Swipe Left: U.S.-Russia Cooperation in Countering Digital Female ISIL Recruitment

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This paper analyzes the feasibility of and proposes a strategy for cooperation between the United States and Russia in the field of countering ISIL in the digital sphere. In doing so, we have identified female recruitment through digital networks as a niche area in which both countries may have overlapping interests and face comparable challenges. Our research consists of a literature review of existing academic studies regarding ISIL and terrorist network recruitment, conversations with both American and Russian experts in public diplomacy and international counterterrorism , an examination of recruitment narratives in the media, and a content analysis of Russian and American social media channels. Our research shows that the US and Russia may increase awareness of this issue among the public in both countries by highlighting stories of women who have survived life under ISIL

and have escaped. It is crucial to create digital content that shares forms and methods of ISIL recruitment, and potential warning signs on social media, in simple and understandable language. We propose the creation and regular management of a micro-site and accompanying social media campaign to aggregate the stories of these women authentically and credibly, encouraging buy-in from the communities that most need this information. The Stanford U.S.-Russia Forum commissioned this paper in a Track II diplomatic effort between young scholars in the United States and the Russian Federation.

Introduction

Today, relations between the United States and Russia are the most strained they have been in the past ten years, and therefore, there are few opportunities for the two countries to find common ground on mutual international challenges. However, due to the existential threat that some of these challenges pose to both nations, it is clear that there must be cooperation on these key issues in order to work toward global stability. One of these areas of critical attention is the situation regarding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the Middle East, which has quickly expanded into a global threat. The Russian and U.S. governments are diametrically opposed regarding ways in which to seek an end to the conflict. Therefore, we see greater potential for a partnership between the two countries on a non-governmental level.

According to United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the problem of fast-growing international terrorist networks that thrive in unstable political climates is the most pressing issue in the Middle East. Terrorism is considered one of the greatest threats globally, destabilizing political and social order and is no longer seen as simply a regional issue. For Russia and the United States, fighting terrorism has been a top priority domestically and internationally. Both countries have experienced terrorism firsthand – Russia's struggle against terrorism has grown since the beginning of the first Chechen war in the 1990s and the unstable situation in the Caucasus. The United States has been waging its "War on Terror" since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Currently, the rise of ISIL and its use of digital media to spread propaganda and recruit supporters and fighters has taken the problem of terrorism into

uncharted territory. The terrorist group's aggressive, previously unmatched methods of online recruitment of both men and women, its possession of land, and its role in the rise in international terror attacks have made ISIL a grave threat to the global community. As both countries face serious repercussions as a result of ISIL's growth, countering violent extremism digitally may be a niche area for cooperation between the United States and Russia. We came to this conclusion after conducting an analysis of ongoing anti-terrorism initiatives being implemented domestically by both countries, as well as initiatives of the United Kingdom and other Western nations; conversations with experts in public diplomacy, digital diplomacy, and counterterrorism; and media content analysis, which included analysis of social media platforms popular in both the United States and Russia.

Why Collaborate Through Non-Governmental Means?

It is widely understood that there are very few realistic opportunities for cooperation between the United States and Russia in the field of counterterrorism, especially through traditional means.[5] This limitation exists due to several factors. First, Russia's 2014 military doctrine[6] lists NATO and the United States as major foreign threats, which seemingly all but eliminates the possibility of forming a military alliance to fight terrorism.[7] Second, both countries have differing long-term strategies and alliances in the Middle East region. In the case of Syria, the Russian government strongly supports the Assad regime, while the United States' position has ranged from demanding that "[Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad must go"[8] to crafting a political transition that may or may not include Assad.[9] Due to these strained relations, we assert that the best way for the two countries to collaborate on this issue is in a less-formal manner through non-governmental organizations, ideally through digital channels.

Countering ISIL in the digital sphere is equally as important as using traditional military means, as the quasi-state has not only gained large swaths of physical territory, but also maintains a strong presence in all corners of the Internet. Therefore, this digital counterinsurgency effort should not be considered as an afterthought to both Russia's and the United States' military operations in the region, but as a critical component of the overall strategy to

degrade ISIL. Furthermore, analysts and other professionals working for both governments who are trained in digital counterterrorism will be able to adapt their skills and apply them to countering other terrorist networks that operate in digital spaces. According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, the territory controlled by ISIL has the highest number of foreign fighters since Afghanistan in the 1980s, with recent reports estimating that 20,000 fighters are foreign recruits, nearly 20 percent of which are from Western countries, making a digital counterinsurgency aimed at curbing recruitment a top priority.[10] However, countering ISIL digitally should not only be designed to stop the recruitment of foreign fighters, but should also work to counter propaganda motivating people to commit acts of violence and terrorism outside territory under ISIL control (i.e. attacks taking place in Western cities, etc.).

We chose to specifically focus on the recruitment of women into terrorist networks because of the current lack in academic research on the topic. Although women do not make up the majority of individuals recruited by extremist networks, the tactics and processes by which women are recruited are important to examine to better understand the holistic nature of the rise of ISIL. Countering the ISIL narrative, particularly with regard to female recruitment, must come through sharing stories of women and girls impacted by ISIL and similar groups. The content must tell the stories of all women, whether they were recruited or held against their will. This digital platform can also serve as a grassroots tool to empower communities of men and women to stand up against extremism, and in particular, protect the rights of and empower women and girls who have been oppressed under ISIL.

Countering the ISIL narrative through government-sanctioned or government-labeled counter-messaging has proven counterproductive. A government or multilateral organization like the United Nations cannot solely generate material aimed at countering terrorism, as there would likely be a lack of buy-in from an already skeptical audience. We recommend the creation of a digital campaign, designed and maintained through collaboration between Russian and American private citizens, that would provide a forum for women and girls to share how extremism, and ISIL in particular, has negatively impacted their lives. is platform would create an online community

where these stories can not only be shared with the public but also allows women who have had similar experiences to communicate with one another.

Literature Review

In order to understand the landscape in which we will seek to forge this collaboration, we analyzed several schools of thought regarding countering ISIL recruitment, specifically female recruitment, in the digital space. We came to the conclusion that the current discussion in academia regarding ISIL online recruitment is focused on a range of topics that can be divided into four distinct groups: victims, content and recruitment methods, the profile and ideology of recruiters, and counter- recruitment efforts. However, none of the literature we reviewed offers policymakers comprehensive, actionable solutions to solve the conflict.

For example, Saltman and Smith[11] from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue explore the topic of gender and radicalization by focusing on women recruited by ISIL. They analyze ISIL propaganda specifically targeting females and investigate case studies from the United Kingdom. Even though Saltman and Smith claim to analyze the effectiveness of various countering tools and provide recommendations on de-radicalization and further counter-narrative work, it is brief. In their study, they specify at-risk groups and suggest the use of general online marketing tools already used by large international businesses in the prevention of radicalization, but do not specify those tools and the ways in which they could be implemented as part of existing counter-messaging strategies.

Bergen, Schuster, and Sterman paint a portrait of Western foreign fighters joining ISIL.[12] This research is one of few pieces that explains the threats foreign fighters pose to their countries of origin and other states, highlighting the impact that foreign fighters have on the U.S. While the content of the paper is quite informative, their recommendations are too general, too idealistic, and too hard to implement. For example, they suggest stemming the flow of fighters from Muslim countries to reduce ISIL manpower. However, this type of strategy would likely be almost impossible to carry out successfully.

Thompson does an excellent job of exploring why social media serves as an ideal platform for radicalization and recruitment, but his final recommendations are vague and do not provide clear policies for governments.[13] The Brookings Institute conducted research on Twitter usage by ISIL supporters,[14] which provides a useful overview of the demographics of the social media platform. The authors also suggest methods to discover, analyze, and deactivate ISIL accounts on Twitter. However, the research does not provide policymakers with either a systemized database for tracking these accounts or possible actions or policy recommendations on how to counter ISIL in cyberspace.

Another major part of existing literature is dedicated to the history of the terror group[15] and focuses on its recruiters. El-Badawy, Comerford, and Welby have conducted deep analysis of the values and ideologies of ISIL recruiters.[16] They also compare recruiting strategies between al-Qaeda, ISIL, and Jabhat al-Nusra.[17] However, one major flaw in this paper is that ideology is analyzed as a set of unchanging beliefs, and fails to trace changes in the rhetoric of these groups since their rise.

While Alberto Fernandez[18] has published a thorough outline of potential responses to ISIL propaganda and William McCants[19] goes a step further in illuminating why ISIL propaganda is more successful than U.S. counter-propaganda, overall there are troubling gaps in the existing literature, the majority of which are theoretical, not practical. The literature does not provide analysis of what counter-methods work and reasons for their success, and methods are sporadically mentioned and not envisioned as part of a holistic counter-strategy.

Further research should explore how social and digital media can be used to counter radicalization and recruitment beyond simply denying recruiters access to these platforms. It should include innovative ways to communicate a counter-narrative that shows the harmful effects of ISIL's governance and recruitment. Further research could also seek a better understanding of the specific psychologies at play in the recruitment process and the specific strategies that recruiters use on social media. Given the lack of literature on designing and implementing effective policies to fight extremism online our

research will outline a pragmatic and comprehensive approach to the narrative presented by ISIL in its recruitment.

ISIL's Recruitment Strategies

Western media has reported about ISIL's successful recruitment process since 2013, when the terrorist group significantly expanded in Syria and Iraq, declaring itself a "caliphate." Since then, ISIL has overshadowed its parent organization, al-Qaeda, and broadened its digital recruitment operations from the Middle East and North Africa to Western countries and Russia. 30,000 foreign fighters have gone to the Middle East to join ISIL and other terrorist groups since 2011. ISIL's successful online recruitment efforts led to approximately half of these foreign fighters traveling to Iraq and Syria to join the group in 2014. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shabab, and other terrorist organizations have since adopted the recruiting techniques that ISIL uses. ISIL not only uses social media to spread its messages and recruit followers, including Westerners, but also to empower supporters to advocate on their behalf.[20]

ISIL's online recruitment and strategy in social media has become a digital phenomenon that some scholars refer to as "Online-jihad 3.0,"[21] even though spreading propaganda online and recruiting via social media on a global scale was first done by other militant groups, most recently the Free Syrian Army (FSA).[22] The FSA spread their alternative vision of the conflict in the region and recruited locals to fight against the Assad regime, starting its own Arabic YouTube channel and releasing its own e-journal. The group's online propaganda and recruitment methods, seen as highly efficient, are hard to combat and counter and were adopted by several militant extremist groups in the Middle East region including Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (Army of Emigrants and Supporters), Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar ash-Sham (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant), and others, including ISIL.

While ISIL's core doctrines and jihadist concepts are shared by a number of other Salafi-jihadist organizations, in many ways the group has redefined modern terrorism, specifically with regard to recruitment strategies. Many aspects of ISIL's online strategy were developed while the group was still part

of al-Qaeda. The more these two groups drifted apart and began to compete for power and influence in Iraq and Syria, the more their online strategies diverged, especially with regard to the use of social media.[23]

Al-Qaeda Versus ISIL Online Recruitment Strategies

ISIL still bases its propaganda on materials developed by al-Qaeda, including a manual written by al-Qaeda in Iraq called "A Course in the Art of Recruiting".[24] Local recruitment and propaganda sharing by al-Qaeda is mainly done online through imams and madrasas and word of mouth. According to Weimann,[25] al-Qaeda still relies heavily on "older" online platforms like websites and forums to communicate with potential recruits. ISIL takes these methods a step further by creating content that is platform-specific. Content is tailored to each different social media platform, includes translations and employs the use of propaganda photos and videos of ISIL territory and the people under their control.

One of the main differences between ISIL and its predecessors is an approach to engaging young audiences through social media and "branding" itself. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban only posted theoretical literature online which rarely reached young audiences because the content was difficult to read.[26]

Below are five specific ways that ISIL has branded itself as different from any other terrorist organization operating today:

1. The declaration of a "caliphate" and its aim to establish a new world order that proclaims an Armageddon ideology. ISIL urges others to join the "State" as new citizens, not as members of a terrorist organization.[27]

2. Implementation of "smart" propaganda: ISIL packages its digital content into an easy-to-read format to reach all socio-economic demographics and takes into account the countries of origin and native languages of potential recruits.[28]

3. A focus on recruiting both locals and members of the international community (including non-Muslims). The group uses foreign recruits as propaganda in their digital communications system.[29]

4. ISIL recruits from the international Muslim community and also allows non-Muslim recruits to convert to Islam.

5. Female recruitment plays an important role in the advancement of ISIL.[30] Over 550 women have joined ISIL as migrants or foreign fighters.[31]

ISIL has successfully mobilized its brand and utilized a wide variety of online platforms with global appeal such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and Instagram, as well as platforms with more niche audiences, such as the biggest social network in Russia, VKontakte (VK) by:

- Posting a wide variety of content to each online platform
    - Examples: Violent videos made to parody American blockbuster films and video games on YouTube; ISIL fighters with cats and flash mobs on Twitter
- P Posting content in local languages
    - Examples: Arabic, English, Russian, Pashto, French, Spanish
- Engaging with and motivating individual users
    - Examples: Commenting on statuses, answering questions through direct-messaging within platforms[32]

ISIL developed a new and very successful model of online propaganda and recruitment, which was adapted by other terrorist groups and may be employed not only in the Middle East, but elsewhere as well. J.M. Berger of the George Washington University says that the group grooms new members by looking for potential supporters in Muslim-oriented digital networks to surrounding targets with a small community that interacts with them and then encourages the recruit to take action. Berger outlined the specific steps that ISIL takes online to recruit fighters in what he calls a five-part template:

1. Discovery: ISIL recruiter discovers a potential recruit, or a potential recruit discovers ISIL.

2. Create micro-community: ISIL supporters flock around potential recruits to surround them with social input.

3. Isolation: Potential recruits are encouraged to cut ties with mainstream influences, families, friends, and local religious communities.

4. Shift to private communications: ISIL supporters encourage targets to take their conversations about ISIL into private or encrypted messaging platforms.

5. Identify and encourage action: ISIL supporters probe to identify what the target is most likely to do on behalf of the group (travel to join ISIL in the Middle East, or carry out lone wolf attacks at home) and encourage them to take action.[33]

ISIL's Recruitment of Females

ISIL recognizes that women are a strategic asset in the success of their governing structure. However, women are often overlooked in Western counterterrorism efforts. There are several push and pull factors that influence women to join extremist groups like ISIL. Saltman and Smith from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue outline the following factors:[34]

Push Factors:

1. Feeling isolated socially and/or culturally, at times speci cally with regard to Western culture

2. Feeling that the Muslim community is being persecuted and unfairly treated

3. Anger, sadness, and/or frustration over perceived lack of international action in response to unfair treatment of Muslims around the world

Pull Factors:

1. Idealistic goals of religious duty and building a utopian "Caliphate state"

2. Belonging and sisterhood

3. Romanticization of the experience

Romanticization of the experience, such as "falling in love," "making new friends," "getting married," "finding people who understand," etc. – is the pull factor most often used by ISIL recruiters.

According to Saltman and Smith, there are at least four ways females can be used in ISIL (in many cases two or more roles can combine):

- As wives and mothers - sometimes called sex jihad (e.g. Eva Robskih, Anastasia Kalabuh from Russia)

- As recruiters, to communicate with potential newcomers via social media and convince them to join ISIL (e.g. Maria Pogorelova and Oksana Panina, both from Russia, or Aqsa Mahmood from the U.K.)

- As matryrs or members of fighting groups (e.g. Diana Ramazanova, the perpetrator of an Istanbul terrorist act and Tashfeen Malik, one of the suicide attackers in San Bernardino, California)

- As members of the all-female religious police Al-Khanssaa Brigade, whose job it is to fight on the front line or to make sure women abide by ISIL's interpretation of shari'a law and punish those who do not (e.g. Aqsa Mahmood from the U.K.)

- As professionals such as doctors, nurses or teachers, although this is rare (e.g. Shannon Maureen Conley from the U.S. who made an unsuccessful attempt to travel to Syria and join ISIL as a nurse)[35]

ISIL Online Recruitment and Counter-Recruitment: Russia Case Study

According to Soufan group's data[36] out of 20,000 foreign fighters that have joined ISIL, 2,400 are Russian and the numbers are still growing.[37] Terrorist recruitment is a delicate question for Russia. Since the beginning of the first Chechen war in the 1990s, long before the appearance of ISIL, the issue of terrorist recruitment has been of great concern to Russia. Initially recruitment was done through local channels inside of the region, mainly in the Muslim-populated Caucasus republics. First, males were recruited primarily to fight in the Chechen civil wars and plan terrorist attacks across the country. Females

were usually recruited after their husbands or family members had been recruited.[38] Recruitment in Russia is not restricted to a specific geographic region, and ISIS recruits in many Russian regions and cities ranging from Moscow and Saint Petersburg to smaller towns further east. For example, Yekaterinburg, a city in the Ural region, was called the "third Russian capital of IS recruitment" by the media,[39] after a story broke about the neutralization of the biggest ISIL cell in Russia, which consisted of seven men. However, the North Caucasus region actually produces the greatest number of new foreign fighter recruits for ISIL.[40] In the Caucasus, direct recruitment, rather than digital, is the main channel. New fighters are recruited in mosques, via radicalized local leaders and friends. While online cases of recruitment exist, this is not the main method of recruitment, and is usually underreported in the media if the recruit is male. However, our research revealed that when a female is recruited, there is greater media attention.

The issue of ISIL's online recruitment and female recruitment in Russia caught public attention after spring 2015, when a Moscow State University student named Varvara Karaulova attempted to join ISIL and was caught, along with thirteen other Russian recruits, at the Syrian border. For Karaulova "falling in love" and "getting married" were the primary factors that inspired her to travel to Syria. She had been recruited by a man she met online on a sports forum.[41] There are dozens of other examples[42] and nearly all of them involve young females being recruited and trying to leave Russia to join ISIL in Syria or Iraq. However, a considerable number of female recruits, especially those who originate from the Caucasus, are recruited locally or through family members.

What are the main channels used for spreading ISIL propaganda in Russia?

Over the past few years, ISIL has intensified its propaganda across Russia with the intention of attracting more foreign fighters from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union.[43] Following English and Arabic, Russian is the third most common language of ISIL propaganda, according to the head of the CIS Anti-Terrorist Center, Andrei Novikov.[44] In 2015, ISIL changed its approach and began to focus on engaging potential recruits via

social media and various online channels by creating a large number of websites and content for traditional media (e.g. daily ISIL news radio stations, ISIL online magazines, CDs with subtitled videos). To recruit new people and maintain communication with loyal supporters, ISIL combines its usage of public networks such as Vkontakte (VK),[45] YouTube, or Instagram, with adopting secure encrypted or hard-to-track tools like WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype, or Zello online radio.[46] Unfortunately, there is not yet public data on the total number of ISIL followers on Russian social media and no information on their gender distribution.

What content is the most attractive to foreign fighters in Russia?

ISIL's recruitment strategy towards Russians consists of interconnected tactics. The group maintains social media accounts for recruitment purposes, communication with supporters, and spreading videos and other types of content, which it also produces. ISIL's recruiting methods and targeted content depend on the type of recruits – "cannon fodder" soldiers or "professionals."
To recruit potential members and increase its mass of loyal supporters, ISIL relies on propaganda videos distributed over social media. Initially, Russian language video content was translated from

Arabic language sources, but by the end of 2015, ISIL's media center for Russia and Post-Soviet states, al-Furat,[47] began producing original videos.

Who counters terrorism/ISIL in Russia?

In Russia, only governmental structures work in the area of countering terrorism. Center "E," the Main Department for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, which was first started in the 1990s during the Chechen wars. Center "E" hunts down extremists online and offline, works undercover within extremist groups, takes down individuals through covert operations and attempts to de-radicalize individual recruits.[48] They confront online propaganda mostly on Internet forums, specifically Islamic forums where Muslims search for wives, by tracing suspicious posts. Members at the Center work individually and immediately

block newly formed extremist groups or individual accounts on VK, but this method is not effective in tracing the whole network of supporters and recruiters.[49] A major problem with this strategy is that the organization is housed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs whose operatives are trained in law enforcement, but are not experienced in digital media. While their expertise is steeped in Russian law regarding terrorism, they are not considered the most effective conduits of counter-ISIL narratives, especially with young people.

Upravlenie "K" (Management K) is also a part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and one of the most secretive units. Management K specializes in cyber security, but is not very active in countering terrorism. Management K tends to use conservative methods when countering ISIL such as instant blocking of suspicious groups and accounts rather than using connections with these recruiters to expose whole cells of ISIL recruiters. Additionally, Russia's Federal Agency for Nationality Affairs has created a new digital initiative designed to encourage Russians to report extremists, terrorism recruitment, and digital propaganda. The newly created Ministry of Northern Caucasus Affairs also works to combat ISIL recruitment in that region specifically.[50]

There are no substantial non-governmental initiatives we are aware of in this field in Russia. The Russian government insists on direct control and management of all counterterrorism efforts. As for indirect methods, some Islamic media outlets, like Kavkazskiy Uzel portray a more moderate version of Islam that contrasts with ISIL's jihadist ideology. However, these media outlets are often not based in the Caucasus and Volga regions, where the majority of Russian Muslims reside.

Countering ISIL Recruitment in Russia

In recent years, the government has produced documents, such as the "Russian National Security Strategy until 2020" and "The Concept of Counter-Terrorism in the Russian Federation," and adopted several federal and regional laws, the most significant being "On combating terrorism," "On Combating Extremist Activity,"[51] that address counter-terrorism."[52]

Russia has established a de jure regulatory framework allowing the government to effectively prevent, combat, and minimize the consequences of terrorism and extremism online and offline on federal and local levels. In practice, however, Russian counterterrorism efforts are done regionally, addressing radicalized individuals rather than working to prevent further radicalization; local governments mostly focus on offline communication. Specialists in this field work closely with the Muslim community, including imams in mosques and other community leaders.

Developing a strategy for countering ISIL both offline and online, and preventing further radicalization is a relatively new strategy for the Russian counter terrorism community.

Table 1. Countering Efforts in Russia

Who counters terrorism in Russia?	• Only governmental structures • Media outlets promoting a moderate image of Islam
How does countering work?	• Work in the regions • Local governments focus on offline as opposed to online communication • No common country-wide strategy to counter-terrorism both online and offline • Shutting down ISIL-affiliated sites, accounts, and groups in Vkontakte
Main channels used for spreading ISIL propaganda	• Vkontakte • Online radio (Zello radio) and encrypted messaging tools (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.)
Most attractive content for Russian recruits	• Videos • Content depends on the type of recruits: "cannon fodder" soldiers types versus "professionals"

ISIL Online Recruitment and Counter-Recruitment: United States Case Study

ISIL recruitment in the United States is less physically networked than in Western European countries, possibly due to a more integrated American Muslim community and the sporadic, geographically-limited presence of radicalizing agents, like radical mosques and extremist imams. The system is much more decentralized and less professional than in most European countries. This however, does not mean that Americans are not being radicalized; it means that extremists are utilizing measures other than physically meeting with their recruits. According to the Soufan Group's data, recruitment within the United States has mostly been reliant on digital channels. Recruiters connect with ISIL members, loyal supporters, and potential newcomers via social media, following up with peer-to-peer communication.[53]

ISIL's recruitment strategy proved successful; as of fall 2015, some 250 Americans have traveled to or attempted to travel to Syria or Iraq to join ISIL. There are more than 900 active investigations against ISIL sympathizers in all 50 states.[54]

What are the main channels used for spreading ISIL propaganda in the United States?

It is estimated that several thousand Americans consume ISIL propaganda online daily.[55] The most popular ISIL recruiting tool in the U.S. is Twitter, but other social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube are also utilized to share video and other English-language content. The Program on Extremism at the George Washington University spent six months following ISIL's online presence in the United States with a specific focus on 300 Americans identified on the Internet as ISIL sympathizers. The report found that ISIL "activists and sympathizers are active on a variety of platforms- including open forums, private messaging apps, and the dark web- but Twitter is by far the platform of choice."[56] Women purportedly operate

one third of the tracked accounts in this study.[57] However, since March 2016, the number of active Twitter accounts associated with ISIL propaganda, identified by their use of any of seven hashtags, declined from an average of 24,271 in August 2015 to 14,700.[58]

What content is the most attractive to foreign fighters in the United States?

Although the number of ISIL supporters on Twitter (46,000 in 2014) is a small fraction of the total number of Twitter users, the tactics used by ISIL to recruit Americans have proven particularly effective. In June 2015, Rukmini Callimachi, a reporter at *the New York Time*s, wrote a story titled, "ISIS and the Lonely Young American," which told the story of a young woman in Washington state who was convinced to convert to Islam by someone she met online. She was encouraged to leave her home to move to ISIL-controlled territory. For her story, Callimachi interviewed former ISIL recruiters, who told her "We look for people who are isolated. And if they are not isolated, then we isolate them." Tweets and messages encouraging recruits to immerse themselves in learning about Islam or ISIL and its leadership, as well as conversations that provide a feeling of companionship, as opposed to brutal beheadings and suicide bombing videos, have proven to be the most effective when recruiting women.[59]

Who counters terrorism/ISIL in the United States?

In the United States, many government agencies and structures, as well as non- governmental organizations and private businesses, counter ISIL recruitment. The Center for Global Engagement, formerly called the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, which is housed in the public diplomacy section of the U.S. Department of State, is the interagency body charged with publically countering ISIL propaganda on behalf of the U.S. government.[60] The State Department has been attempting to push anti-ISIL propaganda by creating several social media campaigns and using multiple digital platforms including Twitter and the State Department's blog, DipNote.[61] In February 2016, the White House hosted the "Summit on Countering Violent Extremism."[62] However, because of the connotation that

the U.S. Department of State branding carries, the CSCC's efforts are often not considered credible by populations that are already at risk of being enticed and recruited by ISIL.

Outside of the government, non-governmental organizations and private corporations are working to stop the use of social media and the Internet in general for terrorist recruitment and the spread of Islamic extremism. One of the most prominent NGO's in the United States for counter-ISIL efforts is the Counter Extremism Project (CEP).[63] Headed by former ambassadors, CEP shares research on foreign fighters and counterterrorism efforts in various countries, and runs campaigns designed to take action against terrorist organizations and encourage social media companies to do the same. Twitter has shut down more than 125,000 accounts "for threatening or promoting terrorist acts, primarily related to ISIS."[64] In June 2015, the Obama Administration convened the top minds in the U.S. film industry, social media, and premium cable TV to brainstorm how to counter propaganda, as ISIL often rips off Hollywood by mimicking blockbuster films.

Countering ISIL Recruitment in the United States

U.S. efforts to use digital media to counter ISIL have evolved over the past three years. These efforts began with very government-centric messaging, with the State Department dictating the tone and tenor of American anti-ISIL messaging. The then-Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications produced counter-ISIL content that was shared across digital platforms, beginning with the unsuccessful "Think Again, Turn Away" campaign. This campaign's cornerstone was a video called, "Welcome to ISIS Land," which mocked ISIL's promises of a utopian society using graphic images of life on the ground. Alberto Fernandez, a former diplomat who ran the center, explained that it was meant to be "like a war room in a political campaign—shake things up, attack ads, opposition research."[65] The backlash from this campaign was massive. Critics within the White House and State Department saw the use of these graphics as aiding ISIL, and the campaign as a disturbing embrace of the enemy's playbook.[66] Eventually, this communication method proved to be counterintuitive and other parts of the executive branch, including the White House, began to strategize other ways

to counter violent extremism through a combination of online and offline tactics. On September 29, 2015, the White House hosted the first ever Leadership Summit on anti-ISIL and Countering Violent Extremism. During the UN General Assembly, the State Department and the Counter Extremism Project co-hosted the Global Youth Summit, which convened young people from around the world who are fighting extremism in their local communities. These summits and high-level meetings all presented similar conclusions: the best way to fight extremism in the digital space is to create content that promotes the stories of young people living in the region and have experienced the real impacts of ISIL or stories of people who have been recruited by ISIL, but eventually stood up and fought against extremism.[67] This campaign, titled "Why They Left Daesh", is a digital collaboration between the United States, the United Kingdom, and NGOs, such as Quilliam. Thus far, the campaign includes 13 videos and 36 social media banners. In January 2015, the organization re-branded itself as the Global Engagement Center (GEC). Rather than using its digital platforms to use similar imagery to counter ISIL's propaganda, stories about "#LifeUnderDaesh" are shared with the public that show the stresses and challenges that people living within ISIL-controlled territory face on a daily basis. GEC's Twitter account has 26,476 followers, which is significant for a government organization that has undergone an intense rebranding process.[68] However, this account is only one amongst a sea of ISIL propaganda accounts.

Table 2. Countering Efforts in the U.S.

Who counters terrorism?	• Government and non-government • Public-private partnerships • Social media companies (Twitter, etc.)
How does countering work?	• Hashtag campaigns (#WhyTheyLeftDaesh) • Shutting down ISIL-affiliated Twitter accounts • Law enforcement/clandestine
Main channels used for spreading ISIL propaganda	• Twitter • Skype • Encrypted messaging tools (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.)
Content that is the most attractive to recruits in the United States	• Personalized messages • Messages that encourage companionship

Conclusions and Recommendations

Digital counterterrorism efforts in the United States and Russia differ significantly; Russia prefers to keep the effort tightly managed by the government, while the United States encourages coordination between the public and private sectors, as well as stand-alone efforts by social media companies, NGOs, and government.

Table 3: How Does Countering Work?

	Russia	The U.S.
Countering is mainly done by high-level governmental structures	✓	✓
Focused primarily on already radicalized groups	✓	✗
Recruitment of foreign fighters	official estimate – 2,400	official estimate – 150
Use of social media in countering recruitment & radicalization	✗	✓
Governmental structures ready to cooperate with civil society and NGOs	✗	✓

ISIL "narrowcasts" their digital media, which means that their campaigns "micro-target" certain groups based on gender, where they live, socio-economic status, and other factors.[69] By implementing new counter-ISIL digital strategies, Russia may be able to prevent early cases of radicalization. In order to successfully counter the ISIL narrative and recruitment strategy, especially with regard to women, both countries should use messaging that shares individual narratives of the women and children impacted by ISIL on the ground in the Middle East, as well as stories of individuals who have fled or defected.

A great deal of ISIL's success can be attributed to their eye-catching graphics and engrossing videos. Therefore, to not only counter the group's narrative, but also its innovation and technology usage, we recommend a strategy that empowers individuals from multiple disciplines, including graphic designers, artists, political scientists, communicators, grassroots activists, and others who can leverage their skills to craft and share creative, engaging content across multiple platforms. While this may prove to be a difficult venture, we believe that this multidisciplinary approach is wholly necessary to create a successful approach to countering ISIL in the digital space in both the United States and Russia.

Since there is little cooperation between the governments of the United States and Russia on the subject of digital counter-ISIL efforts, we recommend the creation of an online platform or website that is both desktop and mobile responsive, which is used to share the stories of women and girls who have

been affected by the spread of extremism and ISIL in both the Middle East and around the world. We envision utilizing a platform similar to "Syria Deeply," a news aggregation site developed by Lara Setrakian "designed to provide you with a complete understanding of the Syrian conflict from all angles, including all the major players, issues, and drivers of the civil war."[70] Similar to the "Syria Deeply" platform, it would share creative content created by multidisciplinary stakeholders that is 'narrowcast' for different groups in an effort to directly counter ISIL's recruitment efforts. While we understand that there are obvious benefits to shutting down Twitter accounts and other ISIL propaganda-sharing accounts on digital platforms, we believe that the space for collaboration between stakeholders in the United States and Russia exists in creating a distinctly separate narrative that elevates credible, individual voices that would normally not be heard in the fight against ISIL.

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