

## Confronting an ISIS Emir: ICSVE's Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter-Narratives Project Videos

*Dr. Anne Speckhard, Georgetown University, and Ardian Shajkovci, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism*

**M**OST EXPERTS AGREE THAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL COUNTER-MESSAGING campaigns against ISIS are the ones that use the voices of insiders—both ISIS victims and ISIS cadres who have firsthand knowledge of the group's brutality, corruption, religious manipulation, and deception. With this in mind, we at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) have spent the last two years in Western Europe, Turkey, Iraq, Central Asia, and the Balkans interviewing ISIS defectors, ISIS prisoners, and ISIS cadre returnees from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Their stories are captured on video and edited down to short clips, interspersed with actual ISIS video footage and pictures, and then turned back against imprisoned ISIS cadres as an intervention measure.

Using “formers” to talk back to terrorism is a well-established practice. Mubin Shaikh is a good example of someone who nearly joined al Qaeda and imbibed deeply of the jihadist ideology before turning away and infiltrating a Canadian terrorist cell to help law enforcement take it down.<sup>2</sup> Usama Hasan, a former radical Salafi extremist and mujahedeen in the Afghan jihad against the country's communist government in the early 1990s, is another example of someone who has turned against Salafi-jihadi ideology and is dedicated to fighting violent extremism in the United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

Using formers to help deradicalize their peers is rife with problems, however. Those who have returned from ISIS were often psychologically unhealthy even before they joined, and are deeply traumatized upon their return. Some do not want to speak about their experiences, while others fear retribution from ISIS if they speak out against the group. Some of them fear further prosecution and social stigma. Others are unstable, reverse their positions frequently, or are not useful role models. Often, former fighters are ashamed of their past and want to hide it. They are not easily accessible and may be psychologically unable to carry out a supporting role in countering violent extremism.

In April 2017, some colleagues and I spoke to Abu Islam, an ISIS “emir” (high in the military command) in a prison in Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. During this interview, we used two videos from ICSVE's Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter-Narratives Project in a psychological intervention with him. The following is an account of that conversation.

### Interview with Abu Islam

Dressed in an orange jumpsuit and wearing a black mask over his face, Abu Islam is brought into the faux wood-paneled room of the Special Forces Security compound in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. His hands are cuffed, and his feet are shackled together.

There are five of us in the room: me (Anne Speckhard); Ardian Shajkovci; Alice, an American who is working with us; a Kurdish handler; and our Peshmerga interpreter, Alaz.<sup>4</sup> I am seated at the front corner of the desk with my laptop

*“I saw that the Islamic State was living by shari'a law. They were throwing homosexual people from high buildings. If you steal, they cut your hand. They are really living it.”*

“I wasn’t Salafi growing up,” Abu Islam explains. “I got that mentality in university when I read the book *Tawhid* by Wahhab.”

unfolded. Ardian is seated to my side. Alice and our handler sit behind the desk. Alaz takes the hooded Abu Islam from the prison guards and guides him gently to the center chair in front of the desk next to me, where he carefully lifts the mask from Abu Islam’s face before taking his own seat. Abu Islam’s dark, wavy hair, medium-length curly beard, and intense brown eyes are revealed. His dark eyes focus briefly on me, burning momentarily into mine, and then dart back again to Alaz. They know each other. Alaz has repeatedly interrogated him.

Only in his mid-20s, Abu Islam has been hunted for two years by the Peshmerga forces who charge him with running a network of cells of suicide bombers, sending some as young as 12 to explode themselves in bombing missions. He is credited with either directly or indirectly organizing attacks that killed over 250 victims, although some of the high-ranking Peshmerga counterterrorism officials we spoke to believe that number to be closer to 500. “He’s a guy we chased for more than two years,” stated the head of Kurdistan’s Zanyari intelligence service in a recent interview with journalist Robin Wright. “To pick him up and realize that we finally got him, it was a big catch for us,” he explained.<sup>5</sup>

Born as Mazan Nazhan Ahmed al-Obeidi, Abu Islam is the second oldest of nine siblings in his family and the oldest male. His father served in former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein’s army. He describes his childhood as both “safe” and “nice.” Growing up in the oil-rich area of Kirkuk, Iraq, Abu Islam finished high school and then pursued university studies in shari’a (Islamic law) at the local university. With only one year left to go before graduation, Abu Islam abruptly left his studies to join the so-called Islamic State in 2014.

“I wasn’t Salafi growing up,” Abu Islam explains. The legs of his orange jumpsuit are rolled up to mid-calf—Salafi style—to match the dress worn by the Companions of the Prophet Muhammed. “I got that mentality in university when I read the book *Tawhid* by Wahhab. It convinced me,” he adds.

Abu Islam is referring to *Kitab at-Tawhid* [The Book of the Unity of God] by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth-century Saudi religious reformer who worked to purify Islam by turning back to following the original practices of the Prophet and his Companions. The violent followers of Wahhab, including al Qaeda and ISIS, interpret his teachings to justify killing those who do not follow their strict interpretation of Islam. ISIS, and groups like ISIS, practice *takfir*—an extreme extension of Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine that sanctions violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims who are deemed as infidels (non-believers). This is the type of Islam and the ideology that Abu Islam had already embraced in his university studies; thus he was ready for ISIS when they came to Iraq and established themselves as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).



“I got into the brotherhood at the mosque,” Abu Islam explains. “They were against the Islamic State, but for me, I saw that the Islamic State was living by shari’a law. They were throwing homosexual people from high buildings. If you steal, they cut your hand. They are really living it.”

When asked where he saw this, Abu Islam answers, “It was on social media, YouTube. It made sense for me. I watched a lot of their videos.” As we listen to him speak, we were reminded of ISIS’s powerful online presence and the online propaganda machine that recruits youth via the Internet. Even in Iraq, ISIS propaganda videos reached this university student, persuading him of their righteousness: “I was convinced and made up my mind.”

“They were on the streets also. They had a territory twice the size of Great Britain. At the time I joined, I was 22 or 23. A lot of my relatives were in the area [ISIS] took over, and some of my cousins and family members were already in [ISIS]. It was easy to join. I got a recommendation,” Abu Islam explains, referring to ISIS’s practice of trusting potential recruits based on the recommendation of another member of ISIS. “They knew I don’t drink or smoke and that I’m a shari’a student. That made my CV look really good,” he explains, smiling enthusiastically.

“I didn’t take shari’a training,” Abu Islam answers proudly when asked about ISIS’s known practice of putting new recruits through two weeks of shari’a training to learn the basics of Islam as they preach it and to take on their “hear and obey” philosophy.<sup>6</sup> “I gave lessons in shari’a.” This is how Abu Islam initially describes his role in the Islamic State. “I became the teacher because of my background,” he continues. He also bypassed military training because they needed shari’a teachers to train the others: “They didn’t teach me weapons. In the beginning, they asked me if I knew how to use an [AK-47 assault rifle], and of course, I did.” The knowledge of assault rifles is common among Iraqis, notes our Peshmerga interpreter.

It appears there are not large camps for the Cubs of the Caliphate in Iraq, compared to the camps in Syria where hundreds of youth are gathered, trained, and taught to fight—with some being trained and prepared to become suicide bombers—after they graduate.<sup>7</sup> In Iraq, it seems the Cubs are gathered into smaller groups. Individuals like Abu Islam appear to serve as their itinerant preachers, traveling from one group to another.

“Sometimes there were four to five or six to seven [individuals]. It depended. I’d go to the villages and teach them. I moved from place to place to give shari’a lessons,” Abu

#### A Cub of the Caliphate





أريد الذهاب الى سوريا لألتقي اخواني واخواتي في الإسلام

ISIS propaganda video

ISIS defectors described their shari'a trainers as "shining charismatics" and were heartened by learning "true Islam" from them.

Islam explains. "It was mostly *fiqh* [the principles and understanding of Islamic practices]: how to pray properly, how to fast, how to help other Muslims, how to pay *zakat* [obligatory charity], and about the Islamic State."

In Syria, ISIS defectors interviewed in our ISIS Defectors Interview Project described their shari'a trainers as "shining charismatics" and were heartened by learning "true Islam" from them.<sup>8</sup> I ask Abu Islam whether the Iraqi recruits already knew their religion or were also gladdened by these teachings. He answers, "They didn't know the right way. We taught them the right ways. We talked about what [the Islamic State] could be. Hopefully, we'll expand our territory. According to our beliefs, we can't say we are definitely doing it. Instead, we say, *inshallah* [by God's will] we will expand our territory. Open the walls. Take down Europe."

Abu Islam tells us that there were "young fighters from foreign places" in his classes, but "they didn't understand much Arabic," which reminds us of an Albanian I interviewed in Kosovo who also recalled taking ISIS shari'a training in Arabic—it all went over his head.

We came to Iraq on this trip to speak at the Iraqi prime minister's conference, Education in Iraq Post Daesh-ISIL Territory. The conference brought together local and international experts to address the issue of the estimated 250,000 to 500,000 youth who lived and served under ISIS in the Nineveh and the Mosul regions of Iraq between 2014 and 2017. Universities were closed under ISIS. Libraries were burned to the ground. Textbooks, even for the very young, were replaced by texts that taught them how to behead enemies and indoctrinated them in the Islamic State's barbarity and its refusal to recognize anyone else's views as legitimate. At the conference, we viewed the exhibit of some of these

captured ISIS texts. Picking them up and handling them gave each of us a chill down the spine—touching the same books ISIS cadres had handed out to children under their control.

The schools in the area continued to run even after ISIS took over, Abu Islam explains, adding, “They used to study English. It was good for us—knowing English—but we denied books that we didn’t like. After a while, we denied all the existing books. We changed all the books over to our mentality.”

“How did you talk to the kids who were going on suicide missions?” I ask, going back to his role as a shari’a trainer. “What did you teach them to persuade them to go on suicide missions?” I ask this, already knowing from our interviews with Syrian ISIS defectors that ISIS leaders fill the children’s minds with bright visions of Paradise and promise that they will feel no pain when they push the button to explode themselves—that they go instantly to Paradise. The faint-hearted ones are even offered a sedative, and in many cases, the youngest do not even realize they are about to die.<sup>9</sup>

“We used to tell them ...” Abu Islam begins, but then quickly detours into denial. “It was not my job exactly.” He hesitates and then continues, “Study and learn your future. We want to expand our territories and put shari’a over the whole earth. Most of the time they came as volunteers, self-motivated.” Asserting that the kids chose themselves as “martyrs,” he gains confidence again, “They have read the Book. We make the way for them. We never told anyone they have to go. It’s voluntary. It’s never forced. I didn’t see anyone forced, ever.”

“So, when you prepared young children to take ‘martyrdom’ missions—driving explosive-laden cars or wearing vests into enemy lines or checkpoints—what did you teach them? How did you prepare them?” I ask, having already learned from Peshmerga counterterrorism officials that Abu Islam sent children as young as 12 years old on suicide missions.

Abu Islam exudes disagreement with how the question was asked and explains that ISIS never takes children into its ranks: “In Iraq, you have to be 18 to sign up for the Army. We [ISIS] don’t have any age limit. Instead we believe that when a man’s semen develops, then he’s considered a grown-up man. We only take them when they get to that point. They were never children. They were men.”

Cynical about how he answered the question, I further probe: “How old were these *men*, according to your criteria?”

“A fully-grown man has to have his semen,” Abu Islam reiterates. “This is according to shari’a.” The translator interjects by explaining that, according to Abu Islam’s definition, a young boy who begins having wet dreams is already a man ready for battle and mature enough to sign his life over for a “martyrdom” mission.

While Abu Islam denies there was any pressure in ISIS for children to become “martyrs,” we know from ISIS defector interviews that in the Syrian training camps, youth are heavily pressured into driving explosive-laden cars into enemy lines and lied to about the painfulness of their deaths—and sometimes fail to even understand that their mission involves death. “There is an office. If anyone volunteers—‘I want to give my *bayat* [pledge]’—then he signs up for a martyrdom

**ISIS leaders fill the children’s minds with bright visions of Paradise and promise that they will feel no pain when they push the button to explode themselves.**

**According to Abu Islam’s definition, a young boy who begins having wet dreams is already a man ready for battle.**

mission at the same time. It's like a regular recruiting process," Abu Islam explains.

He is further asked about the training camps and how they are provided with a steady stream of explosive-rigged cars to put the children in and send them to their deaths at checkpoints and the frontlines.

"There is a training camp they take them to and teach them how to set up and use these cars," he explains. "It's a regular camp, they tell them." He hesitates again. "The car manufacturing is in a different place," he detours.

"But what do they tell these children?" I push.

"They instruct them. They know what will happen. They're happy. It's like a kid at Christmas. You know how happy they are? Calmly happy, knowing something good is going to happen," Abu Islam explains, as we witness how he truly embraces this sickness.

"Is there any ritual to go with this?" I ask further, wondering exactly how they send a kid off to his horrific death.

"[The ISIS senders] have a list of serial numbers and names. If I'm set to go next, then I'm next. If something changes the order and they aren't sent, they start crying. If they aren't the next one, they actually cry and get angry, and even complain, 'My name is set to go! I've seen this with my own eyes,'" Abu Islam explains, as his eyes appear to shine in admiration for their zeal.

"What happens right before you go?" I ask again.

"There is nothing special they do."

"Pray? Wash? Celebrate? Make a video?" I press, since in the past I have sat with relatives of bombers who have seen the videos of their children wrapped up in explosive vests or jammed into explosive-laden vehicles, with some children crying and others seemingly jubilant about going as "martyrs."

"There is nothing special. They wash up to be clean. Everyone prays. Everyone says goodbye. There are tears of joy. We make a video," he admits, but again adds a denial, which is possibly self-protective, given he is a prisoner and does not want to incriminate himself. "I didn't make the videos. I sent them to Kirkuk," he explains.

"Do they receive a sedative?"

"No sedative, ever."

"What's the usual way to go? Car or belt?"

"Both," he answers. "They wear the belt in the car just in case one goes down," he adds.

"What are their instructions?" I further ask. "Kill as many as possible?"

"Yes."

"Any special conditions? What if there are women and children at a checkpoint?" I probe.

"In the front line, everyone is an enemy. Everyone is a target," Abu Islam intones but quickly adds, "In cities, we tell them to try to avoid targeting the markets and civilians, and they have specific targets—military and government targets."

**I have sat with relatives of bombers who have seen the videos of their children wrapped up in explosive vests or jammed into explosive-laden vehicles.**

"And you?" I ask about his recent arrest in which he was wearing, but did not detonate, his suicide vest. "I didn't sign up to be one. I did fight." He goes on to say that he has fought in all three ISIS tactical military formations, including in the very front line where the fighters go in wearing vests and "martyr" themselves if overtaken,

killing everyone around them to avoid capture. He was never one of those front line cadres, yet he states, "I always had my suicide belt on. We jump into the [Peshmerga] helicopters and explode ourselves. There is no surrender. No surrender. Just push the button."

"But you did surrender," I state. "You wore the belt. Did you have it in your mind, when captured?"

"You didn't have time to detonate or didn't want to do it?" inquires Alaz, our Peshmerga translator, explaining to us that he never had the chance to ask him this question and would like to know the answer as well.

"I didn't want to die. I wanted to live, so I didn't do it," Abu Islam states matter-of-factly, despite the fact that he has sent plenty of others to do just that. "I wanted to finish the project, spreading shari'a," he adds.

"Were you scared?" I ask.

"Yes," he admits. "I was scared. Every human being is scared."

I ask Abu Islam about ISIS's policy toward captured women, a question that instantly grabs his attention. He is in his element spouting out shari'a law on the rights of ISIS cadres with regards to captured women. "It becomes a right," he says, while looking around the room in which three out of five present in the room are women, waving his arm to bring us all into his sweeping gesture. "If I dominate everything in this room, then it becomes mine. I do as I want. It all becomes the property of the Islamic State," he adds.

While we are usually capable of listening to anything without having much of a reaction during the interview, we feel suddenly sickened imagining how close to Mosul we have been in the past days—barely an hour's drive—and how this mindset has been a harsh reality for so many captured women, whether they be Yazidis, Christians, Shia, or Sunni.

Abu Islam denies that he had a *sabaya* [sex slave]. He also explains that very few Iraqis had them. He can think of only one man in their area of ISIS, Dr. Mahavia, who had one. This is likely similar to the Syrian experience where married Iraqis who served from home are not seen by ISIS leadership as needing to be supplied with a woman. Yet, we will also hear from an unmarried Iraqi who took full sexual advantage of the enslaved women held in this region of Iraq.

As we continue interviewing Abu Islam, though I am calm, I feel increasingly irritated at how he is able to justify the brutal and inhumane practices of ISIS and to offer arguments in support of their activities. Before my next question, I decide to show him one of our ICSVE-produced videos denouncing ISIS. I open my computer and ask if he would be willing to watch the video of another ISIS cadre (a defector) speaking on this subject. I inform him that it is a short video—only four minutes—and with his agreement, I begin to play it. Abu Islam watches intently as a former ISIS cadre from Syria, Ibn Ahmed, explains his horror and post-traumatic stress after being the guard for 475 Yazidi, Shia, and Sunni sex slaves, including his role in organizing mass institutionalized rape.

Abu Islam's eyes dart along the pictures in the video taken from ISIS, taking in faces and places he may recognize, just as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighter Huthaifa Azzam did when we showed him the same video.<sup>10</sup> "He is an Iraqi," Abu Islam comments. I tell him no, this is a Syrian, but he has a similar accent because he is from Deir ez-Zor. The video plays as Ibn Ahmed paints a grim picture of rape and horror for young captured women separated from their men and children. As more horrifying images of Yazidi and other women abused by ISIS appear on the video, Abu Islam's gaze falls to the floor. Suddenly, he is silent and stunned to see his glorified version of ISIS described in this graphic manner.

ISIS Victim

لكن قل ما قيل لي كان محض كذب ولم تكن ابدا ما وعدت به

**“[The boy] is calling you the *kafir*. How do you feel about that?” I ask after we view the clip. “Do these children have their semen? Are they men?”**

“How do you feel watching this video?” I gently ask.

“I was against that idea,” he says. His voice sounds flattened by what he has just viewed. “It doesn’t matter. When I see this video ... this is the outcome of this practice—this video. It’s not the proper way to turn you to Islam. It’s not a good way to spread our beliefs.” Referring back to the rapes, he adds, “Not everyone listens [to objections]. They just go with it. There are more that like it [raping captured women] than are against it.”

“How about the beheadings?” I ask.

“It was a law,” he answers. We cannot help but see discomfort in his face as he patiently awaits his next question.

“Is it not the same thing? Does it not also spread a negative view of Islam?” I ask.

“I got convinced,” Abu Islam answers defensively.

“How do you feel now?”

“It’s not right,” he says, gazing down at his hands, and adds, “We were wrong.”

“Is there a way to get there without all this violence?” I ask, knowing he harbors the dream of spreading shari’a and making a utopian world where Islam reigns above all else.

“Yes, of course,” he answers.

“Why did you sign up to violence?” I ask, although I know that the United States and the US-led coalition’s security blunder in Iraq, which led to the ousting of Saddam Hussein’s senior military and intelligence officials, coupled with more than a decade of sectarian killings, gave birth to ISIS.

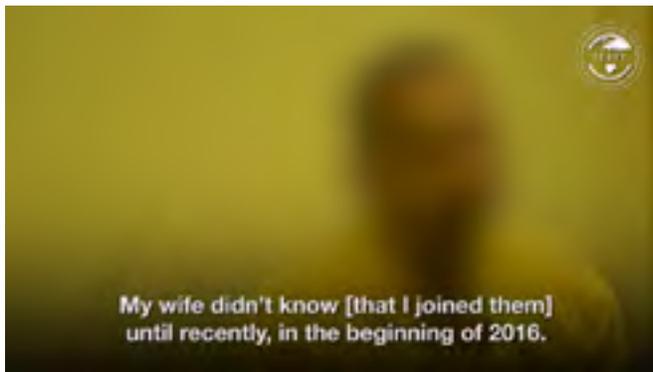
“I believed back in that time,” Abu Islam explains. “I got convinced,” he adds. He explains about how ISIS seemed to be a righteous and Islamic answer to sectarian power struggles and security issues: “I didn’t know it was going to be that way.”

We ask Abu Islam if he is willing to watch another ICSVE-produced video. When he agrees, we show him our four-minute video clip of a 15-year-old Syrian boy describing his time in the Cubs of the Caliphate and how the leaders sent children as young as six years old in explosive-laden vehicles to their deaths—many having no idea they were about to die. There are pictures of children younger than eight in the film. Abu Islam watches this clip intently as well, again studying everything in it. At the end, the boy denounces ISIS, calling them *kafirs* [unbelievers] and infidels.

“[The boy] is calling you the *kafir*. How do you feel about that?” I ask after we view the clip. “These are little kids. Do these children have their semen? Are they men?” I challenge, feeling angry with his denials.

Abu Islam is stunned into silence and again stares at the floor.

Screen captures from ICSVE video



“How do you make this right between you and Allah?” I ask softly, wondering if he will open up more.

“Allah will accept everything—if you admit it,” he answers back, continuing to stare at the floor in shame.

“Did you make a mistake?” I ask.

“Yes. We were mistaken,” are his last words.

We end our interview. The guards come into the room, and Abu Islam’s black mask is once again placed back over his face as he lets them guide him blindly out of the room.

Once confronted with the truth told by other former ISIS cadres, Abu Islam is unable to keep up his false bravado and unquestioned beliefs in ISIS’s interpretation of shari’a law.

## Postscript

Abu Islam is by no means rehabilitated after watching two counter-narrative videos. That being said, capture, interrogation, and imprisonment have all begun to work on him. After being challenged with the harsh realities of ISIS and other ISIS cadres denouncing the group, he admits to not knowing whether ISIS was right. After all, joining ISIS has not worked out that well for him. Once confronted with the truth told by other former ISIS cadres, he is unable to keep up his false bravado and unquestioned beliefs in ISIS’s interpretation of shari’a law. His arguments fall flat. He is backed into submission, as evidenced by his responses after watching the videos.

We have focus-tested the Breaking the ISIS Brand videos in the Balkans, Central Asia, Western Europe, and the Middle East, and they have overwhelmingly hit their mark. No one we spoke to questioned their authenticity or viewed the message as being wrong. Many are sobered by them, including the ISIS emir we interviewed for this article. ❖

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr. Anne Speckhard** is an adjunct associate professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University in the School of Medicine and director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.

**Ardian Shajkovci** is the director of research and a senior research fellow at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.

Copyright 2018, Anne Speckhard. The US federal government is granted for itself and others acting on its behalf in perpetuity a paid-up, nonexclusive, irrevocable worldwide license in this work to reproduce, distribute copies to the public, and display publicly, by or on behalf of the US federal government. All other rights are reserved by the copyright owner(s). Foreign copyrights may apply.

## NOTES

- 1 The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) is a nonprofit organization that focuses on the causes and prevention of violent extremism and terrorism. It runs the Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter-Narratives Project in which 71 ISIS defectors, returnees, and captured cadres from around the globe have been interviewed in depth for the purposes of creating short video clips of insiders denouncing the group.
- 2 Anne Speckhard and Mubin Shaikh, *Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18—Al Qaeda Inspired, Homegrown Terrorism in the West* (McLean, Va.: Advances Press, 2014); Morten Storm, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister, *Agent Storm: My Life inside al Qaeda and the CIA* (New York: Grove Press, 2015).
- 3 See “Usama Hasan,” Quilliam, n.d.: <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/about/staff/usama-hasan/>
- 4 The names of participants other than the authors and Abu Islam have been changed to protect them.
- 5 Robin Wright, “Face to Face with the Ghost of ISIS,” *New Yorker*, 24 March 2017: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/face-to-face-with-the-ghost-of-isis>
- 6 Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, Va.: Advances Press, 2016), pg 234
- 7 Ibid., 39–71, 183–200. “Cubs of the Caliphate” is what ISIS calls its youth groups, where children are trained in military tactics and shari’a law, and prepared to be “martyrs.”
- 8 Ibid., 110.
- 9 Ibid., 40.
- 10 Interview with Huthaifa Azzam by Anne Speckhard, Amman, Jordan, 2016. .