Jihad is our Way:
Testing a Counter Narrative Video in Two Somali American Focus Groups

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I. Introduction

During the height of their influence, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS] was able to recruit tens of thousands of foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs] from all over the world to join their jihad through the use of high-quality, emotionally evocative propaganda memes and videos posted on social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and You-Tube, as well as encrypted apps like WhatsApp and Telegram. ISIS also arose at the precise time when the newly designed immediate feedback mechanisms of social media allowed them to blanket the Internet and then sit back and wait to see who showed interest by liking, sharing, tweeting or otherwise endorsing their propaganda. Then they could hone in on that group to swarm, love-bomb and otherwise interact to move them further along the terrorist trajectory.

Given the broad reach and efficacy of ISIS's videos, fighting the propagation of their terrorist narrative has been a priority for Western governments. Even with the territorial defeat of ISIS, the group continues to disseminate their message online, inspiring so-called "lone actors" to carry out attacks in their name all over the world. Indeed, in March of 2020, ISIS released its latest video from Kirkuk, entitled "Dominant Over Their Enemies." In the video, militants boast of continued attacks in northern Iraq, resulting in multiple civilian and military fatalities.[1] Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to policymakers and intelligence professionals to understand how to make counter narrative videos that can effectively deter would-be ISIS mem-

bers from committing terrorist attacks as well as being radicalized in the first place.[2]

Research has identified three primary means of fighting terrorist narratives online. The first, called "alternative narratives," are proactive efforts to promote democratic values, prosocial behavior, and peaceful ways of enacting positive social change. A second manner of fighting ISIS digitally is called "government strategic communications." These public awareness campaigns are also proactive efforts to explain the government's policies and strategies regarding terrorism and to make people aware of violent extremism and the risk factors for radicalization.[3] Both alternative narratives and government strategic communications can be extremely useful in targeting the general public with a primary goal of awareness. When addressing populations who have already begun to radicalize or hold extremist beliefs, however, those measures often fall flat. For these populations, a reactive approach is better suited. This approach is known as the "counter narrative." Counter narratives, as the name implies, are used to directly contradict the narratives put forth by ISIS and other terrorist groups in their propaganda materials. Counter narratives may be complemented by alternative narratives, but people who have already been radicalized will not be receptive to the alternative narrative until they have been disavowed, or at least shaken, of their extremist beliefs.

There are four criteria crucial to creating an effective counter narrative: 1) "Revealing incongruities and contradictions in the terrorist narratives and how terrorists act," 2) "disrupting analogies between the target narrative and real-world events," 3) "disrupting binary themes of the group's ideology," and 4) "advocating an alternative view of the terrorist narrative's target."[4] Other recommendations include making sure that the counter narrative is based on valid and reliable research of the terrorist narrative, creating the counter narrative with an understanding of the radicalization process, aiming the counter narrative at a specific audience, using a credible messenger, and controlling the distribution of the counter narrative.[5] Some counter narratives have been criticized for focusing too heavily on the terrorist ideology and operating under the assumption that if people no longer ascribe to the ideology, they will not commit a violent extremist act, and that people who commit violent extremist acts by definition hold violent extremist views. This ignores the many purposes, other than ideological, for which individuals join terrorist movements including belonging,

significance, a sense of purpose, dignity, empathy for the plight of oth-
ers, and a sense of duty.

Other counter narratives have been accused of demonizing terror-
ists and their ideology to the point that they are glamorized and made
more attractive in the eyes of the viewer. Both of these criticisms are
merited but can be addressed in a thoughtfully created counter narra-
tive. Portraying true stories told by credible speakers allows the viewer
to see the human cost of the acts committed by terrorist, particularly
if it focuses as much on the cost to the terrorist him or herself. This
approach also humanizes the violent extremists and creates a foil with
whom the viewer may identify and to whom they may listen. Indeed,
anyone going down a dedicated path, particularly extremism, starts
to narrow focus to views propagated by the extremist group, thus an
insider can be a very powerful messenger and one that may be heeded.
When the extremists are portrayed not as purely evil monsters, but as
complex, nuanced characters, the viewer is forced to think critically
about their behavior, particularly if the insider makes the choice of
going down the terrorist trajectory appear that it may not work out so
well for the viewer. Portraying complex characters who are neither all
good or all bad also similarly contradicts the binary nature of the mili-
tant jihadi terrorist narrative, particularly that there is only one funda-
mental and literal interpretation of the Quran and that if one wishes
to be a "good Muslim," they have an absolute obligation to obey the
orders of the terrorist group.

This study provides an evaluation of a counter narrative video that
adheres to these principles, using two focus groups, the first com-
prised of Somali-American men and the second of Somali-American
women living in San Diego, California. Radicalization has long been a
concern in the Somali-American community. Between 2006 and 2011,
there was a surge in young Somali men leaving Minnesota, home of
the highest Somali-American population in the United States, to fight
jihad in Somalia alongside al Shabaab. This group of men was initially
recruited by a European al Shabaab fighter who told potential recruits
that it was their duty to defend Somali women against what he said
was a mass rape by Kenyan soldiers. These first recruits then reached
out to other Somali-Americans on social media to glorify the jihad, first
in Somalia and later for the development of a Caliphate in Iraq and
Syria.[6] As of 2016, at least 20 young people, mainly Somali-Americans,
left Minnesota to join terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, with at least
nine Minnesotans having been arrested on such charges since 2014.[7]

The vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment by terrorist groups is driven by a number of factors, each particularly strong in young Somali-American males. A hostile surrounding environment is a common grievance among both Muslims and Black men, and the effect is compounded by the identity crisis that the individual may experience related to their status as an immigrant or child of an immigrant. Many of these young men have also experienced the traumatic loss of a father figure during the war in Somalia and are therefore more receptive to the idea of joining a supportive, even seemingly nurturing, group in which they completely belong religiously and ethnically.[8]

Given the high number and severity of risk factors for radicalization and subsequent action among Somali-American youth, it is important to explore new methods of prevention. As previously noted, past government efforts to counter the terrorist narrative and prevent radicalization have been found lacking, partially due to the distrust that many Muslim communities feel toward the government in relation to countering violent extremism [CVE]. Indeed, these communities tend to suspect any individual working on CVE efforts of being government informants.[9] Moreover, there have been campaigns put forth by the U.S. State Department ("Think Again, Turn Away") and the UK Home Office that failed due to the U.S.'s mocking tone and use of violent footage that some believed could "legitimize terrorists," and the UK's use of cognitive, rather than emotional, arguments that fell flat when competing with the emotionally evocative calls of terrorist groups.[10]

The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE]'s *Breaking the ISIS Brand – the ISIS Defectors Interviews Project* is a response to the dearth in effective counter narratives for use in fighting ISIS and other terrorist groups online. ICSVE's over 170 counter narrative videos are made from a collection of interviews with over 239 ISIS cadres and defectors, translated and subtitled into 27 languages. Each counter narrative video features a speaker who actually lived under ISIS and has either returned to their home countries, escaped from ISIS, or been imprisoned. These speakers' stories mirror the emotional nature of ISIS's propaganda, but in doing so denounce the group as unIslamic, corrupt and overly brutal. These ISIS insiders tell their stories, sometimes with tears in their eyes, of watching their families die, seeing innocent people being executed, or being tortured themselves for breaking the most minor and arbitrary rule. They focus on the way ISIS lied to them, twisted and misused Islam, and eventually ruined their lives.

The project aims to capture the voices and emotions of credible defectors and imprisoned cadres and the footage used in the videos to illustrate what the speaker is describing is taken from actual ISIS propaganda. This, in essence, turns the terrorists' propaganda on its head, using the defector's voice and ISIS's video records as a direct contradiction to the terrorist narrative, while diligently avoiding glorifying the violent acts depicted in the ICSVE counter narrative video clips. It should be noted that all of the speakers in the counter narrative videos gave informed consent prior to having their interviews filmed and agreed to appear in a counter narrative denouncing ISIS, specifying whether they wanted their names changed or faces blurred in the final product.

Evaluating the efficacy of one of these counter narrative videos in these focus group settings offered ICSVE the opportunity to create an open dialogue with a community particularly vulnerable to violent extremism. In this setting, participants are able to not only provide feedback on the quality of the counter narrative, but also to provide insight into their own thoughts and experiences about ISIS, al Shabaab, and violent extremism in general. Counter narratives are likely the best way to fight ISIS's ideology online among targeted communities that have already been exposed to the ideology. Therefore, receiving feedback from samples representative of those communities is critical.

II. Method

The participants in these two focus groups included five Somali-American men and five Somali-American women, all living in San Diego, California, a city with one of the largest Somali-American populations in the United States.[11] The average age of the men was 25.8 while the average age of the women was 23.4. Of the men and women, only one described themselves as "middle income," while all of the other participants described their economic level as "lower/poor." The participants were well educated, with three men having completed graduate degrees and the other two having completed undergraduate degrees. Of the women, one had completed an undergraduate degree, with the other four listing high school as their highest level of education. All of the participants identified as Sunni Muslim.

Focus group participants gave informed consent prior to beginning the study. They then completed baseline questionnaires designed to assess their feelings and beliefs regarding violence and extremism in

general, as well as regarding ISIS in particular. The questionnaires also asked demographic questions regarding the participant's age, gender, educational level, economic level, and religion. Examples of the broader baseline statements, rated on a seven-point Likert scale, include, "Violence is unfortunately necessary to right the wrongs in the Muslim world," and "Shariah can and should replace corrupt governance structures in the Muslim world." Examples of the more specific statements, rated on the same scale, include, "I would like to see a true Islamic State or Caliphate being formed that unites Muslim lands and peoples," and "I identify with the version of Islam propagated by groups like ISIS, al Shabaab, and al Qaeda." The end of the baseline questionnaire also left space for participants to answer the question, "What do you currently think of groups like ISIS, al Shabaab, and al Qaeda?" as well as write down any other comments.

After filling out the baseline questionnaire, the participants were shown ICSVE's counter narrative video entitled, "Jihad is Our Way." An English-language transcript of the counter narrative video is provided in Appendix A. "Jihad is Our Way" features 27-year-old Kenyan woman, Aisha, who, after being abandoned by her husband and having moved to the UAE to serve as a maid, fell into militant jihadi online discussion groups. After being exposed to extremist ideology online and falling in love with her online recruiter, Aisha aspired to be a suicide bomber for ISIS. When Aisha traveled to India to connect with a man she had met online, with whom she planned to travel to Iraq to fight jihad hoping to die as "martyrs" together, she was arrested by Indian intelligence and extradited back to Kenya, where she was convicted on terrorism charges. The video ends with Aisha explaining that the extremists on social media lied and that she should have studied the Quran in order to go to Paradise in a good and pure way, not by becoming a suicide bomber.[12]

The participants were then asked to fill out two follow-up questionnaires. The first was aimed at gauging the participant's feelings about the video itself. For example, the first two questions on that questionnaire asked participants to circle adjectives describing first what they thought of the video (e.g., "crazy," "powerful," "unsettling") and then describing how the video made them feel (e.g., "anxious," "disgusted," "proud"). The questionnaire then included statements regarding the counter narrative video rated on a seven-point Likert scale, including, "I believe that Aisha is telling the truth about her experiences with violent extremist recruiters and groups," and "I believe this video could

convince someone thinking of joining ISIS or al Shabaab not to do so." Finally, on the second follow-up questionnaire, participants were asked to rate the same statements from the baseline questionnaire, with the addition of one extra statement, "This video made me think more negatively about violent extremist groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab."

III. Results

The participants in the focus groups have many of the demographic risk factors for radicalization, particularly their age and low socioeconomic status. However, they were not as highly exposed to or inclined toward terrorist ideology as the intended audience for counter-narratives. None of the women and four of the men (40% of the total sample) had ever discussed the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Somalia with others. None of the participants had watched ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab's online videos, and 80% did not agree with the statement, "I find some of the claims of groups like ISIS, al Shabaab and al Qaeda to be compelling." The two men who did endorse the statement rated it as 2 and 3 on the seven-point Likert scale. None of the participants said that living under ISIS or al Shabaab was appealing to them.

There were no significant differences between the participants' baseline and post-test scores on the questionnaires. This is likely due to all of the participants having held negative ideas of ISIS and al Shabaab from the outset of the focus groups, so their views were unlikely to change after watching a counter narrative that confirmed their previously held beliefs.

Although the participants' views did not change across time, there was some disagreement among the participants regarding some of the broader statements given on the questionnaires. These discrepancies were all gender-based, indicating that the men in the focus group, despite their negative views of ISIS, were more supportive of beliefs consistent with Islamic extremist ideology. For the baseline questionnaire, on the statements, "People's desire to engage in violence is mostly driven by injustices and the desire to defend the weak and hopeless," "Western powers, in collaboration with local bad governance, are responsible for the mistreatment and humiliation of Muslims around the world," "Shariah can and should replace corrupt governance structures in the Muslim world," and "I would like to see a true Islamic State or Caliphate being formed that unites Muslim lands

and peoples," men gave average ratings of 3.6, 4.8, 5.6, and 4.2, respectively. In contrast, women gave the first statement an average rating of 1.4, with only one woman rating the statement higher than 1. On the three subsequent statements above, the women gave unanimous ratings of 1, indicating their complete disagreement.

More minor gender differences also appeared regarding statements related to exposure to narratives and their potential response to counter narratives. On average, men rated the statement, "I sometimes discuss with others the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Somalia," as 3.4, whereas women were once again unanimous in their complete disagreement. Men also rated the statement, "I would believe someone who has just returned from ISIS or al Shabaab about their experiences inside the group," higher than women, with the two groups rating that statement 3.2 and 1.2, respectively.

As noted above, the scores for the same statements given after watching the counter narrative did not differ significantly and the gender differences remained constant.

While the participants' responses were generally consistent when asked about their thoughts about ISIS, al Shabaab, and Islam, their perspectives on the counter narrative video itself were more variable and appeared to be less gender-based. After watching the video, the participants were asked to circle adjectives from lists regarding, first, what they thought of the video, and second, how the video made them feel. Among the first set of words, the most commonly endorsed was "heartbreaking" (endorsed by six participants), followed by "horrible" and "sad," each endorsed by three participants. Among the second set of words, the most commonly endorsed was "ashamed," which was endorsed by three participants, followed by "horrified" and "nervous," each endorsed by two participants.

Overall, the participants viewed the speaker as a credible messenger, rating the statements "I believe Aisha is who she says she is," and "I believe that Aisha is telling the truth about her experiences with violent extremist recruiters and groups," as 6.2 and 6.6, respectively. This was a positive response in that a counter narrative featuring a terrorist insider lacks power if viewers doubt that it is even an authentic terrorist testimony.

When asked about their thoughts on her story, beyond its veracity, men and women differed in that men were slightly less likely than women to agree with the statement, "I think Alisha's heartbreak and isolation working in the Gulf made her vulnerable to violent extremist

recruitment," (average ratings of 4.6 and 7, respectively). Regarding a different possible motivation for Aisha, women were far less likely than men to agree with the statement, "I think Aisha was already suicidal when she got involved with these violent extremists," (average ratings of 1.6 and 5.2, respectively).

The participants agreed least in regard to the efficacy of the video. For the statement, "This video affects my opinion on how I feel about groups like ISIS and al Shabaab," the participants returned scores with the spread: 1, 1, 2, 2, 4, 4, 5, 6, 6, 7. This spread reflects the participants' insight into their previous anti-ISIS and anti-al Shabaab views and their awareness that a video that supported their views would not have a large impact on them. In contrast, the spread for the statement, "I believe this video could convince someone thinking of joining ISIS or al Shabaab not to do so," was far narrower and more negatively skewed: 1, 4, 6, 6, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. This indicates that the participants recognized that although the video did not affect their already negative views of ISIS, it might have a greater impact on people who held neutral or positive views of ISIS prior to watching the video.

IV. Comments

On the baseline questionnaires, most participants described their views toward ISIS when asked for additional comments in a straight-forward manner: "They don't represent Islam!", "they are crazy," and "they are very unIslamic and should be stopped," while others focused on actions rather than ideology: "They kill innocent women and children." Because the participants who wrote comments in addition to rating the given statements expressed exclusively negative views of ISIS, it is perhaps unsurprising that the comments written after the participants viewed the counter narrative did not demonstrate a change of heart: "They need to study the real Islam that the majority of Muslims practice," "Islam is Peace and these guys are making us look like we are evil."

Some comments written after watching the video, however, indicated insight into the path toward radicalization, in addition to the evil of ISIS: "I feel many people are not understanding the real problem how anyone can be brainwashed." The same participant also wrote, "I was horrified watching this video, I think you should show the entire Somali community." This is a good indication of confidence in these counter narrative videos to convince, protect against and prevent terrorist recruitment.

The participants provided more insight into their reactions to the counter narrative during the facilitated oral discussion. The participants commented that the video was "heartbreaking" and "horrible and scary," with one man stating, "It seemed a little depressing too, it's not cool killing people especially saying it's for my *deen* (religion)." Regarding how the video made him feel, the same man responded, "It kind of makes me feel anxious just because there is too much killing and bombing in Somalia and Kenya as well. I wonder how we are going to fix this." Two other participants expressed shame at being associated with extremist violence. One man said in response to the same question, "I would probably say ashamed, because she's Somali and Muslim; she's screwing her name over, and now I bet there's going to be movies and books about this." Another man agreed: "I would say ashamed, too but I would also add there the biggest disappointment is using religion; every culture has bad people but being Muslim is representing an entire faith; this needs to stop and be controlled."

Regarding the credibility of the speaker, the men in particular expressed doubts about Aisha's expression of remorse as well as her experience. When asked to explain why he did not believe Aisha was remorseful, one man said, "Because she's not even emotional, how are your intentions to kill people and when God brings you back from committing that you're just cool about it and keeping it pushing? She's not even crying or shaking when she's talking about." He may not recognize the emotional numbing that may occur in a traumatized individual, particularly one who has landed in prison as a result of being tricked. Another man responded to his cohort, "Yeah that makes sense, but she could be reading a script too. Overall not everyone can be emotional; people can be different emotionally." Her lack of emotion also led the men to doubt the accuracy of Aisha's story. Said one man, "I don't think she's telling the truth, just my personal opinion if you're willing to kill people you would not be comfortable talking about. It could be she has experience in killing people too and she doesn't give a damn." Another added, "I also believe she could be hiding something, or she had involvements in other terrorist attacks. So basically, I believe she's telling the truth but not the entire truth." According to the Kenyan police and her trial, Aisha had not killed anyone and was stopped before being sent on her suicide mission.

The Somali-American men also speculated about Aisha's vulnerabilities to recruitment by al Shabaab and ISIS. When the facilitator asked if the group thought that Aisha's isolation while working in

the United Arab Emirates made her vulnerable, the men volunteered a new explanation reflecting typical Somali experiences and views of Kenya: "I think her experiences in Kenya had to do with this; she doesn't talk about her bad experience but Somali communities there are being abused. That's where al Shabaab comes in to save the day type of thing," said one. Two others agreed, adding, "Well I don't see much terrorist attacks in the UAE, basically people go there to party, and I think she was vulnerable inside Kenya." "Yes, it's Kenya not really UAE they got lots of money to give people in terms of work and lifestyle even though they abuse Africans."

The men also agreed that Aisha was manipulated, even brainwashed, into wanting to become a suicide bomber, commenting, "I think she was radicalized to be suicidal, these groups are heavily going after women because they're more vulnerable and easier to deceive than men," and "I think she was brainwashed like all the millions of Somalis that are brainwashed by al Shabaab." Although Aisha was recruited by a man, the focus group participants shared the belief that women are often the recruiters, with one commenting, "How do you think these girls are marrying jihadists; it's because other women are wheeling [sic] them in."

Regarding the efficacy of the counter narrative, the men agreed that the video did not change their previously-held negative feelings about ISIS and al Shabaab, but some mentioned that the video made them "think we need to be more aggressive in ending them once for all [sic]!" When the facilitator asked whether the "video could convince someone thinking of joining ISIS or al Shabaab not to do so," the men agreed that it might be more useful for those who had yet to be fully radicalized, as well as the general public, commenting, "It's helpful in the sense of someone who's thinking about joining, but not for someone who's made up their mind already," and "It's helpful and good; I think the best way to kill them by public opinion; show the video to everyone, especially Somalis." This also was a strong vote of confidence in the efficacy of these counter narrative videos to potentially protect and prevent terrorist recruitment.

The women discussed the video separately from the men but echoed their descriptions of the video and their own feelings as "heartbreaking," "horrible," and "nervous." The women found the speaker more credible than the men did, with only one woman commenting that "it

could also be that she's not telling the whole story." In contrast to the men, who noted Aisha's lack of emotion, one woman stated, "I can hear her pain and suffer [sic]," and two other women agreed.

In regard to the question related to Aisha's isolation in the UAE, the women, like the men, introduced new possible vulnerabilities. Instead of expressing a belief that the treatment of Somalis in Kenya was a factor, the women focused on mental health, explaining, "People can have issues dealing with [mental health problems] and people can exploit that," and "These people who are killing and blowing themselves up are all dealing with mental health problems." Another woman responded to the previous comment, "Maybe, but that is an issue in the community, especially Somali community. We don't think mental health affects us at all." As with all focus groups run with the ICSVE counter narratives this reflects an observation of vulnerabilities in the "at risk" community that was evoked by the video and is likely important to consider. Overall, the women were less verbose than the men and did not elaborate extensively on the statements they rated after watching the video.

V. Discussion

The results of these two focus groups indicate that ICSVE's counter narrative videos are emotionally evocative, a key characteristic of ISIS's propaganda videos. Nine participants responded that the video "made me think more negatively about violent extremist groups like ISIS, al Qaeda and al Shabaab," rating the statement as five or greater on the seven-point scale. Given the participants' initial negative views of ISIS, however, it cannot be determined how people with more radical ideologies may be affected by the counter narratives. However, eight participants rated the statement, "I believe this video could convince someone thinking of joining ISIS or al Shabaab not to do so," as five or greater. Indeed, based on the participants' discussions, it appears that ICSVE's counter narratives may be most effective with people considering joining violent extremist groups who have been partially, but not fully, radicalized. There is previous evidence, however, that ICSVE's counter narratives have the potential to make even the most die-hard extremists admit their mistakes and the contradictions between their ideology and their actions as when an actual ISIS emir watched two of them.[13]

The results of this study also confirm that ICSVE's counter narrative model adheres to the criteria put forth by previous researchers. The participants agreed that the video "revealed incongruities and contradictions," as demonstrated by their unanimous rating of 7 for the statement, "ISIS is a corrupt organization," and unanimous rating of 1 on the statement, "The extremist behaviors, as described here, are righteous according to Islam," both answered after watching the video. This consensus regarding the incongruity of the terrorist narrative with actual experiences inside the group exists despite variability in the male participants' agreement with various extremist statements presented in the questionnaire prior to watching the video. In relation to the counter narrative's ability to "disrupt analogies between the target narrative and real-world events" and to "disrupt binary themes of the group's ideology," the results of this study could not reveal a causal effect of the video, as the participants' perspectives of the terrorist ideology did not change after watching the video. Although some of the men agreed with some of ISIS's ideology, both before and after watching the video, such as the desire for shariah to replace corrupt government structures and the desire for a Caliphate to unite Muslim lands and people, none of the men endorsed any violent acts. Additionally, none of the participants endorsed the statement, "I disagree with the methods of engagement (e.g. beheadings, etc.) of groups like ISIS, al Shabaab and al Qaeda, but I support their overall objectives." This suggests that the men who did agree with the aforementioned extremist statements did not view them as part of ISIS's overall objective. Perhaps they have come to the same conclusion as many scholars studying the media coverage of ISIS, namely that religion is the rationalization, rather than the root cause.[14] Future studies would be well-served by inquiring as to what the focus group participants viewed as ISIS and al Shabaab's primary objectives: a true Caliphate, or an authoritarian group's accumulation of territory and power disguised as an idyllic utopia. Such a view could also reflect the prevalence of the belief among many Somalis that religion is inextricably linked to governing, and that governmental failures are due to too much secularization, rather than not enough.[15] The focus group participants also agreed that the counter narrative "advocated an alternative view of the terrorist narrative's target." During the discussion portion of the male focus group, one man astutely commented, "all this stuff of killing is unbeatable in our faith and way of life. I do understand that some people might be interpreting our Quran and Islam to their personal

agenda and it's us that should be stopping them." The men were also able to distinguish between the concepts advocated in the terrorist narratives and the alternative, prosocial ways of addressing them. When asked, "Do you believe going to fight jihad in places like Syria and Iraq is the action of a good Muslim?", one man responded,

"If human beings are being abused and killed we have an obligation to stop that – but in this case it's so-called Muslims who are killing everyone. I don't see people going to fight against al Shabaab and ISIS. It's a disgrace."

Another added that "being a good Muslim is keeping the peace and respecting differences of faith, culture and everything else." A third man's answer to the same question, however, revealed the difficulty in enacting CVE programs in Muslim communities. He said, "Jihad has been given a completely different meaning; it's an agenda by the media to make Muslims look evil. You should go for the real jihad which is to help people live a better life not to destroy humanity." This statement implies that he believes that it is not necessarily the terrorists, but rather the media, as a representative of the larger Western or secular society, that has co-opted and corrupted the word "jihad." Although this man's understanding of the concept of "jihad" is not extremist, someone with this belief may still be susceptible to recruitment by ISIS, as many foreign fighters were, thinking that he would be traveling to Syria to provide humanitarian aid. Moreover, the belief that the media has changed the meaning of "jihad" is consistent with the terrorist narrative that the West is at war with Islam and that mainstream media reports of ISIS's atrocities should not be trusted.

The hallmark of ICSVE's counter narrative model is the use of real ISIS members and defectors as messengers, and this was arguably the most successful aspect of the counter narrative tested in these two focus groups. While some participants thought Aisha may not have been completely truthful about her involvement in ISIS, none of the participants doubted that Aisha was who she said she was or suggested that she may have been play-acting. Their responses to the questions about what they thought about the video and how they felt reflect the empathy that the viewers had toward the speaker. The fact that the participants used words like "heartbreaking," "tragic," and "sad," demonstrates the nuances of Aisha's story. The terrorist narrative is binary, so the endorsement of such complex feelings represents

a deviation from the emotions evoked by terrorist propaganda, such as "angry" or "proud," which do not require contemplation of subsequent action based on those emotions. The words endorsed by the participants are emotions that require thought and discussion, both of which are important aspects of deradicalization.

Thus, the testing of this counter narrative in two focus groups of male and female individuals representative of an at-risk religious-ethnic group in the U.S. proved a success. Further studies along the same lines need to be conducted to learn even more but it is clear that using ISIS and al Shabaab insiders to counter message against this group resonates with at-risk individuals and is judged to be an effective way of potentially protecting against and preventing terrorist recruitment. Given that it only takes one or two persons to mount a lethal homegrown attack, this is a significant step toward success in the CVE field.

Notes

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Appendix A
Transcript of *Jihad is Our Way*

In Paradise, there is eternal life there.
There is no dying there.

So, there is no need of staying in this world.

AISHA
27-year-old
Kenyan ISIS Suicide Bomber

I'm striving to go to *jannah*,
to go to Paradise.

There I'll live forever.

Actually, to be honest,

I just wanted
to be a suicide bomber.

Anticipating what it would be like to explode herself in a crowded place and become a "martyr," Aisha became filled with a mystical ecstasy.

I just feel like I'm just alone on the air
and a little wind coming towards me.

I felt like I was flying,
but I was not high [on drugs].

Aisha learned about violent extremist groups like ISIS, Boko Haram and al Shabaab through social media groups.

There is this woman, an Islamic woman,
who was dressed up in all black

with stockings and gloves and *niqaab*
and she was holding an AK 47.

And, on her gloves, there was this flag
of [the] Islamic State. She was dressing good.

So I loved it, I loved it, I loved it so very much,
so I used to like those posts.

While working in the United Arab Emirates, Aisha met a fellow violent extremist online who was living in Hyderabad, India.

She fell in love with him.

They conspired to go to Iraq to join ISIS and fight militant jihad
together.

[Online extremists claimed] somebody
who is not in our religion is a *kuffar* [unbeliever]

and a *kuffar* is our enemy.

In the Quran, it is said, 'When you see them
in the field [of battle], just cut off their heads.'

[In the online extremist groups,]
we used to say, 'Jihad is our way,

so we're going to do jihad until somebody dies.'

Aisha's employers in Abu Dhabi didn't know that Aisha was preparing
for militant jihad against people like them.

Those people were Shia and
[online extremists claimed that]

[the] Islamic faith are against Shia, you know.

They used to call them pigs.

Aisha says she had second thoughts about potentially killing Shia
because she had emotionally connected with her Shia employer.

I didn't want it to be like that.

I used to love her.

Yeah, she was so kind to me.
She was so good.

Every time that thought comes,
I just ignore it.

 I just ignore it because they were very good,
though they were Shias, but they were very good.

Aisha never had the chance to carry out her suicide mission.

While traveling in India, Indian intelligence arrested and interrogated her. She was extradited back to Kenya where she was convicted on terrorism charges.

Aisha has since changed her beliefs on suicide attacks and militant jihadi groups.

They were lying.
They twist things.

If you believe these lies,
You'll get separated from your family.

Another thing,
you don't want to go to hell.

If you are a Muslim, you have to study the Quran well
and know what the Quran says.

So, don't stick to those social media things
and avoid these things about [militant] jihad.

It is not good for you.

Jannah, I pray to God that I go,
but not in [the militant] jihad way.

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