Challenges and Possible Opportunities for Developing Effective Counter-narrative Measures to the “Islamic State” Movement *

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Introduction

How can Western societies prevent their citizens from joining extremist movements? This has been a steadily recurring topic in public debates since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. With the growing influx of foreign fighters from Europe participating in the Syrian civil war, and especially with the rise of the “Islamic State” movement (ISM) (formerly ISIS/ISIL) and the murder of American journalist James Foley by a suspected London-born IS recruit, the question of how to prevent extremism has become a relentlessly pressing issue capturing the attention of governments and security and intelligence agencies, as well as the general public. In order to be able to answer this question, we must first understand the appeal of extremist movements to prospective members: Why would an individual feel attracted to this specific movement? (What is the movement’s unique selling point?) Who is attracted to this movement? (What are the common characteristics of those who feel drawn to it?) What are the underlying motivations for the actors on both sides (e.g., supplier and demander)? What is the process for joining these movements? By analyzing the appeal of the ISM narratives on its Western born and raised adherents, this chapter aims to provide a basis for outlining the challenges and possible opportunities for developing effective counter-narrative measures.

Narratives, their characteristics, and their functions

Many of those joining the ISM from Western countries are young (the typical age range of those known to have gone to Syria is 18 to 29 years) and seem to have radicalized over a relatively short time-span. Often, they do not possess a deep knowledge or understanding of Islam. It is thus rather probable that they have not adopted, in earnest, a full Islamist ideology.

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1 Since the Islamic State outside of its immediate geographical impact zone provides more of a collective identity than an organized, institutionalized entity, I refer to it as a social movement. According to Social Movement Theory (SMT) as conceptualized by sociologists Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (Donatella Della Porta, and Mario Diani, Social movements: An introduction, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), social movements are based on informal networks that provide information, expertise and material resources to interested individuals. A collective identity provides the individual with socio-historically coherent and valid (i.e. shared) patterns of interpretation and hence schemes of explanation, offering guidance for one's own behavior (Thomas S. Eberle and Ronald Hitzler, “Phänomenologische Lebensweltanalyse,” Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch, (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2000), 116). See Roald Meijer's volume on Salafism as a New Religious Movement (Roald Meijer. Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).) and Quintan Wiktorowicz' anthology on “Islamic Activism” (Quintan Wiktorowicz, Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach, (Indiana University Press, ed. 2004).) for several applications of SMT to different Muslim milieus.

2 Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

3 Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

4 For a thorough example, see Quintan Wiktorowicz' case study on the al-Muhajiroun movement (Quintan Wiktorowicz, Radical Islam rising: Muslim Extremism in the West, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2005).).


(understood as “a systematic body of concepts, especially about human life or culture”), as their radicalization process was too quick for them to have had the opportunity to internalize such a system of beliefs. The internalization of an ideology is brought about by the reasoning-based acceptance that the system of belief in question is not only rational, but also coherent, valid and credible. Through this process, the ideology becomes a personal conviction. As such cognitive processes take time, it is rather likely that the respective individuals were attracted by narratives presented by advocates of extremist interpretations of Islam, and have not (yet) internalized a (more or less) complex ideology.

Narratives are ways of explaining the word—sometimes in the form of stereotypical fragments—stemming from and referring to a certain system of beliefs. Although narratives incorporate pieces of ideological content and may cover a wide range of dictums, they are not integrated into a full and coherent ideological concept. Ideologies, as well as narratives, are absolutist and simplistic in nature, leaving no space for ambiguity. They do not explain reality in a sophisticated way, but reduce its complexity to a simple formula, often assigning blame and offering an easy answer to pressing and complex issues. Their logic is linear, distinct and compulsive. The specific function of the narrative of an extremist group such as IS is to provide clear instructions for behavior and an introspective rationale for (political) action to a wider audience beyond their core supporters.

Extremist narratives, their purpose and their dissemination

Recent examples for such narratives within Muslim extremist milieus include claims that because democracy is in competition and direct contravention with god, it is an institutionalized form of shirk (polytheism) and thus contradicting tawhid (the unity and uniqueness of God), rendering every Muslim who participates in democratic processes or accepts any ordering system other than sharia law as a murtadd (apostate); that within a marriage, violence against women is allowed as a last resort; that there are only two spheres of earthly life: one that conforms to Islam, and one that does not; that the “West” has degraded and colonized Muslim lands and that this situation can only be changed by violent struggle; that the relation

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8 Following the definition of philosopher Frauke Kurbacher, I conceptualize conviction as a personal, intra-subjective phenomenon that binds the self-reference of an individual and its reference to the world to certain beliefs. Conviction is characterized by acts of thinking for oneself and self-enlightenment that includes cognitive, emotional and voluntative components (Frauke Kurbacher, “Radikalität als Denkfigur. Zur Philosophie extremer Überzeugungen,” Diskurse des Extremen (2005), 49-60. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 50-52). In short, it can be regarded as the degree to which one’s beliefs are rooted within one’s identity.
11 Dovermann 2013, 42-44.
12 The concept of tauhid is regarded as the most important principle in Islam, expressed in the Islamic profession of faith (shahada): ashadu ‘an-la ilaha illa illahu (I testify that there is no god except God) wa’ashhadu ‘anna muhammadan rasulu-llah (and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God). The first part confirms the uniqueness and oneness of God, the second part acknowledges the finality of God’s revelation as proclaimed by his prophet (Peter B. Clarke, “Conversion,” Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World, Volume 1 A-L (New York: Macmillan, 2004): 160-163).
13 Sharia law should not be understood as a corpus of fully enunciated specified legally-binding regulations, rather as a compilation of basic rules taken from Quranic statements, the tradition of the prophet Muhammad (sunna) as well as other sources of law. In order to find answers to a specific issue in question, these basic rules are subject to contextualization and thus interpretation by legal scholars (Peter Heine, Der Islam: Erschlossen und kommentiert, (Düsseldorf: Patmos 2007): 158). There is thus no one coherent sharia law codified in a fixed statute book.
between the ummah (community of Muslims) and the non-Muslim world is inherently characterized by an eternal dichotomous and conflictual situation within which it is the individual responsibility of every Muslim to defend Islam and the ummah against aggression; that whoever does not join this fight is neglecting his/her duty as a Muslim and is thus akin to the kuffar (unbelievers); and that, in general, those who do not embrace the tenets and interpretations of the respective group are defectors and therefore enemies to the group.\textsuperscript{14}

The mentioned narratives developed from the Islamic creed, but they do not represent original Islamic dogmas. Instead, they constitute an extrapolation of Islamic principles, an interpretation conducted from a certain perspective. They are by nature subjective constructions and, as such, may be challenged and contested—a fact which the ideologists feeding these narratives into the discourses within and outside Muslim communities are trying to suppress by means of takfir.\textsuperscript{15,16} Their aim is to hijack the communication channels and establish discursive hegemony, leaving no space for alternative interpretations. They impose their views on the audience of the discourse and then use them as carriers to disseminate certain fragments of their ideology. In order to reach this goal, they first need to attract attention. The documentation and dissemination of acts of utmost brutality undertaken by the ISM while expanding their geographical control in Syria and Iraq has helped them to gain ground not only locally in physical terms, but also in the minds of those affected by the discourse, thus reinforcing their claim of power. Committing outrageous acts of violence again and again and again serves a threefold purpose: it attracts and captivates attention; it reinforces the narratives underlying the brutal actions of IS into the heads of those vulnerable to its message; and it shocks and awes both Muslims and non-Muslims, polarizing IS’ audience into two groups: those appalled by their use of violence and those attracted by it.\textsuperscript{17}

ISM recruits – the demand side

When trying to assess the numbers of those who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, caution must be exerted. Obtaining information about who left their home countries to travel to the region, their motivations, and their destinations is difficult, making it impossible to gauge the numbers precisely. Almost certainly though, the number of fighters the conflict has attracted over just the past three years has already surpassed the approximately 20,000 foreigners who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s over the course of a decade to fight against the Soviet occupation and during the Taliban rule lasting from 1996 to 2001.\textsuperscript{18} The war in Syria has become a

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\textsuperscript{15} Takfir denotes the practice of excommunication of a Muslim from the Islamic faith, rendering him/her an apostate (Horst 2013, 59-68).
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\textsuperscript{16} Dovermann, “Narrative,” 42.
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\textsuperscript{17} Musharbash, “Europäer bei der IS-Miliz.”
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\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” International Security, Vol. 35 Iss. 3, (2010/11): 53-94, 61; The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), providing rounded numbers for 50 countries in total, indicates the following break-up as for Western nations: Australia 100-250; Austria 100-150; Belgium 440; United Kingdom 500-600; Denmark 100-150; Ireland 30; Canada 100; Finland 50-70; France 1.200; Germany 500-600; Italy 80; Netherlands 200-250; Norway 60; Spain 50-100; Sweden 150-180; Switzerland 40; United States 100. Relative to population size, the most heavily affected countries in Western Europe are Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and France (Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,” ICSR Insight, January 26 2015. http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syria-iraq-now-exceeds-20000-
new focal point for jihadists all over the globe, attracting fighters from at least 81 countries.¹⁹

The number of Westerners joining the fighting in the region has risen significantly since early 2013.²⁰ Some experts estimate that about eighty percent have joined the IS.²¹

Recruits joining the current conflict are younger than those who went to Afghanistan in the 1980s, who were usually aged between 25 and 35. In contrast, the typical age of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq is between 18 and 29 years, with many as young as 15 to 17 years old or even younger.²² In the current conflict, prospective foreign fighters often leave in groups, sometimes taking their families with them; another new development since Afghanistan is the relatively high percentage (18 percent) of female recruits from EU member states.²³ It appears that most recruits did not have prior military training or fighting experience. Many of the foreign fighters from Western countries are second or third generation immigrants; six percent of them are converts to Islam. Very few seem to have had any prior connection to Syria.²⁴

There are also differences between these two conflicts in terms of the training and recruitment processes. Compared to those recruited to Afghanistan by Al-Qaeda, there seems to be a lower level of control that can be exerted over today’s recruits — likely due to the greater ease with which would-be jihadists can reach their desired destination and the much greater number of foreign fighters overall. In the past, ideological indoctrination and guerrilla training were undertaken simultaneously and over a longer time-span, and the recruits were closely observed to ensure their conformity to Al-Qaeda’s doctrines. Prolonged personal connection to active group members was used to transform a collective identity into collective action.²⁵

This resulted in high motivation among the fighters and a rigid command and control structure during, as well as after, the conflict in Afghanistan. In contrast, it seems that the minds of the new generation of Western foreign fighters are less forged by ideology. Western-born sympathizers of the IS are more likely to absorb the movement’s symbols, but not necessarily its ideology. As a result, the ideological threshold is lower and it is easier for wannabe-jihadists to join the movement, but since the bonds between the IS and its followers are less personal and more fragile, it follows that it should also be easier to disengage from them.²⁶

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²¹ As estimated by the ICSR (Mezzofiore, “Isis in Iraq and Syria”).
²² This development is following a general trend since the mid 2000s of recruits to extremism becoming younger (Barret, Foreign Fighters in Syria, 16).
²⁴ Barret, Foreign Fighters in Syria, 16-17.
²⁶ Alessandro Boncio, email message to author, September 21, 2014.
Analyzing the statements of authorities, as well as of academic experts and those working within the milieus from which the foreign fighters originate, most of the recruits share the following traits: they are, as already mentioned, of young age; they often come from families where religion was of no or very little importance and are often described as religiously illiterate; they perceive themselves as disaffected, sidelined, mistreated and deprived of opportunity to set and achieve life goals; they are disoriented, aimless and lacking a sense of identity and belonging, and they do not possess a deeper sense of purpose and/or meaning to their lives.

A recent study of the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution analyzed data of 378 individuals who presumably left Germany for Syria between June 2012 and June 2014. Of them, 89 percent were men; most of them were between the ages of 21 and 25 years old, with the youngest being 15 and the oldest being 64 years old. Of the total, 88 percent lived in urban areas; 61 percent were born in Germany, 62 percent owned a German passport, and 14 percent, most of them from (non-Muslim) German origins, had converted to Islam. About half of them were married; more than 100 were parents. Thirty percent had graduated from school, while 26 percent were attending school immediately before leaving Germany. Six percent had completed an apprenticeship, and two percent had obtained a college degree. Only 12 percent were employed, most of them in low-wage sectors. Twenty percent were registered as jobless and 65 percent had been delinquents before becoming radicalized (mostly these were violent crimes, property crimes or narcotics offenses). Thirty percent had been active in mosques. Twelve percent were said to have radicalized in a time-span of one to two years, and six percent within less than a year. Fifty-two percent were categorized as having left with the goal to participate in jihad, and 19 percent out of humanitarian concern. Thirty seven percent left with friends, 18 percent with relatives, and 14 percent left alone. A total of 120 persons returned, of which six were imprisoned. Of the 378 who traveled, 84 percent were believed to belong to the Salafi milieu.

The latter observation is very helpful when looking for hints at what might have led young Westerners to go to Syria to join the ISM. By comparing the characteristics of those who have joined the Salafi movement to those who have been radicalized within it to the extent that they have decided to join the fighting in Syria, it is possible to identify possible pull-factors influencing this decision. Both groups include a large number of “reborn Muslims” and converts, mirroring the relative absence of religion in the Salafi-turned-jihadist category. They too lack a sense of identity and belonging, as very often they identify neither with the self-identity of their parents nor with the collective identity of the majority society. Those who

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27 Eight percent were born in Syria, six percent in Turkey.
28 24 percent of them had another passport in addition to the German one (mostly Moroccan, Turkish, Syrian or Afghan).
29 77 percent of the converts were male, 23 percent female.
30 This reflects once more the absence of deeply enrooted religious beliefs, as such practices run counter to basic Islamic principles (an observation the author is grateful for to Alessandro Boncio for having pointed it out).
32 A key feature of the process of developing a self-identity is its internalization. The individual makes sense of the world based on the values and relevancies he/she internalized. It constitutes the framework within which the individual contextualizes his/her perceptions and experiences (Manuel Castells, The power of identity: The information age: Economy, society, and culture, Vol. 2 (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 6-7).
have Muslim roots often witnessed their parents trying hard to assimilate into the majority society but falling short of their aspirations despite their best efforts. They thus experience a feeling of double alienation, as they find a home in neither of the two available identities. Salafism offers them an alternative, as discussed in the following section.

ISM appeal – the supply side

Again, authorities, academics and other experts observing the Salafi milieus agree that for young people in need of stabilization of their self-identity, Salafism can fill a crucial emotional vacuum—the need for a peer group—offering them recognition and orientation wrapped up in a collective identity. Salafism takes on an “all-or-nothing” approach, categorizing the world and also human beings dichotomously into “good” and “bad.” This mindset discourages any tolerance of ambiguity and leaves no space for the negotiation of compromises. Salafism, in the context of Western countries, serves as a means to delineate oneself from one’s environment or social context of origin, to provoke majority society, and to provide a platform on which pre-existing feelings of aggression and deprivation can be acted out.

All too often, what Salafism’s new adherents are looking for is not religion or spirituality (i.e., an inward dimension tool for consciously exploring one’s inner needs that is closely connected to the formation of one’s self-identity). Instead, they are focusing on a collective identity offered to them by Salafism (i.e., on the outward dimension, which instead of offering tools for self-analysis, provides a clearly formed role ready for the taking). Young reborn or converted Salafis are eager to fulfill the norms and rules of conduct as predefined by their respective Salafi peer groups from one day to the other and, by doing so, are seeking to empower themselves by the self-aggrandizement, self-delineation and self-stigmatization brought about by the powerful narratives from which their collective identity is constructed. With its shock potential and high profile in the media and public discourse, Salafism offers the perfect tools to assure the desired effect.

All of this makes Salafism particularly attractive for marginalized groups. Rather than being interested in complex theological discussions and arduous reflections about how to interpret Islam and adapt it to one’s context, they functionalize and instrumentalize Islam with the purpose of reducing the complex reality that they are exposed to, thereby whittling down their insecurities and enhancing their sense of self-worth.

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35 The concept of self-identity differs from the concept of a social role. A social role is constructed through a bundle of normative behavioral expectations ascribed to an individual by one or more peer groups (Rüdiger Peuckert, “Soziale Rolle,” Grundbegriffe der Soziologie. (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 242-245.). The self-identity of a person can intersect with his/her social role, but while self-identity refers to the personal characteristics of the individual, a social role remains superficial. As sociologist Manuel Castells succinctly summarized, “(...) identities organize the meaning, while roles organize the functions” (Castells, The power of identity, 7).
36 Contemporary Salafism in Western countries is widely acknowledged as a recently fast-growing youth phenomenon made up predominately of Muslims who, prior to their engagement with Salafism, did not perceive themselves as religious, as well as converts.
Notwithstanding that the Salafi milieu seems to predispose vulnerable individuals to take a path that deviates significantly from the mainstream, the main question remains: What is the driving force that leads some individuals to take the leap from crossing the lines of – but never really leaving – the boundaries of the world they are familiar with by taking the rebellious step to become a fighter on a real battlefield at the high risk of being killed.\[37\] Where non-jihadi Salafis are satisfied with the nimbus of belonging to a group of outcast "enfants terribles" and adapting the narratives of their (new) peer group and witnessing the shocked reactions of majority society, for those going to Syria, being the “punk” of the 2010s is insufficient in fulfilling their need for attention and significance. They seek to meet this desire by stepping out onto the most-closely watched arena of all the conflicts in Syria, which is mentioned in several hadith (sayings of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions) as the land of jihad where an epic battle will take place, leading to the end of times. Because of its historic weight, this narrative is probably the most forceful one— the master narrative, so to say, with the power to override everything else. It is ubiquitous in ISM propaganda as well as in the social media comments of its foreign recruits.\[38\] The ISM is using this narrative as a compressed-time-and-space momentum to propel their aspirations and political goals to the forefront of the agenda of those susceptible to their message.\[39\]

Enhancing the power of this narrative is the masterstroke choice of IS’ most important symbol (and one that is valuable for its high brand recognition): the black flag, appropriated from other jihad-oriented groups. It depicts the shahada (the first of the five pillars of Islam declaring belief in the oneness of God) in white letters with a white circle in the center, which displays in black letters “God’s Messenger Mohammed” which is known as the “Seal of Mohammed.” The prophet is said to have used this seal on his letters, including those he wrote to foreign leaders asking them to ally with him.\[40\]

On a more tangible (political) and less mythological (abstract) level are the narratives generated by the official IS artifacts, which can count as the group’s founding documents and its uncodified program,\[41\] including the set of rules it has imposed on the citizens of Iraq’s Nineveh province as published on June 12, 2014; the proclamation of the caliphate and announcement of the change of its name from ISIS/ISIL to IS by its speaker Abu Muhammad al-

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\[37\] Boncio, email, 2014.
\[38\] Barrett, Foreign Fighters in Syria, 18.
\[39\] The narratives the IS is using are not that new; as it is the case with every narrative, they are being adapted to the current relevant context in which they are meant to impact (Barrett, Foreign Fighters in Syria, 18; Hedayah and ICCT, Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism, Meeting note, (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014), 1).
\[40\] Ilene Plusher, “What the ISIS Flag Says About the Militant Group,” Time, September 9, 2014, http://time.com/3311665/isis-flag-iraq-syria. The power of the reference to the above-mentioned concept of tauhid as the most important principle in Islam is also included in this symbol. More information on the background of this flag can be found in MENA and terrorism expert Aaron Zelin’s blog post: Aaron Zelin, “On Flags, Islamic History, and al-Qa’ida,” Al-Wasat Blog, November 6, 2011, http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2011/11/06/on-flags-islamic-history-and-al-qaida. Next to its self-aggrandizement by means of this powerful reference, the ISM is also exploiting the flag as a shield, as explains Hayder al Khoei of the London-based Chatham House think tank: when such flags were burned during protest in Beirut in the context of a #BurnISIS campaign, the Lebanese Minister of Justice announced severe punishment for such actions, as burning anything with the word Allah on it is to be considered sacrilegious. The IS is thus manipulating Muslims who do not approve of the group into protecting what has become their leading icon (Yassin Musharbash, “Soll man die Flagge des ‘Islamischen Staates’ verbieten?” Radikale Ansichten Blog, September 12, 2014, http://blog.zeit.de/radikale-ansichten/2014/09/12/soll-man-die-flagge-des-islamischen-staates-verbieten; Plusher, “What the ISIS Flag Says.”).
\[41\] MENA and terrorism expert Yassin Musharbash in personal communication with the author on September 10, 2014.
’Adnani in an audio statement on June 29, 2014, the first day of Ramadan, and the Ramadan speech of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on July 1, 2014.

Next to these show-of-force, intimidating “top-down” narratives revolving around rules, “shoulds” and “wills,” there are those meant to depict the “soft” and “bright” side of life as a foreign fighter, usually transmitted via social media: “... the general picture provided by foreign fighters of their lives in Syria suggests camaraderie, good morale and purposeful activity, all mixed in with a sense of understated heroism, designed to attract their friends as well as to boost their own self-esteem.” Some Muslims from Western countries may for the first time in their lives feel accepted rather than discriminated against. Adding to this perception of purposeful activity is how IS puts foreigners to work according to their skills and profession: doctors, mechanics, social-media experts or military trainers. The ISM’s brutal violence serves simultaneously as proof, carrier, and magnifier of their narratives. Effects and affects of the ISM’s appeal

When trying to assess the ISM’s appeal to current and prospective adherents, it is important to acknowledge that IS is a relatively new local power gaining the awareness of a wider global public. Thus it is likely that the impact it has had is not so much because of intellectual examination and delivery of a coherent, sophisticated political program or from the strategy the IS implements to bring its vision to life, as it is because of the emotional effects stimulated by the potency of the tactics it uses to further its power and demonstrate its narratives. It is thus worth considering whether it is not so much the actual content of the narratives that resonate with those who feel attracted to them, as it is what they represent—the underlying sound bites so to say—which sententiously, directly and subconsciously “speak” to the individual, triggering certain associations and sentiments, and catering to specific needs. This kind of perception is subconscious rather than a cognitive, apperceptive process in which new information is scrutinized and evaluated.

For those attracted to the ISM, their propaganda can generate, on a psychological level, an inebriating feeling of grandeur, as delusional as this sentiment may be. The rush of such

44 A translated version of the speech with the title “A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan” is available under this link: http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/documents/baghdadi-caliph.pdf.
45 Barret, Foreign Fighters in Syria, 17.
47 The facts that even al-Qaeda disapproved of the IS’ violent actions and that the IS has substantial financial recourse will add to that feeling.
48 Musharbash, who has been analyzing the IS and its genesis, is implicitly raising this question in his blog post “5 Things we don’t know about the Caliphate” when pondering about the question “Is there a plan for expansion of the “Caliphate”? He comes to the conclusion that the statements issued by the IS are not helpful for predicting its next moves, as they serve propaganda purposes; we can only make assumptions which are based on our “idea of IS, rather than facts” (Yassin Musharbash, “5 Things We Don’t Know About the Caliphate,” Abususu’s Blog, August 26, 2014 http://abususu.blogspot.de/2014/08/5-things-we-dont-know-about-caliphate.html).
49 In psychology, apperception is defined as “the process by which new experience is assimilated to and transformed by the residuum of past experience of an individual to form a new whole.” (Ledger Wood, “Apperception,” Dictionary of Philosophy, (Littlefield, Adams, and Company, 2004), 15.
adrenaline-spiking events can be very powerful, if not overwhelming, especially when contrasted against a previously strong feeling of insignificance. For many, the prospect of making history by establishing a caliphate that, in a thousand years, people will credit to those Muslims who came from the West to fight for the Islamic state, regarding them as super-heroes, is thrilling and alluring to adventure-thirsty young men (and some women) who have become bored in their safe Western homes.\textsuperscript{50} The violence used by IS is framed as a necessity and an exertion of God’s will. The sacralization and romanticization of these brutal acts is looked upon from the outside with pure horror, dislodging the would-be jihadis even further from their former contexts.

At the same time, the political artifacts (rules and edicts) of the IS balance its violent rampages in a way that places the mercilessness it displays towards its enemies within the context of an accountable rationale. The IS thus brings to life a utopian vision, framing its caliphate as a phoenix to be born out of the fire of destruction. This is appealing to lost youth and young adults looking for stability and orientation, or for a way to have a secure life that doesn’t require thinking too hard about the complexities of one’s existence or where to go and what to do, because with that one decision to join IS, everything becomes clear and simple; everything that follows will be pre-determined, fixed and defined—by others. This imposition is not perceived as something negative, but, on the contrary, comes as a relief. These people do not perceive our postmodern life\textsuperscript{51} with its sheer endless possibilities as an opportunity for which to be grateful or to seize upon, but rather as a burden.\textsuperscript{52} They can avoid exposing themselves to this burden by leaving their context of origin behind and entering a new world in which everything will be set out for them. The boldness of the decision to take this huge, irreversible step must be very empowering.

Categories of individuals to be addressed by counter-narrative measures

In summary, we can identify the following general categories of people among the ISM disciples: bored or frustrated adventure/thrill seekers; megalomaniacs who fantasize about ruling the world (or at least part of it) and/or want to participate in its takeover whether through active combat (catering to the individual (male) jihadi’s machismo\textsuperscript{53}) or as “silent support” (in the case of female members);\textsuperscript{54} alienated, disoriented, and lost youth and young adults who feel outcast (i.e., like the “other”) and devoid of strong self-identities which would give them the tools to actively take on the challenges of their daily lives; deluded idealists thinking they are fighting for a good cause; and those who think it is their individual duty as righteous Muslims to partake in the IS’ efforts to topple the Syrian regime and/or establish a caliphate.


\textsuperscript{51} Postmodern societies are characterized by processes of steadily increasing differentiation, individualization, detraditionalization, pluralization and decommunitization. The individual must in consequence construct its reference points and thus its identity itself.

\textsuperscript{52} As has been elaborated on in great detail by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman.


\textsuperscript{54} Persons with severe personality disorders such as sadistic traits could probably also be placed within this group. One such example is Belgian citizen Mehdi Nemmouche who is said to have raped and killed a young mother before beheading her baby. French journalist and former ISIS hostage Nicolas Hénin who was kidnapped by Nemmouche described him as a pervert and sadist who did not go to Syria “to construct an ideal but out of a lack of recognition, to fulfill himself.” (David Chazan, “Brussels museum shooting suspect ‘beheaded baby’,” \textit{The Telegraph}, September 7, 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11080079/Brussels-museum-shooting-suspect-beheaded-baby.html). Nemmouche is accused of a terrorist attack in the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014 upon his return to Europe, killing four people (ibid.).
The diversity of these categories (and hence the underlying motivations of the individuals pertaining to them) hints at the complexity of developing effective counter-measures to the ISM’s narratives. Yet, we can group them into two main categories: 1) those who are affected by the subtexts of the narrative sound bites that cater to the emotional needs of the percipient; and 2) those who are affected on a cognitive level. The adventure/thrill seekers, the megalomaniacs, and the lost "othered" belong to the "emotion" category, while the deluded idealists and "righteous Muslims" belong to the "cognition" category. Islam-specific counter-narratives will have an impact only within the cognition category. For those within the emotion category, they would be rather useless, as their motivations have nothing to do with Islam. Individuals drawn to Syria and Iraq because of triggers at an emotional level are not really concerned with Islam; it is merely a master frame that provides the narratives for them to use to play out their fantasies and satisfy their personal needs. This means different strategies must be applied when dealing with each category: one that provides alternative interpretations of Islam in view of the ISM’s (and similar) narratives and one that addresses the root causes that lead to the development of "adventure-seeking, othered megalomaniacs". A working counter-narrative must cater to both the cognitive and emotional appeal of specific narratives.

Challenges for developing Islamic counter-narratives

When using Islamic counter-narratives, the goal should be to show that IS and similar groups represent a perverted, murderous, hypocritical, and heretical caricature of Islam that is imposed by fascistic self-acclaimed "saviors."\(^{55}\) Muslim organizations need to make clear and decisive public condemnations of the IS and its ideology\(^{56}\) in order to discredit their key figures and role models by exposing their arrogance, inhumanity and hubris through "naming and shaming."\(^{57}\) The vision of Islam that needs to be disseminated is one that values the virtues of humility, reason, prudence, reflection, and leading by positive example—not imposition, coercion and blind obedience. It is crucial that this vision not be imposed from outside, which would make it futile. The agency must remain with those concerned with Islam (i.e.,

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\(^{55}\) For an assessment of public diplomacy approaches in generic terms to this problem see Schmid 2014.

\(^{56}\) Examples include a fatwa recently drafted by Sheikh Usama Hasan (head of the Quilliam Foundation, a London-based think tank with the aim to challenge religious extremism) and signed by the head imams of Leicester and Manchester Central Mosques, the head imam of the Makkah Masjid in Leeds, the co-director of the Association of British Muslims and the founder of the Islamic Council in the UK, stating that “IS is a heretical, extremist organization and it is religiously prohibited (haram) to support or join it; furthermore, it is an obligation on British Muslims to actively oppose its poisonous ideology, especially when this is promoted within Britain” (Kersten Knipp, “British fatwa against IS. Breaking the spell of a poisonous ideology,” Quanitra.de, September 8, 2014, http://en.qantara.de/content/british-fatwa-against-is-breaking-the-spell-of-a-poisonous-ideology); the statements of at least eight representatives of German Muslim communities (available under this link: http://mediendienst-integration.de/fileadmin/Dateien/Stellungnahmen_muslimischer_Vertreter_gegen_Gewalt.pdf); the German day of action under the motto “Muslims against hate and injustice” on 19 September 2014; the statement of Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia’s most important cleric, branding the IS as “enemy No.1 of Islam” (“‘IS is Enemy No. 1 of Islam’, Says Saudi Grand Mufti,” Al Arabiya News, August 19 2014, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/08/19/Saudi-mufti-ISIS-is-enemy-No-1-of-Islam-.html); the denunciation of the IS by Mehmet Gormez, the head of Turkey’s Directorate of Religious Affairs for portraying an erroneous image of Islam and Muslims (“Head of Religious Authority denounces ISIS,” Daily Sabah, August 20, 2014, http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2014/08/20/head-of-religious-authority-denounces-isis); and the open letter to al-Baghdadi signed by 126 Islamic scholars from several different countries (accessible under letteratobaghdadi.com/index.php). An example for a grassroots organization providing a platform for the condemnation of the IS ideology is the #notinmyname campaign initiated by the London-based Active Change Foundation (see http://www.activechangefoundation.org/portfolio-item/notinmyname).

the local Muslim communities and Muslim individuals).  

Otherwise, even rational and coherent counter-narratives not be perceived as valid and credible, rendering them useless. It should be kept in mind that from the perspective of the extremists, the discourse they feed their narratives into is a sham, serving the sole purpose of injecting and spreading their extremist interpretations and gaining new adherents for their ideas—not as a platform for discussion. Making the ideological components of their interpretation available to people outside of their circles exposes them to scrutiny and the chance for their ideologies to be reframed and reinterpreted. This means that there is a chance to crack those harmful narratives and rob them of their power by implanting seeds of doubt that will lead to questioning, reasoning, reflection, and—hopefully—deconstruction of the harmful narratives. The more that the control the extremist groups have over the discourse diminishes, the higher the chances are of overcoming the narratives.

In order for this strategy to succeed and to immunize individuals against extremist interpretations, Muslims must be encouraged to create their individual, sustainable interpretations of Islam through (self-)reflective reasoning and to take back their sovereignty in defining Islamic concepts and terms on a methodologically and dogmatically sound basis. This concept or practice already exists and has a name—ijtihad, but it is not authorized by the majority of Islamic scholars. Even so, it is being practiced on a daily basis by Muslim individuals in an endeavor to integrate their religious beliefs with their everyday life. To further this process in all its multi-facetedness, Islamic theologians, Muslim communities, and also Muslim families must consider this idea, acknowledge its factuality, and work on their willingness to take on the extra effort individual reflection requires as compared to simply acquiescing to what

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58 e.g. Hedayah and ICCT, Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks, 4-6, 10; Though I would like to stress that the “target audience” should not only be “involved at all stages of developing the counter-narratives”, but maintain the ownership. This will also allow for the “organic” shaping and changing of “creative and flexible narratives” as called for by the participants of the roundtable expert meeting on “Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism” in June 2014, organized by the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) (cf. ibid., 4). Taking into account that currently “no sustainable or long-lasting effort to create and coordinate counter-narratives” (ibid., 7) is in place on a macro level, the bottom-up approach becomes even more important (for ideas regarding the design of possible programs to develop counter-narratives, see ibid., 7-9).

59 Mahmoud Abdallah, lecturer of Islamic Theology at the Eberhard Karls University Tübingen, borrowing from Günther Grass’ concept of the ‘mature citizen’, aptly phrased this as “becoming a mature Muslim” (in a private conversation with the author on September 13, 2014).

60 As the findings from my empirical research for my doctoral thesis on converts to Islam in Western Europe – as well as my observations in Muslim milieus in Berlin, London and Paris – suggest, this kind of private as well as group-driven contextualization of Islamic norms and dogmas has been gaining momentum. My sample consisting of 27 Berlin, London and Paris-based converts to Islam had a very cognitive, reflexive, individualized and active approach to their new religion: cognitive because they assessed Islam intellectually; reflexive because they scrutinized their own biography as well as Islam, developing a critical distance from both; individualized because they worked out their very own understanding and conceptualization; and active because they most of the time kept the ownership of agency. As a result of their reflective and individualized approach, they developed a high degree of ambiguity tolerance towards other interpretations of Islamic principles and norms. Because of these features, I dub them converts to reflexive Islam (Milena Uhlmann, “Konversionen zum Islam in Westeuropa. Eine explorative Studie,” (PhD diss. (unpublished), Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2014). “Ich habe großen Respekt vor Menschen, die diesen Schritt gegangen sind!” Bayerischer Rundfunk, June 20, 2014, http://www.br.de/puls/themen/leben/milena-uhlmann-interview-konvertiten-dschihad-100.html). See also Islamic scholar Thomas Bauer’s publication – in which he calls the Koran “the ambiguous text as such” (Thomas Bauer, Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams (Berlin: Insel Verlag 2011), 46; my translation) – regarding historic examples (and the historic legacy which can be used to turn these examples into creative precedences) of such ambiguity tolerance.
they are told. Also, individuals must have access to adequate sources of information about Islam, especially for those whose parents cannot answer their children’s religion-related questions due to their own lack of knowledge. “Adequate” in this context means that the sources and the contents must be accessible (i.e., available in the knowledge seeker’s language); they must be rational, coherent, valid and credible; and they must be capable of addressing the daily life issues of the individual (e.g., a young Muslim in the West). So far, it is representatives of Salafi Islam who offer such sources of information through imams (who often come from the same backgrounds as their young followers and understand their perspectives and are able to master their cultural codes, whereas “import imams” cannot), literature (the Internet is permeated with Salafi ideology) or personal outreach. In addition, the less institutionalized and formalized structures of groups within the social movement offer a lower threshold for joining and participating offline as well as online, thus allowing for the development of more niches for subgroups and their molding of Islam. The Internet, which offers the lowest threshold, all too often serves as a radicalizing agent and facilitator for setting up contacts between jihadists in various parts of the world, especially through social media.

The preventive measures listed above can also serve as deradicalizing measures, for example by providing vulnerable individuals with tools to deconstruct harmful narratives while strengthening their self-identities. For an already-radicalized individual, the “delegitimization and invalidation” of those narratives can help to guide the person to question them.

Challenges for developing narratives that foster a sense of belonging

Developing counter-narratives to take on the "emotion" category probably constitutes an even bigger task, as the problem is a much more commonplace yet profound one. The picture developing from the above analysis of ISM narratives and the information available regarding Western foreign fighters, and the milieu from which they stem, hints that it might not be the pull-factor of the IS’ ideology that is attracting foreign fighters as much as it is the push-factors of their Western context, combined with personal traits prompting them to make their decision to join the fighting. These seem to be correlated with the lack of a sense of belonging. Therefore, in order to understand the grip and appeal of extremist narratives, we must examine the context of the societies where they are having an impact.

Prior to the 1990s in Western Europe, people who had migrated from other places were referred to as "foreigners." In the 1990s, changing perspectives led to calling those with a migratory past by their country of origin (i.e., "Afghans" or "Saudis" instead of "foreigners"). In the 2000s, it changed again so that now immigrants from Muslim countries are referred to collectively as "Muslims," rather than as "foreigners" or according to their country of origin.

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61 As postulated by Abdallah (in a private conversation with the author on September 13, 2014).
62 The IS’ recruitment campaign is unprecedented in its effectiveness, succeeding in attracting many young followers using public forums such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube while managing to avoid detection by authorities, as notes Charlie Cooper of the Quilliam Foundation (Madeline Grant, and Damien Sharkov, “Twice as Many' British Muslims Fighting for ISIS Than in UK Armed Forces,” Newsweek, August 20 2014, http://www.newsweek.com/twice-many-british-muslims-fighting-isis-armed-forces-265865). Whilst al-Nusra and al-Qaeda predominately use Arabic on Twitter and Facebook, the IS is more diverse, which surely is contributing to enhancing their support base (Barret Foreign Fighters in Syria, 7-8). In addition to disseminating counter-narratives using social and traditional media, also other forms of transmitting them such as rallies could be considered. Creating symbols which condense the content of a counter-narrative in a way that it can be displayed e.g. on a t-shirt could work well among youths (Hedayah and ICCT, Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks, 6-7).
64 Ibid., 188 (see Köhler 2013 also for a closer look on the important role of families and family counseling in the context of dealing with radicalized individuals).
Throughout the process they faced individual, institutional and structural discrimination, and were usually either marginalized and ignored or stigmatized and pressured to assimilate into majority society.\(^{65}\)

The inability to constructively deal with diversification of the local population induced by the immigration of people with differing cultural, ethnic, and religious origins led to social tensions and—often aggressive—debates about the definition and essence of culture and national identity in Western Europe. Previously ignored, the religious affiliation of immigrants has since become a topic of special interest,\(^{66}\) usually in the context of what is framed as a "clash of civilizations" between essentialized conceptions of Muslim and non-Muslim culture.\(^{67}\) The nature of public dialogue on Islam and Muslims, which has been characterized by friction and distrust since the events of 9/11,\(^{68}\) as well as a focus on security and integration issues are intertwined with this perception.\(^{69}\) In comparison to other parts of the world,  the Religion Monitor\(^{70}\) states that “Europe in particular exhibits a certain fundamental fear of Islam.”\(^{71}\) Islam is perceived as a foreign (and often violent) menace,\(^{72}\) upholding a conception propagated in Europe since the Middle Ages.\(^{73}\) The Religion Monitor links this perception to “specific contexts and events as well as to the link between Islam and terrorism in the minds of the population.”\(^{74}\) Opinion surveys confirm the prevalence of this narrative on a regular basis.

In the United States, the legacy of the grand narrative of all Americans being immigrants (at least theoretically) makes the initial situation somewhat different from the one in Europe, where the concept of belonging is still very much connected to ethnicity and shared cultural origins. Yet it is an ideal, not necessarily the practice; even prior to 9/11, Muslims were


\(^{67}\) The catchphrase the “clash of civilizations” was coined by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. He conceptualized cultures as fundamental determinants of human action and inherent characteristics of civilizations. Cultures shape the identities of the individuals belonging to the respective culture and are transnational by concept. In Huntington’s model, the main features of the “fault lines” between civilizations are of cultural and religious nature and “particularly prevalent between Muslims and non-Muslims” (Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 207-210).


\(^{72}\) Ibid, 28.

\(^{73}\) Frégosi, “La perception,” 966-967.

\(^{74}\) Pickel *Understanding Common Ground*, 12.
viewed more negatively than other minority groups in the United States and tended to be looked at in an essentialized way with regard to their religious beliefs and practices and cultural orientations. Ascribed to them as well as to their ethnic origins, all of which stigmatized them as a deviation from the mainstream. After the 9/11 terror attacks, Muslims were subjected to increased scrutiny and hostility by the general public, as well as by security officials. They found their loyalty to America being questioned because of their religious identity with nearly fifty percent of their fellow countrymen believing Muslims posed a threat to national security. These sentiments were repeatedly triggered among the general public by events such as the murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands in 2004, the Madrid train bombings the same year, the 2005 London subway and bus bombings, the Danish cartoon controversy in 2006, the controversy around the Mosque at Ground Zero in 2010, the killing of Osama bin-Laden in 2011, the attack on the American diplomatic mission in Libya in September of 2012, and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. American public debates tend to objectify and politicize Muslims and Islam, framing Islam as a possible security threat and Muslims as "the enemy within." This development is reinforcing and emphasizing another grand narrative: the Judeo-Christian heritage of the United States. This serves to marginalize other faith groups and stands in contrast to the above-mentioned grand narrative of inclusivity.

Developing a narrative that fosters a sense of belonging is not a one-way road. The problem is that we already have a powerful master narrative in place: the one of Muslims as "the other." This negative singular view on Muslims and Islam is not only a huge obstacle to forging alliances between non-Muslim majority societies and Muslim communities, but also offers a narrative for those who want to delineate themselves from the mainstream (non-Muslim and Muslim alike). They are using the stigmatization reinforced by third parties (such as IS) through the ascription of negative identity markers to construct a resistance identity. This “exclusion of the excluded by the excluded” creates a high degree of group coherence, which enhances the group’s agency and potency and allows them to transform their marginalization into sovereignty.

To counter this vicious circle, we must do away with harmful narratives, such as that of the clash of civilizations (which plays into the hands of the extremists) and that Islam, in its es-

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75 These are often associated with authoritarianism, the questioning of their loyalty and religious traditionalism (Ozan K. Kalkan, Eric M. Uslaner, and Geoff Layman, “‘Bands of Others’? Attitudes toward Muslims in Contemporary American Society,” (Journal of Politics 71, 2009):1-16, 13).
78 Haddad and Harb “Post 9/11,” 483-484; Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” Public Culture, 18 (2006), 323–347, 344. Seemingly, this perceived antagonism is not an interfaith-problem: a 2009 Gallup study suggests that religious practice is negatively correlated to holding extremely negative views of Muslims. At the same time, prejudice against Muslims is positively correlated to prejudice against Jews (Gallup, “Religious Perceptions,” 12-14).
80 Castells, The power of identity, 7.
81 Ibid, 9.
82 Ibid.
sence, is incompatible with "Western" ways of life. Instead, we need to foster anxiety-free discourse about Islam and the daily realities of Muslims and initiate face-to-face dialogue. This means we must take the discourse participants seriously and engage with them out of genuine interest and without ulterior motives (i.e., not objectifying Muslims by using them to transmit counter-narratives). Doing this would mean using them in the same way the extremists are using them—simply as a carrier of ideas imposed upon them in order to reach a certain goal without caring for them as individuals and respecting their individuality. The ultimate goal would be to accept one another as being different (in our individual characteristics) but also the same (in our humanity), leaving everyone the space to take part in shaping a pluralistic, democratic, inclusive and flexible collective identity. Rather than essentializing (and thus stigmatizing) people according to characteristics they share with others (i.e., grouping them into a fixed category and thereby collectivizing their identity), we should give individuals the space to develop self-identities and be ready to accept all the hybrid variations of individuality that emerge within the diverse populations of Western countries.

Conclusions

From a sociological perspective, any form of reality and, consequently, (collective) identity is socially constructed. As social interactions constantly take place within an ever-changing reality, identity construction is a constant, never-ending process. This is something we can—and should—take advantage of. Sociologist Anthony Giddens, in his conceptualization of self-identity, emphasizes the conscious, reflexive element of identity construction by defining it as “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her/his biography.” By that he means that identity construction involves the active interpretation of one's own biography as a “reflexively organized endeavor.” It is the only sustainable individual effort to successfully build a coherent, flexible biographical narrative suited to positively engage with the implications of our often confusing and taxing postmodern society and its abundance of options to mold and lead our lives. It is this reflexivity that will give us the self-responsibility and prudent agency to counter harmful narratives.

Experts suggest that when dealing with Western foreign fighters, the best way to employ this tool of self-reflection is to enable returning disillusioned former combatants to deconstruct extremist narratives by telling their stories of why they got radicalized and then disenchanted. For this to be successful, programs must be worked out which take into account that many of them will be traumatized by their experiences and might need psychological treatment as well as physical protection. If conviction is what the current generation of foreign fighters lacks, this approach offers practitioners a great opportunity to develop sustainable counter-measures, while also offering the returning individuals the option to disengage and

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85 Ibid, 5.
86 Ibid.
87 Personal communication with Claudia Dantschke, member of the Hayat team; Mary Beth Altier and John Horgan, “The Future of Terrorist De-Radicalization Programs,” Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 13 Iss. 2 (2012): 83-90; Horgan, “Why Do People Join ISIS?”; Shiraz Maher and Peter R. Neumann, “Boris Johnson's proposal for British fighters in Syria and Iraq is dangerous and counterproductive,” The Independent, August 26, 2014; http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/boris-johnsons-proposal-for-british-fighters-in-syria-and-iraq-is-dangerous-and-counterproductive-9692303.html. At the same time, such schemes would serve to offer a radicalized person discontinuance of extremist behavior on the pragmatic level, i.e. disengagement by abandoning the personal/organizational structures and the ideological isolation tying him/her to the respective extremist milieu (Köhler “Family Counselling,” 187).
88 Hedayah and ICCT, Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks, 5-6.
deradicalize. One such program receiving more and more attention is the German Hayat program. Hayat’s aim is to serve as a bridge and mediator between security agencies and civil society. It emphasizes the importance of the role family and friends of a radicalized person can play and provides them with guidance. With respect to foreign fighters, its goal is to prevent individuals from leaving in the first place, to motivate those who have left to return or refrain from fighting, and to induce a deradicalization process when foreign fighters return home. Between the start of the program in 2011 and February of 2015, Hayat dealt with 127 cases. Of these, 21 cases have been considered a success in the sense that the process of radicalization was stopped or a process of deradicalization was induced. Twenty-nine more cases were closed after a few conversations. Of the 127 cases, 34 were "relevant to security" (sicherheitsrelevant), meaning the radicalized individual was either planning to travel to one of the different theaters of jihad (battles), was involved in fighting, or had returned after taking part in fighting or was suspected to have engaged in another type of terrorist activity. In nine of the cases with connections to the conflict in Syria and Iraq (e., the person in question had either travelled to the region or had had plans to do so), successful interventions were carried out, leading to a reevaluation of the person's "security status."

Given that the impact and potency of the ISM stems, in large part, from its ability to shock and awe to such a considerable extent, it might be useful for the global audience to develop resilience against the ISM atrocities, as horrible and impossible as this sounds. Giving the ISM and its sympathizers so much attention and emotional resonance fuels their power base. A working counter-narrative could be to ridicule them rather than grant their preposterous visions any level of seriousness. It might also be helpful to stop calling those Westerners leaving to join the IS and similar groups "radicals," referring to them instead as "extremists" to point out the lack of firm roots among many of them.

When taking a long-term perspective, we must address the individual vulnerabilities of such rootless persons, confront them regarding their issues and actions (to facilitate self-reflection), and provide them with alternative coping mechanisms for handling the daily stresses and dis-

90 Köhler “Family Counselling,” 2013, 197. See also for a detailed account of Hayat’s first two years of work (ibid. 199-202).
91 Claudia Dantschke, member of the Hayat team, e-mail message to author, February 6, 2015.
92 Daniel Gerlach, Interview with Klaus Weidmann, Phoenix vor Ort, Phoenix, August 7, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtbC7gilEEx&list=UUwylPnNIT8UABRrnGmU0T9jg.
93 As it is already happening through sarcastic and satiric publications such as the cover page of the fake “Jihadi Vogue” magazine (“Jihadi Vogue” magazine lampoons Iraq’s Islamic State warriors,” The Telegraph July 16, 2014, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10971080/Jihadi-Vogue-magazine-lampoons-Iraqs-Islamic-State-warriors.html).
appointments of life. Providing rational, coherent, valid, and credible counter-narratives is insufficient for limiting the impact of extremist interpretations of Islam; the target group must first be willing to accept the counter-narratives as valid and relevant (which means they must be authentically inclusive) in order for them to be effectively applied. If the targeted groups or individuals do not have at least a basic readiness to consider alternative narratives, all efforts to use counter-narratives as a way to facilitate deradicalization are doomed to fail.

In its essence, both the challenges and possible opportunities for developing effective counter-narrative measures for dealing with the “Islamic State” movement (and other extremist narratives) are connected to the requirement that they take a holistic approach and involve multiple layers of society. An example of such an approach that works at the societal/community level is the Swedish Prevent Strategy. It promotes inclusiveness and dialogue while emphasizing the importance of becoming involved with vulnerable individuals on a local grassroots level with the aim of “countering the internal identity crises before radicalization takes over.” In deed, the most sustainable approach to the problem of extremism is prevention; once extremists find a way to reach a person at a psychological level, they can introduce narratives to re-route and direct his/her perceptions and assessments of information, thus influencing his/her mindset and making him/her more susceptible to certain emotional triggers and cognitive stimuli. Even if this does not result in the adoption of an integrated or systematic ideology (as is the case with those absorbing IS’ sound bites), these narratives can do great harm.

Ultimately, we must all develop a more reflective approach regarding how we treat one another. It is the responsibility of every member of society to work toward an inclusive collective identity; doing so will rob resistance identities, such as those offered by the ISM and similar groups, of their power.

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94 Qatar International Academy for Security Studies (QIASS) and The Soufan Group, Countering Violent Extremism: The Counter Narrative Study (New York: The Soufan Group, 2013) 53; for more information on the strategy see ibid. 48-61.