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Out-narrating the IS

The so-called ‘Islamic State’ needs to be exposed as a fraudulent claimant to the status of ‘Caliphate’. Its ideological appeal among jihadists stems from the spurious universality of its message. The West must partner with Arab governments to discredit this message through psychological operations that highlight the group’s physical and moral weaknesses.

by Prem Mahadevan

The ‘Islamic State’ (IS) poses a rare type of terrorist threat to Europe, owing to the notion of territoriality that is encapsulated in its claim of being a ‘Caliphate’. By posing as an alternative sovereignty in the international system, it aims to suborn the loyalties of Islamists worldwide, regardless of the political contexts in which they live. From Arab autocracies to Western democracies, the subversive challenge presented by this group is equally stark. It has even out-performed Al Qaeda in the jihadist race to fire up lone-wolf radicals in the West and incite them to direct action. Attacks in Canada, Australia and Europe in 2014–15 have all been claimed as inspired by IS propaganda. Hence, the psychological dimension of combating the IS is as important as the physical.

If the IS ‘Caliphate’ were to endure in any meaningful form until 2020, it would demonstrate the inability of the West to staunch the tide of history as jihadists see it. The year is important because according to the script originally prepared by Al Qaeda, 2020 would mark the establishment of a new Caliphate to succeed the one abolished in 1924. The IS has merely stolen this script and spooled it forward. Dreams of empire-building unite its field operatives with distant supporters and sympathizers, across ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

At the local level, a rare combination of doctrinaire rigidity and political absorptiveness has helped it assimilate former enemies such as members of the secular Ba’ath party, and tribal leaders who previously fought against it. This demonstrates a nuanced practice of *realpolitik*, akin to an entrenched political actor.

Governance and the attendant trappings of magisterial authority are the most potent weapons in the IS’ propaganda arsenal. As long as its administrative machinery works, it functions as a beacon for stateless jihadists across the globe. Some of these, radicalized during the

KEY POINTS

- Psychological operations are crucial to defeating the IS, alongside military operations.
- The ‘statehood’ claim lies at the core of the IS’ ideological appeal, and must be discredited.
- Former jihadists must be coopted to denounce IS violence and highlight inept leadership.
- PSYOPS need to be relentlessly offensive, taking advantage of the IS’ military defeats.

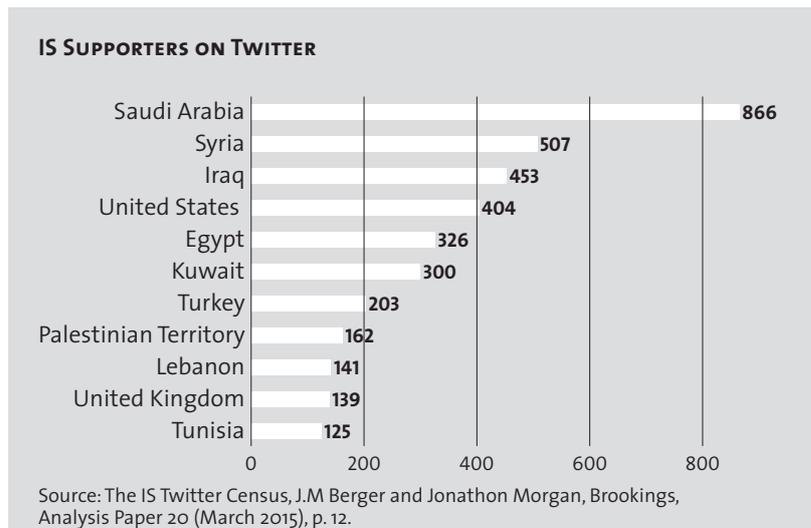
2000s by Al Qaeda's narrative of 'Islam in Danger' are being freshly spurred on by a notion that their Iraqi co-religionists need help in resisting yet another Western military assault. Others, representing a younger generation of jihadists who came of age since the 2011 Arab Uprisings, perceive themselves as having been newly enfranchised by the IS. Defying all logic, these first-timers see an intellectual and spiritual homeland in IS territory, despite it actually being a cultural and geographic wasteland.

European governments that either materially or rhetorically support the anti-IS coalition led by the United States need to aggressively discredit the IS' claims of statehood, if the militant backlash to themselves and their citizens is to be contained. Whatever be the time-frame of military operations in Iraq, the IS is not waiting to be defeated. It has already announced the creation of five new 'provinces' in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Announcements of yet more regional franchises can be expected in the Caucasus, Levant and South Asia. Unlike Al Qaeda, which has a one-point agenda of striking the West, the IS has an additional asset – sectarianism. By exploiting local Shia-Sunni tensions, it can gain a foothold in areas where Al Qaeda cannot reasonably expect much support for its globalist vision. For this reason, psychological operations (PSYOPS) against the IS must be prioritized by European security agencies, in partnership with friendly Arab states.

Poor strategic communication

Almost fourteen years since the 9/11 attacks, the West still has not been able to devise a credible counter-narrative to international jihadist discourse. Part of the reason might be excessive reliance, born of path dependency, on the ideational package that won the Cold War: concepts such as democracy, individual liberties and economic prosperity. What worked with East European states has limited resonance in ultra-conservative societies that partly function on the basis of tribal politics. Not only does democracy blasphemously suggest that God should share sovereignty with elected legislators, but individual rights are anathema in cultures organized around collectivism. And economic prosperity is less potent when projected not across adjacent borders (ie., from Western to Eastern Europe), but across continents, thus remaining mostly beyond the reach of its audience.

By unilaterally declaring itself a Caliphate, the IS has changed the terms of reference in its propaganda battle with the West and Al Qaeda. Now, its supporters believe they represent the policies of a *de facto* government and not



merely an organization. Al Qaeda of course disagrees, but it cannot detract from the IS' growing support base among younger militants. An inter-generational tussle is presently unfolding between old school ideologues who had pledged loyalty to Osama bin Laden in the 1990s and 2000s, and a new wave of criminally-inclined upstarts for whom 9/11 is but a distant memory. The latter view the Caliphate's future as belonging to themselves, and are inclined to pay no heed to self-appointed 'seniors' who have little combat experience and thus no 'street cred'.

What this means for the West is that PSYOPS against the IS need to demolish its claim of being an embryonic civilization-state. This claim is the IS' Clausewitzian centre of gravity. If intense pressure is exerted against it, the IS can regress into being an also-ran in the international jihadist community. If however, efforts to combat the group focus on promoting an alternative, non-violent version of Salafism, as recommended by some security analysts, the unintended consequences could be grave. There is no assurance that even 'moderate' Salafis would unequivocally denounce the Caliphate vision, particularly if they wish to retain credibility with new-generation jihadists. Ultimately, it is this vision that fuels terrorism risks in Europe, because it provides an emotional connection between radicalized Muslims on the Continent and their overseas counterparts.

For its part, the United States has already discovered that it has few means of re-engineering its image in the Islamic world, especially after the twin disasters of the Afghan and Iraq wars. Nor can it advise Arab societies how to govern themselves, without feeding its critics' narrative of being a neo-colonial power. Instead, the best results in its strategic communication against Al Qaeda have come through 'black' or unattributable propaganda, dis-

seminated through credible proxies in the jihadist community and in partnership with local security agencies. The same approach has to be followed with the IS.

Possible themes for attack

Rather than put forward one meta-narrative, it is better to simultaneously push several sub-narratives, all targeted towards specific audiences. The latter might occasionally overlap, but the general principle should be to match message to listener. For local IS cadres, fear of physical safety is a key behavioural influence. For foreign fighters, the need to scapegoat personal frustrations onto larger forces is a common motive (few successful people choose to wage jihad in a combat zone, preferring instead to financially underwrite it while living comfortably). Even bin Laden only became a full-time operational planner once his commercial investments in the Sudan began failing. For older militants, uncertainty over family welfare after they have been killed or wounded in action is a primary concern.

All these vulnerabilities can be exploited by a propaganda offensive that emphasises the IS' limited resources (and hence, the certainty that it will lose the war it has started). Tanks and 'technicals' need to be serviced – what is the IS' capacity to do so on a regular basis, or to replenish losses incurred from coalition airstrikes? Do foreign fighters in its ranks constitute stalwarts of Western and Arab societies, or educational and familial rejects unable to hold down a regular job? Will they suddenly discover hidden talents for public administration if put into positions of responsibility in the newly-formed 'Caliphate'? How does the IS take care of veterans' families? Is promotion based on merit, or favouritism underscored by the prospect of immediate execution for protesting unfairness?

Answers to such questions are not always self-evident; they need to be researched by PSYOPS specialists relying on intelligence debriefings of IS prisoners and defectors. Once a detailed profile of IS morale and a list of exploitable weaknesses in the group's public relations campaign have been prepared, they need to be constantly updated. For the actual projection of PSYOP content, it would be advisable to use former members of the group, the more senior the better. Past experience has indicated that Western efforts to directly respond to jihadist propaganda online deliver poor results. Such initiatives only imply parity between government officials and the ragtag militiamen they engage with. If today's jihadists are prepared to mock their own elders in the Salafi community, what chances do 'infidel' bureaucrats have against bored young adults happy to indulge in day-long sparring for their own amusement? The fact that the IS can gen-

erate up to 90,000 social media messages daily suggests that its publicity department does not lack for time or inventiveness.¹ Much better to use insiders from the IS to make the same point that governments would like to make themselves.

Strike when the iron is hot

Context is everything. The IS has suffered setbacks of late, losing 8500 cadres to coalition air attacks. Its oil production facilities have been hit, reducing fund-raising capacity. Resentment simmers over preferential treatment given to foreign fighters, many of whom are unwilling to enter the thick of fighting in areas where victory is not already assured. And finally, the failure to take Kobane has dented morale, because the IS leadership was imprudent enough to make it a prestige issue, despite the town having limited military value. Taken together, these factors make for a brittle morale status.

Things are not going to get better for the group. With Iraqi security forces showing some willingness to fight back, the mystical halo that had appeared around the 'Caliphate' after the fall of Mosul in June 2014 now looks hazy. To compensate for this, since last September the IS has been inciting terrorist attacks on Western soil. It is also forging new alliances with jihadist groups outside the Iraq-Syria theatre, the most prominent being Boko Haram. Some reports suggest that the Caucasus could be another area for expansion, with Dagestani jihadists divided over whether to join the group. As elsewhere, there seems to be an inter-generational clash at play here, with an entrenched old guard opposing the IS, while some young militants are open-minded about pledging allegiance to it.

It is imperative to maintain the tempo of both kinetic and non-kinetic operations, because the IS has proven its resilience in the past. From losing 95% of its combat

FURTHER READING

ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror *Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan (Regan Arts, 2015)*

An excellent primer on the rise of the IS, containing insights on its military strategy and adroit navigation of local politics to capture territory.

Al Qaeda's Twenty-Year Strategic Plan: The Current Phase of Global Terror *Martin Rudner, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Vol. 36, No. 12, pp. 953–980.*

Detailed scholarly study of how Al Qaeda conceptualized its battle plan for building a Caliphate, and the timeframe it has operated according to.

What ISIS Really Wants *Graeme Wood, The Atlantic (March 2015)*

A widely-read journalistic article that highlighted the IS' recruiting appeal and its vision of an apocalyptic battle against the West.

strength during 2007–10, it has bounded back as the wealthiest Salafi militia in the world. Much of its success has been due to strategic planning – during the American-led occupation of Iraq, its members plotted to get *into* jail so that they could build connections with other imprisoned jihadists, in preparation for a joint offensive once the Americans left. This offensive eventually culminated with the capture of Mosul in 2014.

Given some months, the ‘Caliphate’ can adjust to its newly shrunken boundaries, having so far lost only 20% of its territory to Iraqi government and Kurdish counterattacks. The Sunni tribal heartland, which constitutes the backbone of the insurgency, is too paralysed with fear to independently rise up. Yet, there are definite limits to how effectively Kurdish or Iraqi Shia troops can operate amidst a hostile population – just because the IS is draconian, does not make its enemies beloved among Iraqi Sunnis. And recent losses in Iraq can be offset by future advances in Syria, where Western policy differences on how to deal with the Damascus regime make for a freer jihadist operating environment.

Learn from the adversary

In conclusion, the history of warfare, both regular and irregular, suggests that PSYOPS can play an important ancillary role to main-force operations. They cannot substitute for kinetic efforts to degrade enemy capabilities, but in a strategic timeframe can dilute hostile intentions by illustrating the fruitlessness of further struggle. Tactically, they

can also weaken enemy morale at a critical juncture, as the IS demonstrated when it presaged the occupation of Mosul with a propaganda video and tweets warning Iraqi government troops of the fate that awaited them if they did not desert. The group has since showcased its savagery in an insurgent version of ‘shock and awe’ doctrine, to ensure that any local resistance to its military movements and administrative presence is hamstrung by fear. But these methods are only as effective as its combat performance. Once counter-pressure starts to build up, the IS will itself become vulnerable to internal fissures and whispering campaigns. That is a situation which European security agencies, together with their coalition partners, must exploit. Although airstrikes and the employment of special operations forces in a training and advisory role (as well as occasional direct action) will be staples of the Western offensive against the IS, PSYOPS cannot be neglected. The long-term defeat of this group shall depend as much on the latter as the former.

SELECTED SOURCES

1. ‘Battered but Unbowed, ISIS Is Still on Offensive’, *New York Times*, 13 March 2015.

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