Fighting the Islamic State

Defeating this global menace will require a finely tuned information operations campaign

By **Bryant Wu**

Although the Islamic State (IS) is relatively new to the general consciousness, its history and lineage trace back to the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. The power vacuum left by the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime resulted in a power struggle that evolved from civil war to insurgency. By 2004, the Iraq War had spawned a subsidiary of al-Qaida calling itself al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. AQI quickly gained a reputation for aggressive action and chilling brutality, prompting coalition forces in Iraq to devote enormous resources to pursue its leader and mastermind. In 2006, al-Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike, and AQI soon disappeared from the limelight of Western media coverage.

AQI, however, did not die with its leader; it rebranded itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and later as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. By 2014, the organization had renamed itself again, now simply the Islamic State (IS), and under this name it reclaimed the attention of the world with an aggressive and brutal campaign that claimed large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

In addition to the physical military campaign, the IS launched an equally aggressive information campaign though social media outlets on the internet. YouTube, Facebook and Twitter were all co-opted to spread IS propaganda and used to develop sympathizers and recruit fighters for the cause. The effectiveness of IS information operations seemed to surprise U.S. and European governments, and they struggled to understand and contain the IS in the virtual world. Its methodology was nothing particularly new — al-Qaida had also used the internet to spread its message. So why was the IS more effective?

One part of the problem may have been doctrinal; governments and the media misidentified and mislabeled the IS, resulting in a fundamental flaw in how the West attacked the group. The other aspect was an information environment that had changed significantly over the previous decade and had become a breeding ground for inflammatory anti-Islamic rhetoric. Combined with democratic principles of free speech, they created a fertile and permissive environment for IS information operations. In 2016, however, the IS appears to have lost momentum, both in the physical world and the virtual world. This article will examine potential reasons for the early success of IS information operations and its apparent recent decline.

Evaluating the IS

First, let us briefly examine how we define the IS and how that definition influences how we fight it. In official government statements and in the mainstream and alternative media, the IS was, and still is, referred to as a terrorist organization. Unfortunately, the application of this term to the IS is legally and doctrinally inaccurate. It would be more accurate and appropriate to call the IS an insurgency. The

question of what differentiates terrorism from insurgencies has received its share of consideration, though the lack of consensus on how to define terrorism makes answering the question somewhat problematic. For the purposes of this discussion, we will use several definitions from the U.S. as well as from the international community. The Code of Laws of the United States (henceforth referred to as the U.S. Code) defines terrorism as "activities that — (A) involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State" and "appear to be intended — (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping." The U.S. Department of Defense defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political," while NATO defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of force or violence against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives."

> The question of what differentiates terrorism from insurgencies has received its share of consideration, though the lack of consensus on how to define terrorism makes answering the question somewhat problematic.

The U.S. Code lacks any definition of insurgency; the closest it comes is to define sedition. The Department of Defense, and the U.S. government in general, define insurgency as "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region." NATO defines insurgency as "the actions of an organized, often ideologically motivated, group or movement that seeks to effect or prevent political change of a governing authority within a region, focused on persuading or coercing the population through the use of violence and subversion."

Within these definitions we can identify three points of differentiation between terrorism and insurgency: scope of intent, the role of violence and the relationship with the population. Regarding the first point, scope of intent,

terrorism merely seeks to coerce and influence behavior while an insurgency seeks political control by replacing the existing government in what is typically referred to as regime change. A 2007 training manual from the U.S. Military Academy echoes these conclusions, stating "each of the five goals of an insurgency — the violent arm of a given resistance movement — centers on attacking regimes. In comparison, the goals of terrorists are not specific to governments but rather focus on broader ideological intentions. Furthermore, we see that terrorists may not even feel the need to target governments. Instead they may choose to attack societies directly to achieve a particular end state. Hence, by definition terrorists are not concerned with regime change, reallocation of power, or challenging existing social orders." So while terrorism and insurgency are both inherently political in nature, terrorism is more limited in scope.

Within these definitions of terrorism and insurgency, we can also see a difference in the role of violence. In terrorism, violence is the primary tool used to instill fear and apply pressure on the government. An insurgency, however, combines violence — either terrorism or armed uprising depending on the phase of the insurgency — and subversion, which the Cambridge dictionary defines as "the act of trying to destroy or damage an established system or government." Terrorism is then only one of several methods available to the insurgent, so to label the IS as a terrorist organization implies that it employs no other methods to achieve its desired end state, yet the widely acknowledged information campaign clearly demonstrates a methodology that seeks to undermine IS' enemies through propaganda and recruitment from within their populations.

This leads us to the organization's relationship with the general population. Looking back to our definitions, we can see that they imply very different relationships. The definition of terrorism implies a hostile relationship with the general population, where violence is used "against individuals or property in an attempt to coerce or intimidate governments or societies." The definition of insurgency, however, implies a different relationship as it is "focused on persuading or coercing the population." Since an insurgency ultimately seeks to govern, it must establish some degree of political legitimacy and therefore cannot rely on violence to sway popular opinion. Although the IS terror tactics are its most visible aspect, we can't ignore that they have also established a governing regime and have managed to draw adherents and sympathizers with appeals to religious values.

Defining the fight

After examining the IS according to these definitions, it seems clear that it is not simply a terrorist organization, but an Islamist insurgency on a transnational scale. But does it matter? Isn't this distinction just a matter of semantics and doctrinal hair splitting?

The distinction between a terrorist organization and an insurgency matters because it changes how you fight.

The Islamic State uses social media to spread its toxic message.
PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

When we look at the intent of terrorists and their methodologies, we can see that their relationship with the general population is essentially adversarial. Terrorists use the general populace as leverage against the government in an effort to bend the government to their will. Therefore, aside from the terrorists' constituent minority, there is neither the need nor the desire for popular support. For the counterterrorist, this means that attacking the terrorist organization's operational capabilities with military or paramilitary force is sufficient because the general population is assumed to support the government and will therefore tolerate limited collateral damage (unintended casualties and damage or destruction of private property). In doctrinal terms, the center of gravity for a terrorist organization is its capability; attack and destroy that center of gravity and the terrorist is rendered ineffective.

In an insurgency, however, the center of gravity is the population. As noted earlier, since the insurgent ultimately seeks to govern, it must receive the consent of the general population; otherwise the new regime may eventually face an insurgency of its own. This requirement means that while an insurgency may use terrorism to coerce the population, it cannot be the only tool the movement employs. At some point, the insurgency must convince the population that it is a better option than the existing government, which means a less adversarial relationship with the population. In other words, the insurgent must conduct a "hearts and minds" campaign to generate sympathy and establish legitimacy.

That difference in the relationship with the general population means that the counterinsurgent is faced with a far more complex problem set; the counterinsurgent must neutralize the operational capability of the insurgency's combat forces while maintaining the support of a population that may be ambivalent, or even hostile, to the government. Therefore, the counterinsurgent cannot simply rely on lethal force to defeat the operational capability of the insurgent; the counterinsurgent must use information and influence operations to undermine the legitimacy of the insurgency and its ideas.

Even when the counterinsurgent force does use lethal means, it must do so without damaging the government's legitimacy or at least the perception of legitimacy. In short, both the insurgent and the counterinsurgent are battling for the hearts and minds of the general population, and in order to do so, both sides must employ information to influence and persuade, rather than rely on lethal, kinetic methods to simply coerce or destroy.

The role of social media

By defining the IS as a terrorist organization, the West relied on military force to win while information operations were virtually ignored. This allowed the IS to seize the initiative and control the message in the information war, and ultimately it was the information war that spawned the phenomenon that created considerable anxiety in the West: the defection of young men and women born and raised in North America and Western Europe to the ranks of the IS. Al-Qaida and the Taliban also managed to recruit from the West, but mainly from Europe and almost never from North America, and the reported numbers were lower than with the IS. So why was the IS able to achieve greater success with essentially the same methods?

One of the simpler answers is technology. When al-Qaida first made its presence felt in 2001, social media was still in its infancy. To spread its message, al-Qaida had to rely on a website that was essentially a centralized distribution system. In the mid-2000s, three social media platforms emerged that would change the distribution dynamic — Facebook in 2004, and Twitter and YouTube in 2006. As these platforms exploded in popularity, they provided new opportunities for information operations.

First, information producers were no longer dependent on a centralized distribution system via a website. Now, in addition to a producer's home site, whether it was a website or social media account, they could employ an army of proxies to spread the message. Every employee, sympathizer and agent had the ability to become a distribution node for the producer. This also meant that producers no longer had to "pull" consumers to their website; every node in the distributed network could actively push the message to other members of their subnetwork. So when the IS re-emerged in 2013, it had social media tools that were not available to al-Qaida in 2001, which gave the IS a wider reach and also allowed it to push information continuously. Finally, the technology meant that the IS didn't have to rely on a blindly cast net to find recruits; IS recruiters could scour Facebook and Twitter looking for prospects and selectively target individuals they deemed vulnerable.

The evolution in social media also helped IS information operations by changing the tone of the information

environment. In a general sense, the internet has helped to radicalize the information environment by democratizing the dissemination of political and social ideas. In the pre-internet world, the vectors by which ideas could spread were limited to radio, television and print media. All of these required significant capital, so the means of dissemination were largely controlled by mainstream media organizations that were reasonably constrained by professional standards and ethics. This meant that before information reached the public, it had to pass through a professional filter that tended to remove inaccurate information and unsupported ideas, creating a moderating effect on the information environment. The internet, however, makes it possible to disseminate any idea by virtually eliminating capital costs. In the United States, the cost to buy a domain name and website is less than a fast food meal, and social media accounts are free. In fact, the most significant cost is probably internet access, but even that is minuscule compared to the capital costs of traditional media. The result has been a proliferation of information media outlets referred to as "new media" or "alternative media." Often unfettered by professional standards or ethics, these information outlets cater to specific demographics with information that can be skewed or manipulated to support a specific political perspective. In other words, you can say virtually anything on the internet, and not only will you find someone to believe you, but there will be virtually no consequences for disinformation.

This media revolution has contributed heavily to an information environment in the U.S. that is critical of Islam. In 2001, the information environment in the U.S. relative to Islam was fairly benign. Although it was one of the world's three biggest religions, Islam barely intruded into American public awareness, and then only because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the U.S.' simmering relations with Iran. The September 11 attacks triggered a shift in public perception and opinion of Islam, and by 2013, after more than decade of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan with thousands of Americans killed and wounded, the information environment had become consistently hostile toward Islam. That hostility found its outlet in social media. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter all became platforms for anti-Islamic rhetoric, and while broadcast media was littered with negative, and sometimes inflammatory, coverage and editorials on Islam, it was still relatively restrained when compared to the roiling cauldron of social media. Unconstrained by professional standards or ethics, social media outlets bloomed with expressions of hostility, hate and vitriol. The nature of the content, whether reasonable or not, is largely irrelevant; what is essential is the perception of almost unrelenting animosity toward Islam.

This perception almost certainly helped create fertile recruiting ground for the IS, especially among young Muslims. A paper written by Efraim Benmelech and Esteban Klor titled "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?" published in 2016 by the National Bureau of Economic Research of Cambridge, Massachusetts, revealed that poverty did not drive participation in the IS. In the abstract, the researchers stated that "our results suggest that the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS is driven not by economic or political conditions, but rather by ideology and the difficulty of assimilation into homogeneous Western countries," which seems to support the idea that the IS' success is not simply a product of its own information operations, but rather the cumulative effect of its information operations augmented by information environments that are hostile toward Islam and Muslim population groups.

Waning support for the IS?

In 2016, however, the IS internet recruiting machine seemed to be in decline. In a U.S. Department of Defense briefing on April 26, Maj. Gen. Peter Gersten, deputy commander for operations and intelligence for the coalition fighting the IS, stated that the number of foreign fighters joining the IS had dropped to about 200 a month, down from over 1,500 a year ago. A week earlier, James Comey, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, stated that the number of people attempting to leave the U.S. to join the IS had declined for nine months.

Other officials and experts, however, noted that the IS territorial setbacks did not tell the whole story. Dr. Jonathan Schanzer, vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, noted that "you can defeat ISIS in ISIS-controlled territories, but you're not going to defeat ISIS itself. The ideology of jihadism continues to evolve and continues to exist."

Planned, coordinated attacks in France and Belgium — and more recently in Turkey, Iraq, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia — are keen reminders that the IS not necessarily limited by its territorial setbacks. Dr. Schanzer's sentiment was echoed in a briefing to Congress on April 12, when U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, "to be fully effective, we must work to prevent the spread of violent extremism in the first place — to stop the recruitment, radicalization and mobilization of people, especially young people, to engage in terrorist activities." From this perspective, it is not enough to destroy the IS' physical body and its capabilities; the West must also defeat the ideology and prevent it from gaining a grip on the hearts and minds of young people around the world.

The way ahead

To win hearts and minds, the information campaign must consist of two fronts. First, the U.S. and its allies must develop a strategic message that provides a meaningful alternative to the IS' jihadist rhetoric. This will require a delicate balancing act, because not only must the strategic message appeal to Muslims, it cannot alienate other segments of the population. This may be problematic; the U.S. has a significant evangelical Christian population, many of whom report negative views of Islam, while some European countries have social and cultural structures

Families displaced by the Islamic State gather north of Baghdad, Iraq, in July 2016. The author argues that the group's habit of capturing territory suggests members behave more like insurgents than traditional terrorists. REUTERS

that create tension with their Muslim minorities. To further complicate matters, the messaging campaign cannot rely on reason and logic; it must also take into consideration that young adults are more susceptible to appeals to their emotions and values rather than logic and reason, and that hate and revenge can be more potent motivators than compassion, patience and compromise. Finally, the strategic message must be echoed at the local level by centers of influence, such as pop culture figures and organizations, and it must be transmitted across multiple platforms, with special emphasis on outlets that appeal to young adults.

Sometimes, however, what is not said is just as important as what is said. This means that an effective information operations campaign must find a way to curtail provocative and inflammatory attacks on Islam. Taken to the maximum extent, such a campaign would include any event or publication that mocks or pokes fun at Islam and its symbols, especially Mohammed and the Quran. Any such curtailment may prove difficult because Western democracies value the principle of free speech and any attempt to curb anti-Islamic rhetoric would surely be considered an infringement on this right and, at least in the U.S., viewed as a capitulation to political correctness. Furthermore, the shift in American politics exemplified by the election of Donald Trump may embolden anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and racist elements in the United States and Europe, making restraint less likely.

There are, however, legal precedents in the U.S. that support attempts to curb hate speech, though they tend to restrict it based on race rather than religion. It might also be noted that Article III, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution considers treason acts that "aid the enemy's recruiting efforts," but even if the U.S. government had the courage to apply the treason clause, political opponents would certainly contest the connection between anti-Islamic speech and IS recruiting. In the end, we must find a way to reduce the sense of social and cultural isolation that creates the negative messaging that drives young adults to the IS, otherwise any positive strategic messaging may become irrelevant.

Ultimately, if the U.S. and Europe hope to defeat the IS they must abandon the politically expedient course of referring to the IS as terrorists and embrace the reality that they are fighting an Islamic insurgency that is able to appeal to and recruit from a global human resource pool. They must also accept that military power by itself is inadequate and that to beat the IS, they must engage key parts of the population with messaging and politics that persuades them, logically and emotionally, that it is in their best interests not to support religious extremists that want to drag the Islamic world back to the Middle Ages. Finally, they must acknowledge the role that free speech plays in democracies in creating an environment that facilitates IS recruiting and information campaigns.

Although difficult and requiring careful thought and patience, these guidelines are probably our best hope to defeat the IS and mitigate potentially long-term bloodletting that may have severe and unforeseen costs to our societies. □