

# **ISIS Online: Countering Terrorist Radicalization & Recruitment On the Internet & Social Media**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security,  
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**Testimony by Peter Bergen**

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**This testimony will consider, first, the reach of ISIS online propaganda; second, the profile of ISIS’ Western and American recruits, third, the content of ISIS propaganda and fourth, how might that propaganda be countered.**

### **1. The reach of ISIS propaganda in the U.S.**

Early in the morning of June 12, 2016 a strange call came into the 911 operators in Orlando. The caller said, “ I wanna let you know, I’m in Orlando and I did the shootings... My name is, I pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State.” The caller then abruptly hung up. Shooting his victims with a legally purchased military-style assault rifle inside the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the mystery 911 caller, Omar Mateen, paused to speak on the phone to a police negotiator, describing himself as an “Islamic soldier” and demanding that the United States “stop bombing Syria and Iraq.” He also claimed that he was wearing an explosive-laden vest, similar to those worn by the ISIS terrorists in Paris who had killed 130 people eight months earlier. Just so there would be absolutely no ambiguity about his affiliation, Mateen also called a local TV station and told a producer that answered the phone that he was carrying out his attack for ISIS.

In an audiotape posted online, one of the leaders of ISIS had three weeks earlier urged that sympathizers of the group should carry out attacks in the West during the holy month of Ramadan, which was by now in full swing. Omar Mateen was a regular consumer of ISIS propaganda.

Before police shot Mateen dead around 5 a.m., three hours into his murderous spree, he had killed 49 and wounded 53. It was not only the worst terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11, it was also the deadliest mass shooting in the United States. The attack was emblematic of the problem that the United States faces from “homegrown” militants today, more than three quarters of whom are active on jihadist websites; almost all of whom identify with ISIS, and a number of whom have attempted or succeeded in carrying out lethal attacks in the States following ISIS’ commands. None of these “homegrown” terrorists have had any formal connections, training or financing from ISIS. In other words, ***ISIS is crowdsourcing jihadist terrorism in the States.***

## **So what's the level of threat in the States?**

Unfortunately, ISIS' English-language propaganda is finding a number of takers in the United States. The FBI says that there are ISIS terrorist investigations in all 50 states, and that there are about 900 terrorism investigations in progress, the majority of which are ISIS-related. During 2015 there was also an unprecedented spike in terrorism cases in the States with more than 70 – mostly ISIS related – during the year, the most cases in any year since 9/11.

**Over the past year and half, there have also been six ISIS-inspired attacks in the United States.** The most lethal was in Orlando in June. Another lethal attack occurred in San Bernardino, California, in December, when a married couple attacked office workers attending a holiday party killing 14.

In the fall of 2014, Zale Thompson allegedly attacked police officers with a hatchet in New York. He is believed to have been inspired by ISIS. Last May, gunmen inspired by ISIS and also in direct contact with members of the terrorist group, opened fire at a cartoon contest of the Prophet Mohammed held in Garland, Texas. The gunmen, Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi, were killed by police. And in November, a student at the University of California, Merced stabbed four people on campus, after visiting ISIS websites. In January, Edward Archer allegedly shot Philadelphia police officer Jesse Hartnett. Archer told police, “I pledge my allegiance to the Islamic State, and that's why I did what I did.”

The good news, though, is that we are not so far seeing Americans trained by ISIS in Syria in paramilitary tactics then returning to the United States as we have seen with the multiple French and Belgian recruits to ISIS, including those who carried out the Paris attacks that killed 130 in November.

James Clapper, the U.S. director of National Intelligence has said that at least 6,900 militants from Western countries have traveled to Syria since 2012. But relatively few of these are Americans, and only seven have been publicly identified as having returned to the United States. Of these, one returned to Syria to carry out a suicide attack in 2014, and one has been charged with attempting an attack on the United States. Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud of Columbus, Ohio is believed to have

left for Syria in April 2014 and fought there before returning to the United States around two months later. The government alleges that before he was arrested he discussed some kind of plan (with an informant) to kill American soldiers at a military base in Texas. Mohamud has pleaded not guilty.

All this suggests that while continued ISIS-inspired attacks are certainly a very strong possibility in the United States, they would likely be "lone wolf" attacks in which the perpetrator has no formal links to ISIS and has had no training from the terrorist group. The lack of ISIS training generally makes these lone wolves less lethal than the trained killers we saw in Paris.

**What U.S. counterterrorism officials are particularly concerned about is what they term a “blended” attack in the States, which is both inspired by ISIS but also directed by the terrorist organization.** Under this scenario, an American recruit inspired by ISIS might reach out directly to members of ISIS in Syria over an encrypted social media platform, seeking some kind of specific directions for an attack.

We already saw a harbinger of this last May, when the FBI says one of the two ISIS-inspired militants who attacked the Prophet Mohammed cartoon contest in Texas sent more than 100 encrypted messages to an ISIS terrorist in Syria.

### **How does ISIS crowd source jihad in the States?**

As FBI director James Comey noted when referring to the 2013 arrest of Terry Loewen, who was accused of plotting an attack on Wichita airport in Kansas, “We have made it so hard for people to get into this country, bad guys, but they can enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas.” The “photon” Comey was talking about was, of course, the Internet. The only profile that tied together American militants drawn to the Syrian conflict is that they were active in online jihadist circles. More than three quarters were posters of jihadist material on Twitter or Facebook, or were in direct contact with ISIS recruiters over social media.

This raises the question of how we should conceptualize lone wolves in the age of social media. A militant radicalizing in front of his or her computer by himself at home is now not really alone. He/she is swimming in a virtual sea of jihadist

recruiters, cheerleaders, and fellow travelers who are available for interaction with him or her 24/7. Contrast this with a classic lone-wolf American terrorist of the past such as the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, who mailed his targets more than a dozen bombs between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s that killed three people and injured some two dozen others, all in service of his obscure, Luddite beliefs. Kaczynski did this entirely by himself while living like a hermit in a remote cabin in Montana with—forget the Internet—no electricity.

Today's lone wolf is instead plugged into a vast self-referential and interactive ecosystem where he or she can virtually, instantly find thousands of other people around the world who share his or her beliefs. Take the case of Alex, a twenty-three-year-old sometime Sunday school teacher living in a remote part of Washington State who converted to Islam. In 2015 multiple members and fans of ISIS spent thousands of hours online with her, promising that they would find her a suitable husband and even sending her gifts of chocolate and books about Islam. Three teenage Khan siblings from Chicago were in regular touch with virtual recruiters in Turkey and Syria and militants in the United Kingdom before attempting their emigration to the caliphate in 2014. In the useful formulation of the Israeli counterterrorism expert Gabriel Weimann, the lone wolf is now part of a virtual pack.

## **2. Who are ISIS' Western and American recruits?**

Who exactly are the estimated 6,900 Westerners who have been drawn to join ISIS and other militant groups in Syria? To provide some answers to that question, New America collected information about 715 individuals from 26 Western countries who have been reported by credible news sources as having left their home countries to join ISIS or other Sunni jihadist groups in Syria or Iraq. The Western fighters drawn to Syria and Iraq represent a new demographic profile, quite different than that of other Western militants who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s or Bosnia in the 1990s.

First, women are represented in unprecedented numbers. One in eight of the militants in New America's data set are women. Women were rarely, if at all, represented in previous jihadist conflicts. While Western women are not going to fight in the war in Syria, they are playing supporting roles, often marrying front-

line fighters and sometimes working as a kind of police officer enforcing ISIS's draconian laws. They are women like Sally Jones, 44, from the United Kingdom, who took her 10-year-old son to Syria in 2013, and Emilie Konig, 31, one of the first women to leave for Syria, who left France and her two children behind in 2012 to join her husband there. The U.S. State Department says both women have encouraged terrorist attacks in their native countries, and it has officially designated both of them terrorists.

Second, the recruits are young. The average age of Western volunteers drawn to the Syrian jihad is 25. For female recruits, the average age is 22. Almost one in 6 are teenagers, almost than a third of whom are female.

Third, many have familial ties to jihadism. More than a third of Western fighters have a familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives who are also fighting in Syria and Iraq, through marriage or through some link to other jihads or terrorist attacks. For instance the father of British ISIS recruit Abd el-Majed Abdel Bary is Adel Abdel Bary, who was convicted in New York for his role in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Of those with a familial link, about one third are through marriage, many of them marriages between female recruits and male fighters conducted after they arrive in Syria. Almost half of Western fighters with familial ties to jihad have a relative who has also left for Syria. For example, the Deghayes family in the United Kingdom had three sons, ages 16 to 20, fighting in Syria together.

**Fourth, the Americans drawn to the Syrian jihad -- 250 who have tried or have succeeded in getting to Syria -- share the same profile as the Western fighters overall: Women are well-represented, and the volunteers are young, and many have family ties to jihad. One in seven of the Americans drawn to the Syrian conflict are women. The average age of the American militants is just under 25, with a fifth still in their teens. Almost a fifth of the American militants have a familial connection to jihad. The American recruits are, perhaps unsurprisingly, particularly active online: More than three quarters of the American militants were active in online jihadist circles, posting jihadist material on Twitter or Facebook, or were in direct contact with ISIS recruiters over social media.**

Fifth, for Western militants, the wars engulfing Syria and Iraq have often proved deadly. Almost half of the male fighters and 8% of the female recruits have been killed in Syria or Iraq.

Sixth, few of the Western fighters who have traveled to Syria and Iraq are in government custody. Only one-fifth of Western fighters in New America's data set are in custody, and almost two-fifths of individuals are still at large. The remaining two fifths are dead.

Seventh, overwhelmingly the most popular route to Syria is through Turkey. Almost forty percent of the Western foreign fighters made their way to Syria or Iraq via Turkey. Only one of the militants is documented as attempting to use an alternative route via Lebanon. For the rest of the Western militants, it's not clear from the public record how they arrived in Syria.

Eighth, where an affiliation can be determined, the majority of the Western fighters have joined ISIS: More than three-fifths have joined ISIS, fewer than one in ten joined al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, and the others joined smaller groups or their affiliation is unknown.

### **3. The content of ISIS propaganda**

A review of ISIS propaganda shows a diverse mix of motivations and themes that ISIS uses for its recruiting strategy. These include:

- Opposition to the Assad regime;
- The spiritual benefit of participating in jihad;
- The religious duty to live in the caliphate;
- Anger at Western society;
- Objections to U.S. foreign policy;
- Glorifying attacks carried out in the West to inspire others to action;
- A comfortable life with ISIS that includes being paid; free groceries and free medical care;
- We are victorious:
- The "coolness," and even romance, of holy war.

In July 2014 ISIS began publishing its online, English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, which is now in its 14th iteration, (the most recent edition was released in April). Articles in *Dabiq* report on the group's military activities as well as aim to reassure readers that ISIS is an actual state that provides social services and maintains infrastructure. One issue of *Dabiq* included photos with captions showing "services for Muslims," including street cleaning, electricity repairs, care homes for the elderly, and cancer treatment centers for children. The first issue of *Dabiq* even had a sort of classified ad for "all Muslim doctors, engineers, scholars, and specialists" to come and join ISIS. (ISIS has also launched similar magazines in Russian, French, and Turkish.)

ISIS initially downplayed the merits of "homegrown" extremism, concentrating on wooing its "foreign fighter" recruits to travel to join the "caliphate" in Syria. Whereas al-Qaeda in Yemen's *Inspire* webzine focused largely on inspiring attacks in the West, ISIS' *Dabiq*, which models itself on *Inspire* in many ways, was initially geared more toward perpetuating ISIS's successful insurgencies in Iraq and Syria. *Dabiq* encouraged followers to join the jihad; a writer in the third issue of *Dabiq* in 2014 declared, "This life of jihad is not possible until you pack and move to the #Khilafah."

ISIS has disseminated online guidebooks to encourage its Western recruits. ISIS posted online in early 2015 a handy fifty-page booklet, *Hijrah to the Islamic State*. *Hijrah* is an Arabic word that means emigrating for religious reasons. The booklet's jaunty subtitle explained, *What to Packup. Who to Contact. Where to Go. Stories & More!* Inside, ISIS aspirants in the United States and other English-speaking countries could read how to make the journey to Syria. Some of the advice was obvious: ISIS told its would-be recruits not to tell "anyone, even family" of their plans. Other tips were subtler. ISIS suggested that anyone trying to reach its de facto capital in Syria, Raqqa, near the Turkish border, should not buy a ticket to Turkey, as enough "foreign fighters" had already passed through Turkey that this might attract attention from law enforcement. It instead advised volunteers to buy a ticket for a less "suspicious" vacation spot, such as Spain or Greece, buying a ticket to Turkey once they arrived there.



ISIS recommended bringing a sleeping bag and a good backpack with plenty of pockets “as you will definitely have to move around in *Sham* [Syria] once you get here.” A solar charger for electronics was also advised “since electricity is a big problem here,” as well as a headlamp suitable for use in dark conditions. Because of the cold of the Syrian winter, recruits were urged to pack a good, warm jacket and a “beanie hat.”

Once in Turkey, recruits were told, they would wait in a hotel and make contact with an ISIS facilitator, often a “Twitter contact.” ISIS even helpfully provided the Twitter handles of seventeen ISIS recruiters to whom potential recruits could send private Direct Messages in order to set up their travel from Turkey into Syria. The booklet urged operational security for such messaging, telling recruits to use the Tor browser to disguise their IP addresses, and recommending Androids as “securer” than iPhones.

If asked in Turkey about the purpose of their trip, ISIS recruits were advised to say “tourism.” To give credibility to this cover story, they were urged to bone up on well-known tourist spots. They were also advised not to pack knives that could be used as weapons, or combat boots that might give away their ultimate purpose in Syria. There was also special advice to ISIS “sisters” (female recruits) not to travel as a “pack” on a plane and to “be chill to the airport officers” because “you’re just tourists.”

The group painted an idealized yet accessible picture of life under ISIS’s rule: recruits would receive free housing, electricity and water (but not free gas); they would receive free groceries such as pasta, canned foods, rice, and eggs; they would be given monthly allowances and free medical care; and they would pay no taxes. Presenting itself as a real state with plentiful social services and constructed infrastructure was a smart innovation on ISIS’s part—it made al-Qaeda’s high-flown rhetoric about the restoration of the caliphate seem like concrete reality.

ISIS also promised a place where pious young Muslim men and women could come to find their perfect marriage partner. One of the most active of ISIS’s recruits on social media was a Malaysian doctor in her mid-twenties who had married a foreign fighter she met only once briefly before the marriage ceremony.

The doctor explained in one of her frequent posts in English that no one would force women recruits to marry, and that marriages consummated under ISIS's black banners were truly "blessed." She helpfully noted that the banks of the Euphrates River were "almost every newly married couples' favorite spot."

An ISIS video showed smiling kids taking amusement park rides at a city fairground in Mosul. According to ISIS propaganda, life in the Islamist utopia was, almost above all, *normal*.

Another 2015 ISIS publication, a one-hundred-page booklet titled simply *The Islamic State*, outlined the training regime new male recruits would go through. This included learning how to use "basic firearms" such as AK-47s and also "medium heavy" weapons such as machine guns, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades, as well as "chemical" and "electronic" warfare. ISIS advised that those who wanted to perform a suicidal "martyrdom" operation "are put on a waiting list," implying that there were more volunteers for suicide operations than ISIS could handle. Page after page showed dead militants "smiling," having seen their home in Paradise just before their souls left their bodies. The bodies of these martyrs, the booklet assured, did not decay.

Collectively, ISIS's English-language propaganda machine offered an answer to the big question: Why would anyone in the United States or the West want to give up his comfortable life to join ISIS? Making it look easy might help one overcome practical objections, but inspiration was another matter. The answer for ISIS's recruits was, as for so many militants, the desire to belong to something greater than themselves. In the minds of ISIS's recruits the group was doing something of cosmic importance by defending Sunni Muslim civilians from the onslaughts of the Assad regime. The final, inevitable battle between the West and Muslims would presage the arrival of the *Mahdi*, the Islamic savior, and the victory of Islam; the battle against Assad was its opening salvo.

All this bloviation was made easier to swallow because ISIS was, at least initially, *victorious*. In the summer of 2014 the group released a video showing a bulldozer breaking down the great sand berm that demarcated the Iraq-Syrian border, first established by Britain and France in a secret agreement to carve up the Ottoman

Empire following the end of World War I. This was ISIS's symbolic first step toward expunging all vestiges of Western influence in the Arab world. Al-Qaeda had never controlled such large swaths of the Middle East (a territory by some estimates around the size of the United Kingdom) or ruled over millions of people.

The group has also secured pledges of allegiance from two-dozen militant organizations from around the Muslim world, including in Egypt's Sinai region and Egypt's neighbor Libya, while around 10 other groups have declared some form of solidarity with ISIS. The key to ISIS's success is not the group's military strength — ISIS in Syria and Iraq may number only about 20,000 to 30,000 fighters — but the weaknesses of the regimes where the group is doing well.

**Think of ISIS as a pathogen that preys on weak hosts in the Muslim world. In fact, there something of a law: The weaker a Muslim state the stronger will be the presence of ISIS or like-minded groups.**

As with all totalitarian regimes, mythmaking became essential to ISIS's rhetorical authority. It celebrated its creation of the purportedly perfect state as a way of enchanting new believers. In a propaganda video released in August 2014, shortly after the group had seized control of key Iraqi cities and declared its official name to be simply the Islamic State, a global brigade of fighters (British, Finnish, Moroccan, South African, Trinidadian) all extolled the wonders of living in the caliphate. Filmed during "golden hour," near sunset, the video showed groups of boys with guns and happy ISIS fighters. An ISIS fighter from South Africa said, "I don't have the words. I don't have the words to express myself about the happiness to be here." The video closes with two boys armed with guns in a park waving to the camera. Text on the screen read, "I wish you were here." In other words, "Yes, we have created an Islamist utopia here on earth! And you should be part of it." Another ISIS fighter helpfully noted, "You can still survive even if you don't speak Arabic. You can find almost every race and nationality here."

ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has also lent his voice to the effort to recruit foreign fighters. In May 2015, ISIS released an online audio recording of Baghdadi in which he called for all Muslims to make hijrah to ISIS's territory, saying there is no excuse for any able Muslim not doing so.

The establishment of ISIS “caliphate” was a powerful draw for some of ISIS recruits. Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old woman from Alabama, told her father in a phone call from Syria that she traveled there for missionary work because the caliphate had been declared and every Muslim was required to travel there in order to get to heaven. Before attempting to travel to Syria in 2014, Chicago teen Mohammed Hamzah Khan left a letter for his parents in which he explained “there is an obligation to ‘migrate’ to the ‘Islamic State’ now that it has ‘been established.’” Virginia teen Reza Niknejad called his mother on February 5, 2015, after having reached Syria to join ISIS, telling her about how well he was being treated in the “Khalifah.”

Others have cited feelings of alienation or oppression in Western society. Mohammed Hamzah Khan’s 17-year-old sister wrote a letter to her parents before attempting to travel to Syria, saying: “I could not bear to live in ... the land who’s people mock my Allah, my beloved Prophet...” Muthenna Abu Taubah, a 24-year-old fighter from central London who later died in an accident at a bomb-making factory in Raqqa, the de facto ISIS capital, commented to a BBC reporter: “Look at China—men aren’t allowed to grow beards and Muslims aren’t allowed to fast. Look at France—women can’t wear niqab. Look at the USA and U.K.—you can’t even talk about jihad.”

Based on court records and press reports, New America identified several Western militants acting as online recruiters. Among them are a number of Americans. For instance, Abdi Nur, a 20-year-old from Minnesota, allegedly took on the role of online recruiter after leaving for Syria in the summer of 2014. A complaint filed in November 2015 that charged six Minnesota men with trying to go to join ISIS accuses Nur of acting as an online recruiter and providing encouragement and advice to the men via Kik and other social media platforms from Syria. Another is Hoda Muthana, the 20-year-old American woman from Alabama, who was identified by BuzzFeed as the individual behind the Twitter account Umm Jihad, which encouraged militants to leave for Syria.\_\_\_\_\_

**By early 2015, however, ISIS’s message had shifted from “come join the caliphate” to encouraging attacks in the West.** Issue seven of *Dabiq* carried a four-page article extolling the virtues of Amedy Coulibaly, who had conspired

with the attackers at the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and had recently killed four Jews at a kosher supermarket in Paris. Though he self-radicalized in France, Coulibaly had released a video in which he declared his ISIS allegiance,

"How to Survive in the West" is an ISIS online guidebook about how to "be a secret agent" in a Western country, giving readers tips on the making of Molotov cocktails, cell phone detonators; hiding weapons in secret compartments of vehicles, in the same fashion as gangs; and how to identify and evade police surveillance, even suggesting that readers watch the Jason Bourne film series for tips on employing evasion tactics. Tips also included making sure to have a Western-sounding nickname so as to attract less suspicion and wearing colored contact lenses after an attack to confuse the police. There were also instructions on how to build a bomb using a microwave oven.

Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the spokesman for ISIS, released an audiotape in late May in which he called for attacks in the Muslim world and also in the West, saying, "Ramadan, the month of conquest and jihad... make it a month of calamity everywhere for the non-believers." ISIS-inspired attackers subsequently struck in the West, first in Orlando where 49 people were killed in the nightclub and, the day after the Orlando attack, an ISIS-inspired terrorist killed a police officer and his partner in a town outside Paris.

In 1985 British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher spoke about terrorism at the annual convention of the American Bar Association. Following a recent high profile hijacking of a TWA passenger jet in Beirut that had received lavish media coverage, Thatcher urged that news organizations, "must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend." It's a dilemma that news organizations have grappled with for many decades since. Terrorist attacks are, of course, news, but terrorists also depend on "the oxygen of publicity" provided by the media to spread accounts of their violence.

But what if: *Today's terrorists are the media?* On Friday ISIS militants took hostages at a upscale café in Dhaka Bangladesh and killed twenty, mostly non-Muslim foreigners. During the massacre, the militants sent images of their victims lying in pools of blood on the floor of the café to the ISIS media outlet Amaq,

which posted them for the world to see.

In the past terrorists had to rely on the media to get their messages out, but now they can completely control their own message, from making their own content to ensuring its widespread distribution. Terrorists are now broadcasting their crimes through their own “news agencies” in real time.

Consider also that ISIS produces its own lavish TV productions shot in High Definition and filmed professionally of everything from its murder of civilians, to profiles of its heroic fighters, to the supposedly idyllic life that can be lived under its purportedly utopian rule. The terrorist organization also publishes multiple ISIS webzines in English, French, Russia and Turkish, while ISIS and its supporters maintain many tens of thousands of social media accounts to further propagate the ISIS message. The group also has its own de facto news agency, Amaq, that credibly reports on ISIS own atrocities.

In a new twist of the past three years, ISIS and other jihadist militants are now reporting on their own bloody work in real time. During the Westgate mall attack in Kenya in 2013 in which at least 67 were killed, someone close to the Shabaab terror group was live tweeting details of the attack, which were often far more accurate than any other source. As the assault at the Westgate mall was underway, a Twitter account used by the Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab tweeted: "The Mujahideen ('holy warriors') entered Westgate mall today at around noon and they are still inside the mall, fighting the Kenyan kuffar ('infidels') inside their own turf."

It was the first confirmation that the attack was the work of Al-Shabaab, and journalists around the world quickly reported this. Crucially, Al-Shabaab then explained in a tweet that the mall attack was going to be a fight to the death in which there would be no negotiations for the lives of the hostages the gunmen had taken: "We'll not negotiate with the Kenyan govt as long as its forces are invading our country, so reap the bitter fruits of your harvest #Westgate." This key aspect of the assault on the mall was also reported globally.

The Westgate mall attack was the first major terrorist attack that was live tweeted by someone close to the perpetrators. In recent weeks we have seen an appalling

new iteration of this trend with the terrorists posting pictures of their victims in real time, as we saw in the attack in Bangladesh on Friday.

Similarly, last month, Larossi Abballa, the ISIS-inspired militant who killed the police official and his partner in a town outside of Paris, immediately after the murders, videotaped himself live on Facebook declaring his allegiance to ISIS. While Abballa was taping this statement, near him was the couple's terrified three-year-old son.

Pledging allegiance to ISIS on Facebook after a murderous attack is now almost routine for terrorists in the West. Omar Mateen, the terrorist in Orlando who killed 49 at the nightclub, pledged his allegiance to ISIS on Facebook as he carried out his attack. So too did the terrorists in San Bernadino in December who killed 14 attending an office holiday party.

One of the big ideas of modern terrorism, from the Munich Olympics of 1972 during which Palestinian terrorists kidnapped Israeli athletes, to 9/11 itself, is to use widespread TV coverage of violent acts to propagate and advance the political ideas of the militants.

**Today, terrorists bypass traditional media entirely and they now act simultaneously as the protagonists, producers and propagators of their acts of nihilistic violence.**

#### **4. How to Defeat ISIS' Online Propaganda: Eleven Action Items:**

**There seems to be some conceptual confusion in the U. S. government about what "Countering Violent Extremism" programs are attempting to do: Is it counter-radicalization? Or is it counter-recruitment? Counter-radicalization--turning many millions of Muslims away from radical ideas---seems both a nebulous mission, but also one that may not be achievable. A far more specific task is trying to stop the relatively small number of Muslims who are trying to join ISIS or sign up for its ideology from doing so. From an American national security perspective that is, after all, what we all want to prevent. Thinking "bad" ideas isn't illegal nor has anyone satisfactorily answered how to replace these bad ideas with better ideas.**

**What follows are some specific action items about how to counter ISIS recruitment efforts that can be undertaken by civil society and the government.\_\_\_\_**

1. Enlist defectors from ISIS to tell their stories publicly. Nothing is more powerful than hearing from former members of the group that ISIS is not creating an Islamist utopia in the areas it controls, but a hell on earth. The flow of “foreign fighters” to ISIS from around the Muslim world is estimated to be about 1,000 a month. Reducing that flow is a key to reducing ISIS manpower. Muhammad Jamal Khweis, 26, of Alexandria, Virginia, was held by Kurdish fighters after allegedly deserting from ISIS in early 2015. Khweis gave an interview to a Kurdish TV station in which he said: "My message to the American people is: the life in Mosul [the Iraqi capital of ISIS] it's really, really bad. The people [that] were controlling Mosul don't represent the religion. Daesh, ISIS, ISIL, they don't represent the religion, I don't see them as good Muslims."

U.S. prosecutors could throw the book at Khweis for joining ISIS, and he could get 20 years or more, but they also could try something more creative -- a deal in which he tells prosecutors what he knows about ISIS in return for a reduced prison sentence. And one more thing: He would also have to appear before the American public explaining that ISIS is creating hell in the areas it controls.

2. Amplify voices such as that of the ISIS opposition group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, which routinely posts photos online of bread lines in Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS in northern Syria, and writes about electricity shortages in the city. This will help to undercut ISIS propaganda that it is a truly functioning state.

3. Amplify the work of former jihadists like the Canadian Mubin Shaikh, who intervenes directly with young people online, who he sees are being recruited virtually by ISIS.

4. Support the work of clerics such as Imam Mohamed Magid of Northern Virginia, who has personally convinced a number of American Muslims seduced by ISIS that what the group is doing is against Islam.

5. Keep up pressure on social media companies such as Twitter to enforce their



own Terms of Use to take down any ISIS material that encourages violence. Earlier this year, Twitter took down 125,000 accounts used by ISIS supporters, but the group continues to use Twitter and other social media platforms to propagate its message.

6. Keep up the military campaign against ISIS. The less the ISIS “caliphate” exists as a physical entity, the less the group can claim it is the “Islamic State” that it purports to be. That should involve more U.S. Special Forces on the ground embedded with Iraqi and other coalition forces and more U.S. forward air controllers calling in close air support strikes for those forces.

7. Applaud the work that the Turks have already done to tamp down the foreign fighter flow through their country to ISIS in neighboring Syria, and get them to do more. Turkey, which had long been criticized by Western countries for allowing foreign fighters to move through its territory on their way to Syria, has started to clamp down on that traffic into Syria. Those efforts by the Turks are paying off, according to ISIS itself. In early 2015, ISIS posted advice in one of its English-language online publications to would-be foreign fighters, saying, "It is important to know that the Turkish intelligence agencies are in no way friends of the Islamic State [ISIS]."

8. Provide “off ramps” to young ISIS recruits with no history of violence, so that instead of serving long prison terms for attempting to join ISIS — as they presently do in the United States — they would instead serve long periods of supervised probation. This will help families that presently face a hard choice: If they suspect a young family member is radicalizing and they go to the FBI, that person can end up in prison for up to 15 years on charges of attempting to support ISIS; but if they don’t go to the authorities and their child ends up traveling to Syria, he or she may well end up being killed there. Providing off-ramps would offer families a way out of this almost impossible choice.

9. Educate Muslim-American parents about the seductive messages that ISIS is propagating online.

10. Relentlessly hammer home the message that ISIS positions itself as the defender of Muslims, but its victims are overwhelmingly fellow Muslims.

11. Build a database of all the foreign fighters who have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate there, the Nusra Front. This is one of the recommendations of the House Homeland Security Committee's September 2015 report on foreign fighters in Syria and it is a very good one. How can you prevent an attack by returning foreign fighters if you are not cognizant of their names and links to ISIS? Right now INTERPOL has a list of some 5,000 foreign fighters, but that is simply dwarfed by the estimated 30,000 foreign fighters who have gone to fight in Syria.

12. Either through electronic warfare or other means find and destroy ISIS' media production arms.