



# Metis

## Study

**Delegitimising the IS narrative:  
What are the strategies  
of our partners?**

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# Summary

In terms of propaganda, particularly on the Internet, the Islamic State (IS) has set new standards. Although the organisation has been defeated militarily, individual IS-related attacks continue to take place. Additional preparations must be made with a view toward countering successor organisations. This

paper first examines the radicalisation process as well as the IS narrative. Against this backdrop, it develops three rules of thumb with which to create counter- and alternative narratives aimed at delegitimising IS. To this end, it draws on practical examples from partner nations.

## Setting propaganda standards

The so-called Islamic State (IS) has, for now, been defeated on the battlefield. The territories it occupied in Iraq and Syria have largely been recaptured. Since 2016, IS propaganda production has gone down and more countermeasures have been taken to stop the spread of IS propaganda. The message of IS has changed as well: Its rhetoric of victory has been replaced with calls to avenge alleged attacks on Islam.

Nonetheless, it remains necessary to understand how IS was so uniquely successful in recruiting fighters all over the world (the requirement for its presence on the ground) by means of propaganda and radicalisation<sup>1</sup> – not only because individual attacks in the name of IS continue to take place, but mainly to guard against future jihadi terrorist organisations and to take preventative steps to counter recruitment efforts. In Western societies, (young) women and men will continue to be addressed (directly) and/or feel addressed; future propaganda measures will be unlikely to lag behind the standards set by IS with regard to content and presentation strategy.

An important – though not uncontroversial among scholars – means to proactively confront IS propaganda is

the development of counter- and alternative narratives to delegitimise the organisation.

In the following, this paper first provides an overview of the paths to radicalisation that lead individuals to groups such as IS. Subsequently, the jihadi narrative is described. Three rules of thumb for working with delegitimising counter- and/or alternative narratives are then developed, drawn from strategies pursued by our partner nations as well as from their lessons learned. Finally, several proposals derived from these rules are laid out for the Bundeswehr.

## Reasons for and routes toward radicalisation

Scholars disagree as much on how to define radicalisation as they do on the type and adequacy of any countermeasures. However, there is a consensus that the radicalisation process includes changes in the behaviour and attitude of individuals and groups.

In terms of behaviour, the crucial question focuses on the role of violence. Those who support the idea of a direct connection view radicalisation as an actual procession from non-violence to (terrorist) violence.

In the case of IS, attitude is characterised by the increased willingness of young Muslims – both male and female – to focus on jihadist ideology by, for instance, consuming jihadist publications and/or observing its rules.

The reasons for radicalisation are manifold and dependent on personality. With regard to IS and jihadism, however, the following typical paths can be inferred:

<sup>1</sup> Figures on what are termed the Foreign Fighters of IS fluctuate. According to estimates, some 4,000 predominantly (~ 80%) male individuals have joined IS from the EU alone, of which between 6% and 23% are converts to Islam.

*Search for identity, meaning, and orientation:* The search for a higher meaning is an important step along the path to radicalisation. The same holds true for IS. The search for meaning not infrequently involves rebelling against the materialism of Western society, seen as hollow and sinful,<sup>2</sup> particularly by individuals who feel that their participation and existence in life has been a failure and who have lost their sense of direction. IS offers them a tightly knit and rules-based community (brotherhood) – and thus a clear sense of identity. That way, IS manages to instil into its members a surprisingly high level of willingness to sacrifice themselves.

*Reaction, recognition, revenge:* IS was particularly skilled at turning the suffering of individuals with weak social networks into an asset for the organisation by helping them blame secular Western society for their personal despair and the pain caused by feelings of exclusion. Individuals who before had felt powerless or cast out could now not only join a new, united community but transform into the mighty “lions” (men) or nurturing “mother lions” (women) of IS. Their new, glorious role empowered them to wreak vengeance on the enemies of IS – and the society that had rejected them – in battle, a shared adventure in the name of God. An affiliation with IS continues to provide justification for lone-wolf terrorists and to inject meaning into indiscriminate acts of violence. Unlike with other groups, many research findings (drawn, for instance, from questioning would-be suicide bombers) indicate that lone attackers (acting in the name of IS) are more likely to suffer from mental (such as narcissistic or suicidal) disorders, which may not cause radicalisation but can favour it.

*Economic incentives:* Financial pressure may initially pave the way toward radicalisation, particularly among men who feel threatened by the social stigma of being unable to provide for their family otherwise.

Phase or mechanism models help break down the radicalisation process into individual elements. The sequence of these elements is considered to be dynamic and neither linear nor, crucially, deterministic. Additionally, it is important to note that only few people become radicalised, even if elements of their personality or socio-economic circumstances might favour radicalisation in individual cases. An even lower percentage actually ends up committing acts of violence.

These findings are surprising, as the previously outlined paths toward radicalisation are similar in that, in the beginning at least, they can be followed easily and with

little effort while offering instant gratification. This is because most roles within terrorist organisations do not require individuals to invest time and apply patience and persistence to work their way up the ladder. Additionally, the phenomenon of the “home-grown” terrorist shows that under certain circumstances, a direct connection to a terrorist organisation may not even be necessary, as determined attackers can also act autonomously in the interest of an organisation. Both Anis Amri and the group around the 7 July 2005 London bombings are examples of the type of radicalisation that develops mostly independently of any organisation and ends in acts of violence.

The first step towards radicalisation, however, becomes much more likely if there is a personal connection between the individual at risk and another extremist.

Besides personal contacts and physical spaces in which to interact (such as clubs or mosques), the internet and social media are additional, decisive factors in the radicalisation process of individuals and groups. Here in particular, IS has set new standards with its extensive use of social media and messenger services as well as with its online presence in general.

Adapting content to the viewing habits of young audiences by imitating the look and feel of Hollywood blockbusters and the aesthetics of video games served not only to recruit new followers, particularly foreign fighters. It was also intended as a show of force – with the execution of its captives, whom it had dressed in orange overalls, IS showed among other things that it was capable of taking an eye for an eye. Western victims were humiliated as a form of retaliation against the alleged violation of Muslim dignity.

### **The IS narrative and its purpose**

Only in recent years has a systematic academic analysis of narratives been conducted in the field of terrorism research. While a fixed definition of the term “narrative” does not exist, scholars generally understand a narrative to consist of one or several sequences of (written or spoken) text that link actors, deeds, and (causal) chains of events together into a meaningful account.

The IS narrative is framed by a romanticised tale of past caliphates and an idealised notion of a sworn community of Muslims who will live in a future caliphate under the righteous rule of God. This world, as fair as it is strict, is governed by the precepts of Islam according to the word of God: For every individual, there is a clear-cut blueprint that promises a good, contented life in prescribed (gender) roles that transcend those of modern, pluralistic, diverse and disconcerting societies.

The IS narrative is seductive in part because of its restricted world view, which is contrasted with the circumstances – described as unbearable – of Muslims as a community victimised across the globe in the here and now (conveyed to men as a legitimisation of violence and

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<sup>2</sup> Many of these elements can also be found in other radical political narratives. For instance: The West embodies the capitalist and exploitative rule of the rich and powerful, media and politics are controlled, democracy is opium for the masses, etc.

to women as an opportunity for humanitarian involvement). Another factor that makes the narrative a powerful one is the absence, to a large extent, of potentially puzzling details (such as the question as to who should be caliph).

Not only does this narrative allow IS to use terrorist violence, it also practically requires the organisation to do so to liberate Muslims from oppression, cleanse them from heresy, and allow them to live in the new community. By contrast, those who do not join in this militant form of jihad cannot be considered true Muslims. The purpose of the IS narrative, in a nutshell, is to provide meaning and legitimise courses of action as well as to create a sense of community and of individual identity.

### Countering the IS narrative: Three rules of thumb

Counter-narratives can be narratives that seek to discredit the content of the jihadi narrative, which seeks to provide meaning and legitimacy. In 2015, for example, the French government launched an initiative it entitled #StopDh-jihadisme, a counter-narrative in the form of a YouTube video that shows the dreary reality of quotidian life in IS-occupied territories. An accompanying website provides information on how to unpack IS propaganda and understand the manipulation techniques it employs.

Additionally, attempts are made to offer alternatives. These include developing a positive message promoting tolerance, diversity, universal human rights, and the advantages of a free and democratic order.

In practise, mixed forms made up of such counter- and alternative narratives are generally employed. Both share the common goal of an “immunisation” against the IS narrative.

So what are the counter-narratives that the Bundeswehr can develop or adapt from models currently employed by our partner nations?

At this juncture, it should be noted that among scholars, there is disagreement as to whether any counter-narrative can be effective. Critics often point out the low number of views for videos posted online – particularly in comparison to successful IS videos.

At the same time, however, three rules of thumb regarding sources, content and distribution of counter-narratives can be developed from terrorism research and the experiences made by important partner nations – the United States, the United Kingdom and France – affected by IS terrorist attacks.<sup>3</sup> In this regard,

the United Kingdom and the United States in particular dispose of a wealth of experience, especially online and in social media.

*First rule of thumb – Source: The source of a message is at least as important as an intelligible presentation of its contents.*

Communication science analyses of US military attempts to undermine and to “replace” the IS narrative showed that initially, too little attention was devoted to the source, i.e. the author or transmitter of the narrative. Depending on the context – the cultural, political or religious environment – the reliability of the counter-narrative’s source always constitutes an essential acceptance factor (which is also why the aforementioned personal contacts, usually with individuals of the same sex, disproportionately increase the chances of radicalisation; conversely, personal stories told by former supporters are especially effective in terms of deradicalisation). Familiarity with local geography and an understanding of the ideology, symbolism and codes used by IS are thus important when developing narratives. This means, in particular, that narratives cannot consist of random, “make-believe” stories, but must build on accepted truths.

As sources for counter-narratives, religious authority figures with a solid background in theology are of the utmost importance for efforts to delegitimise the IS narrative.

The United Kingdom, in response to the challenges of religious radicalisation and violence, was quick to leverage these insights, strategically promoting these sources of counter-narratives from 2003 onwards. The UK approach included initiatives such as the online portal “Radical Middle Way” or the “Muslim Youth Helpline”, both operated primarily by Islamic actors.

*Second rule of thumb – Content: Focusing on content, i. e. the interpretation of Islam, is a way to delegitimise the IS narrative.*

The “correct” interpretation of Islam, if it is from a credible source, provides most counter-narratives with their core content. One technique is to compare the IS narrative and real-world developments and to point out false analogies. Analogies – and quasi-causal direct links that often completely disregard chronological gaps – between current events, as well as more or less fictional representations of the past, are an essential component of the IS narrative’s claim to authenticity and its attempts to justify its acts. These analogies can be challenged and the links picked apart, for instance by providing two alternative interpretations of Islam.

A traditionalist and conservative interpretation of religious sources can protect against radicalisation and jihadist violence. Jihadism is thus presented as a “distorted” form of Islam which threatens the spirituality, diversity

<sup>3</sup> The website of the European Commission collects contacts from relevant organisations, including practical examples of how to disseminate alternative narratives; see [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-best-practices/ran-delivering\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/ran-delivering_en).

and tolerance of the “majority” interpretation. After all, jihadist texts cite only a small group of Qur’an verses to justify their positions – the high degree of selectivity undermines the theological validity of their arguments. Thus, counter-narratives formulated directly within the context of Islam and with reference to the Qur’an are well-placed to condemn extremist actions as un-Islamic and to instead offer peaceful alternatives and interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

Liberal Muslims, on the other hand, can base their acceptance of democracy and the rule of law on reformist interpretations of Islam. In these, jihad is understood not as a radical, violent undertaking, but instead as a spiritual, lifelong endeavour; Muslim women’s rights movements in particular employ this definition to campaign for a dialogue between secular and religious references and for gender equality.

*Third rule of thumb – Distribution: The message must be disseminated in a manner that is up to date and tailored to the target audience.* Finally, investing a large amount of effort into the production of the counter-narrative is not only useful but, to put it simply, indispensable. The high standards set by IS propaganda apply also to counter-narratives, particularly for video content presented online.

Globally, the media strategy thus has to be effective, both in terms of the attractiveness and relevance of the counter-narrative and of the communication channel


chosen by the target audience; i.e. it needs to address them – irrespective of age and gender – in spaces in which they already consume media and in which narratives are already being distributed.

### Concluding remarks

This paper makes no recommendations for action but does propose several considerations for the Bundeswehr.

The Bundeswehr is closely bound to German society and the free and democratic constitutional order. Individuals who seek social cohesion – comradeship – will find it in the Bundeswehr. Young Muslim citizens could be addressed directly as part of recruitment efforts. A concrete example would be poster advertising that features testimonials by service personnel.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the Bundeswehr could offer its military expertise in a targeted way to other actors interested in incorporating this knowledge into the development of counter-narratives – for example, when it comes to the “disenchantment” of videos, by IS or by other groups, that focus on military aspects.

Internally, the Bundeswehr should continue to concentrate on an appropriate communication of civic education and leadership development – the most successful protection against embarking on the path toward radicalisation. 

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<sup>4</sup> For example, one of the verses most often cited in jihadist literature is in Chapter 8 of the Qur’an, Sūrat al-Anfāl (The Spoils of War), verse 60: *And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged.*

A counter-narrative would focus on the subsequent passage, verse 61, which promotes a peaceful resolution to the conflict: *And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing.*

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<sup>5</sup> E.g.: “I am a Muslim and a soldier of the Bundeswehr. I defend our freedom of religion.”



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