

The War of US against ISIS in Psychological Warfare and Internet as the New Frontline

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Abstract

Barbaric, savage, horrific-these were terms to define the decision of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to murder its captured Jordanian pilot by burning him alive inspired a thesaurus of horror and revulsion. The men who did it, the perpetrators were described by the media as mad men, thugs, monsters. To most of the people, the act itself seemed inexplicable and without sense. However, behind the choreographed and videotaped violence lies a calculated horrible cold logic. Although, ISIS is often portrait as a mighty force on the ground in Syria and Iraq, facts state that they control mainly communications between various provinces in both countries, and, as most guerrilla armies, are militarily weak by conventional measure. ISIS has little or almost none defense against the bombing campaign that is facing now, while US has formed a coalition that is confronting them on the ground as well, after President Barack Obama published the "New Security Doctrine" which includes degrading and finally destroying ISIS. ISIS, however, have proven to be very organized in promoting dramatic acts of violence against their enemies and promoting them to achieve two goals: use terror tactics as a psychological weapon against all those facing them and all those that are to face them in combat. Secondly, through usage of social network platforms to promote killings and executions, the aim of ISIS is to encourage recruits from out of Syria and Iraq, and elsewhere, to join them in their cause. Online operations of ISIS fall under a production group called the Al Hayat Media Center. The Center was created to seduce Westerners into joining the ranks of ISIS and also to distribute propaganda through social and media platforms. It is difficult to assess the success of this operation, but solid sources provided by US military and intelligence estimate that at least 300 Americans are fighting in the ranks of ISIS (at least two Americans have been killed fighting for ISIS in Iraq/Syria region) while the number of Europeans is in thousands. The US Response to this psychological kind of warfare came when President Barack Obama established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) aiming to combat terrorist propaganda. The main strategy of CSCC is not directly to confront ISIS operatives, but rather than that to deal with the people they are trying to recruit. Now, with almost entire international public opinion on their side, it is time for US to more actively respond to ISIS especially in the manner of psychological warfare since it is obvious that operations of "winning hearts and minds" of people in Iraq and Syria are not enough compared to ruthless tactics of ISIS which "winning hearts and minds" by brute force, terror, and vivid violent images. The online propaganda war is a new component to conflicts of 21st century that allows enemies to reach one another's home fronts directly. ISIS might seem not so strong on the ground but it has captured one fundamental flaw of the media of 21st century-the one that bad news is always good news and that televised violence will always have an audience. ISIS has proclaimed that its goal is to create a caliphate of 21st century but its psychological warfare and propaganda is inspiring individuals throughout the West to commit horrible terrorist crimes. Could this be another mind game set up by ISIS, it remains to be seen. However one thing is for certain, US and its allies must tackle ISIS not only by planes and other military means, but also by a strategy that would eliminate its influence in spreading their propaganda.

Keywords: US, ISIS, psychological warfare, on-line propaganda warfare

INTRODUCTION

Psychological warfare is best defined as any operations that are carried out in order to achieve victory through mental changes in the enemy.¹ These operations, that contribute to such changes, include demoralizing the enemy (military or civilian, individual or group), convincing the enemy that it would be useless to continue fighting, or bringing about a new understanding of the conflict that subsequently leads to other forms of resolution. These operations are therefore aggressive acts, but not always in strictly military sense.

Psychological warfare is often based under the assumption that the ultimate roots of the conflict lie in dissatisfaction of the populace, therefore military victory on the battlefield is not sufficient. It is important to win "hearts and minds" of the people who generate, feed and support the insurgency, or opposing side and best way to tackle this is to apply a model known as "low intensity conflict" which basically is more sociopolitical than purely military war.² Psychological warfare is part of this sociopolitical confrontation. Its most common operations include propaganda campaigns, open or clandestine transmission of news, rumors, and civic-military actions that are aimed to meet the material needs of the population or to change either images of the enemy or of one's own forces. Thus, a basic mechanism used to gain objectives in psychological warfare is unleashing of personal insecurity: about one's beliefs, judgment, feelings, about what is wrong and what is right, what should or should not be done. This insecurity finds an immediate and calming response in solution offered by those in power: to accept the "official truth" and submit to the "established order". The psychological means to the desired objective is not to fear or terror in the face of a cruel authority, but instead insecurity to an authority that is simultaneously powerful and magnanimous.³

In order to make the population feel insecure, psychological warfare tries to penetrate their primary frame of reference: their basic beliefs, their most precious values, and their common sense.

Psychological warfare is not aimed exclusively at the enemy. It is often aimed at own public opinion as well (for instance in cases of justifying the military conflict to the public opinion), at own military forces (for motivation and strengthening the morale), at allied countries (for gaining a better international position and support).

All above mentioned makes psychological warfare a very modern weapon, although its use in various forms of propaganda has been known since ancient times. This weapon contains some important features that separates it from other weapons in the battlefield: psychological weapon is weapon of "spirit" that affects directly the psychology rather than the body of the subject, psychological weapon has unlimited reach and knows no borders or frontlines, psychological weapon can operate constantly without pause, psychological weapon changes the beliefs of the enemy while defending the morale of own country and military forces, psychological weapon serves during and after the military operations on the ground, psychological weapon influences globally at the same time the enemy and own public opinion, and finally psychological weapon does not kill, it convinces.⁴

The phrase "psychological warfare" is believed to have migrated to United States in 1941 from Germany. *Weltanschauungskrieg*, used by German military at the times, when translated literally means "worldview warfare" and was defined as "scientific application of propaganda, terror, and state pressure as a means of securing an ideological victory over one's enemies". Contemporary psychological operations (PSYOP) doctrine of the United States categorizes psychological warfare activities under three typologies: tactical, operational, and strategic. Tactical operations attempts to influence the "will to fight" of the enemy soldiers actually participating in physical combat, whereas operational PSYOP not only targets fighting soldiers, but the civilian population within a particular region (such as Iraq or Syria) using same technologies (leaflets, radio, television, and even more increasingly internet and social networks) as tactical psychological

¹ P. Watson, "War of the Mind: The military uses and abuses of psychology", New York: Basic Books, 1975

² A.J. Bacewicz, J. D. Hallums, R.H. White, T.F. Young, "American military policy in small wars: The case of El Salvador", Paper presented at John F. Kennedy School of Government, March 22nd 1988

³ Ignacio Martin-Baro, "Religion as an instrument of Psychological Warfare", Journal of Social Issues Vol. 46 No.3, 1990, pg 96

⁴ Vera Ranogajec, "Psiholoski Rat", Zagreb: Polemos 3, 2000, pg 148

warfare, but deploying them more broadly. US strategic PSYOP is international in scope uses the most up-to-date and far-reaching information and communication technologies at a level that is a long, protracted effort, usually lasting years.¹

In the latest efforts to degrade and destroy ISIS, Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (or ISIL), US is employing psychological warfare at another level, one that includes social networks and internet as the platform or the new battleground, new frontline. When confronting al-Qaida, US officials, from military and administration, have treated the organization as terrorist one since it was such and employed such methods. Terrorism is defined as “use of violence or threat of violence by small groups against larger groups aiming to achieve political goals”.² Terrorism itself though is not a strategy, it is a tactic used by organized groups. In case of ISIS, which currently controls considerable parts of territory in Iraq and Syria, terrorism is defined differently. ISIS uses terrorism in its classical form, suicide bombings, executions, mass destructions, but is also a fighting force that operates from its own currently controlled territory. It is also the best funded terrorism organization in the world that US has confronted so far.

ISIS's strategic narrative is the creation of Caliphate marking the return to the original version of Islam including the introduction of Sharia law. The restoration of “caliphate” is considered by ISIS to be a religious duty as are the draconian laws and the terrorism it applies. ISIS has strategic psychological operations and information objectives: setting the international media agenda in order to gain attention and visibility of their message, controlling the narrative, countering western, Shia muslim, and other “propaganda” against ISIS, projecting itself as the most powerful jihadist faction, connecting supporters via on-line networks, recruiting new supporters and members, demonstrating capabilities and command and control structures, raising funds. ISIS seems to have six strategic target audiences: sympathizers and supporters, potential recruits, donors, international media, local audiences in Iraq and Syria, and wider international community.³

ISIS's tactic planners know that internet and social networks are not an area that they can compete with US and its allies. Instead, what ISIS has is asymmetric power-the ability to shock and terrify with videos of terrorist activities and other crimes committed by its members. The aim is clear-to shock, scare the public opinion and their opponents within the territory it controls and those it fights, and attract new followers for their cause.

New media and new propaganda from ISIS has come a long way from grainy camera footage on VHS tapes. High definition videos, social media accounts, internet in general are the new norm for groups like ISIS who have certainly set the bar for other terrorist accounts affiliated with ISIS. These online operations fall under a production company created in 2014 called AlHayat Media Center. The main aim of this company is to seduce Westerners into joining the ranks of ISIS and distribute propaganda through social media platforms.⁴

In April of 2014 ISIS confirmed their status as media-savants with the launch of an official Android app for the Google Play Store titled “The Dawn of Glad Tidings” as the go-to source for news on Islamic State. This application though required users to submit a wealth of personal information and hand over control of their Twitter account. This had allowed ISIS to tweet propaganda across thousands of accounts simultaneously. Although this application had been pulled from Google play it reached its purpose since it acquired Twitter accounts. When ISIS marched in Mosul, Iraq in June 2014, its supporters were able to send over 40,000 tweets in a single day. This use of social networks by a terrorist organization was unprecedented before. In a speech at the Brookings Institution, Matt Olsen, Director of National Counterterrorism Center in 2014, stated that ISIS operates “the most significant propaganda machine of any Islamist extremist group and that no other group is as successful and effective as ISIS is at using propaganda, particularly social media.”⁵

¹ Tyler Wall, “US Psychological Warfare and civilian targeting”, London: Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice, 2014, pg288-289

² Clark R. McCauley, “The Psychology of Terrorism”, Social Science Research Council, www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/mccauley accessed December 2015

³ Thomas Elkjer Nissen, “The Weaponization of Social Media”, Royal Danish Defense College, <http://www.fak.dk/publikationer/Documents/The%20Weaponization%20of%20Social%20Media.pdf> accessed in February 2016

⁴ Brookings Institution, “Respond to the Islamic State threat (on Twitter)”, www.brookings.edu/blogs/techtank/posts/2014/10/20islamic-social-media accessed in January 2016

⁵ Anne Gearan, “National Security US attempts to combat Islamic State propaganda”, Washington Post September 07 2014, accessed in January 2016

In June 2014, US President Barack Obama ordered the launch of Operation "Inherent Resolve", which included military operations, mainly air-strikes, by US and its coalition allies against ISIS positions. The operation is still ongoing with participation of US allies from NATO and those of the Middle East. Even before, US State Department had launched a tough and graphic propaganda counteroffensive against ISIS, using some of the group's own images of barbaric acts against fellow Muslims to undercut its message. In 2011 a Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, a 50 members team with a budget of 6 million USD, was set up to concentrate and target al-Qaida, ISIS threat and operations in internet more specifically in social media presence-on Youtube, Twitter, Facebook and beyond. President Obama, on September 9th 2011, signed Executive Order 13584 providing policy backgrounds and responsibilities to CSCC. This Center is guided by National Strategy for Counterterrorism and operates under the policy direction of the White House and interagency leadership. CSCC immediately released a video production "Welcome to ISIL Land" aimed at young Muslims with the message "run-do not walk to ISIS Land" as part of "Think Again. Turn Away" campaign. US State Department spokesperson at the time stated to Foxnews.com: "We believe countering our adversaries in this space (the internet) is critical. We must contest the space by confronting distortion with reality and lies with the truth".

However, many former US public diplomacy officials have expressed fear that the sophisticated, social media and internet born propaganda of ISIS is outmatching US efforts countering it. Shahed Amanullah, who was in charge of establishing anti-extremist Muslim voices and programs at the State Department and who has left his position in 2015, had stated that US government is in no position of engaging jihadi extremists on Twitter. In the off-line world, US response has occurred in public diplomacy hubs from Dubai to Washington, where State Department has sent out Arabic-speaking mouthpieces to amplify the denunciation of ISIS. Much of the focus was centered at media outlets like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, also in Europe, with the sole aim of dissuading Muslim youth from joining ISIS.¹

The fears that the US psychological warfare campaign, that is going parallel with the military operations, might not be able to defeat ISIS's campaign are also founded in previous similar situations when western democracies and their armed forces faced Islamic terrorists. Ten years ago, in July 2006, Israel launched a military offensive in South Lebanon aiming to degrade and damage Hezbollah organization. Israeli Defense Force body in charge of conducting PSYOP at the time was MALAT (Mercaz L'Mitzaei Toda'a: The Center of Consciousness/Perception Operations).

MALAT, during 2006 military and psychological warfare campaign, used "traditional" methods (leaflets) as well as "new" ones such as SMS messages and websites. Of these, it was the new modes of communication, especially the Internet, which proved valuable when assessing enemy's response to Israel's PSYOP offensive. In previous occasions, an assessment of enemy's reaction was based either on speculation, enemy's media, captured documents, or on interrogation of captured POWs.² IDF had two goals: reducing or completely eliminating Hezbollah's capability of shelling Israel from their positions and discrediting the organization itself, particularly its leadership and head Hassan Nasrallah. What subsequently happened was that while MALAT continued its PSYOP the IDF forces withdrew from Lebanon after 34 days of fighting, which was hailed as a victory by Hezbollah and Palestinians in general since Israel went out while Hezbollah remained in South Lebanon. MALAT's operation was a failure as a result of failure of IDF to achieve its military goals.

Ten years later, the US military is struggling to achieve its military goals against ISIS and as a result of that US PSYOP counter message against ISIS's is struggling. US and its allies, including Russia, are bombing ISIS positions since 2014, but ISIS is still on the ground in Iraq and Syria and this is the main message of ISIS's PSYOP.

CONCLUSIONS

The Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC estimates that 90.000 messages are daily disseminated by supporters of ISIS in social networks using internet, and according to analysis by intelligence firm

¹ Spencer Ackerman, "ISIS's online propaganda outpacing US-counter-efforts, ex-officials warn", The Guardian September 22 2014.

² Ron Schleifer, "Psyoping Hezbollah: The Israeli Psychological Warfare Campaign During 2006 Lebanon War", Terrorism and Political Violence, 2009, pg 223

Recorded Future, despite efforts by Twitter to shut down affiliated accounts, in September 2014 there were still 27.000 "pro-ISIS" accounts.¹ The question arises how will US counter message and what strategy will it use in the future.

CSIS recent findings conclude that the dominant message among the youth of the Middle East, that is the primary target of ISIS, remains the one of aspiring peace, stability, prosperity in spite of vigorous on-line campaign promoted by ISIS and its affiliates. Promoting this narrative could be a new task for US psychological operations as the dominant narrative in stopping the recruitment of young Arabs within ISIS ranks. The obstacle remains in the sense that US might not be the credible source alone, due to the recent history of the conflict in the Middle East and US military role (Drone program, rendition program, Abu Ghraib abuses), in promoting this counter message especially in explaining the difference between Islam and Islamic extremism. This message must also come from US allies in the region, Arab states and Turkey, in order to be credible and sufficient in the long run as efforts to degrade and destroy ISIS militarily continue. The message of freedom of choice and prosperity rather than tyranny and oppression should be the central theme of US PSYOP anti-terror fight in social networks and overall internet. The US must present a different side to ISIS, the one that is not idealized, the one that is full of infighting, human greed and senseless violence.

Successful psychological operations are impossible to be separated from military performance. PSYOP does not operate in the vacuum, and just as it can promote military objectives, so military successes on the ground are crucial to the attainment of PSYOP goals. Even the most well thought-out PSYOP campaign would flounder in cases where the enemy is able to boast one or more military achievements. The online psychological warfare is a new component in the 21st century that allows enemies to reach each other's home fronts directly. US psychological operations planners should keep this in mind when designing and applying future PSYOPS that must have its effects among ISIS and its allies as well as US home front and its own allies.

NOTES

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