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A SECURE SOCIETY IS CONNECTED

Lieutenant-Commander Christopher Learn

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A SECURE SOCIETY IS CONNECTED

By Lieutenant-Commander Christopher Learn

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria was aided by their success in recruiting followers and effectively employing them. ISIS was able to seize territory in the Middle East and exercise effective control over it until they were ultimately defeated. ISIS leveraged a violent interpretation of Islam and used cult indoctrination techniques to attract followers and control them. The armed response to ISIS was ultimately effective at regaining control of the territory that they seized. However, other methods to disrupt ISIS's control over its followers may have improved the effectiveness of the response and reduced the force required to regain the territory seized by ISIS. This paper will examine ISIS techniques to recruit, control, encourage violence and limited the exit options of their members and propose an effective approach including the strengthening of social connections that could have been employed as part of a comprehensive approach to disrupt ISIS's ability to recruit and control its followers.

ISIS employed recruitment techniques in the same manner as many other cults that existed before it.[1] The recruitment techniques were very effective. In addition to local recruitment, ISIS' efforts attracted more than thirty thousand recruits from more than 100 countries to Syria and Iraq.[2] Effective ways to prevent cult recruitment would rob ISIS of personnel resources which would hamper their ability to carry out operations.

To effectively counteract cult recruitment efforts, it is necessary to understand those who may be susceptible to recruitment techniques. The majority of people who join cults do not exhibit a mental or behavioural disorder.[3] Recruits have needs that are not being met in their

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[1] Florence Gaub. "The Cult of ISIS," *Survival*, 58:1 (2016), 113-130, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1142142., 115.
[2] Speckhard, Anne, Shajkovci, Ardian, Wooster, Claire, Izadi, Neima. "Mounting a Facebook Brand Awareness and Safety Ad Campaign to Break the ISIS Brand in Iraq." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. June 2018, Vol. 12 Issue 3, 50.
[3] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 4. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.

current social networks and are searching for a sense of belonging or meaning in their lives.[4] In

other cases the needs may be less existential, for example the former Ba'athists joined ISIS

seeking to regain the power and standard of living that they lost due to the US policy of de-

Ba'athification.[5] Understanding the motivations of those who are susceptible to join ISIS as well

as their recruitment techniques allows for the development of anti-recruitment techniques that

could prevent them from joining.

ISIS used online communication to promote their organization and encourage further

engagement. Some videos used video game imagery to promote the adventure of combat as a

means of proving one's manhood.[6] Other videos were more benign, showing the availability of

popular foods and discussing the availability of coffee in Islamic State territory.[7] Messages were

aimed at both men and women, men were promised wives and adventure while women were

promised a comfortable life and the ability to bear and raise children in a Muslim environment

with all the modern conveniences.[8] These types of messages were crafted to appeal to people

who felt that something was missing from their lives.

ISIS was not limited to promoting adventure and ideal living. The English language

magazine Dabiq reinforced the message of living in a utopian Muslim caliphate created by ISIS

and also to take credit for successful operations and terror attacks.[9] Success is important for

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[4] Florence Gaub. "The Cult of ISIS," *Survival*, 58:1 (2016), 113-130, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1142142., 117.
[5] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 19-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[6] Nance, Malcolm. *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe.* New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016., 309.
[7] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 129.
[8] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 20. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[9] Nance, Malcolm. *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe.* New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016., 321.

attracting recruits as it reinforces the message that ISIS is an organization worth belonging to.[10]

The social media campaign was effective in communicating ISIS' message but messaging alone is not sufficient to recruit candidates.

One on one interaction is an important factor for successful cult recruiting efforts. Affinity for the group at a personal level, usually facilitated by a pre-existing personal relationship with a member is a key indicator for recruitment success.[11] The majority of recruiting in ISIS held Iraqi territory was conducted in mosques and through person to person contact.[12] Ninety Five percent of foreign ISIS recruits were recruited by friends and family members.[13] Personal contact and development of bonds between potential recruits and members is a key component of ISIS's recruitment effort.

Social media and other online applications were used leveraged by ISIS to communicate with potential recruits. Twitter, Facebook and other online communications were used to develop relationships.[14] Skype conversations would follow to finalize and help firm up commitments to join the organization.[15] Recruits would be guided to ISIS created online applications that allowed for more secure communication and provide advice on how best to travel to ISIS territory.[16] The use of social media was a highly effective tool for recruiting, it was deemed directly responsible for the recruitment of several teenage girls in Austria, the US and the UK.[17]

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[10] Florence Gaub. "The Cult of ISIS," *Survival*, 58:1 (2016), 113-130, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1142142., 116.
[11] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[12] Speckhard, Anne, Shajkovci, Ardian, Wooster, Claire, Izadi, Neima. "Mounting a Facebook Brand Awareness and Safety Ad Campaign to Break the ISIS Brand in Iraq." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. June 2018, Vol. 12 Issue 3, 50.
[13] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 17-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[14] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 129.
[15] Ibid., 130.
[16] Ibid., 130.
[17] Ibid., 127.

Responses to ISIS recruitment techniques are referred to as Countering Violent

Extremism (CVE).[18] The most common type of CVE seeks to promote a counter-narrative to the

message put forth by ISIS and to support police intervention with those who may be at risk of

radicalization.[19] Online tools and educational resources to promote a peaceful message and

encourage reporting the potentially radicalized are part of CVE support this approach.[20] The

messaging can be improved by using former members to deliver the counter-narrative and

aligning the look and feel with existing ISIS messaging.[21] However, the focus on counter-

narrative and empowering state resources to intervene with individuals can create the impression

that the state is trying to suppress some voices and further alienate potential ISIS recruits.[22] The

US investment in peer to peer CVE programs in universities to provide student led a counter

narrative may help to remove this perception in some cases.[23] This approach also ignores the

importance of the personal connection to recruiting and should not be regarded as sufficient in

and of itself to combat ISIS recruitment.

Censorship to limit ISIS' ability to communicate its message online not an effective

means of interfering with recruiting.[24] The use of take down notices and algorithms to detect and

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[18] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 7. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.
[19] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 15. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[20] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 132-133.
[21] Speckhard, Anne, Shajkovci, Ardian, Wooster, Claire, Izadi, Neima. "Mounting a Facebook Brand Awareness and Safety Ad Campaign to Break the ISIS Brand in Iraq." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. June 2018, Vol. 12 Issue 3, 52.
[22] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 15. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[23] Ibid., 15.
[24] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 130.

remove ISIS propaganda are less effective in languages other than English.[25] ISIS use of fake

accounts to redirect potential recruits to other secure sites allows them to circumvent censorship

efforts on popular social media sites.[26] Efforts by groups like Anonymous to dox, conduct denial

of service attacks and similar efforts are only effective for as long as the group is willing to

continue them and can be circumvented the same methods.[27] While censorship efforts are a

worthwhile as part of a larger coordinated effort, they cannot be relied upon alone.

The most effective way to counter ISIS recruitment efforts is also the most difficult due

to the need to foster a connection between an individual and society. If the needs of the recruit

can be met within their current social network, their susceptibility to recruiting techniques will

be dramatically reduced. Denmark has implemented a program to connect at risk people with

mentors, provide support to improve their skills and provide opportunities to improve their

lives.[28] Canada and Germany have programs to emphasize the support network that exists at

home.[29] The same techniques that corporations use to track online activity could be leveraged to

identify potential recruits and connect them with a person to intervene.[30] This approach is

problematic from a privacy standpoint unless governments are willing to compel corporations to

give up their data and include the fact that they will in their user agreements and licenses to gain

consent for data collection. Regardless of the communication tools available, it is recognized that

face to face interaction and interpersonal activity is still the most effective way to reach potential

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[25] Speckhard, Anne, Shajkovci, Ardian, Wooster, Claire, Izadi, Neima. "Mounting a Facebook Brand Awareness and Safety Ad Campaign to Break the ISIS Brand in Iraq." *Perspectives on Terrorism*. June 2018, Vol. 12 Issue 3, 51.
[26] Ibid., 51.
[27] Nance, Malcolm. *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe.* New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016., 321-322.
[28] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 20. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[29] Ibid., 20.
[30] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 132.

recruits and sway them from joining ISIS.[31] The importance of creating a sense of fulfillment and

real connections between potential ISIS recruits and their existing social network cannot be

overstated.

 Once ISIS has recruited someone to their cause, the next step is to control their

thinking.[32] The first step is to isolate the recruit from their existing social network followed by

indoctrination into a new way of thinking about the world.[33] The new mode of thinking is

reinforced by strict control of behavior and creating dependence on the cult to meet the needs of

the individual.[34] The isolation of the individual and creation of dependence on ISIS to solely

meet their needs is a key method of cementing their association and channeling their thinking.

 Isolation of new members from their previous lives is accomplished by supporting new

recruits in traveling to ISIS held territory. Physical separation fosters dependence on ISIS and

removes them from the influence of family and friends.[35] ISIS online applications that provide

travel advice greatly assisted in this process.[36] While physical separation makes the adoption of

new beliefs and strengthens ties to ISIS it is not necessary for ISIS to exert control.

 Online messages that communicate ISIS' belief system can also indoctrinate new cult

members. Propaganda videos that reinforce the message of violent jihadist acts result in entrance

to heaven are effective in some cases.[37] An indoctrinated follower may also transfer the

responsibility for a violent act to Charismatic ISIS figures viewed online giving themselves

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[31] Speckhard, Anne ,Shajkovci, Ardian, Ahmed, Mohamed. "Intervening in and Preventing Somali-American Radicalization with Counter Narratives: Testing the Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Videos in American Somali Focus Group Settings." *Journal of Strategic Security*. 2018, Vol. 11 Issue 4, 61. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.11.4.1695.
[32] Florence Gaub. "The Cult of ISIS," *Survival*, 58:1 (2016), 113-130, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1142142., 118.
[33] Ibid., 119.
[34] Ibid., 120-121.
[35] Ibid., 119.
[36] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 130.
[37] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 4. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.

permission to act as proposed by Stanley Milgrim's "agentic" theory.[38] While online indoctrination does provide some influence over cult members, control can be achieved more reliability when the cultist is completely under the control of the cult.

ISIS was particularly adept at social encapsulation[39] within their territory, limiting outside influences. Once members joined ISIS they would be subject to an extremely strict interpretation of Islam which constrained their behavior.[40] This code was enforced by the Hisbah morality police,[41] and the all-female al-Khansaa and Umm Rayhan brigades.[42] The punishments for transgressions were brutal, cruel and included lashes, stoning, amputation of limbs, and death by crushing, dragging, immolation, beheading, explosives and crucifixion.[43] ISIS doctrine also directly correlated behavior with belief;[44] any member who did not conform would also be guilty of apostasy. The police state and extreme punishments for non-compliance combined with this faith based behavior imperative helped to ensure conformity amongst ISIS' members.

ISIS sought to remake the environment that its members occupied to eliminate reminders of opposing viewpoints. ISIS destroyed cultural artifacts from belief systems that disagreed with its interpretation of reality throughout the territory it controlled.[45] The elimination of contrary viewpoints aided in reinforcing their message.

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[38] Ibid., 5.

[39] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.

[40] Nance, Malcolm. *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe.* New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016., 206.

[41] Ibid., 179.

[42] Ibid., 181.

[43] Ibid., 207-208.

[44] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 19. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.

[45] Nance, Malcolm. *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe.* New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016., 228.

Military operations that can lessen the effectiveness of ISIS' mind control capability should be focused primarily on degrading their ability to provide for their members physical needs. Interruption of supply lines and raiding[46] and the destruction of infrastructure[47] will limit ISIS's ability to provide for their members, increase dissatisfaction with their rule and encourage defections. Military planning can also take into account the preservation and protection of historically and culturally significant sites and artifacts which would preserve the reminders of different viewpoints.[48]

Other measures to combat ISIS' behavior modification techniques should be similar to those employed against their recruiting efforts. Counter-narratives to attempting to halt progression to more extreme ideals disrupt ISIS messaging and increase exposure to dissenting voices can help to counter ISIS messaging.[49] While person to person interaction is the most effective way of introducing opposing viewpoints,[50] this may not be feasible within ISIS held territory. Public health style communications similar to those used to warn about the dangers of drink driving or offering assistance, like Kids Help Phone, may be useful prophylactic measures to weaken agreement with ISIS' belief system and could reach those in ISIS occupied territory.[51] Counter-narratives may be counterproductive for those with well entrenched beliefs. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance and/or belief perseverance may result in well indoctrinated ISIS members clinging more stubbornly to their beliefs.[52]

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[46] Ibid., 333.
[47] Ibid., 337.
[48] Ibid., 244.
[49] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 8. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.
[50] Ibid., 8.
[51] Ibid., 8.
[52] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 16. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.

The choice of counters to ISIS' mind control techniques must include consideration of the conditions that an individual is subject to. If the target individuals are not physically isolated from their social network, in person interaction is likely the most effective means. For those who are physically isolated and dependent on ISIS for all their needs, degradation of ISIS' capability to provide for those needs is likely to more effective at reducing their allegiance to the organization.

ISIS employs the logic of violence to create a unique shared experience to bind its members closer together.[53] Individual exposed to progressively more extreme beliefs without contradictory views will eventually come to accept them as the norm to the point of becoming willing to commit violence to further those beliefs.[54] ISIS theology calls upon all Muslims travel to occupied territory to support jihad is their duty and if they cannot do so then they should wage war wherever they are.[55] They claim that child rape, killing children, beheadings and suicide bombing are all acts of worshiping God.[56] Any clerics within ISIS who objected to these practices were executed.[57] By encouraging these despicable acts, bonds between the perpetrators were formed and strengthened as no other group would be accepting.

If the aforementioned influencing techniques to encourage changes in belief to prevent this type of behavior are ineffective, the response to the logic of violence techniques is force. Military and security forces action to protect potential victims or apprehension of the perpetrators if the action cannot be prevented is the only viable option in response to atrocities.

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[53] Florence Gaub. "The Cult of ISIS," *Survival*, 58:1 (2016), 113-130, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1142142., 121.
[54] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 3. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.
[55] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 19. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[56] Nance, Malcolm. *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe.* New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016., 200.
[57] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 128.

ISIS, like many other successful cults, is difficult to leave. The punishment for attempting to leave or behavior that would warrant expulsion from the cult is death.[58] The environment for those who were affiliated with the cult in the outside world is not welcoming, even participating in the distribution of ISIS messages can result in jail time.[59] For those already within ISIS, the outside world appears to be a hostile place.

In addition, recruitment, through mind control and the logic of violence all serve to bond cult members closer together. The social connections that were lacking in the majority of converts are created within the cult.[60] Strongly held beliefs will become more entrenched over time and foster an intense emotional commitment to defending those ideals.[61]

If radicals from ISIS do manage to leave the organization, the approach to dealing with them should be carefully considered and engineered to encourage others to do the same. Addressing or preventing the reoccurrence of the conditions that led them to seek out the cult should be the focus of any rehabilitation efforts.[62] Ideological arguments alone will not be sufficient to break the bonds established by the cult itself and may increase risks over the longer term.[63] A French program that takes a counter ideological approach and forces radicals to live together could have an effect similar to the conditions which created ISIS leadership cadre in Camp Buca in Iraq.[64] Gentler de-radicalization approaches in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen,

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[58] Florence Gaub. "The Cult of ISIS," *Survival*, 58:1 (2016), 113-130, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1142142., 124.
[59] Bunt, Gary R. *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2018., 129.
[60] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[61] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 2. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.
[62] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 17. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[63] Ibid., 21.
[64] Ibid., 20.

Indonesia and Singapore involve discussions with moderate Muslim clerics regarding the correct interpretation of Islam.[65]

The creation of stronger ties between communities can aid in creating an environment that discourages radicalization and may improve the chance of re-integration of ex-ISIS members into society. Communities that have ties to other communities within a society are more flexible and create environments that inhibit extremist ideology.[66] Government investment in communities to increase employment opportunities, education and civic engagement will also improve the societal conditions that will help foster the social connectivity that potential radicals are lacking.[67] Building trust between communities and the government is also an important goal, singling out a particular group to report on ISIS behaviors may only serve to increase the possibility of members to feel isolated from society as whole.[68]

Intervention to disrupt ISIS' ability to recruit and control its followers ideally should start as soon as possible. The most effective way to combat radicalization and indoctrination into cults is to create the conditions in which cult members do not feel disconnected from the societies in which they live. This can be accomplished by creating communities with access to education, employment opportunities and good economic conditions help foster social connection. Encouraging ties to other communities within the society can also prevent a sense of isolation. In areas that have been disrupted by conflict, restoration of infrastructure and services as quickly as possible will help to prevent conditions where they will seek other organizations that will meet their needs. In addition to societal reinforcement activities to prevent or minimize recruitment

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[65] Rahman, Tahir. "Extreme Overvalued Beliefs: How Violent Extremist Beliefs Become "Normalized"." *Behavioral Sciences* (2076-328X). January 2018, Vol. 8 Issue 1, 7. doi:10.3390/bs8010010.
[66] Day, Joel, Kleinmann, Scott. "Combating the Cult of ISIS: A Social Approach to Countering Violent Extremism." *Review of Faith & International Affairs*. September 2017, Vol. 15 Issue 3, 18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1354458.
[67] Ibid., 21.
[68] Ibid., 21.

opportunities, a robust CVE effort to counter, dilute and limit the reach of extremist narratives is a valuable augmentation to societal improvement efforts. Sufficient military and security forces to defend or prevent extremist violence are also necessary if a cult like ISIS grows to a size where it is capable of conducting operations. Responding to extremist organizations like ISIS will likely always require the use of force and promotion of counter-narratives but these are short term responses that may eliminate the immediate threat as it did in the case of ISIS. However, failure to address the underlying conditions that led to growth of the cult, only defers the threat until another extremist organization can grow to take its place.

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