

14/12/2021

## CSEP BRIEFING

# Breaking the ISIS Brand

## Project description

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The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) has created over 250 counter narrative video clips (up to five minutes long). It has also given voice to over 50 of those who left from Europe to join ISIS. Drawing on their own lived experiences inside ISIS, they speak out against the group as un-Islamic, brutal and corrupt. Using these counter narrative videos, ICSVE has conducted over 140 targeted and general campaigns on Facebook globally, with measurable results in terms of reach and impact. It has also developed empirical methods to re-target and re-engage individuals exhibiting violent extremist tendencies online. ICSVE research has also led to over 500 social media accounts either being removed or investigated for terrorism-related content.

ICSVE Internet campaigns for this project utilised ICSVE's counter narrative videos. Campaigns also included new videos made from interviews referred to by consortium partners and filmed in Syria and Iraq. The videos were aimed to reach target groups within the EU Member States with the highest numbers of those traveling to ISIS (Austria, Germany, Belgium, France, Finland, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands and Sweden). These are countries whose subpopulations are susceptible and vulnerable to online radicalising and terrorist content, or who are among those who already have been either radicalised or are on the brink of radicalisation. Seventeen language groups are of particular significance for reaching these audiences, as they represent the languages of countries with a high proportion of travellers to Syria and Iraq to join groups like ISIS, and of minorities that have immigrated and have had representatives of their communities join and act on behalf of ISIS.

Furthermore, ICSVE completed the following tasks.

- Conducted and shared analysis (without identifiers being included) with interested consortium partners to help intervene for better informed face-to-face interactions with similar populations. Profiles of concern were also reported.
- Supported and trained law enforcement and CVE professionals in online interventions, face-to-face prevention, and the use of ICSVE counter narratives.
- Provided practitioners the results of current research on terrorism and empirical tools for prevention and interventions to be used in their line of work.
- Used offline focus testing of the videos with vulnerable populations where appropriate, to maximise the online campaign's reach.

The expected impact of the proposed activities were two-fold. Firstly, behavioural changes (reversing the appeal of violent extremism as an answer to social, political, and personal problems). Secondly, boosting resilience and critical thinking and increasing confidence that one can succeed even with the challenges of being Muslim of immigrant descent, a convert to Islam and/or a migrant.

This paper follows a briefing structure, in which it summarises the campaign, the main achievements of the project, the lessons learned on online campaigning in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and also includes links to some of the campaign messages.



**International Center for  
the Study of Violent Extremism**



## Brief summary of the campaign

Vulnerable populations for violent extremism include Muslim immigrant descent individuals who face real or perceived discrimination or are finding it difficult to integrate. The list also includes converts from any background looking for some sort of belonging and purpose and/or are angered over geopolitics; and new migrants, particularly from war-torn areas where militant jihadi groups are active.

The Breaking the ISIS Brand online campaigns use counter narrative video clips which are just long enough (up to one minute) to maximize viewer retention. They feature a European ISIS insider – a defector, returnee, or imprisoned cadre – speaking out against the group and denouncing it as corrupt, unIslamic, and overly brutal. The speakers in the campaign are male and female, of different ages, and with different ethnic and personal backgrounds. For this project, eight European videos for Facebook counter narrative campaigns in the EU were created, subtitled in the local language of the particular country (German, Dutch, Italian, Finnish, French, Albanian, Bosnian, Arabic, Turkish, and Swedish). The links to these videos are listed below. An additional 242 Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative videos can be found on ICSVE's YouTube channel.

- [Learning About Your Religion in the Islamic State Caliphate](#)
- [Interpreting Scriptures in the Islamic State Caliphate](#)
- [Life is Good in the ISIS Caliphate](#)
- [My Islamic Duty to Help Suffering Syrians](#)
- [The Promises of ad-Dawlah to Women](#)
- [In Search of a Just Islamic Caliphate](#)
- [Enduring Injustice for the Islamic State Caliphate](#)
- [Following my Husband from Belgium into the Islamic State](#)
- [The Islamic State Fighting a Dictator in Syria](#)

Notably, some of the counter narratives are based on interviews and advice given by ISIS prisoners when ISIS was still active in Syria and calling Europeans to come join in Syria. With the downfall of the territorial Caliphate that is no longer an issue. However, the delegitimising of ISIS remains very important given that the digital Caliphate is still going strong and now advising Europeans to join and attack at home.

## Achievements

- The eight campaigns that run through this project included **162 individual ads**, localised according to country and language.
- In total, the videos have been watched 4,215,727 times for at least 15 seconds. **The videos have been watched in their entirety 1,748,992 times.** On average, 41.5 % of all 15-second views became complete views, indicating a high level of viewer retention. Additionally, we found that the longer viewers watch the videos, the more likely they are to watch the videos until the end, as 73.3 % of 45-second views became complete (60-second) views.
- With regard to **viewer engagement**, together the campaigns received 7,217 reactions, 1,140 comments, 1,530 shares, and 878 saves. The comments on the videos varied widely in content and tone, ranging from anger and calls for the speaker to be left in Syria to die, to sympathy and compassion for the speakers who regretted being misled by ISIS. Some comments were Islamophobic and conflated ISIS with Islam, whereas other comments pushed conspiracy theories about ISIS origins, namely that the group was created by some malicious force such as the United States, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Russia, in order to destroy Muslims or to give Islam a poor reputation. The comments indicate a high level of viewer engagement and a clear **emotional impact** of the videos, as well as providing insight into European viewers' perspectives and opinions regarding ISIS and ISIS foreign fighters who may become returnees
- ICSVE – Europe also created the Breaking the ISIS Brand – Europe Training Manual. The manual describes all 50 counter narrative videos that feature speakers from European and Balkan countries who left for Syria. The videos also provide study questions, Islamic explanations about why ISIS's arguments are wrong and tips on how to use the counter narrative videos online and in face-to-face interactions for P/CVE work. The manual is available for download [here](#).

## Lessons learned

- The primary challenge encountered over the course of this project was navigating the ever-changing and, at times, arbitrary Facebook review process. The multi-stage review process required in order to run the campaigns in countries outside of the United States (where the primary project staff are based) and to have the campaigns paid for with Facebook ad credits was time consuming and changed over the course of the project period, largely due to the rampant spread of dis-, mis-, and mal-information about COVID-19 and the United States presidential election.
- This challenge was greatly mitigated by a strong working relationship with the team at Facebook. Two Facebook staff members worked closely with us to provide solid guidance and to advocate on our behalf when we appealed decisions by the Facebook reviewers. Facebook also contracted social media consultants to work with us, who were immensely helpful in all stages of the campaigns.
- Although, there are few ways to avoid the obstacles of Facebook's review process, we advise others to make sure they are in close contact and in good relationships with Facebook employees who can help them navigate the process and lend support for the counter narrative content when necessary.

### What we would do differently next time

Next time, the project would work to create videos that are targeted more at dismantling the militant jihadist ideology generally and less on preventing people from trying to travel to join ISIS. While this original aim was impactful when ISIS still had a functioning Caliphate, it is less relevant today. As such, future counter narrative videos should remain parallel to ISIS propaganda videos in being emotionally evocative but shifting viewers' focus to revealing the reality of ISIS goals and the fallacies of their beliefs, as well as preventing people from supporting ISIS by sending money to imprisoned ISIS fighters or attacking at home in retribution for the destruction of the Caliphate.

## Follow-up

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### What has been the added value of this project for P/CVE policies?

- This project demonstrates the utility of counter narrative content, particularly using the testimonies of actual ISIS insiders, to expose the reality about ISIS to vulnerable audiences and encouraging them to question what they may have heard from extremist radicalisers and recruiters.
- Even though the COVID-19 pandemic was unforeseen, running these campaigns during global lockdowns emphasised the need for online strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism.
- Considering that online radicalisation has not ceased during this time, the Breaking the ISIS Brand counter narrative campaigns have been and continue to be useful in disrupting and disputing the claims that violent extremists continue to propagate.

### Do you have any strategic recommendations for policymakers?

- Policymakers should not discount the utility of honest, authentic counter narrative content. We have found through this project that viewers seem to be willing to listen to actual ISIS insiders (instead of actors or government messengers) telling their honest and often messy stories of joining and leaving ISIS. Viewers appear to relate to the speakers and find them credible, which is a key consideration for strategic communications.
- Populations that are vulnerable to violent extremist radicalisation and recruitment tend to feel marginalised, isolated, and alienated from the larger society, especially if they are members of a minority ethnic or religious group. Therefore, they may already be mistrustful of the government and law enforcement. The Breaking the ISIS Brand counter narrative videos avoid the pitfall of being dismissed or delegitimised as government propaganda, rather appearing as a warning message from someone just like the target viewer, who may have felt discriminated against in Europe but found that joining ISIS was a dangerous, misinformed, life-ruining remedy for that discrimination.
- We advise policymakers not to shy away from acknowledging the legitimate grievances of people who are vulnerable to radicalisation, and rather to address those grievances and hence make joining a terrorist group less attractive.

### How can it be followed up on (in international, national and/or local context) or what could/should be the next step(s)?

- The Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project has already been expanded to other countries, with campaigns being planned and run around the world, including the Maldives, Trinidad and Tobago, Iraq, and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa.
- As reciprocal radicalisation continues and white supremacism grows in Western countries we recommend carrying out projects similar to this one using white supremacists to speak against their groups and ideologies.
- The Breaking the ISIS Brand training manual is freely available to policy makers and practitioners so that they can use the counter narrative videos and their associated study guides in their work. The training manual can be downloaded [here](#).