

A Critical Analysis on kidnapping and hostage-taking strategies by Islamic extremist groups since 2000

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Introduction

Since its formation in 2013, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham, formerly known as ISIL) has shocked the world not only with its lightning conquest of territories in Iraq and Syria, but also its gruesome executions of kidnapped hostages. The brutal murders of hostages, both Western and non-Western, quickly became ISIS' iconic 'act' as they were recorded on camera and spread to the world through the Internet. Although such acts are not entirely new in the history of terrorism,¹ new trends are observable. Terrorist groups overall are becoming less interested in kidnapping for financial gain (dropped from about 50% in the 1970s to only 5% between 2008 and

¹ Pete Lentini & Muhammad Bakashmar. "Jihadist Beheading: A Convergence of Technology, Theology, and Teleology?" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. 30:4. p.304.

2010)² than for political effects. They are also more interested in being selective about the individual hostages to kidnap as opposed to carrying out large-scaled indiscriminate attacks like 9/11 (25% of all hostage incidents since 1970s happened after 2005)³.

This essay seeks to examine the motivations behind the strategies of kidnapping and holding Western hostages by Islamic terrorist groups since the mid-2000s. It will show that such acts, when broadcast to the world in the form of images and videos, empower terrorists with great publicity and psychological advantages. This is a crucial weapon of mass 'deception' in a highly asymmetric conflict. Taking hostages becomes a means through which terrorist groups elevate their international status by initiating state-to-state dialogue with governments. They also act as an effective political tool for discrediting coalition governments by creating 'Vietnam-like' scenarios in which governments can be blamed and demoralized. In other words, the desired effects can be disproportionally magnified by relatively little effort. The essay will then analyze the strengths and weaknesses of such strategies, and finally suggest possible counter-terrorist measures.

A staged spectacle of power and brutality for maximum publicity

One of the main characteristics of the new 'kidnapping terrorism' is its fanatical obsession with propaganda, crafted deliberately at a global audience to maximize media exposure for organizational branding and recruitment. Ever since the famous kidnapping of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics by Black September, terrorists worldwide have been thrilled to experiment with the propaganda potential of kidnapping individuals with symbolic identities. Adapting to today's information society, the ultimate aim and value of the kidnapping is neither ransom or revenge⁴, but the presentation of a specific message or image to the world, as well as shocking the world so that it will pay attention to the message.

The message that many Islamist groups want to convey to the world is clear: "We are powerful. Our threat is real. Be terrified and listen to us." To the potential recruits around the world, the message is: "We are winning. The world fears us. Join us and you will win." Kidnapping and execution of Western hostages is inevitably the most effective channel for delivering these two messages to the world. Western media has proven to be intrinsically drawn to stories of jihadists' threats to execute westerners.⁵ Hostage-takers simply create a few videoclips and photographs of staged 'shows' of kidnapping and executions, release these them to the media, and the world is shocked. Global media tends to cooperatively channel the public's attention to the videos and photographs released by the terrorists.

Hezbollah was among the first extremist groups to exploit the potentials of hostage videos. In the 1980s, in order to influence U.S. and Israeli decisions, Hezbollah created videos of British and American hostages being hanged. This differed from previous hostage incidents because the videos were made especially to propagate a messages of fear and maintain media coverage and

² James J.F. Forest. "Global trends in kidnapping by terrorist groups" *Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*. 24:3. pp. 324-325.

³ Ibid. pp. 311-314, 328.

⁴ Dimitris Sotirchos. "European Interagency Security Forum - Hostage Taking: New Tool for Media Impact." *European Interagency Security Forum*. February 23, 2015. <https://www.eisf.eu/news/hostage-taking-new-tool-for-media-impact/>.

⁵ Pete Lentini & Muhammad Bakashmar. "Jihadist Beheading: A Convergence of Technology, Theology, and Teleology?" p. 304.

Brad Alan Millick. *The Shift in Terrorist Information Operations Strategies: A Comparative Case Study*. Catholic University of America. p. 108.

public interest.⁶ The videos were effective as they captured the Western world's attention immediately and were seen as public humiliation for Western governments. Each execution of Western hostages is calculated to present a prevailing public image in which the Jihadists are winning and the West is helpless, even though the execution is merely a simple murder which implies nothing about the terrorists' actual military, political and economic strength.

In the early 2000s, Al-Qaeda became the organization that carried this practice of 'branding-through-kidnapping' to the next level. In 2004, Al-Qaeda kidnapped Paul Johnson, an American aircraft engineer and made a video of it. Instead of utilizing traditional forms of passive media (such as television) to propagate a video, Al-Qaeda turned to interactive media — the Internet. In June 2004, a two-minute video showing the beheading of Johnson, as well as a message from Al-Qaeda, appeared on an Islamist website. Since the video was on the Internet, mainstream media was not in the communication chain between the terrorists and the target audience.⁷ This significantly empowered the terrorists by transferring the control over all aspects of the message, including both textual and visual presentation to Al-Qaeda.

This trend continued to advance. In 2014-2015, ISIS fully exploited the use of hostage videos by releasing not one, but a series of hostage execution videos online, with professional cinematography, graphic executions, lengthy scripted monologue by hostages, as well as English subtitles. The carefully crafted theatrical spectacle in the videos exposed ISIS' obsession with its public image. All hostages are dressed in the symbolic orange jumpsuit of Guantanamo prisoners, emphasizing the West is now the detainees and the Islamic terrorists are the authority. Some videos, such as *Although the Disbelievers Dislike it* which contains the execution of 22 Syrians prisoners, show ISIS executioners in U.S. Army-styled camouflage uniform, a clear symbolic reference to military power.⁸ In the execution video of the 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in early 2015, executioners are shown as seven-feet-tall 'giants', physically and visually empowering the helpless hostages. Like in commercials, all videos made by Al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS always display the organizations' logos on the screen to remind the audience which 'brand' they are watching. By holding a Westerner hostage, ISIS is able to control and publicize numerous images, videos, statements, together with its brutality and ideology, to the global audience efficiently.

Elevating itself to a nation-state status

Such 'public relations value' of Western hostages is not limited to global audiences on the Internet, but also a powerful communication channels to Western governments. In the face of possible devastating airstrikes by coalition forces, terrorists are pressurized to devise ways to circumvent intimidation by Western military superiority through alternative ways to exact revenge.⁹ In such unequal power balance, the weaker party often has no choice but to bring about resourcefulness and creative ingenuity.¹⁰ Although brutally executing hostages does not generate mass casualties like 9/11 attacks, it is able to produce similar magnitudes of shock waves across the world, thereby forcing world powers to respond. Brutality and graphic content is designed to create fear that matches their fear of the West's military strength. In her analysis of James Foley

⁶ Brad Alan Millick. *The Shift in Terrorist Information Operations Strategies: A Comparative Case Study*. Catholic University of America. p.144.

⁷ Ibid. p.169.

⁸ "Detailed Analysis of Islamic State (ISIS) Video: Although the Unbelievers Dislike It." Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium. <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/article/detailed-analysis-islamic-state-isis-video-although-unbelievers-dislike-it-story-expansion-7>

⁹ Minwoo Yun. "Implications of Global Terrorist Hostage-taking and Kidnapping." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. XIX, No. 2, Summer 2007, p. 137.

¹⁰ Charles Lockhart. *Bargaining in international conflicts*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1979.

videos, Mosendz explains the effectiveness of hostage videos in establishing communications with Western governments with strength:

"The U.S. government is showing itself to be extremely responsive to videos. One of the reasons they gave for the [Bowe] Bergdahl negotiation was a video in which he looked like he was in poor health. [Terrorists] do videos of the executions for the public relations value. The Obama White House is showing they do react to videos. Our adversaries around the world see this and they learn from it. All of this went into their calculation; went into what would bring them the most value for Foley."¹¹

Holding hostages is therefore a seductive bargaining chip designed for dismantling the current power structure as terrorist groups become obsessed with the image of their threat and hegemony.¹² A hostage provides a reason for governments to at least pay attention to the terrorists' demands. Therefore the act of holding Western hostages and threatening with extreme power-oriented measures elevates the terrorist organization to a state with unofficial international recognition by initiating a government-to-government level dialogue.¹³ In one of ISIS' numerous hostage videos, ISIS clearly established itself as a "state" in its statement to the U.S. government:

"You are no longer fighting an insurgency; we are an Islamic Army and a state that has been accepted by a large number of Muslims worldwide, so effectively, any aggression towards the Islamic State is an aggression towards Muslims from all walks of life who have accepted Islamic Caliphate as their leadership."¹⁴

Another prominent example of hostage-taking that illustrated its power in elevating the terrorists' international status is ISIS' treatment of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh in early 2015. ISIS demanded the release of the failed female suicide-bomber Sajida al-Rishawi from Jordanian custody in exchange for al-Kasasbeh's life. By doing so, ISIS was establishing itself to the status of a nation-state, capable of corresponding diplomatically to Jordan, a vital member of the anti-ISIS coalition forces.¹⁵ Desperate to save al-Kasasbeh, Jordan actually agreed to the prisoner swap, but demanded to see proof that al-Kasasbeh is alive. According to Sajjan Gohel, International Security Director at the Asia Pacific Foundation, the fact that the Jordanian government officially responded to ISIS gave the impression that ISIS was functioning as a state.¹⁶ As ISIS ignored Jordan's agreement and viciously burned al-Kasasbeh to death in front of the world, ISIS successfully leveraged its power to asymmetrically shock its adversaries. All the talk of a possible

¹¹ Polly Mosendz. "FBI Hostage Negotiators Share Their Insight on the James Foley Tragedy." *The Wire*. 21 Aug 2014. <http://www.thewire.com/global/2014/08/fbi-hostage-negotiators-give-their-insight-on-james-foley-tragedy/378841/>

¹² Yungwook Kim. "Negotiating with terrorists: The iterated game of the Taliban Korean hostage case" *Public Relations Review*. 34 (2008). p.264.

¹³ "The Islamic State's Hostage Strategy." *The Soufan Group*. January 30, 2015. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-hostage-strategy/>.

¹⁴ Alexander Dziadosz. Steve Holland "Obama condemns killing of reporter, U.S. hits militants in Iraq." 21 Aug 2014. <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/20/uk-iraq-security-idUKKBN0GJ0S720140820>

¹⁵ "The Islamic State's Hostage Strategy." *The Soufan Group*. January 30, 2015. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-hostage-strategy/>.

¹⁶ Laura Smith-Spark and Deborah Feyerick. "How ISIS' new hostage strategy is shifting the goalposts." *CNN*. January 30, 2015 <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/30/middleeast/isis-hostage-strategy/>

prisoner swap was merely a ruse,¹⁷ not intended to get al-Rishawi back but a psychological tactic to force Jordan to respond, draw media attention and publicly humiliate coalition governments.

A blaming game

While trying to elevate oneself to appear as a recognized state, extremist groups also try every possible means to publicly discredit the adversary states. Islamic extremists crave legitimacy, both political and religious, in order to consolidate their rule over their subjects and appeal to potential Muslim recruits. Legitimacy is vital for their ideological survival, as well as for their own psychological conviction that they are doing 'the right thing'. This inevitably involves discrediting the legitimacy and demoralizing the resolve of Western governments. Kidnapping and hostage-taking, again, proves to be a highly effective means because it creates scenarios where these governments or their allies could easily be politically and morally blamed.

In 2012, Islamic militants kidnapped American journalist James Foley and demanded GlobalPost a ransom of \$100 million Euros. As the payment was refused, the militants, who later became ISIS, beheaded Foley in August 2014. Analysts believe such a large ransom demand was deliberately made when the motive was not financial gain.¹⁸ The strategy is to ask for something that would not happen. This is consistent with ISIS' later demands to release a bomb maker and a failed suicide bomber in 2014 and 2015. Demanding something impossible ensures that no matter what the outcome is, the American government will appear to have failed to protect its own people.

Hostages are also held so that in cases of airstrikes by Western powers, extremist groups can easily accuse the West of harming hostages. On 23 April, 2015, international media was flooded with reports stating that the U.S. air operations accidentally killed an American and an Italian hostage. While it might be true that Western operations did kill the hostages, the media coverage became an automatic weapon that evocatively demoralize or even demonize the West. Western hostages are therefore pawns in a blaming game with the West, or bait in a planned "homicide-by-cop," where the authorities are either provoked into a deadly assault of which the government will be accused,¹⁹ or are reluctant to negotiate, in which the government will be criticized for being idle and useless.

¹⁷ "Jordan Pilot Murder: Islamic State Deploys Asymmetry of Fear." *BBC News*. February 4, 2015. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31129416>.

¹⁸ Polly Mosendz. "FBI Hostage Negotiators Share Their Insight on the James Foley Tragedy." *The Wire*. August 21, 2014. <http://www.thewire.com/global/2014/08/fbi-hostage-negotiators-give-their-insight-on-james-foley-tragedy/378841/>.

¹⁹ Adam Dolnik & Keith M. Fitzgerald. "Negotiating Hostage Crises with the New Terrorists." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2011) 34:4. p.279.

In the news



Obama takes blame for operation that killed two hostages

Yahoo Politics - 1 hour ago

Another American, **Al-Qaeda** spokesman Adam Gadahn, was killed, "likely in a separate US ...

Al Qaeda hostage, American Warren Weinstein, killed in operation

CNN - 13 mins ago

US Accidentally Killed Two Al Qaeda Hostages

Sky News - 58 mins ago

More news for al qaeda hostage video

US Accidentally Kills Two Al Qaeda Hostages - Sky News

news.sky.com/story/1470861/us-accidentally-kills-two-al-qaeda-hostages ▾

4 hours ago - Play video "Accidental Killing Of Two Hostages" ... In a **hostage video**, he asked the US to free al Qaeda prisoners and said he felt "totally ...

Al Qaeda hostage, American Warren Weinstein, killed ...

www.cnn.com/2015/04/23/.../warren-weinstein-al-qaeda-hostage-death/ ▾

13 mins ago - **Al Qaeda** hostage, American Warren Weinstein, killed in operation. By Ashley Fantz **Al Qaeda** released a **video** of him on Christmas 2013.

US killed Americans held by, working with al-Qaeda - CNBC ...

www.cnbc.com/id/102614141 ▾

2 hours ago - The **hostages** killed were American Dr. Warren Weinstein and ... An image grab taken from a **video** produced by **Al-Qaeda's** media wing As-

White House Announces US Operation Killed Innocent ...

abcnews.go.com ▸ Politics

4 hours ago - US Working 'Behind the Scenes' for **Al Qaeda** Hostage Release ... In a **video** released by **al Qaeda** in 2012, Weinstein, a former peace corps ...

American, Italian Hostages Killed in CIA Drone Strike in ...

www.wsj.com/.../american-italian-hostages-killed-in-cia-drone-strike-in-jan...

1 hour ago - A CIA drone strike in January targeting a suspected **al Qaeda** compound in ... killed an American and Italian being held **hostage** by the group: ... In a **video**

The front page of *Google News* on 23 April, 2015 after a keyword search of 'Al Qaeda hostages'

Again, hostage videos play a crucial role in ensuring coalition governments are blamed and their anti-terror policies discredited. Terrorists often use videotapes to shift blame via hostage confessions. In 1987, Charles Glass, an American-British author and journalist, was kidnapped by Hezbollah in Lebanon. In a video released in July 1987, Glass confessed to working for the CIA, "I collect information for the CIA. For that I made secret missions." To date, there has never been

evidence suggesting that Glass worked for the CIA.²⁰ This taped confession, however, shows Hezbollah's elaborate attempt to manipulate public perception of the cause-and-effect issue "Who was to blame for the hostage's suffering?" By constantly referring to the CIA, Hezbollah attributed the hostage's suffering to an organization that symbolized American power.²¹

In 2014 and 2015, ISIS released a series of videos of hostage 'confessions'. One video series was on British journalist John Cantlie. Done with professional lighting and editing, the series showed Cantlie giving six long monologues, explaining that his tragic fate was because his British government had "abandoned" him. The long scripted monologues exposed ISIS' eagerness to turn public opinion against coalition governments by creating frustration, directing the anger towards the West, and reinforcing this narrative of blame. In other words, Islamic extremists try to recreate a 'Vietnam-like' situation in which media materials could turn public opinion against Western governments due to the belief that unnecessary waste of human lives is caused by the governments' foreign commitments, eventually forcing the government to give up and withdraw.

Strengths and weaknesses

The practice of kidnapping and hostage-taking also provides other advantages. Kidnapping for ransom, although successful in no more than 4.5% of all kidnapping incidents²² due to U.S. and Britain's policy of no ransom, has helped generate large sums of income for Islamic groups. In early 2010s, Al-Qaeda affiliates were paid at least \$60 million for holding about 150 Western hostages.²³ This mounted to a total of \$125m in the past two decades.²⁴ Taking individual hostages and producing hostage videos is also logistically straightforward. It does not involve risks of physical assaults from coalition forces as in barricade hostage incidents. Targeting an individual can even generate more shockwaves to the public than suicide attacks on random anonymous victims due to the media's higher concentration on the hostage's story, adding a 'personal touch' to the narrative. Making hostage videos also give terrorists complete control over the timing, message and visual effects of the presentation.

Despite these advantages, hostage-taking has become increasingly problematic for the terrorists. Analysts have increasingly pointed out that the tactic of graphic executions has backfired on ISIS badly. After the slaughtering of Western aid workers and the 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians, public sympathy for the hostages and Christians in the Middle East swamped social media platforms. Egypt also launched airstrikes against ISIS immediately, a result exactly opposite to ISIS' intended effect. The gruesome execution of Japanese and Jordanian hostages also provided opposite results. Although ISIS managed to inflate their hostage 'spectacle' into 12 days of worldwide publicity, they gained nothing practical afterwards.²⁵ Both the Japanese and Jordanian governments clearly became more committed to the anti-ISIS coalition forces. The

²⁰ Brad Alan Millick. *The Shift in Terrorist Information Operations Strategies: A Comparative Case Study*. Catholic University of America. p.146.

²¹ Ibid.

²² James J.F. Forest. "Global trends in kidnapping by terrorist groups" *Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*. 24:3. p.329.

²³ Iain Cobain. "UK Hostage Strategy Scrutinised after Isis Threatens Fifth Western Hostage." *The Guardian*. October 8, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/08/uk-hostage-negotiation-strategy-scrutinised-isis-threatens-fifth-western-hostage>.

²⁴ Sophie McBain. "Al-Qaeda Earns \$125m from Ransom Payments: Should European Governments Stop Paying Up?" *NewStatesman*. July 30, 2014. <http://www.newstatesman.com/global-issues/2014/07/al-qaeda-earns-125m-ransom-payments-should-european-governments-stop-paying>.

²⁵ Rod Nordland. "ISIS Tactics Questioned as Hostages Dwindle." *The New York Times*. February 1, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/world/middleeast/isis-tactics-questioned-as-hostages-dwindle.html?_r=0.

Jordanian population was generally more united behind their government's anti-ISIS stance. Muslim imams around the world issued statements condemning the act, calling it 'un-Islamic'. This is devastating because boasting about religious legitimacy and recognition from the global Muslim population is one of ISIS' main propaganda tools. Outrage from Muslims has been so strong that ISIS was coerced to come up with their justifications quickly,²⁶ such as the eight pages of defense for the execution of the Japanese and Jordanian hostages published in its newsletter *Dabiq*.

The brutal treatment of hostages also caused substantial internal divisions within Islamic groups. Al-Qaeda recognized this issue when it stopped beheadings in Iraq in 2004. Observers believe beheadings turned people away in the communities they were trying to recruit from.²⁷ As noted in a 2006 letter written by Ayman al-Zawahiri, a senior leader of al-Qaeda, to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi urging Iraqi fighters to stop videotaped beheadings because "We are in a race for hearts and minds of our umma."²⁸ The ordeal of the Jordanian pilot was also a main cause of tensions between ISIS' Iraqi leadership, who agreed with the prisoner exchange, and a faction of Saudi fighters who wanted to execute the pilot. This group, led by Abu Talah al-Kuwaiti, split from the group over the issue.²⁹ Several ISIS fighters also chose to desert after being asked to watch or carry out executions of hostages.³⁰ To some ISIS followers, the beheadings of foreign aid workers and journalists including David Haines, Alan Henning and two Japanese hostages, was a step too far.³¹ To an organization that claimed religious legitimacy, the tactic of executing hostages ironically posed a great threat to its religious credibility.

Possible countering measures

As shown above, hostage-taking strategies and end-goals are devised mostly in political, social and religious terms. They are to psychologically shock the public into believing in their power, to elevate their international status by pressurizing coalition states to respond, and to discredit coalition governments by engineering public moral blame on them. In other words, the threat is predominantly devised in a game of perception. Terror is in the eyes of the beholder. Power of the hostage-taker depends heavily on how the other side perceives³² and responds to the threat. If the other side disregards the pressure, the terrorist's self-claimed power is futile.³³ Therefore effective

²⁶ "Jordan Pilot Murder: Islamic State Deploys Asymmetry of Fear." *BBC News*. February 4, 2015. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31129416>.

²⁷ Polly Mosendz. "FBI Hostage Negotiators Share Their Insight on the James Foley Tragedy." *The Wire*. 21 Aug 2014. <http://www.thewire.com/global/2014/08/fbi-hostage-negotiators-give-their-insight-on-james-foley-tragedy/378841/>

²⁸ James J.F. Forest. "Global trends in kidnapping by terrorist groups" *Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*. 24:3. p.322.

²⁹ Soufan Group "The Islamic State's Hostage Strategy." *The Soufan Group*. January 30, 2015. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-hostage-strategy/>.

³⁰ Patrick Cockburn. "Life under Isis: Why I Deserted the 'Islamic State' Rather than Take Part in Executions, Beheadings and Rape - the Story of a Former Jihadi." *The Independent*. March 16, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-under-isis-why-i-deserted-the-islamic-state-rather-than-take-part-in-executions-beheadings-and-rape--the-story-of-a-former-jihadi-10111877.html>.

³¹ Lizzie Dearden. "Isis defector speaks on why he left militant group after six months fighting in Syria." *The Independent*. February 11, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-defector-speaks-on-why-he-left-militant-group-after-six-months-fighting-in-syria-10038206.html>

³² J.W. Salacuse. "How should the lamb negotiate with the lion? Power in international negotiations." Edited by Deborah Kolb. *Negotiation Eclectics*. Cambridge, MA: Sages Publication. 1999. p. 87.

³³ Yungwook Kim. "Negotiating with terrorists: The iterated game of the Taliban Korean hostage case" *Public Relations Review*. 34 (2008). p. 266.

counter-terrorist strategies need to be laid out in political, social and religious terms in a way that is especially designed to spoil the enemies' end-goals. Based on the above analysis, this paper suggests the following strategic measures to Western governments:

‘No negotiation with terrorists’ policy in hostage incidents

- British and U.S. governments generally have a ‘no negotiation’ policy in all hostage incidents, due to the common misconception that ‘negotiation’ equals making concessions to terrorists’ requests. Yet negotiation is “the use of communication to exercise influence in order to change someone’s thinking, behavior, and decision making.”³⁴ In other words, negotiation is not compromising, but an act of manipulating perceptions and shifting power balances. The conventional ‘no negotiation’ policy not only cannot save the lives of hostages, the death of hostages is widely regarded by terrorists as a public humiliation for Western governments, and hence a victory for their cause. This itself encourages even more terrorist acts and kidnappings. It is crucial that Western governments respond. But how? The key is to respond with power and threat in a way that render terrorists with nothing to gain but more to lose from the terrorist act:
- In hostage incidents, Western governments and media should take great precaution in discussing or even mentioning the hostage in public. The discussion itself could imply that the hostage taker is in control. Therefore pleading from the hostages’ families in the media should be minimized as it gives terrorists a chance to ‘play God’ publicly and a great sense of power. News coverage should focus primarily on the victims’ stories and the sympathy they are receiving from the public and Muslim communities as a result of the incident. There is a need for legislation to regulate how coverage and photos of individual terrorists posing cheerfully or victoriously be published in the media. Such photos should be avoided especially in the headlines as they are likely to inspire more disillusioned youth to join their cause.
- Targeting political legitimacy and public impression of popularity:

ISIS repeatedly admits in its publications that it is fighting a ‘war of information’. It is crucial that Western authorities recognize Islamic groups heavily rely on its image of popularity, which is obsessively emphasized throughout their propaganda. The image of legitimacy and popularity is absolutely indispensable to its recruitment, which is indispensable to their success and even survival.

The West should channel resources to strategies that take advantage of this by systematically manipulating public perception of each of the extremist groups in the public sphere. One strategy is to consistently portray them as a failing movement, both morally and militarily. This may include regularly highlighting the corruption, sexual crimes, rapidly rising internal discontent and desertions, power cuts and starvation in territories under their control, as well as the large exodus of Muslims fleeing from territories occupied by the extremists. Western media should regularly draw attention to stories of their military defeats. When military success is reported, the coverage should always be accompanied by scepticism and attention to failing aspects of the movement.

³⁴ Adam Dolnik & Keith M. Fitzgerald. “Negotiating Hostage Crises with the New Terrorists.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, (2011) 34:4. p.137.

- Similarly, the West should continually publicize rising public support (particularly from the Muslim population) and the increased unity and morale among coalition forces *as a direct result* of each hostage incident or other terrorist acts. This spoils the terrorists' intention of demoralizing or segregating the West through taking and killing hostages. This may explain why ISIS suddenly halted such practice after the killing of the Japanese journalists and Jordanian pilot as both the Japanese government and the Jordanian population clearly became even more committed to the anti-ISIS coalition after the incident.
- Targeting the extremist groups' religious legitimacy:

While Western governments are politically compelled to distinguish between Islam and terrorism, terrorist groups are desperate to establish their religious legitimacy in the eyes of fellow Muslims, swamping their propaganda with religious justifications. The West can turn this into its advantage by employing the same religious rhetoric. This includes lobbying with Muslim communities to publically label the terrorists as "enemies of Islam", "violation of the Holy Quran", or "blasphemy against the merciful Allah". Governments can also work closely with the media to ensure these labels are constantly reinforced in the media. The media can also to publicly expose the terrorists' immoral lifestyles and impose public shame to individual terrorists in Islamic contexts such as indulgence in 'Western' lifestyles, pornography use, or un-Islamic superstitions. In other words, whenever an Islamic group holds a person hostage, the coalition forces holds its religious honour hostage. This is one way to discourage the practice of hostage taking.

While Islamic extremist groups rely heavily on victimization complex (particularly the "Muslims lands are being attacked" narrative) to generate anger and recruit fighters, coalition governments may also reinforce narratives that "Muslim lands are being attacked by Terrorist groups" by repetitively portraying Muslims as main victims of individual Islamic groups.

Responding to Islamic terrorist insurgencies in general

- Western states should avoid using the label "terrorist" which is a compliment to Islamic groups since their primary strategy is to terrorize the public. This will only boost their ego and invite other copycats to do the same. This is a big mistake made by the US government, which often discusses a 'list of terrorist organizations'. Indeed, governments need to make this list internally, but the name 'terrorist list' does give the extremist groups a great sense of power and accomplishment. The list affirms their strategy of terrorizing the public because they must be feared and taken seriously to be powerful. Instead, Western states can make a list called "enemies of Islam list," using 'Islamic' terminology and catchphrases to label terrorists and all terrorist activities - e.g. "an insult to Islam", "blasphemy", or "apostates".
- Governments should also avoid making statements such as "We condemn the terrorist attacks". Terrorists enjoy being condemned by governments and the attention they gain from such statements.

- In addition, the focus of news reports should not be the "atrocities of the Islamic State" as this is exactly how the terrorist group wants to be publicized. Instead, the media can focus on portraying the crimes as an "attack on Muslims".
- When a terrorist attack has taken place on Western soil, the media must avoid implying there is widespread fear and panic among the general public as this is exact effect the terrorists intend to create. Instead, news coverage should focus on the unity and solidarity of the public, as well as sympathy for the victims.
- Whenever a terrorist group claims responsibility of an attack, never use the phrase "claimed responsibility" in the news report. Use "took the blame for" instead. This is because Islamic groups always aim to put the blame for Western governments to demoralize the public after each terrorist attack.
- Extremist propaganda is generally attracted to a pervasive 'zero-sum' mindset as terrorists tend to see the world in "winner-takes-all" terms. Western media and government press releases must avoid implying or enforcing this mentality. Media campaigns can be launched, particularly social media campaigns, to emphasize how the victims' side and their cause gain vast new sympathy from the public *due to* the terrorists' actions, while the terrorists' cause loses support from Muslims around the world. Such campaigns can also emphasize that the terrorists' actions have caused Muslims around the world to start questioning their faith in Islam.
- Likewise, the way jihadists' journeys to the Middle East and deaths are currently reported in media is probably inspiring more people to join their cause. The media should refrain from describing western jihadist fighters travelling to Syria as "joining ISIS." This is because, ironically, it sounds rather heroic and inspirational to numerous bored and disillusioned youth, as well as a propaganda victory for ISIS. Ideally, nothing regarding the jihadists (including names, background, past histories, recent actions, reactions of their families, where they died) should be reported at all. Only the victims' lives and stories are to be reported.
- Finally, governments and the media may take advantage of the 'politically correct' narrative that advocates "Islam is a peaceful religion" for counter-terrorism campaigns. Anything violent done in the name of Islam should be immediately labeled and accused as an insult on Islam. This implies we can target and arrest radicals/terrorists in the name of Islam too, further exposing their ideological contradictions.

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