

THIS IS COGNITIVE

During the past five years we have witnessed an interesting phenomenon: local terrorist organisations make international headlines more and more often. Hundreds of independent militant groups have flourished in the poorly governed, lawless or war-torn territories across the Middle East and Africa (in places such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Mali, Somalia, northern Nigeria, the Egyptian Sinai and Yemen). Most have primarily – or exclusively – locally-tailored objectives, concerned with expanding their influence, overturning an autocratic state or defending a vision of Islam from supposed foreign threats. “We are seeing global movements turning local – seeking local anchorage, local resonance,” suggests Mathieu Guidère, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Toulouse in France.

One of the striking features of these local groups is that they do not operate only as guerrilla movements, but more closely resemble the ground forces of regular armies. Hundreds of their fighters march into cities, towns and villages, backed by pickup trucks and armoured vehicles with mounted machine guns, and even demonstrate seized missiles – a military arsenal usually found in a national army. Some of these groups include hundreds of members with military backgrounds; almost all groups have training camps and instructors. The best example of this trend – in which a terrorist group resembles a more regular armed force rather than a gang – is the Islamic State (IS). We should establish the fact that this group presents not only an asymmetric threat, as it is in case of al-Qaeda, but quite obviously a symmetric (military) threat as well. IS is engaged in warfare, and does so by military and cognitive means.

A cognitive approach to warfare is based on the notion that the will of the adversary is central in the war. In this approach, belligerents attempt to bypass the material assets of an adversary altogether and focus on the mind, mental processes, emotions, feelings, perceptions, behaviours and decisions of a person, group, nation or other community (Sadowsky&Becker, 2010). The cognitive approach to warfare is typically developed most quickly by actors who, in a pure war, might face adversaries which have significant material advantages and, consequently, for whom a material style of warfare is impractical. By its nature, cognitive warfare is less expensive than the material-style of warfare but, to be effective, it also requires a significant level of professional competence. A cognitive style of warfare focuses on distracting, dissuading, deterring or outlasting an adversary as the primary defeat mechanism. In this way, strategy is focused on disrupting the will of an adversary to continue the fight or interfere with the adversary’s political (in case of IS, religious) aims.

Cognitive warfare is also an instrument of attracting more recruits and supporters, through so-called fighting



IS’s PR is aimed at recruiting new fighters around the world and inspiring terrorist attacks or civil unrest in other countries.”

for hearts and minds. We see that IS wages its cognitive warfare against Iraqi and Syrian authorities, Western countries and Russia, as well as against any other religious groups and minorities. The major share of its propaganda and, in some ways, its PR is aimed at recruiting new fighters around the world, and possibly provoking or inspiring terrorist attacks or civil unrest in other countries (on behalf of IS).

The barbaric and cruel acts of IS have achieved one major goal of this local terrorist group – the whole world knows about it and is obviously shocked by its unprecedented atrocities. Public beheadings, impalement, mass rapes, eating internals of human body, public crucifixions of civilians and unthinkable cruelty towards children are all employed by IS to frighten off and to suppress any resistance.

IS uses its reputation for terror to dissuade Iraqi and Syrians forces from ever seeking battle. Fear is an effective weapon, which can serve as powerful deterrence as well. Poorly paid or unloyal (or just hesitant) soldiers would hardly fight knowing about their own destiny should they be captured. The graphic nature of beheading, the focus on the individual and the act of bodily desecration all render this far more chilling than the explosion of a bomb, even where the latter’s death toll is greater. The beheading of Western journalists and aid workers – and the uploading of these materials to social networks – works as great deterrent. Just the idea that captured Western soldiers might pay such a price could stop Western governments from undertaking any land operation.

The repetition of phrases such as “our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people” and demands that Muslims kill un-believers by any means in Western countries, may also create an atmosphere of suspicion, ethnic tension and panic – not only in the

TIVE WARFARE



Middle East but all around the world. Uncovered plots of public beheading in Australia and the US, as well as terrorist acts in Canada, illustrate the reach of IS cognitive warfare. Terrorism is a form of propaganda by deed. And the more chilling the deed, the more impactful the propaganda.

Violence towards Kurds has already provoked civil unrest in Western countries, particularly among the significant number of resided Kurdish refugees. In Germany, Kurds clashed with Turks and radical Muslims, which could be dangerous precedent for future acts of aggression and fighting between these diasporas.

Rebranding the organisation Islamic State (IS) has proved a great success. Actually the group has been renamed several times before; each time the name reflected the current status and needs of the organisation. Prior to it starting the explicit move away from al-Qaeda, the organisation was known simply as the Islamic State of Iraq. In the past year or so, it adopted a name that could be translated variously as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (both shorthanded as ISIS). "Levant" linguistically suggests a broader territory than simply Iraq and Syria, also generally encompassing Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Today, the short and clear name – "Islamic State" is the synonym to the caliphate – exploits the belief in the "golden age" of Muslim history and drops all pretence of geographic boundaries. The Idea of the caliphate - an Islamic state under the rule of a community of religious scholars guided by a supreme leader, the caliph or khalifah, is quite precise and looks very attractive for fighters from all over the world.

IS has gone further than any other group by claiming the legitimacy of the caliphate. The caliph is historically supposed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad's Quraysh tribe in Arabia. Since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the leader of the Islamic State in 2010, he has claimed that he is a descendant of Muhammad and is of the Quraysh tribe. The formation of the caliphate has created a "with us or against us" mentality within the Islamic State, which is likely to create even more enemies. The upshot is that anyone who does not believe in IS's severe interpretation of Islam must convert or die.

IS continued its PR campaign by launching its own official magazine – Dabiq (accompanied with translation of its articles to several European languages). In Dabiq, IS discusses its strategic direction, recruitment methods, political-military strategy and tribal alliances. For example, one article discusses why Saudi Arabia might become the Islamic State's next target. Issuing the magazine serves a number of purposes. The first is

THIS IS COGNITIVE WARFARE



©Getty Images

to call on Muslims to come and to help the new caliph. Next, the magazine, comprising 50 vivid pages of colour pictures, illustrations and artfully crafted text, tells the story of the Islamic State's success in gaining the support of Syrian tribes, reports on the success of its recent military operations and graphically portrays the "atrocities" committed by its enemies, alongside vivid pictures of its own violence against Shi'ites. The first issue is quite a mix of classic Islamic texts, popular apocalyptic literature, prophecies and modern tactics taken from Salafi-Jihadist strategic literature. The intention is clearly to capture the imagination of young warriors and inspire them to come and fight for causes of IS.

IS also launched Al Hayat Media Center that delivers its propaganda work. We see a stark contrast with al-Qaeda's verbose style: IS's messages are very simple and short, targeted and "easily consumable". IS actively uses social networks, and its Twitter style of messaging is very clear to teenagers and young people. One tactic they have used in particular has been address young girls and women directly. IS also uses old cinema's patter about "real guys" and "tough men", who fight for the good cause. Videos of torture and killings attract a high number of pathological sadists, people with criminal

and/or unsocial behaviour. Unfortunately, with the development of the computer game industry, we have generation of young men who think about murders as a game; someone's fear and pain are parts of this game.

The group's ambition to build a functioning state has also directed the PR campaign to attract not only fighters but also specialists, such as doctors and engineers. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has already addressed some of his audio speeches to professionals, and we may assume that this appeal for international mobilisation will continue to grow.

It could be said that IS's cognitive warfare efforts are based on the primitive and barbaric message of the organisation. But it would be a big mistake to presume that because IS's message is primitive, the group itself is primitive. It is not. The coalition of countries lining up against the group must not concentrate solely on defeating them through military means – they must also counter their message as well. The barbarism and cruelty of IS may even play a significant role in uniting their opponents. Psychologists, psychiatrists and educational specialists must be invited to participate in selecting a new, broad-ranging strategy for creating our own cognitive warfare against IS.

The young and the restless: much of IS's propaganda is aimed at recruiting youths, as well as professionals

Lina Kolesnikova is a Russian-born, Brussels-based Fellow of ICPEM. Lina provides consultancy in the area of security, risk and crisis management to number of organisations within both the private and public sectors. She is a member of the advisory board for Crisis Response Journal and CBRNE-Terrorism Newsletter.