestion of greater offline impacts. These studies have also analyzed the success of these counter narrative videos to engage viewers enough to comment and participate in discussions about them, as well as the content of the comments on these videos, finding both pro- and anti-ISIS comments on most of the counter narrative videos. While most pro-ISIS comments either called the speaker a liar or simply exalted ISIS's achievements, the anti-ISIS comments could be clearly split into two different groups. In one group, comments condemned ISIS as criminals and thieves, while simultaneously defending Islam and declaring that ISIS did not represent the religion. In the other group, however, comments were difficult to endorse as being the sought-after reaction to the videos. These comments condemned ISIS but cited conspiracy theories that ISIS was created by outside forces, specifically the United States and Israel, to destroy Muslims from within and to besmirch the religion to the world. Those comments, while indicating that the commenter would be unlikely to travel to Syria to join ISIS,

do not indicate that the commenter would never engage in terrorist tactics, as many of the commenters expressed their ire that ISIS was attacking other Muslims, when they should have been attacking Israel or the West, to which al Qaeda notably refers as “the far enemy” (Novenario, 2016).

Other researchers have examined these types of seemingly paradoxical online statements, often posted spontaneously or in conversation on various social media sites. For instance, analyses of Arabic Twitter posts between 2012 and 2015 found a correlation between negative views of ISIS and negative views of the United States. However, the authors of those studies determined that “the animus is directed less toward American society than toward the impingement of the United States on other countries,” meaning that America may have been used as a general representation of the U.S. military and its coalition partners invading the Middle East (Jamal et al., 2015). In fact, a study examining posts in 2012 and 2013 found that Arabic Twitter posters also wrote negatively about Iran, thus explaining “Anti-Americanism [as...] a specific manifestation of a more general phenomenon: resentment toward powerful countries perceived as interfering in national and regional affairs” (Jamal et al., 2015). Comments of this type have been written in response to previous ICSVE counter narrative video ad campaigns on Facebook, particularly those run in Iraq, which included such statements as, “Terrorism is originally from Europe and America,” “ISIS is an American production, and our stupid people welcomed them,” “What Muslims, these are Jews that pretend to be Muslim to distort Islam, conspire and separate between Muslims for the sake of tearing Mohammed’s nation,” and, a notable deviation from the norm, “The source of terrorism is Turkey.” Such sentiments are readily available all over the mainstream Internet, typically referencing the United States’ history of sowing division in the region and the lack of ISIS attacks in Israel, though one blogger went so far as to name Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as a Mossad agent (Freeman,

2019). Given these findings, the present study examines comments in direct response to these counter narrative videos, rather than posted spontaneously, and the presence of anti-American and other similar sentiments in those comments.

Method

This article covers comments on ICSVE's counter narrative videos in Facebook ad campaigns running from December 3 to December 31, 2019 in local languages in Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia, Kosovo, Bosnia, Albania, Montenegro, and Saudi Arabia. A full description of the ad campaigns can be found in Table 1. The videos in the Facebook ads featured speakers interviewed in prisons run by the Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria and Iraq who were filmed as part of a larger project interviewing ISIS members and defectors around the world. All of the speakers gave informed consent to have their interviews videoed, to take part in the *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narratives Project* and specified if they wanted their names changed or faces blurred. ICSVE staff complied with these requests. The videos were edited by ICSVE staff to create a coherent, emotionally evocative counter narrative to ISIS's propaganda. The same video was shown in Kosovo, Bosnia, Albania, and Montenegro, collectively referred to as "The Balkans" in this article. All of these countries have been identified as significant sources of ISIS FTFs, with the exception of Iraq, which by definition cannot provide FTFs. According to a report from The Soufan Center, approximately 2.8% of foreign fighters came from The Balkans, approximately 10.1% came from Jordan, approximately 9.8% from Tunisia, and approximately 10.9% from Saudi Arabia (Barrett, 2017).

The purpose of these campaigns was to target general Facebook populations in different countries in an effort to raise awareness about the dangers of joining ISIS, hopefully dissuade them from engaging with ISIS and direct them

to ICSVE's TheRealJihad.org, which provides deradicalization resources in English, Arabic, and Albanian. Table 1 provides the names and links to the counter narratives run in each country during December of 2019.

Table 1. Ad Campaigns

Country	Language	Campaign Date	Counter Narrative
The Balkans (Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina)	Albanian	December 3-31, 2019	"The Balkan Muhajireen of the Islamic State Caliphate"
https://youtu.be/z0BwZtfAGs4			
Saudi Arabia	Arabic	December 3-31, 2019	"A Saudi Arabian Reaches for Paradise in the Islamic State Caliphate
https://youtu.be/VpKSqyxNu9A			
Tunisia	Arabic	December 3-31, 2019	"Serving in the Islamic State – I Give my Soul for Tunisia
https://youtu.be/hBcrq8DTbyk			
Jordan	Arabic	December 3-31, 2019	"Guarding Shariah in the Islamic State"
https://youtu.be/uCLHkV3ze2E			
Iraq	Arabic	December 3-31, 2019	"Guarding Shariah in the Islamic State"
https://youtu.be/uCLHkV3ze2E			

Results

Geographic location and demographic information

Table 2 portrays the demographic breakdown of each of the countries where ICSVE ran ad campaigns in December of 2019. The “Reach” metric refers to the number of people who were potentially exposed to the counter narratives. It is not an estimate of how many people watched the counter narrative, but rather of on how many individuals’ Facebook feeds the video was placed, indicating the number of people for whom it was possible to watch the counter narrative. The Reach for these campaigns was lower than that of previous ICSVE-run campaigns featuring counter narrative videos, likely due to the captions for these ads having been in English, while the subtitles of the video itself were in the local language of the Facebook users.

Table 2. Demographic Breakdown

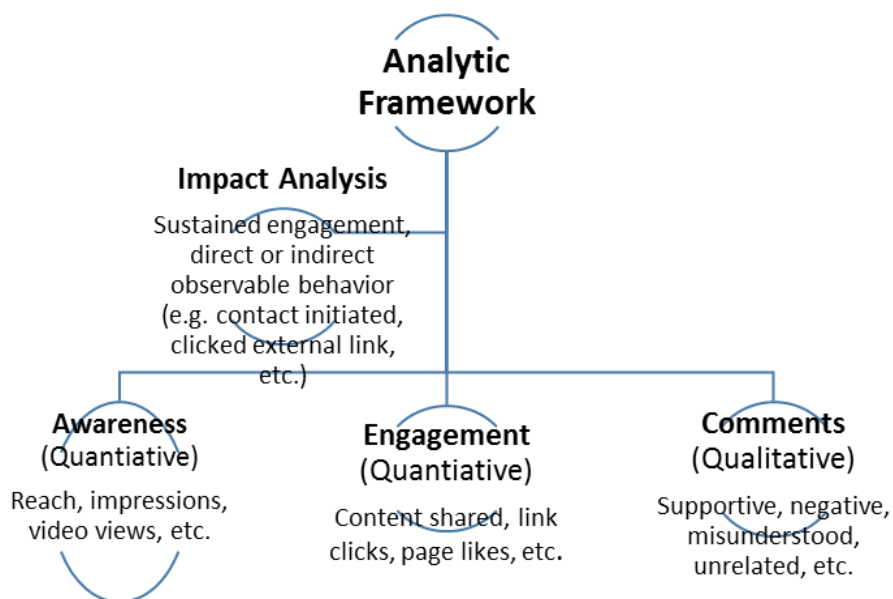
Country/Region	Age Breakdown (Male)	Age Breakdown (Female)	Total Reach
The Balkans	13-17 (1,024)	13-17 (376)	26,472
	18-24 (3,280)	18-24 (1,120)	
	25-34 (5,736)	25-34 (1,600)	
	35-44 (4,584)	35-44 (1,192)	
	45-54 (2,704)	45-54 (928)	
	55-64 (1,448)	55-64 (896)	
	65+ (1,072)	65+ (328)	
Saudi Arabia	13-17 (604)	13-17 (280)	17,248
	18-24 (2,004)	18-24 (720)	
	25-34 (6,060)	25-34 (1,860)	
	35-44 (2,712)	35-44 (808)	
	45-54 (1,128)	45-54 (300)	
	55-64 (332)	55-64 (100)	
	65+ (172)	65+ (108)	
Tunisia	13-17 (7,904)	13-17 (4,032)	63,615

	18-24 (11,248)	18-24 (3,856)	
	25-34 (14,576)	25-34 (4,480)	
	35-44 (6,432)	35-44 (1,520)	
	45-54 (3,216)	45-54 (1,104)	
	55-64 (2,016)	55-64 (704)	
	65+ (1,792)	65+ (576)	
Jordan	13-17 (3,448)	13-17 (1,184)	37,264
	18-24 (8,456)	18-24 (2,024)	
	25-34 (9,672)	25-34 (1,584)	
	35-44 (4,536)	35-44 (936)	
	45-54 (2,456)	45-54 (416)	
	55-64 (1,256)	55-64 (328)	
	65+ (616)	65+ (184)	
Iraq	13-17 (10,320)	13-17 (1,616)	79,409
	18-24 (17,616)	18-24 (2,448)	
	25-34 (22,672)	25-34 (3,136)	
	35-44 (10,080)	35-44 (992)	
	45-54 (5,232)	45-54 (896)	
	55-64 (2,272)	55-64 (592)	
	65+ (1,008)	65+ (320)	

Reach and impact analysis

The first objective of these ad campaigns was simply to engage as many people as possible to ICSVE's counter narrative videos. The second, albeit more impactful goal, was to redirect viewers to ICSVE's TheRealJihad.org website, which is a repository of counter-narrative videos, written materials, and links to helpful organizations for the prevention of and exit from violent extremism. The campaign results were analyzed in terms of awareness, engagement, and impact metrics derived from industry best practices (Patel, 2017; Saric, 2017).

Figure 1. Data Analysis Framework



Source: Authors

Tables 3 provides quantitative awareness metrics regarding video views. The Reach number is compared with the number of video views for at least three seconds and the number of video views for at least 75% of the video duration. Although significant proportions of people reached by these campaigns viewed the video for at least three seconds, watching the videos for three seconds does not ensure that the viewer was exposed to any counter narrative content, as many of the videos begin with introductions similar to ISIS propaganda videos. It is possible that viewers decided not to watch the videos, believing that they were ISIS propaganda. It is also possible that viewers who watched the videos for only a few seconds did not even register

the content and simply stopped while scrolling through their Facebook feeds, perhaps to look at another post. The videos would then be terminated when the person scrolled past them. In contrast, viewers who watched at least 75% of the videos were certainly exposed to the counter narrative content. Those who watched 75% of the video but did not watch until the end of the video may have stopped watching when it became clear that the speaker was encouraging the viewer not to join ISIS.

Using the metrics described above, the percentage of viewers who, after watching until the 10-second mark, decided to watch the rest of the counter-narrative was also calculated. The significant drop in video view rate, first from the three-second threshold to the 75% threshold, and then from the 75% threshold to the Complete View Rate, demonstrates that many viewers' attention was not captured immediately, an important aspect of any ad in the social media era. The decrease in views from 75% to 100% is possibly attributable to the viewer disagreeing with the content of the end of the video, or simply to boredom.

Table 3. Quantitative Awareness Metrics

Country	Video Watches – At Least Three Seconds	Video Watches – At Least 75%	Complete Views	Percent of 10- Second Viewers Who Completed the Video
The Balkans	11,622 (22%)	522 (2.0%)	177 (0.7%)	2.8
Saudi Arabia	6,228 (36%)	253 (1.5%)	77 (0.4%)	3.5
Tunisia	20,341 (32%)	1,143 (1.8%)	246 (0.4%)	2.8
Jordan	12,352 (33%)	1,444 (3.9%)	240 (0.6%)	3.7
Iraq	38,433 (48%)	3,762 (4.7%)	631 (0.8%)	3.1

Table 4 portrays the quantitative engagement metrics. Reactions, the easiest way to engage with the ad, were predictably the highest number of these metrics. The reactions on the videos in Iraq, Tunisia, Jordan, and the Balkans were proportional to both the Reach metric as well as to the number of video watches, measured at both the three-second and 75% marks. For the video shown in Saudi Arabia, however, reactions were disproportionately high compared to the number of view watches, with a higher number of reactions than views for at least 75% of the video duration. Because shares, saves, and comments were not disproportionately high for Saudi Arabia, the high number of reactions suggests that Saudi Arabian Facebook users were likely reacting to the videos as they scrolled past them, often without watching the video in its entirety, sometimes without watching the video at all.

Table 4. Quantitative Engagement Metrics

Country	Reactions	Shares	Saves	Comments
The Balkans	64	6	4	4
Saudi Arabia	265	25	5	4
Tunisia	197	48	28	33
Jordan	134	32	51	28
Iraq	667	32	51	105

Engagement with ICSVE and The Real Jihad

One goal of the counter narrative videos was to promote engagement with ICSVE's Facebook page as well as The Real Jihad website, which offers resources to those at risk for radicalization. Table 5 displays the engagement with ICSVE's Facebook page the resulted from the ads. "Page Engagements" refer to "the number of actions that people took on [the] Facebook Page and its posts, attributed to [the] ad." "Page Likes" refers to the number of people who liked the ICSVE Facebook page itself, not just individual posts. Finally, "Link

Clicks” indicates the number of actions taken through the ad that lead the person to another page or website. This includes people who clicked the link to be directed to TheRealJihad.org, as well as people who navigated to the ICSVE Facebook page from the ad, or to other Facebook profiles, such as those belonging to other commenters. In total, the ads run in December 2019 resulted in 103,208 engagements with the ICSVE Facebook Page and twelve new page likes. The page likes amounted to 38.7% of ICSVE’s new page likes from December 3, 2019 to December 31, 2019.

Table 5. Engagements with ICSVE and The Real Jihad

Country	Page Engagements	Page Likes	Link Clicks
The Balkans	13,081	1	1,312
Saudi Arabia	7,104	0	578
Tunisia	22,724	1	2,089
Jordan	14,298	4	1,732
Iraq	46,001	6	6,721

Comment analysis

The comments on the counter narrative videos indicate that the videos did generate emotional responses from viewers, even if they did not necessarily dissuade the users of their previously held views. It should be noted, however, that Facebook comments are a self-selecting sample: The views expressed in the comments are not representative of the entire country in which they were posted, nor are they representative of the entire sample who viewed, or even reacted to, the videos. Only the most engaged, most passionate viewers will take the time to comment on the videos, thus the comments represent only that small percentage of viewers who were most affected by the video. Nevertheless, it is that subsection of people toward whom the counter

narratives should be geared, as the same people would likely be emotionally affected by ISIS propaganda videos, as well.

Very few comments on the counter narrative videos expressed a positive view of ISIS, with those that did typically calling the speaker a liar or simply accusing ICSVE of lying, such as one commenter from Tunisia, who wrote, “WTF I just watch and why the fuck is it keep coming in as a suggestion get the fuck outta here ain’t nobody got time for your bullshit” [sic]. An Iraqi commenter clearly held a positive view of ISIS, writing in Arabic, “Raise the Lord of ISIS.” A viewer from Montenegro commented in Croatian, “Mockery! This is what the West does,” suggesting either that he did not believe the content of the video and implying that the counter narrative was part of a greater Western effort to discredit ISIS, or that ISIS was created by the West to make a mockery of Islam. The latter view is commonly held in the Arab world but is not as prevalent in the Balkans or elsewhere. Another Bosnian commenter suggested turning ISIS’s cruel punishments back on the speaker, writing, “While he was killing, he was a hero. Now that he’s trapped he becomes a coward, I suggest beheading him.”

Researchers testing these counter narratives in face-to-face interactions and focus groups notice that the speaker is almost always viewed as credible. However, online viewers often attack the credibility of the speaker as way of expressing anger over some aspect of what is being portrayed or that they surmise is behind the counter narrative. For instance, some commenters took the counter narrative and speaker having been from their country as an insult to their national pride and thus suggested that they did not find the speaker credible. These commenters then spoke rather in defense of their own country rather than in defense of ISIS. One wrote in Croatian, “Hell, there are no ISIS terrorist in Bosnia! Fuck you, America!” while a Tunisian viewer wrote,

The is falsification Tunisia is far from being the land of extremism we are by far the most tolerant open minded Arab country we do not discuss “Jihad” in the streets we don’t even discuss religion that much and those who went to Syria to kill their brothers are no longer welcomed they are a threat to our national security these imbeciles have no no rights and are not entitled to anything. [sic]

Some commenters simply posted straightforwardly negative comments about ISIS, such as a commenter on the video shown in the Balkans, who wrote, “Every ISIS fighter should be executed and burned!” as well as commenters from Tunisia, who wrote, “u deserve nothing but a bullet a dirty one” [sic] and “We, Tunisian people , don’t want these rats infesting our country ..they are NOT welcomed here . and we will chase them one by one out of our streets. may they rot in ISIS’s hell.” [sic]. Notably, one anti-ISIS commenter wrote not in negative terms toward ISIS members, but rather in constructive terms. The man wrote in Bosnian, “I would love to work in Kurdistan, not for faith but for justice.” All of the aforementioned comments demonstrate the ability of these counter narrative videos to evoke strong emotions and to engage viewers enough to comment and even sometimes engage in discussions with other commenters on Facebook.

Many comments were neither straightforwardly positive nor negative, as they referenced the conspiracy theory that America and Israel created ISIS. Such comments can be classified as anti-ISIS but are certainly not endorsing non-violence or moderation and thus deserve further attention. One Jordanian commenter wrote, “Terrorism is an American and Zionist made even with different names. Daesh [ISIS] is lying. American Russian Jewish made. What the Americans did in Iraq is double double of what Daesh did.” The same commenter also suspected that ICSVE was a part of the conspiracy: “This is

made by the westerners to destroy Arab countries for the sake of those monkeys and pigs Zionists.” Another Jordanian wrote, “The Zionist occupation is terrorism,” though he also acknowledged, “This is the first time for me to hear about Daesh that way,” indicating that the counter narrative video did introduce a new and interesting viewpoint, even if the commenter did not fully agree with that viewpoint. An Iraqi commenter, who viewed the same counter narrative as that shown in Jordan, doubted that the speaker did not commit more atrocities as part of ISIS while also broaching the topic of the anti-Zionist and anti-Western conspiracy, conflating all his perceived enemies as being part of Daesh: “Who says you didn’t kill or destroyed houses, you all are not honorable neither European, American, Israeli, Iranian you all Daesh.” Another Iraqi posted a cartoon of a pig bearing the Turkish flag, with piglets labeled in Arabic as Liberation Levant, Daesh, Al Nusra Front, Mohamed Al Fatih, Syrian Coalition, and Al Fatih Brigade suckling at its teats, suggesting with a degree of plausibility that the militant groups fighting in Syria who are overtly jihadist and who carry out jihadist crimes while calling out their slogans were birthed by and dependent on Turkey and not truly fighting for the rights of the Syrian people (Hinnebusch, 2015).

Although the conspiracy theory that Israel and the West created ISIS is more prevalent in Arab countries, commenters in the Balkans indicated their support for the theory, although they mentioned Israel far less often than Tunisians, Iraqis, and Jordanians did, perhaps because Israel is seen as less of a threat for them. One commenter in Kosovo wrote, “ISIS is Russian organization mercenaries...!!! Many of them didn’t know why are what they fuckin doing...!!!,” [sic] while another wrote, “ISAL [sic] is American killing army supported by money from NATO protection racket. Mafia!”.

Comments of this anti-Western and anti-Israeli nature have also been written on prior Facebook ad campaigns featuring other ICSVE counter

narrative videos run earlier in 2019 and 2018. For instance, one Iraqi commenter wrote:

This is what you have done to my city and our people [...] so that they facilitate something you've prepared which is a plan made by Israel, America, and Europe and it's one the Cold War's threads between the Soviet Union and America... do you think we're not aware of your deeds [...] we will expose all your plans [...]

Another commenter in Iraq wrote, "What Muslims, these are Jews that pretend to be Muslim to distort Islam, conspire and separate between Muslims for the sake of tearing Mohammed's nation," while another claimed, "The source of terrorism is Turkey" (Speckhard, Shajkovci, Wooster, & Izadi, 2018). A Jordanian commented that ISIS is "an American industry distorting the minds of the Arab-Islamic generation to eliminate Islam gradually, there is no God but Allah, Muhammed is the messenger of Allah," and another wrote, "America is the godfather of terrorism" (Speckhard and Shajkovci, 2018).

Discussion

The use of counter narratives to combat ISIS online is a relatively recent and rarely examined development. This study of five Facebook ad campaigns featuring counter narrative videos examines both the quantitative and qualitative metrics that may be used to determine the potential effectiveness of counter narratives to prevent and disrupt ISIS recruitment. The campaigns, run in countries from which ISIS heavily recruited and continues to recruit, aimed to use credible speakers to dispute the claims made in ISIS propaganda in the same emotionally evocative manner and by doing so to essentially *break the ISIS brand*.

While these counter narrative videos proved their ability to reach and engage viewers there is still need for improvement. Quantitatively, the Reach and Video Views metrics reveal the videos' initial ability in terms of their titles and thumbnails to grab the viewer's attention and keep it for long enough to introduce the counter narrative. However, less than half of all people who were shown the ad on their Facebook feeds watched the videos for even three seconds, and a miniscule proportion of those people watched the videos until the end, suggesting a need for improvement in keeping the viewers' attention, which is not an easy challenge on social media. Changes to future ad campaigns will likely improve these metrics. One already mentioned limitation with these ad campaigns was that the captions were in English, versus using the language of the viewers, as was done in the over 100 of ICSVE's other more successful campaigns. This mistake likely repelled many potential viewers and certainly would give the impression of an outsider trying to influence them on the topic of ISIS. Campaigns that have used captions in the appropriate language have received much higher rates of three second views. Likewise, all of the ICSVE campaigns underline two important issues: First, that most viewers watch the videos on their phones, and second, that many viewers do not have the patience when scrolling through their Facebook feed to devote an entire five minutes for a counter narrative campaign. That any viewers do complete the videos in this highly competitive social media milieu is a sign of engagement success for the ICSVE counter narrative videos. Still, future ICSVE campaigns will test the utility of shorter counter narrative videos, which is likely to increase the percentage of viewers who continue watching until the end of the clip, rather than scrolling past after a few seconds. Those that did watch the videos not only engaged with the video but with ICSVE's Facebook page as well, demonstrating that viewers who watch the entire videos are

curious to learn more about deradicalization and related subjects, which is a positive sign of attitude shift as well.

Qualitatively, the emotionally charged comments on the ads reveal that ICSVE's counter narratives resonate with the viewers' real life experiences and feelings about discrimination, marginalization, unemployment and other injustices that ISIS is able to exploit as well as resonate with their yearnings for belonging, significance, purpose, prosperity, dignity and life lived according to Islamic principles—all things ISIS promises to deliver. Given that other counter narrative efforts have failed to engage on an emotional level with viewers as ISIS's propaganda does, ICSVE's model of using insiders' voices and graphic imagery demonstrates a model of the emotionally evocative counter narrative.

While a study on Facebook such as this one is limited in the ability of researchers to learn what offline results may occur from viewing the *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narratives*, it is possible to learn if the videos are watched, if they engage viewers and to learn how those engaged enough to comment think and feel both about ISIS and insiders who denounce the group as unIslamic, corrupt and overly brutal. That the videos are able to engage and that any viewers comment that they have been challenged with a new view about ISIS, such as in the comment "This is the first time for me to hear about Daesh that way," is a positive outcome and suggests that more who did not comment may have had a similar experience with the videos. Whether the challenges to ISIS's ideology and practices cause viewers to then avoid ISIS's outreach in the future cannot be determined from these comments alone, but one would hope it would, given they were impacted enough to comment in such a manner.

An important issue for consideration is that few of the comments on the ads were specifically pro-ISIS, but a large portion of the comments related to a

perspective that is not oriented toward nonviolence, posing a difficult question: Is the view that ISIS was created by Western forces one that ought also to be challenged or left alone, given that people who hold it are extremely unlikely to join ISIS? Or does it simply create space for new terrorist organizations as well as established anti-Western groups such as al Qaeda to recruit new members?

In addition to their significantly better social media machine, ISIS's concrete, tangible ideology was a key deviation from al Qaeda that likely contributed to the exponentially higher numbers of FTFs joining ISIS than al Qaeda. However, ISIS's loss of territory may be used as evidence that the Caliphate is, as al Qaeda posits, a distant goal. Furthermore, propagation of the conspiracy, either purposefully or inadvertently through comments on counter narratives, that ISIS was created by Israel and Western powers to destroy Islam from within, may also provide fodder for groups like al Qaeda which focus on targeting the "far enemy" while proselytizing to Muslims who do not adhere to their form of radical fundamentalism (Braniff and Pereira, 2014).

Previous studies of anti-American comments have put forward several explanations as to why these conspiracy theories have gained traction, predominantly, but not exclusively, in the Arab world. The authors of one study suggested that the United States tends to be an archetype for a global power interfering in the Middle East, making Anti-American sentiments less about Americans and American society and more about global meddling in the affairs of Iraqis and Syrians. This hypothesis is supported by the presence of statements also made against Saudi Arabia and Iran in the comments on videos shown in Jordan, Iraq, and Tunisia. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have waged proxy wars in the region, often by funding sectarian militias (Mohammed and Moorthy, 2019). It is notable that commenters in the Balkans expressed anti-Russian sentiments, seemingly replacing Saudi Arabia and Iran with Russia as the more proximal global power of which to be wary, this particularly in light

of Russian support for Serbian aggression in the last wars fought there (Nalaeva and Semenov, 2016). This fear was also legitimized by a recent report from the European Council on Foreign Relations concluded that Russia may intend to use the Balkans as a political bargaining chip with the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Galeotti, 2018). Arguably, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have used Iraq, Syria, and other smaller Middle Eastern countries for similar purposes.

The anti-Israel comments, though sometimes linked with anti-Western and anti-American comments, however, cannot be placed in the same category and likely reflect societal wide views and widespread anger in these Middle Eastern countries about Israel. Although there is evidence that Israel engages in covert operations in the region, that the country and its people are viewed in many comments as symbols of meddling global powers equal to the United States, Russia, or even Saudi Arabia and Iran is alarming. This likely reflects longstanding Middle Eastern anger against Israel over the Palestinian issue as well as views of Israel's inflated power in the region, particularly following military defeat by Israel of some in the region coupled with anger over strong U.S. support for Israel. The anti-Israeli sentiments and the theory that Israel created ISIS to sow division among Muslims found in many of the comments appears to be a reflection of mainstream Middle Eastern society in which this view of equating ISIS with Zionism and eloquently claiming that ISIS was created by Israel is also spread in scores of online blog posts and opinion pieces. One commentator echoed these same statements: "Israel has plotted and conspired against Arab states in the region, playing sectarian and tribal tensions to generate instability." He continued, "The fact that ISIS has not moved against Israel and instead focused on killing Muslims says a lot about this organization's real mission" (Shakdam, 2014; Martinez, 2015; Freeman, 2019; Chihab, 2019). The same question was also echoed in ICSVE's interviews of

ISIS members, some who asked their leaders why the group was not first attacking Israel before fighting Middle Eastern powers and attacking Western targets. Other online articles widely circulated in the Middle East also express the view that ISIS and Zionism are essentially the same ideology (Walberg, 2018). It is likely the societally wide spread of such beliefs may underly the presence of anti-ISIS views mixed together with anti-Israel views stated in these Facebook comments. Moreover, it is interesting that the same thought process of likening ISIS's ideology to Zionism has also been used by ISIS members and supporters to justify their actions and characterize people who support Israel and oppose ISIS as Islamophobia.

Conclusion

The Facebook ad campaigns run by ICSVE in December 2019 reinforce the findings from ICSVE's previous counter narrative campaigns: Improvement is necessary to increase viewership, but when people watch the videos, they engage and interact with them, likely showing some level of prevention qualities in terms of *Breaking the ISIS Brand* and disrupting ISIS's successful online and face-to-face recruitment. The quantitative metrics demonstrate that the videos are likely too long to effectively retain as much viewership as they might gain with shorter versions. Going forward, ICSVE will test whether more viewers will watch the entirety of a one-minute versus a five-minute video. One can imagine a situation in which a user will watch three to ten seconds of a video before moving their cursor to check the duration of the video. Seeing that there is less than a minute, rather than three or four minutes, left may encourage more users to continue watching the video to the end rather than moving to other content on their Facebook feeds. As noted above, ensuring that users see the ads in their native language will also improve quantitative metrics.

Despite the difficulty in encouraging users to watch the entirety of the counter narrative videos, it is clear from the qualitative metrics, particularly the comment analysis, that those who do watch the videos are deeply affected by them. Commenters do not taunt the speakers or ICSVE itself, and they rarely accuse the speakers of being actors. Rather, the commenters post messages expressing their true feelings, like sadness, anger, fear, and suspicion. Regardless of their opinions about ISIS and its fighters, most commenters see the speakers as credible and are willing to engage in conversation about the group as a result of hearing his or her story of life inside ISIS. Thus, it is evident that the content of ICSVE's counter narratives is effective and may be used not only online, but by professionals working with people at risk for radicalization to the militant jihadist ideology.

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Disclosure Statement

ICSVE and the authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Biographical Note

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

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