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# Watching ISIS: How Young Adults Engage with Official English-Language ISIS Videos

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## ABSTRACT

Research on *jihadist* online propaganda (JOP) tends to focus on the production, content, and dissemination of *jihadist* online messages. Correspondingly, the target of JOP—that is, the audience—has thus far attracted little scholarly attention. This article seeks to redress this neglect by focusing on how audiences respond to *jihadist* online messaging. It presents the findings of an online pilot survey testing audience responses to clips from English-language Islamic State of Iraq and Syria videos. The survey was beset at every stage by ethical, legal, and practical restrictions, and we discuss how these compromised our results and what this means for those attempting to do research in this highly sensitive area.

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## Researching *Jihadist* Online Propaganda (JOP)

Broadly speaking, JOP raises three core questions: (1) what is it or what forms does it take?; (2) what is its causal role in the radicalization process of *jihadists*?; and (3) how is it received by the audiences it is intended to shake up, berate, or terrorize? Thus far, scholarship in terrorism studies has made great progress in answering the first question, but has made strikingly little headway in probing the second and third. It is not difficult to understand why. Assuming they have the requisite know-how in locating it, JOP is readily accessible to the researcher. By contrast, the radicalization process of *jihadists* is not immediately accessible to the researcher and the question of what role (if any) exposure to JOP plays in it raises some formidable methodological problems. (It also involves leaving one's study, a prospect that no doubt terrifies some scholars of terrorism.<sup>1</sup>)

It is worth briefly considering what these problems are. The first and most serious one is of access: of finding a decent sample of *active jihadists* with whom one could interview about their exposure to JOP. As research by Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam has demonstrated, it is not impossible to make contact with *jihadists* and interview them via online messaging apps.<sup>2</sup> But it probably is not feasible for most scholars to conduct the kind of in-depth, face-to-face qualitative life-history interviews that would facilitate introspection and illuminate their radicalization pathways, given the physical risks involved.

The second problem is intellectual in nature: even if one were to conduct life-history interviews with a decent sample of active *jihadists*, it is far from certain that speaking to them about their pathways to becoming *jihadists* would settle the question of how JOP featured as a causal component. This is because there is every reason to expect that they simply would not know how it featured among all the other myriad experiences, events, and choices that shaped their radicalization.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative approach would be to interview *ex-jihadists*, who present no obvious security risk to the researcher. But this is far from ideal, given not only the difficulties of assembling a decent sample of interviewees, but also the inherent methodological problems associated with retrospective account-making, and the way in which time skews memory and perception. This is not to say that interviews with *ex-jihadists* or ex-terrorists of any stripe are not worthwhile—*far from it*—but that the methodological problems of interviewing ex-terrorists are especially acute because of the enormous pressures on them to rationalize or excuse, rather than to reliably explain, their involvement in terrorism.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the accounts of some former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members, this takes the form of a Goffmanesque “sad tale,”<sup>5</sup> in which the teller presents himself as the innocent victim of “brainwashing.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, in Sykes and Matza’s terminology, they are more “more sinned against than sinning.”<sup>7</sup>

A second alternative approach would be to interview *would-be jihadists* or those who are sympathetic to *jihadist* groups but are not yet fully convinced of the cause. The main advantage of this approach is that it would shed light not just on how culturally immersed they are in JOP, but also on how they actually consume and relate to it.

There is compelling evidence to suggest that active *jihadists* are *deeply* immersed in the culture of *jihadism*, and *jihadist* videos form a central element of that culture.<sup>8</sup> A recent report by Policy Exchange, a U.K. think tank, claimed that “over two-thirds (69%) of Islamist-related terrorism offences in the UK [between 1998 and 2015] have been committed by individuals who were known to have in some way consumed extremist and/or ‘instructional’ terrorist material.”<sup>9</sup> Now, if *would-be jihadists* were only *lightly* exposed to JOP, it might suggest that the role of this propaganda was not particularly salient in the radicalization process, and that, as some scholars have theorized, JOP acquires a causal salience only *after jihadists* have become radicalized as a reinforcement tool. But even if this were not the case, and they were actively consuming JOP before becoming fully radicalized, it would still be difficult to empirically demonstrate and measure its role in bridging the gap between sympathy and actual involvement in *jihadist* activity.

The main disadvantage of this approach, however, is its feasibility. The problems, roughly, are twofold: first, it is not at all clear how one would assemble a sample of *would-be jihadists* or those who are sympathetic with *jihadist* causes. Perhaps some researchers would be “in the know,” so to speak, in some communities, but most would not be, and even for researchers who possess the relevant knowledge, it is not clear how they would select and recruit individuals to their sample of *would-be jihadists*. Second, it is also unclear how researchers would manage the highly flammable politics around the selection issue, given the potential offense any approach may cause to those of Muslim background who already feel securitized and subject to anti-Islamic bigotry. In addition to this, there would also be the very real risk of interference from law enforcement agencies, who may request to see any data gathered under terrorism laws.<sup>10</sup> Potential interviewees would also be sensitive to this possibility,<sup>11</sup> and hence it is highly unlikely that they would participate in a research study that not only

implied they were “vulnerable” to terrorism, but also put them at risk of arrest or interference from the authorities.

Of the three core questions about JOP identified above, (3)—how is it received by the audiences it is intended to shake up, berate or terrorize?—remains the most under-researched in terrorism studies. Given that terrorism is a form of symbolic communication targeted at audiences,<sup>12</sup> one would expect to see a keener engagement among terrorism studies scholars with the many and varied audiences of terrorist atrocities. There is of course an impressive range of scholarship on terrorism as a form of signaling, where the focus is on how competing terrorist groups escalate violence to project strength and primacy to both their supporters and competitors in violence,<sup>13</sup> but on the issue of how ordinary civilians interpret and respond to terrorist atrocities and campaigns of violence there is little sustained scholarship. This probably says more about the schedule of research priorities in terrorism studies than about an attitude of incuriosity on the part of scholars toward the audience of terrorism.<sup>14</sup> In a field where the primary focus is on terrorist organizations, the people who belong to or support these organizations and the ideologies they subscribe to, the wider audience of terrorism will always remain somewhat of a marginal research concern. Yet (3) is the more empirically tractable of the three questions, but it, too, raises some vexing problems, which we discuss at length in this article.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first sets our research into a broader scholarly context. The second describes the Islamic State Audience Reception (ISAR) Survey, and details the numerous challenges—ethical, legal, and practical—we faced in carrying it out. And the third presents the results of the survey and a discussion of key findings. We conclude by addressing the limitations of our study, and outline the challenges and possibilities for further research in this area.

## Contextualizing ISIS Online Propaganda

### *The Scholarly Consensus*

In February 2015, three teenage schoolgirls from east London absconded to Syria and vanished into the block caps of international headline news.<sup>15</sup> According to a report in the *Daily Mail* the girls—Shamima Begum, Kadiza Sultana, and Amira Abase—had been “ruthlessly groomed online” and were “brainwashed in their bedrooms.”<sup>16</sup> By way of substantiation, the report noted that both Begum and Sultana were prolific Twitter users and that Begum had followed scores of pro-ISIS accounts, giving her “access to a torrent of appalling images and footage.” It also quoted Begum’s sister as saying that ISIS is “preying on young innocent girls and it’s not right.”

Despite the haziness of the details about the girls’ motives and how they became radicalized, the story of their defection to ISIS became generalized into a moral fable about the dangers of violent Islamism, and how even the most innocent and precocious minds are vulnerable to its deadly allure.<sup>17</sup> In much of the media frenzy surrounding the case, the girls resembled not so much active agents with personal convictions as the passive victims of ideological indoctrination or mind-control.<sup>18</sup> It was not that they had come to believe, after a period of personal reflection and rumination, in what they saw as the virtues of Islamic theocracy over the demerits of Western secular society; rather, it was that they had been corrupted by “slick” propaganda, distributed by online “groomers.” A further plotline in this

horror story of maligned youthful innocence was how powerful social media platforms, like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, had aided and abetted the monster of violent Islamism by disseminating its virtual pathogens.<sup>19</sup>

As the above suggests, popular discourse on ISIS tends to construct the group as a virtual hegemon with unparalleled powers of persuasion and intimidation, poisoning young minds and terrifying older ones. Scholars, however, typically strike a more cautious note. Peter Neumann, for example, is quoted as saying: “I don’t believe we’ve seen a single case of a fighter who traveled to Syria without knowing someone [in real life] who went there first.”<sup>20</sup> “The function of social-media propaganda,” according to Neumann, is “to provide a growth medium for the germ [of *jihadist* ideology] once it has been contracted. Then, on their own time and through easily accessible sermons, articles, and videos, individuals can nurture and feed it.”<sup>21</sup> This reflects a broader consensus among scholars: namely, that while extremist online content is not in itself a sufficient cause of radicalization, it plays an important contributory causal role in the complex process by which ordinary people become radicalized toward violence.<sup>22</sup>

Within this consensus, there is not a huge amount of clarity on just *how* important that role is in relation to other aspects of the radicalization process.<sup>23</sup> But on the nature of the role of extremist online propaganda most scholars agree that sustained<sup>24</sup> exposure to it helps *reinforce* preexisting assumptions and beliefs that are already tending toward the extreme.<sup>25</sup> For many scholars, the nature of this reinforcement is one of “normalization,” whereby exposure to extreme material serves to validate a person’s already extreme views, so that they no longer seem taboo or deviant.<sup>26</sup> In addition to this, some scholars suggest that extremist online material can serve to *trigger* the radicalization process by inducing a sense of moral outrage in the person who comes across it.<sup>27</sup>

What this consensus has going for it is that it intuitively makes sense. It also avoids the reductive, baseless, and slightly hysterical narrative of extremist online content as a principal driver of *jihadist* radicalization and violence. Yet, just like the narrative it calls into question, it lacks a firm empirical grounding. We still know all too little about how extremist online propaganda is consumed and understood by those already radicalized or moving toward radicalization, still less how its consumption shaped their thoughts, emotions, and, ultimately, life-choices.<sup>28</sup> As Anne Aly remarks, there is a “lack of empirical evidence to support assumptions of causality between online narratives and radicalization to violent extremism.”<sup>29</sup> Maura Conway similarly notes: “There is no yet proven connection between consumption of and networking around violent extremist online content and adoption of extremist ideology and/or engagement in violent extremism and terrorism.”<sup>30</sup>

As yet, there is no scholarly consensus on how terrorist atrocities are understood and emotionally absorbed by the wider audiences at whom they are targeted because scholars have barely begun to address the issue. As Aly makes clear: “Within the literature on terrorism and the Internet, the audience—those individuals who receive messages, make meaning from them and then decide whether to act on them—is conspicuously missing.”<sup>31</sup>

### ***ISIS Online Propaganda: What We Know and Do Not Know***

There is a rapidly expanding body of research on the content and dissemination of ISIS online messaging. One prominent study, for example, by J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, measured ISIS’s presence and demographic composition on Twitter.<sup>32</sup> More recent studies have charted the migration of ISIS propagandists from Twitter to the encrypted messaging

service Telegram, now that the former has adopted a more vigilant policy toward suspending pro-ISIS accounts.<sup>33</sup> Many more studies have sought to code and describe the content of ISIS's varied online messages. One of the first and most comprehensive of these was a report by Charlie Winter, in which he identified six key themes in ISIS online messaging: mercy, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war, and utopia.<sup>34</sup> Of these, the most prominent, according to Winter, was the last one—far more so than brutality,<sup>35</sup> with which the group has become synonymous in popular accounts. In a more recent study, Haroro J. Ingram provided a content-analysis of nine issues of *Dabiq* magazine, using this to illuminate “the strategic logic of IS's communications campaign targeting Western Muslims.”<sup>36</sup> In another Cori E. Dauber and Mark Robinson adopted a more qualitatively oriented approach, closely documenting ISIS's appropriation and use of what they call a “Hollywood visual style” in official ISIS videos.<sup>37</sup> And in yet another Henrik Gråtrud conducted a thematic analysis of seventeen ISIS *nasheeds* released between December 2013 and March 2015.<sup>38</sup>

Thanks to this body of research,<sup>39</sup> we now have much better idea of what ISIS messaging looks and sounds like, how it rhetorically works, what its dominant themes are, how much of it there is and how it reaches its audiences. What we still do not know, however, is what the various audiences on the receiving end make of it all. In what follows we describe a two-year-long effort to redress this knowledge-deficit.

## The ISAR Survey

Well before launching the ISAR survey, our original research plan was to conduct an audience-reception study of ISIS videos using a qualitative approach similar to that deployed in Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz's seminal 1990 study of audience responses to the soap opera *Dallas*, titled *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of "Dallas."* For that study, Liebes and Katz would watch the show with groups of families and friends from Israel, Japan, and America, and then initiate a conversation about it. Watching *Dallas*, they found, was “an active and involving experience” that “varies with the cultural background one brings to the viewing.”<sup>40</sup> “How in the world is a program like *Dallas* so universally understandable, or is it?,” asked Liebes and Katz.<sup>41</sup> “Is it understood in the same way in different places? Does it evoke different kinds of involvement and response?”<sup>42</sup> We wanted to ask a similar set of questions in relation to ISIS English-speaking propaganda videos, and we were particularly concerned to explore how Muslim young adults in the West—one of ISIS's primary target audiences—responded to these videos, and whether their responses differed from non-Muslim young adults. But after speaking with several gate-keepers from the Muslim communities we wanted to reach, it soon became clear that such a project was not fully feasible. In the current political climate in Britain, it has become difficult for many young Muslims to speak openly and publicly about ISIS for fear that what they say may attract unwanted interest or interference from the authorities.<sup>43</sup> According to U.K. terrorism-legislation,<sup>44</sup> university lecturers (as well as teachers in schools and colleges) have a legal duty to report to the authorities anyone who displays “signs of radicalization”<sup>45</sup> in their classrooms or on the campuses in which they work.<sup>46</sup> If the Muslims we interviewed happened to support ISIS or express positive views about the ISIS videos we wanted to show them, it would be highly unlikely that they would tell us about this, and if they did we would be legally obliged to report this to the authorities. We were also advised that any attempts on our part to recruit Muslims to focus-groups on ISIS videos may be seen by them as stigmatizing by associating them with ISIS.

Given these problems, we abandoned this plan, and instead decided on an anonymous online survey on ISIS videos aimed at young adults, of all faith-backgrounds, in Britain and North America. The idea behind the survey was simple: Ask ordinary young adults to watch clips from ISIS videos—which we edited to exclude scenes of graphic violence—and then get them to tell us about that viewing experience.

The ISAR survey was launched with its own dedicated Web-domain in September 2016 and remained online until the end of March 2017. To our knowledge, it is the first audience reception survey of ISIS videos anywhere.

Before taking the survey, respondents were asked to read a page of text describing the core aim and rationale of the research, making it explicit that the survey (a) was being conducted by researchers at the University of Kent; (b) that it was an anonymous research instrument that did not require the disclosure of any personal information; (c) that it would take no more than 15 minutes to complete; (d) that all responses would be automatically saved and encrypted; (e) that the video footage used in the survey may cause distress or unease; (f) that respondents could terminate their participation at any time by clicking on a “STOP THE SURVEY NOW” bar attached to every page of the survey; and (g) that by clicking on the “START” bar at the bottom of the page respondents would indicate their consent to participate in the survey. The second page of the survey gave a brief description of ISIS, using sparse and neutral language.

The survey contained four embedded clips from four official, English-language ISIS videos: “The Clanging of the Swords part 4” (al-Furqān Media; released on 17 May 2014); “For the Sake of Allah” (al-Ḥayāt Media Center; released on 14 April 2015); “Eid Greetings from the Land Of Khilafah” (al-Ḥayāt Media Center; released on 2 August 2014); and “Although the Disbelievers Dislike it” (al-Furqān Media; released on 16 November 2014). All four videos were major releases for ISIS, and attracted considerable attention in the Western news media.<sup>47</sup> The individual clips were between 1–2 minutes long, and contain ISIS’s unmistakable digital imprimatur: they are technically assured, in High Definition, and scored with ISIS’s signature *nasheeds*. Each speaks to a particular theme or number of themes, including those of power, violence, vengeance, benevolence, Islamic rectitude, and warrior “badassery.”<sup>48</sup> The first clip shows drone footage of a triumphant ISIS convoy in Fallujah;<sup>49</sup> the second is taken from the middle section of a *nasheed*-driven video performed by the German ISIS member and former rapper Denis Cuspert (AKA Deso Dogg);<sup>50</sup> the third shows a beatific scene from ISIS’s recently fallen de facto capital Raqqa, where a strong and attractive-looking bearded ISIS fighter hands out toys to enthused young children; and the fourth shows an international cast of knife-wielding ISIS recruits marching scores of Syrian Army captives to a line-up where they are to be executed.<sup>51</sup> (The clip stops just before the mass-beheading ensues.) In addition to these four clips, the survey also included a 2-minute U.S. government “countermesssage” video in which former ISIS members speak out against the injustices and inhumanity of ISIS rule.

Respondents were asked to play the clips and then prompted to select from a menu of fixed answers about their technical quality, thematic content, and veracity. They were also asked, at different points in the survey, to: (1) rate their attitude toward ISIS; (2) indicate whether or not they had seen an ISIS video before, and if so how they came to watch it and how many they had watched; and (3) indicate whether or not they had seen a U.S. State Department “countermesssage” video, and if so, how they came to watch it and how many they had watched. We also asked respondents a limited range of demographic questions.



## Ethical, Legal, and Other Restrictions

According to Maura Conway:

Direct audience research is problematic because of the nature of violent extremist and terrorist online content, which presents problems for undertaking the kinds of experiments that are standard in other areas of Internet audience research as it would require introducing subjects to online content with allegedly radicalizing effects and, in fact, almost certainly necessitate exposing youth and young adults to distressing levels of violence. Progressing research in this area is thus not easy; it is not impossible either however.<sup>52</sup>

We would broadly concur with this, and in what follows we outline the various restrictions we faced in carrying out the ISAR survey.

The first restriction, which Conway alludes to above, had to do with the types of visual material we could use in the survey. Had it been possible, we would have liked to subject respondents to what Conway calls “distressing levels of violence,” given that so much of ISIS’s video content aimed at English-speaking audiences is drenched in just such violence.<sup>53</sup> But had we included this video content in the survey, it would never have passed ethical review.

The second restriction was to do with legality, since in the United Kingdom, under section 2 of the 2006 Terrorism Act, it is a crime to disseminate a “terrorist publication,” which is defined as “matter” that is likely to be understood by those who receive it “as a direct or indirect encouragement ... to them to the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism,” or “to be useful in the commission or preparation of such acts.”<sup>54</sup>

The clips used in the ISAR survey were edited so as to exclude scenes of interpersonal violence, but two were saturated in the promise of violence, and one openly encouraged and glorified *jihadi* attacks against civilians in Western cities. This greatly protracted the process of ethical review, since before we were even allowed to submit an ethics application to our school’s Research Ethics Advisory Group (REAG), the chair of the REAG stipulated that we obtain a legal opinion on the survey. We agreed to this, but it took at least a month to convince our school that it had a moral duty to cover the cost of the legal opinion.

Once we had received confirmation from our school that it would cover the cost of the legal opinion, we duly enlisted the services of Christopher Henley Q.C., who in the opening remarks of his opinion put the matter like this:

I am instructed to provide a written advice on the lawfulness of what is proposed. ... To put it bluntly might those responsible for this survey be putting themselves at risk of prosecution under any part of the terrorism legislation, once it goes live.

According to the 2006 Terrorism Act, a person commits an offense if he distributes a “terrorist publication” with the aim of directly or indirectly encouraging “the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism.”<sup>55</sup> He also commits an offense if he is *reckless* as to whether his conduct [i.e., distributing a “terrorist publication”] has an effect of encouraging the commission, preparation, or instigation of acts of terrorism.<sup>56</sup> This is Henley:

The relevant section is section 2 of the Terrorism Act 2006, “Dissemination of terrorist publications.” Section 2 (1)(a) & (b) deal with offences committed with the specific intent of encouraging acts of terrorism, but section 2(1)(c) makes it an offence if the individual disseminating the terrorist publication “is reckless as to whether his conduct has [such] an effect.” The definition of a terrorist publication is drawn widely but includes “any matter which glorifies the commission or preparation (whether in the past, in the future or generally) of [terrorist] acts” (s2(4)

(a). There is little room for doubt that the second [“For the Sake of Allah”] and fourth [“Although the Disbelievers Dislike it”] films fall within this definition, and uploading them would satisfy the definition of the relevant conduct set out exhaustively at subsection (2)(a).

“However,” Henley continued:

it is a defence if the person (i.e. Dr Cottee) can show “that the matter by reference to which the publication in question was a terrorist publication neither expressed his views nor had his endorsement” (section 2(9)(a)), **and** “that it was clear, in all the circumstances of the conduct, that the matter did not express his views and did not have his endorsement” (section 2(9)(b)). This defence would in my view provide legal protection to Dr Cottee. This is an academic research project and there is no sensible basis to suggest that any of the ISIS videos reflect Dr Cottee’s views. They obviously do not. This is an objective study designed better to understand ISIS propaganda and what exactly are the features which are most compellingly persuasive.

Henley further clarified:

If the statutory defence set out at s2(9)(a)&(b) applies, which Dr Cottee could rely upon in the first instance, an offence will still be committed if a police constable gives notice to remove the offending material within two working days and there is a failure to comply with the notice. If there is a failure to comply with the notice within two working days then “the statement, or the article or record to which the conduct relates is to be regarded as having the endorsement of a person” (i.e. Dr Cottee) (s3(2)), and the defence is no longer available.

About a month after submitting our application to the REAG, along with Mr. Henley’s report, we were notified that our application was put on hold, pending clarification on how we would mitigate against the risk that a person below the age of 18 might view the ISIS video material included in the survey. Although the survey could only be activated by clicking on a bar that said, “YES, I’M OVER 18,”<sup>57</sup> the chair of the REAG was not satisfied that this was adequate enough mitigation. After discussing this issue further with both the chair and our head of school we were told that the survey could only go ahead on the condition that we were to limit its dissemination to university students—a population we could reasonably expect to be 18 and over. Two further conditions were imposed: (1) that we refrain from advertising the survey on social media and (2) that we ensure that the survey’s Web address could not be picked up by Internet search engines.

We accepted both conditions, and then immediately began work on circulating the survey, first to hundreds of undergraduate students from all degree programs at our university. Some of these students in turn circulated the survey’s Web address on social media, although we have no way of knowing how many further respondents were gathered via this route. We advertised the survey on several adult-restricted online gaming sites, and on several adult-restricted Reddit sub-forums.<sup>58</sup> We also enlisted the help of scores of colleagues in the United Kingdom and the United States, requesting that they advertise the survey to their own students, using a standard invitation that we had prepared. Some colleagues, mainly criminologists and sociologists, were enthusiastic about the survey and offered to circulate the invitation and survey Web address to their students or among the wider student-body in their respective departments; some used the survey in their own classes on terrorism and ISIS. Others were rather less enthusiastic, explaining that they would need to submit an ethics application to their own university Institutional Review Board before they could advertise the survey to their students. Quite a few colleagues did not get back to us. And

some pointedly declined to assist. For example, one academic, a professor in computing, expressed his concerns like this:

I understand your research, and appreciate it but. ... Well I decided I had to view it and take part before I sent it on to my students. To be honest, I have to say that the ISIS videos are far more compelling than the counter-message, and that makes me feel very uncomfortable.

The ISIS message is community, togetherness, acceptance, outward looking, socially cohesive. The US counter-message is individualistic, inward looking and socially one-off. It also makes a lot of use of females—who don't carry the same evidential weight in Islamic culture (in fact 50% evidential weight, at best).

My students, including several with an ILP [Inclusive Learning Plan], do not always exhibit the best judgement, and some even have difficulty in separating fact from reality. Some are loners who are lacking community and many are quite vulnerable. If I sent this to 100 students, I feel that there is a very strong risk that some proportion of them will be swayed by the message. Basically I am concerned that I would be doing ISIS's job for them.

Sorry to sound negative—because I know your research is valuable—but in good conscience I cannot circulate it to my students. I hope you can understand that.<sup>59</sup>

Another colleague, a professor of criminology and a head of a university department, said, somewhat evasively: “We have had a look at the survey and we are concerned about some of the videos in the survey and how these would be received by our students. We are not happy to circulate the survey to our students, unfortunately.”<sup>60</sup> One colleague reported to us that she had been reprimanded by another colleague for circulating the survey, who told her that it contravened U.K. terrorism law. And one student similarly reported to us that she had been asked to remove the survey advertisement and Web address from a Facebook group she belonged to.

Despite the restrictions and sensitivities surrounding it, the ISAR survey picked up respondents quickly in the first few weeks of going live, and after just three months it had generated over 2,000 responses. This surprised us, given the difficulties we encountered in circulating the survey and that respondents were not paid. What also struck us was how few responses there were from Muslims. In an effort to rectify this we contacted various Muslim organizations to see if they would be willing to advertise the survey to their members. We sent e-mails to the administrators at Ummah.com (a popular website for Muslims based in the United Kingdom) to see if they might be willing to help. They did not respond to our requests. We reached out to the Salam Project, based in West London and Moss Side, Manchester,<sup>61</sup> who told us that it was highly unlikely that their members would do the online survey, due to concerns over accessing ISIS videos from their personal electronic devices and how this would look if they were forced to hand these over to the police. We also contacted the Active Change Foundation, based in Walthamstow, East London, which was extremely supportive of our research and advertised it to their members, generating over 200 survey completions. Still, the total number of Muslims in our survey sample is very small, as can be seen below.

## Results and Discussion

In the six-month period for which it remained online, the survey generated approximately 3,000 responses. About half of all respondents were in full-time education. Of the respondents, 1,290 were from North America, and 1,011 were from the United Kingdom; around 431 were from Europe. Their mean age was 30, with a big clump—1,442—between 18 and 26. Sixty-four percent were male, with 5 percent either not stating their gender or choosing “Other.” Thirty-six percent identified as having no religion; 17 percent identified as Christian; and 4 percent (135 respondents) identified as Muslim. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondents—93 percent—reported a negative attitude toward ISIS. Only 34 people (just over 1 percent) reported a positive view of the group, with a further 177 (6 percent) reporting a neutral view. Of the 34 who reported a positive attitude toward ISIS, five were Muslims, and although this group—135 in total—had a higher inclination to report a positive or neutral opinion of ISIS (13 percent compared to 7 percent of non-Muslims) the vast majority—113 (87 percent)—professed a negative opinion of the group. Fifty-seven percent said they had watched an ISIS video before, beyond clips shown on TV and in online news material. Of this number, 46 percent said they had actively searched for it online, while 38 percent said they had stumbled across it by accident; 8 percent indicated they had accessed the video through a Web link that someone else had sent them. Of the 57 percent who said they had watched ISIS video-material, 46 percent—that is, 759 survey respondents—reported they had seen *more than ten ISIS videos*. This may well say more about the quirks of the survey sample than about young adults’ exposure to ISIS—or it may not. It is hard to know, although the ease with which ISIS videos can still be viewed on the Internet, despite the recent pushback from social media companies,<sup>62</sup> is quite remarkable.<sup>63</sup> These figures are presented in [Table 1](#).

### Production Values

In the main, respondents were generally impressed by the technical quality of all the ISIS video clips ([Table 2](#)). Forty-three percent positively rated the production values of video 1 (“The Clanging of the Swords part 4”), although 52 percent were negative about the acapella singing over it. Video 2 (“For the Sake of Allah”) scored even higher, with 60 percent expressing a positive view about production values, although 75 percent did not like the Deso Dogg *nasheed* on which the video was based. Respondents were even more impressed by the production values of video 3 (“Eid Greetings from the Land Of Khilafah”), with 74 percent expressing a positive view, although 56 percent did not like the *nasheed*<sup>64</sup> in the clip. But by far the most positively rated ISIS video in terms of production values was video 4 (“Although the Disbelievers Dislike it”), with 80 percent of respondents expressing a favorable view, despite the disturbing subject-matter of the video.

The most striking findings of the survey relate to videos 3 and 4, both of which deal with two central themes in ISIS’s self-presentation to the world: namely, the promise of a paradise on Earth for Muslims (with bountiful markets, pristine hospitals and parks, and righteous justice) and the use of ultra-violence in making good on that utopian promise.

### Utopia

Video 3 (“Eid Greetings from the Land Of Khilafah”) shows a handsome, strong-looking adult male member of ISIS (a leather bullet-belt hangs from his shoulders) handing out toys

**Table 1.** Descriptive characteristics of the sample.

| Characteristic                      | Categories and frequencies |                  |             |                |                   |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------|
|                                     | U.S.                       | Canada           | U.K.        | Europe         | Other/unspecified |
| Region                              |                            |                  |             |                |                   |
| <i>n</i>                            | 1,024                      | 266              | 1,011       | 431            | 372               |
| % of valid                          | 33.0%                      | 8.6%             | 32.6%       | 13.9%          | 12.0%             |
| Religion                            | No religion                | Muslim           | Christian   | Other religion | No answer         |
| <i>n</i>                            | 1,125                      | 135              | 536         | 123            | 1,185             |
| % of valid                          | 36.2%                      | 4.3%             | 17.3%       | 4.0%           | 38.2%             |
| Attitude toward ISIS                | Positive                   | Neutral          | Negative    |                |                   |
| <i>n</i>                            | 34                         | 177              | 2,689       |                |                   |
| % of valid                          | 1.2%                       | 6.1%             | 92.7%       |                |                   |
| Attitude toward ISIS and religion   | Positive                   | Neutral          | Negative    |                |                   |
| Identify as Muslim                  |                            |                  |             |                |                   |
| <i>n</i>                            | 5                          | 12               | 113         |                |                   |
| % of valid                          | 3.8%                       | 9.2%             | 86.9%       |                |                   |
| Do not identify as Muslim           |                            |                  |             |                |                   |
| <i>n</i>                            | 29                         | 165              | 2,576       |                |                   |
| % of valid                          | 1.0%                       | 6.0%             | 93.0%       |                |                   |
| Have you seen an ISIS video before? | No                         | I can't remember |             | Yes            |                   |
| <i>n</i>                            | 1,113                      | 120              |             | 1,659          |                   |
| % of valid                          | 38.5%                      | 4.1%             |             | 57.4%          |                   |
| How many ISIS videos have you seen? | One or two                 | Three or four    | Five to ten | More than ten  |                   |
| <i>n</i>                            | 383                        | 316              | 197         | 759            |                   |

(continued on next page)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

| Characteristic                   | Categories and frequencies |                    |                 |               |                   |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Region                           | U.S.                       | Canada             | U.K.            | Europe        | Other/unspecified |
| % of valid                       | 23.1%                      | 19.1%              | 11.9%           | 45.9%         |                   |
| How they came to watch the video | Search for specifically    | Stumbled across it | Sent via e-mail | Sent via link | Couldn't remember |
| <i>n</i>                         | 764                        | 629                | 19              | 140           | 123               |
| % of valid                       | 45.6%                      | 37.6%              | 1.1%            | 8.4%          | 7.3%              |



**Table 2.** Reception of production values and *nasheeds*, all videos.

| Production values, music and reception of ISIS videos |            |                |       |         |          |                   |
|---|------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| How would you rate the production of:                 |            | Very good      | Good  | Average | Poor     | Very poor         |
| Video 1   | <i>n</i>   | 309            | 806   | 822     | 461      | 209               |
|   | % of valid | 11.9%          | 30.9% | 31.5%   | 17.7%    | 8.0%              |
| Video 2   | <i>n</i>   | 481            | 938   | 627     | 221      | 105               |
|   | % of valid | 20.3%          | 39.5% | 26.4%   | 9.3%     | 4.4%              |
| Video 3   | <i>n</i>   | 669            | 913   | 443     | 68       | 37                |
|   | % of valid | 31.4%          | 42.9% | 20.8%   | 3.2%     | 1.7%              |
| Video 4   | <i>n</i>   | 691            | 791   | 285     | 45       | 42                |
|   | % of valid | 37.3%          | 42.7% | 15.4%   | 2.4%     | 2.3%              |
| Consider the music—do you like it?                    |            |                |       |         |          |                   |
|   |            | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
| In video 1  | <i>n</i>   | 128            | 425   | 669     | 575      | 756               |
|   | % of valid | 5.0%           | 16.6% | 26.2%   | 22.5%    | 29.6%             |
| In video 2  | <i>n</i>   | 63             | 180   | 327     | 501      | 1245              |
|   | % of valid | 2.7%           | 7.8%  | 14.1%   | 21.6%    | 53.8%             |
| In video 3  | <i>n</i>   | 96             | 299   | 504     | 557      | 587               |
|   | % of valid | 4.7%           | 14.6% | 24.7%   | 27.3%    | 28.7%             |

to a group of boys and girls. At one point, he picks up a particularly young girl and affectionately kisses her on the cheek. Sixty-seven percent concurred with the statement that “the children look happy and well cared for.” Sixty-one percent concurred with the statement that “there’s a strong sense of community spirit here.”

Regarding the ISIS militant, around one third of respondents expressed positive judgments about his physical strength and moral character: Thirty-seven percent agreed that he looked “strong,” while 28 percent agreed that he looked like a “decent man.” And a not insignificant number—28 percent—said the video gave them a “warm feeling,” and this percentage only drops to 26 percent when restricted to those who proclaim to feel negatively about ISIS.

Asked if they thought the scenario in the video looked “made up,” 67 percent of respondents expressed agreement. Yet a fairly sizeable 33 percent were either not sure or did not think that it looked made up (Table 3).

### **Ultra-Violence**

Video 4 (“Although the Disbelievers Dislike it”) shows a group of ISIS fighters marching captured members of the Syrian Army, described as “Nusayri officers and pilots,”<sup>65</sup> to an execution line-up, where they are forced to their knees. The camera lingers on their cleanly shaven faces,<sup>66</sup> and then focuses tightly on the hands of one of the executioners as he slowly caresses his knife. Then “Jihadi John” (Kuwaiti-born British citizen Mohammed Emwazi)

**Table 3.** Reaction to “Eid Greetings from the Land Of Khilafah” (video 3).

| Utopia (Video 3)   |            | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| When considering the scene:                                      |            |                |       |         |          |                   |
| The children look happy and well cared for                       | <i>n</i>   | 260            | 1143  | 392     | 195      | 90                |
|  | % of valid | 12.5%          | 55.0% | 18.8%   | 9.4%     | 4.3%              |
| There is a strong sense of community spirit here                 | <i>n</i>   | 294            | 967   | 424     | 249      | 141               |
|  | % of valid | 14.2%          | 46.6% | 20.4%   | 12.0%    | 6.8%              |
| The scene looks made up  | <i>n</i>   | 745            | 650   | 386     | 254      | 37                |
|  | % of valid | 36.0%          | 31.4% | 18.6%   | 12.3%    | 1.8%              |
| Consider the bearded man:  |            |                |       |         |          |                   |
| I like his look  | <i>n</i>   | 44             | 216   | 640     | 572      | 584               |
|  | % of valid | 2.1%           | 10.5% | 31.1%   | 27.8%    | 28.4%             |
| He looks strong  | <i>n</i>   | 87             | 677   | 632     | 373      | 285               |
|  | % of valid | 4.2%           | 33.0% | 30.8%   | 18.2%    | 13.9%             |
| He looks like a decent man                                       | <i>n</i>   | 69             | 509   | 680     | 365      | 425               |
|  | % of valid | 3.4%           | 24.9% | 33.2%   | 17.8%    | 20.8%             |
| How much do you agree or disagree?<br>It gives me a warm feeling |            |                |       |         |          |                   |
|  | <i>n</i>   | 108            | 484   | 450     | 533      | 537               |
|  | % of valid | 5.1%           | 22.9% | 21.3%   | 25.2%    | 25.4%             |

**Table 4.** Reaction to “Although the Disbelievers Dislike it” (video 4).

| Ultra-violence (Video 4)                 |            | Strongly agree | Agree            | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|------------|----------------|------------------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| How does the video make you feel,        |            |                |                  |         |          |                   |
| It scares me                             | <i>n</i>   | 605            | 469              | 310     | 271      | 206               |
|  | % of valid | 32.5           | 25.2             | 16.7    | 14.6     | 11.1              |
| It makes me feel uncomfortable           | <i>n</i>   | 958            | 464              | 225     | 132      | 80                |
|  | % of valid | 51.5           | 25.0             | 12.1    | 7.1      | 4.3               |
| It makes me feel sick                    | <i>n</i>   | 755            | 484              | 265     | 236      | 113               |
|  | % of valid | 40.7           | 26.1             | 14.3    | 12.7     | 6.1               |
| It bores me                              | <i>n</i>   | 75             | 125              | 449     | 664      | 540               |
|  | % of valid | 4.0            | 6.7              | 24.2    | 35.8     | 29.1              |
|  |            | No             | I do and I don't | Yes     |          |                   |
| Would you like to see more of this video | <i>n</i>   | 825            | 438              | 613     |          |                   |
|  | % of valid | 44.0           | 23.3             | 32.7    |          |                   |



**Table 5.** Reaction to U.S. countermessage (video 5).

| U.S. Countermessage (Video 5)  |                     | Very good                     | Good                         | Average                 | Poor                      | Very poor                     |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| How would you rate the production quality of this video                    | <i>n</i> % of valid | 339<br>17.7                   | 645<br>33.7                  | 644<br>33.6             | 218<br>11.4               | 69<br>3.6                     |
| How do you understand the video, It's saying ISIS is really bad            | <i>n</i> % of valid | Strongly agree<br>930<br>48.6 | Agree<br>837<br>43.7         | Neutral<br>110<br>5.7   | Disagree<br>28<br>1.5     | Strongly disagree<br>9<br>0.5 |
| Do you think the video is truthful?  | <i>n</i> % of valid | No<br>125<br>6.5              | Not so sure<br>511<br>26.5   | Yes<br>1294<br>67.0     |                           |                               |
| Have you watched any other U.S. State Department counter-messaging videos? | <i>n</i> % of valid | No<br>1523<br>79.0            | Can't remember<br>177<br>9.2 | Yes<br>227<br>11.8      |                           |                               |
| How many U.S. counter-messaging videos have you watched?                   | <i>n</i> % of valid | one or two<br>102<br>45       | three or four<br>67<br>30    | five to ten<br>27<br>12 | More than ten<br>31<br>14 |                               |

**Table 6a.** Differences between males and females in relation to "Although the Disbelievers Dislike it" (video 4).

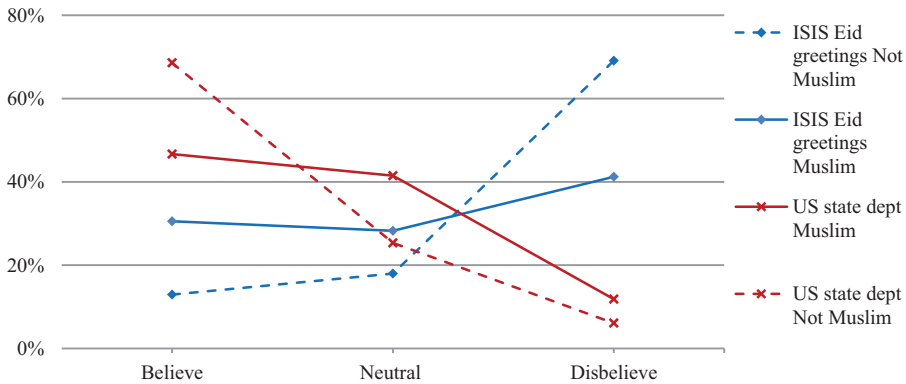
|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree | <i>n</i> |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|----------|
| It makes me feel good (video 4)          |                |       |         |          |                   |          |
| Female                                   | 1.1%           | 0.3%  | 1.0%    | 8.2%     | 89.4%             | 613      |
| Male                                     | 1.6%           | 1.7%  | 6.7%    | 15.0%    | 75.0%             | 1,238    |
| It bores me (video 4)                    |                |       |         |          |                   |          |
| Female                                   | 1.8%           | 3.8%  | 21.9%   | 36.1%    | 36.4%             | 607      |
| Male                                     | 5.1%           | 8.2%  | 25.5%   | 35.6%    | 25.5%             | 1,229    |
| It makes me feel uncomfortable (video 4) |                |       |         |          |                   |          |
| Female                                   | 71.8%          | 18.2% | 5.6%    | 2.0%     | 2.5%              | 609      |
| Male                                     | 41.8%          | 28.2% | 15.2%   | 9.6%     | 5.2%              | 1,233    |
| It scares me (video 4)                   |                |       |         |          |                   |          |
| Female                                   | 55.6%          | 25.2% | 11.3%   | 5.2%     | 2.6%              | 611      |
| Male                                     | 21.3%          | 25.2% | 19.1%   | 19.0%    | 15.3%             | 1,233    |
| It makes me feel sick (video 4)          |                |       |         |          |                   |          |
| Female                                   | 61.9%          | 24.9% | 6.9%    | 5.1%     | 1.2%              | 606      |
| Male                                     | 30.7%          | 26.8% | 17.8%   | 16.3%    | 8.5%              | 1,230    |

**Table 6b.** Whether males and females want to see more of “Although the Disbelievers Dislike it” (Video 4).

|  | No   | I do and I don't | Yes  | n    |
|--|------|------------------|------|------|
| Would you like to see more of This video (video 4) |      |                  |      |      |
| Female   | 54.1 | 30.3             | 15.6 | 614  |
| Male   | 39.4 | 19.6             | 41.0 | 1243 |

**Table 7.** Differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in relation to “Eid Greetings from the Land Of Khilafah” (video 3).

|  | Strong agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly disagree | n     |
|--|--------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|-------|
| It gives me a warm feeling (video 3)   |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 19.7%        | 28.8% | 23.5%   | 15.9%    | 12.1%             | 132   |
| Non-Muslim   | 4.1%         | 22.5% | 21.2%   | 25.9%    | 26.3%             | 1,980 |
| When considering the scene, the children look happy and well cared for (video 3)       |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 22.7%        | 54.5% | 16.7%   | 2.3%     | 3.8%              | 132   |
| Non-Muslim   | 11.8%        | 55.0% | 19.0%   | 9.9%     | 4.4%              | 1,948 |
| When considering the scene, there is a strong sense of community spirit here (video 3) |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 24.0%        | 51.2% | 12.4%   | 6.2%     | 6.2%              | 129   |
| Non-Muslim   | 13.5%        | 46.3% | 21.0%   | 12.4%    | 6.8%              | 1,946 |
| When considering the scene, the scene looks made up (video 3)                          |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 19.8%        | 21.4% | 28.2%   | 25.2%    | 5.3%              | 131   |
| Non-Muslim   | 37.0%        | 32.0% | 18.0%   | 11.4%    | 1.5%              | 1,941 |
| Consider the bearded man, I like his look (video 3)                                    |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 6.4%         | 21.6% | 36.8%   | 20.8%    | 14.4%             | 125   |
| Non-Muslim   | 1.9%         | 9.8%  | 30.8%   | 28.3%    | 29.3%             | 1,931 |
| Consider the bearded man, he looks strong (video 3)                                    |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 7.9%         | 38.6% | 30.7%   | 15.7%    | 7.1%              | 127   |
| Non-Muslim   | 4.0%         | 32.6% | 30.8%   | 18.3%    | 14.3%             | 1,927 |
| Consider the bearded man, he looks like a decent man (video 3)                         |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 8.5%         | 33.3% | 32.6%   | 16.3%    | 9.3%              | 129   |
| Non-Muslim   | 3.0%         | 24.3% | 33.2%   | 17.9%    | 21.5%             | 1,919 |
| Consider the music in this scene, I like it (video 3)                                  |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 11.0%        | 27.6% | 30.7%   | 17.3%    | 13.4%             | 127   |
| Non-Muslim   | 4.3%         | 13.8% | 24.3%   | 27.9%    | 29.7%             | 1,916 |
| Consider the black and white flag, it looks cool (video 3)                             |              |       |         |          |                   |       |
| Muslim   | 7.7%         | 17.7% | 32.3%   | 21.5%    | 20.8%             | 130   |
| Non-Muslim   | 1.9%         | 9.8%  | 19.9%   | 30.3%    | 38.0%             | 1,911 |



**Figure 1.** Videos 3 and 5 authenticity reception, by religion.

talks to the camera: “To Obama, the dog of Rome, today we are slaughtering the soldiers of Bashar and tomorrow we’ll be slaughtering your soldiers. With Allah’s permission we will break this final and last crusade and the Islamic State will soon like your puppet David Cameron said begin to slaughter your people on your streets.” The clip ends just before the executioners start sawing, simultaneously, into the necks of their captives.

On viewing this clip, 58 percent said the video scared them, while 26 percent reported that it did not, with 17 percent expressing no particular view either way (Table 4). Significantly more—76 percent—said it made them feel uncomfortable, while 67 percent said it made them feel sick. Only 11 percent said the video bored them, suggesting that, for the majority of respondents, while staged beheadings may be uncomfortable, scary, and sickening to watch, they nevertheless make for compelling viewing. Indeed, when asked if they wanted to view the video to its grisly completion, 33 percent said yes, with 23 percent reporting feelings of ambivalence about wanting to see this. Less than half—44 percent—said they did *not* want to see the video to the end.

Research on horror films shows that for all the disgust that scenes of graphic violence elicit, audiences are drawn to watch them because of the stimulation and curiosity they arouse.<sup>67</sup> Is this true of ISIS execution videos? Perhaps it is, and there is certainly suggestive anecdotal evidence pointing to a keen interest in ISIS beheading videos in the English-speaking world. According to Frances Larson, an estimated 1.2 million people in Britain had watched the beheading video of James Foley in the days immediately after its release.<sup>68</sup> It is difficult to know just how reliable this estimate is, but it is clear that large numbers of people were actively interested in it,<sup>69</sup> and it is also clear from our findings that given the chance to view an ISIS staged atrocity, many people will willingly take it. However, what is not clear is just *how much* of ISIS’s brand of ultra, High Definition violence they are prepared to expose themselves to. Would the one third of those who said they wanted to continue watching have turned away at the first spurt of blood, or would they have watched, transfixed, right up until the end? It is certainly not something we were able to test in our survey, given the ethical constraints to which it was subject.<sup>70</sup>

### **The Countermessage**

The final video clip in the survey is a 2-minute-long U.S. State Department “countermessage” video (Table 5). Titled “Why they left Daesh,” the video is centered on the testimony

of those who have left ISIS. Speaking from their own personal experiences, the interviewees describe how brutal and corrupt ISIS rule was, with routine public executions, horrific abuse of women and children, and a lack of food and sanitation.

In the Western media, the U.S. State Department's anti-ISIS videos have been widely derided for their amateurish and low-budget production quality.<sup>71</sup> Surprisingly, then, 51 percent positively rated the production quality of the video, despite it being a "mash-up" of preexisting footage. Thirty-four percent thought it was average. Only 11 percent rated it as poor, with 4 percent rating it as very poor. Interestingly, in terms of production quality, respondents were far more positive about this video than the first ISIS video in the survey, which David Carr had praised for its "remarkable drone camera work."<sup>72</sup>

The intended message in the video is that life under ISIS is a horror show that could not be further from the Islamic utopia the group claims to have established in its territories in Syria and Iraq. Ninety-two percent understood the message in this way. Only 2 percent failed to understand the intended message of the video. Strikingly, 67 percent agreed that the video was truthful; 6 percent dissented from this view, while 26 percent neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that the video was truthful. Rather more predictably, 79 percent had never seen a U.S. State Department countermessaging video before, and of the 12 percent who had, 45 percent had seen just one or two. This stands in marked contrast to respondents' exposure to ISIS videos (recall that 57 percent had watched an ISIS video before, and of this number 46 percent had seen more than ten). This discrepancy may be for two reasons: first, because ISIS-produced content dwarfs that of the U.S. State Department; and, second, because U.S. countermessaging videos, unlike those of ISIS, have generated little sustained coverage in the Western media.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Ultra-Violence, Utopia, and Trust***

Audience reception research on violent films suggests that women are less open to scenes of violence and gore than men,<sup>74</sup> and opinion-poll data shows that large numbers of Muslims are distrustful of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>75</sup> We were curious to find out if our survey data supported these two established research findings. We were also curious to probe if Muslim respondents, given their faith background and communal identity, would be more receptive to the utopia theme in video 3 ("Eid Greetings from the Land Of Khilafah") than non-Muslim respondents.

Female respondents, we found, were far more likely to report negative emotional responses to the mass beheading video than male respondents, with 90 percent reporting that the video made them "feel uncomfortable," compared to 70 percent of men, 81 percent reporting that it made them "feel scared," compared to 46 percent of men, and 87 percent reporting that it made them "feel sick," compared to 58 percent of men (Table 6a). Only 16 percent of female respondents professed a wish to continue watching the video to its bloody climax, whereas 41 percent of male respondents said they wanted to continue watching (Table 6b).

One way of interpreting this is to say that men and women respondents were equally put off by the mass beheading video, and that the discrepancy between the two can be explained by the gendered expectation that men should not show, or testify to, feelings of discomfort, fear, and disgust.

But it's also possible that the discrepancy we found may actually reflect a real discrepancy between men's and women's tolerance for watching gore and violence. And there is a great

deal of evidence from media researchers to show that this discrepancy is real: that men, on the whole, especially young men, are far more enthused by gore and horror than women. Our data seem to support this.

Despite the small sample size, we also found marked differences between how Muslim and non-Muslim respondents responded to video 3 (“Eid Greetings from the Land of Khilafah”) (Table 7). Almost 50 percent (49 percent) of Muslim respondents said the video gave them a “warm feeling,” compared to 27 percent of non-Muslim respondents. Asked whether they liked “the look” of the ISIS fighter, 28 percent of Muslim respondents said yes, compared to 12 percent of others; asked whether they thought the ISIS fighter looked like a “decent man,” 42 percent of Muslim respondents versus 27 percent said yes; asked whether they thought the ISIS flag in the video “looks cool,” the ratio was 26 percent to 12 percent; and asked whether they liked the music in the scene, almost 40 percent (39 percent) of Muslim respondents said they did, compared to 18 percent of non-Muslims. In fact, on the likability of ISIS *nasheeds*, we found that Muslim respondents were far more inclined to like than non-Muslim respondents, with 82 percent either positive or neutral about at least one of the three *nasheeds* in the survey, compared to 45 percent for non-Muslim respondents. It is not clear what explains these discrepancies, although it may be conjectured that the “warmth” many Muslim respondents felt at viewing the scene owed something to their religious identification with the participants depicted in the clip.

A yet further difference between Muslim and non-Muslim respondents was exhibited in responses to the believability of the “Eid Greetings” video clip. Asked whether they thought the scene in the clip looks “made up,” 41 percent of Muslim respondents said yes, compared to nearly 70 percent (69 percent) of non-Muslim respondents. In fact, 30 percent of Muslim respondents thought the scene *did not* look made up, compared to just 13 percent of non-Muslim respondents.

These findings are almost exactly reversed in respect to the U.S. State Department “counter-message” video, with 47 percent of Muslim respondents saying they thought the video was “truthful,” compared to nearly 70 percent (69 percent) of non-Muslim respondents. And whereas 42 percent of Muslim respondents were on the fence about whether the video was truthful or not, for non-Muslim respondents that figure was much lower: 26 percent. Twelve percent of Muslim respondents did not think the video was truthful, compared to 6 percent of non-Muslim respondents (Figure 1). This seems to be consistent with polling data on worldwide Muslim attitudes toward the United States, and suggests that any countermessage that bears the seal of the U.S. State Department will be rendered partially ineffective by that symbolic association. However, it is important to add that with only 135 Muslims in the survey sample whatever differences the data show in relation to this group must be treated with great caution.

## Conclusion

Our investigation into audience responses to ISIS videos was beset by acute ethical, legal, and practical problems. We were unable, due to political sensitivities, to assemble an adequate, much less representative, sample of young Muslim adults. Indeed, we were unable, due to the restriction imposed on the investigation by our university REAG, to assemble anything remotely like a representative sample of British and American young adults *tout court*. And were it not

for the goodwill and nerve of some academic colleagues, as well as the solid support of the Active Change Foundation in London, we would not have been able to assemble a sample at all. Our investigation is also subject to all the many limitations that quantitative survey research is necessarily subject, as well as to all the well-known drawbacks of online survey research.

Because of the non-representative nature of our sample, our results cannot be used to make generalizations about young people's engagement with ISIS videos. Still less can they be used to shed a direct light on the question of the role (if any) of JOP in the radicalization of *ihadists*. But they are not irrelevant to that last question, for at least two reasons. First, what our results show is there is a morbid buzz associated with ISIS atrocity videos, and that for all the disgust, discomfort, and fear they evoke, something makes us—or many of us, at least—want to look at them. If, as some scholars suggest, exposure to JOP can “trigger” or “catalyze” the radicalization process for some people, the desire among so many of our survey respondents to want to watch ISIS atrocity videos should be a matter for concern.

A second area of concern that our results speak to is the seeming palatability of ISIS's nonviolent videos, and how the themes of community and righteousness they trade on are received positively among a not insignificant number of those who profess no sympathy for the group. Were these videos not so palatable, both in terms of production values and message-content, fewer people would want to watch them, or carry on watching them.

Given the immense challenges involved in doing research on audiences of JOP it is unclear where future research in this area is headed. In the United Kingdom, at least, the picture looks decidedly bleak, given plans by the current government to make it a criminal offense to repeatedly view “terrorist online content.”<sup>76</sup> It is one thing for researchers to run the risk of arrest for disseminating that content, as we did, but it is quite another to expect respondents to run it as well. But outside of the United Kingdom and the United States, in countries where terrorism legislation is less draconian, and where ethics boards are less risk-averse, the opportunities look brighter, and one particularly promising area of research would be to explore the so-called crime-terror nexus<sup>77</sup> by conducting audience-reception research on JOP in prisons, with a control group outside of them.

The broader question of how exposure to JOP features in the radicalization of *ihadists* is not answered in our research, and it may, in fact, be unanswerable, given how difficult it is to disentangle the multiple causal threads in the process by which someone becomes radicalized. And while there is evidence to suggest that *ihadists* often consume and disseminate a range of *ihadist* online material, there is no hard evidence to suggest that they were radicalized by that material.

However, there is still much that can be learned about the role and affective impact of JOP, and a good place to start is by researching those on the receiving end of it. Though the challenges of working in this research area are immense, they are not insurmountable, and far more research needs to be done on this important and neglected area of inquiry.

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## Notes

1. As Bruce Hoffman observes: "Just as the cartographers a century ago mapped from a distance a vast and impenetrable continent few of them had ever seen, most contemporary terrorism research is conducted far removed from, and therefore with little direct knowledge of, the actual terrorists themselves" (Bruce Hoffman, "Foreword," in Andrew Silke, ed., *Research on Terrorism: Trends, Achievements, and Failures* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), p. xviii).
2. Lorne L. Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40(3) (2017), pp. 191–210. See also Amarnath Amarasingam, "An Interview with Rachid Kassim, Jihadist Orchestrating Attacks in France," 18 November 2016. Available at <http://jihadology.net/2016/11/18/guest-post-an-interview-with-rachid-kassim-jihadist-orchestrating-attacks-in-france/> (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 29 October 2017.)
3. On the overdetermined nature of the radicalization process, see Peter R. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," *International Affairs* 89(4) (July 2013), pp. 873–893; Fathali M. Moghadam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (February–March 2005): 161–9; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20(3) (2008), pp. 415–433; and John Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (July 2008), pp. 80–94. "No one who studies radicalization," Neumann writes, "believes that individuals turn into extremists overnight, or that their embrace of extremism is caused by a single influence" (Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," p. 874).
4. As John Horgan notes, "Much of what is said by individual terrorists about ideology is *post-hoc* invention after the event" (Horgan, "Interviewing Terrorists: Reflections on Fieldwork and Implications for Psychological Research," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 4 (3) (2012), p. 200). On rationalization and excuse-making in the context of juvenile delinquency see, classically, Gresham Sykes and David Matza, "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency," *American Sociological Review* 22 (1957), pp. 664–670; and Marvin B. Scott and Stanford M. Lyman, "Accounts," *American Sociological Review* 33(1) (1968), pp. 46–62.
5. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 151.
6. See Graeme Wood, "What We Still Don't Know About the Islamic State's Foreign Fighters," *The Atlantic* (19 August 2017). Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/isis-foreign-fighters/537279/>; and Simon Cottee, "Can Ex-Militants, and their Redemption Stories, Stop Anyone from Joining Islamic State?," *The Los Angeles Times* (5 September 2017). Available at <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-cottee-ex-militant-narratives-20170905-story.html>
7. Sykes and Matza, "Techniques of Neutralization," p. 667.
8. See Thomas Hegghammer, ed., *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
9. Martyn Frampton et al., "The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online," Policy Exchange, 23 September 2017. Available at <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-New-Netwar-2.pdf>, p. 15.
10. This risk is even more acute in the case of active *jihadists*: For example, in October 2015, the Metropolitan Police used special powers under U.K. terrorism laws in order to seize the laptop of the BBC journalist Secunder Kermani. Police sought the order to read communications between Kermani and an ISIS fighter in Syria he had interviewed via Skype (see Ben Quinn, "Newsnight

- Journalist's Laptop Seized by UK Police under Terrorism Act," *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/oct/28/uk-police-terrorism-act-news-night-journalist-secunder-kermani-laptop>).
11. See Marco Nilsson, "Interviewing Jihadists: On the Importance of Drinking Tea and Other Methodological Considerations," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1325649> p. 3.
  12. See esp. Brian M. Jenkins, "International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare," RAND Corporation, 1974. Available at <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P5261.pdf>, p. 4; and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
  13. See, preeminently, Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
  14. For a recent illuminating discussion, see Amarnath Amarasingam and Colin P. Clarke, "Terrorism Fatigue," *Slate* (1 November 2017). Available at [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/for\\_eigners/2017/11/terrorist\\_acts\\_like\\_the\\_new\\_york\\_vehicle\\_attack\\_are\\_losing\\_their\\_ability.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/for_eigners/2017/11/terrorist_acts_like_the_new_york_vehicle_attack_are_losing_their_ability.html).
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  16. Chris Greenwood et al., "Police Spoke to Schoolgirl Jihadi Brides in December—but there was 'No Evidence' They had been Radicalised, Insists Headteacher," *The Daily Mail* (22 February 2015). Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2964421/Brainwashed-bedrooms-British-schoolgirl-jihadi-brides-fled-Syria-join-ISIS-following-70-extremists-Twitter-accounts-internet-giant-refused-axe.html>
  17. See Humaira Patel, "Without More Support, Muslim Girls may Well be Tempted by Isis's HR Department," *The Guardian* (24 February 2015). Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/mentisfree/2015/feb/24/muslim-girls-isis-teenage-east-london>; Roula Khalaf, "Isis and the Lure of Online Violence for Jihadi Brides," *The Financial Times* (25 February 2015),. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/8dafdf2e-bcda-11e4-9902-00144feab7de>; Michael Holden, "Cameron: Internet Firms must do more after UK Girls Head to Syria," *Reuters* (23 February 2015). Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-britain-schoolgirls/cameron-internet-firms-must-do-more-after-uk-girls-head-to-syria-idUSKBN0LR1UT20150223>; Henry Ridgwell, "Young Muslims Radicalized Online," VOA, 4 March 2015. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/young-muslims-radicalized-online/2667444.html>
  18. Simon Cottee, "What ISIS Women Want," *Foreign Policy* (17 May 2016). Available at <http://for eignpolicy.com/2016/05/17/what-isis-women-want-gendered-jihad/>
  19. See, for example, Alexandra Klausner, *The Daily Mail*, "Twitter under Pressure from Lawmakers to Crack Down on 46,000 ISIS Sympathizer Accounts," 18 February 2015. Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2959198/Twitter-pressure-Congress-against-terrorists-report-identifies-46-000-ISIS-sympathizer-accounts.html>
  20. Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 91.
  21. Ibid.
  22. See Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., "Literature Review: The Impact of Digital Communications Technology on Radicalization and Recruitment," *International Affairs* 93(5) (September 2017), p. 17.
  23. See Benjamin Ducol, "A Radical Sociability: In Defense of an Online/Offline Multidimensional Approach to Radicalization," in Martin Bouchard, ed., *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Radical and Connected* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 87–88.
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27. See Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, *ISIS in America: From Retweets To Raqqa*, December 2015. Available at <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>, p. 19.
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31. Aly, "Brothers, Believers, Brave Mujahideen," p. 63.
32. J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, March 2015. Available at [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf); see also Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and & Terrorism* 38(1) (2015), pp. 1–22; and Ali Fisher, "Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9(3) (2015). Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/426/html>
33. Mia Bloom, Hicham Tiflati, and John Horgan, "Navigating ISIS's Preferred Platform: Telegram," *Terrorism & Political Violence* (2017); see also Nico Prucha, "IS and the Jihadist Information Highway—Projecting Influence and Religious Identity via Telegram," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10(6) (2016), pp. 48–58. Available at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/556/html>. On the suspension of pro-ISIS Twitter accounts, see J. M. Berger and Heather Perez, "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters," February 2016. Available at [https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger\\_Occasional%20Paper.pdf](https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf)
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37. Cori E. Dauber and Mark Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style." Available at <http://jihadology.net/2015/07/06/guest-post-isis-and-the-hollywood-visual-style/>
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41. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
42. *Ibid.*
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44. See [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/445977/3799\\_Revised\\_Prevent\\_Duty\\_Guidance\\_\\_England\\_Wales\\_V2-Interactive.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445977/3799_Revised_Prevent_Duty_Guidance__England_Wales_V2-Interactive.pdf)
  45. See Simon Cottee, “The Pre-Terrorists Among Us,” *The Atlantic*, 27 October 2015. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/counterterrorism-prevention-britain-isis/412603/>
  46. See Keith Spiller et al., “‘What does Terrorism Look Like?’: University Lecturers’ Interpretations of their Prevent Duties and Tackling Extremism in UK Universities,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11(1) (2018), pp. 130–150.
  47. See Friis, “Beyond Anything We have Ever Seen,” p. 726.
  48. On the ways of the “jihadi badass,” see Simon Cottee, “Islamic State’s Badass Path to Paradise,” *The Los Angeles Times* (6 September 2014). Available at <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-oe-0907-cottee-badass-jihadi-cool-20140907-story.html>
  49. About this clip, the late *New York Times* media critic David Carr wrote: “Anybody who doubts the technical ability of ISIS might want to watch a documentary of Fallujah that includes some remarkable drone camera work” (David Carr, “With Videos of Killings, ISIS Sends Medieval Message by Modern Method,” *The New York Times*, 7 September 2014. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/08/business/media/with-videos-of-killings-isis-hones-social-media-as-a-weapon.html>
  50. See Ted Thornhill, “German ISIS Rapper Threatens his Home Nation with a Charlie Hebdo-Like Attack in Music Video Filled with Horrifying Footage of Beheadings and Executions,” *The Daily Mail* (15 April 2015). Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3040269/German-ISIS-rapper-threatens-home-nation-Charlie-Hebdo-like-attack-music-video-filled-horrific-footage-beheadings-executions.html>
  51. Shiv Malik, “Isis Video Appears to show Hostage Peter Kassig has been Killed,” *The Guardian* (16 November 2014). Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/16/isis-beheads-peter-kassig-reports>
  52. Conway, “Determining the Role,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40(1), pp. 91–92.
  53. See Yuanbo Qi, “A Content Analysis of ISIS Official English-Language Videos 2014–2017,” forthcoming.
  54. See [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/11/pdfs/ukpga\\_20060011\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/11/pdfs/ukpga_20060011_en.pdf), p. 3.
  55. *Ibid.*
  56. *Ibid.*
  57. Immediately above the bar was the following note: “Are you over 18? This survey contains material that some people may find disturbing, so we’d like to make sure you’re of legal age before we let you see it.”
  58. Reddit is an American social news aggregation, Web content rating, and discussion website.
  59. E-mail, 2 November 2016.
  60. E-mail, 13 October 2016.
  61. The Salam Project is a British BME [Black and minority ethnic] youth and community initiative, led by the former British rapper Ismael Lea South.
  62. See, for example, Monika Bickert and Brian Fishman, “Hard Questions: How We Counter Terrorism,” 15 June 2017. Available at <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/06/how-we-counter-terrorism/> and “An Update on Our Commitment to Fight Terror Content Online,” 1 August 2017. Available at <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2017/08/an-update-on-our-commitment-to-fight.html>.
  63. See Frampton et al., “The New Netwar.”
  64. “The Shari’ah Of Our Lord Is Light.” Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL7h\\_ZQ29iQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL7h_ZQ29iQ). It is possible that, given the survey did not permit the expression of hostile judgments about ISIS, respondents’ negative rating of the *nasheeds* stood in for a broader hostility toward the group.
  65. “Nusayri” is the name of a Shi’ite minority sect.

66. This is in marked contrast to the heavily bearded executioners, and is obviously intended to signal their reviled status, from the ISIS perspective, as apostates.
67. See, classically, Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (London: Routledge, 1990); Jeffrey H. Goldstein, ed., *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Cynthia A. Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).
68. Frances Larson, "ISIS Beheadings: Why We're too Horrified to Watch, too Fascinated to Turn Away," *CNN* (14 January 2015). Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/13/opinion/beheadings-history/index.html>
69. See Brigitte L. Nacos, *Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 353–356.
70. Some research suggests that people's appetite for real-life violence and gore is limited (Jonathan Haidt, Clark McCauley, and Paul Rozin, "Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disgust: A Scale Sampling Seven Domains of Disgust Elicitors," *Personality and Individual Differences* 16 (1994), pp. 701–713, but the popularity of online gore sites, where many violent ISIS videos are shared and celebrated, places a question mark over this.
71. Rita Katz, for example, denounced the State Department's "Think Again Turn Away" campaign, launched in English in December 2013, as "embarrassing" and counter-productive (Rita Katz, "The State Department's Twitter War with ISIS Is Embarrassing," *Time* (16 September 2014). Available at <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/>
72. Carr, "With Videos of Killings."
73. The single exception was "Welcome to ISIS Land," which created controversy due to its use of graphic footage of ISIS atrocities (see Greg Miller and Scott Higham, "the U.S. Tried to Play by the Enemy's Rules," *The Washington Post* (8 May 2015). Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.da253df11324](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-a-propaganda-war-us-tried-to-play-by-the-enemys-rules/2015/05/08/6eb6b732-e52f-11e4-81ea-0649268f729e_story.html?utm_term=.da253df11324). "In a Propaganda War against ISIS").
74. See Goldstein, *Why We Watch*, p. 213.
75. See "American Character Gets Mixed Reviews: U.S. Image Up Slightly, but Still Negative," Pew Global Attitudes Project, 23 June 2005. Available <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/247.pdf>
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77. See Rajan Basra, Peter R. Neumann, and Claudia Brunn, *Criminal Pasts, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus*, ICSR (2016). Available at <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Criminal-Pasts-Terrorist-Futures.pdf>