



Terrorism Gone Viral:

The burgeoning media war between ISIS and the U.S.

By Capt. Kevin C. Sandell

Moments before opening fire on an unsuspecting throng of attendees at a Prophet Muhammad caricature contest, the Islamic State sympathizer examined his guise, cocked his weapon and prepared his last living act. Logging onto Twitter, the terrorist typed 126 characters, pledging his allegiance to the Islamic radicalist group, and signing off with the hashtag, “TexasAttack.” While no bystanders were killed in the evening assault, the attack prodded the U.S. government to deeply analyze the future of war – how terrorist groups modified their center of gravity to actively recruit and engage global audiences through the use of social media.

To combat this emergent trend, the U.S. military must take a concerted, comprehensive and aggressive posture to degrade terrorist propaganda, deny enemy recruitment efforts and ultimately defeat the Islamic State.

Terror Groups’ Changing Recruitment Tactics

Gone are the days when radical extremists signed up under the inspiration of Osama Bin Laden’s terrorist camp video footage or listening to copies of his scratchy audio tapes. Today, potential terrorist recruits are heavily influenced by ISIS’ grisly footage of beheadings, car bombings and kidnappings posted through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

In a statement to the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul said, “Social media networks have become an extension of the Islamist terror battlefields overseas, turning homegrown extremists in to sleeper operatives and attackers. ... We are no longer hunting terrorists living in caves who only communicate through couriers. We are facing an enemy whose messages and calls to violence are posted and promoted in real-time.”¹ Islamic radicalists now propagate their battlefield successes instantly on location, customized to specific audiences, and often with the professional appearance of cutting-edge imagery, graphics and editing.



Mirroring news packages seen on international newscasts, the Islamic State has created an expanding portfolio of instantaneous video and radio news programs touting triumphs of seized territory across Iraq and Syria. Within the group, those operating cameras and editing equipment are esteemed as highly as those wielding swords, explosives and guns.

In a recent video released by the Islamic State mujahedeen, a fighter states that media is “half of the battle, if not its majority.”² Reaching potential recruits, who like Americans, are glued to their smartphones and the apps that allow rapid transmission of images, means the group must bombard social media channels with its messaging. A study conducted by the Brookings Institute and quoted by Associated Press reporter, Lori Hinnant, found more than 46,000 active Twitter accounts associated with the Islamic State over a two-month period.³ Even if an account is deactivated, there’s one right behind it waiting to surface.

The commander of U.S. European Command, Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove, said the group can find underlying motivations and market those to recruit fighters. “[ISIS is] able to reach and find out what is important to these people, what motivates these people, and then they create an ability to fill that need, initially through the social media, internet,” Gen. Breedlove said.

The assistant director of the FBI, Michael B. Steinbach, testified to Congress that ISIS establishes a narrative and connects with its target audiences, especially those on-the-fence. The group emphasizes a complete lifestyle change, and being an element of a larger unit:

Unlike other groups, ISIL has constructed a narrative that touches on all facets of life – from career opportunities, to family life, to a sense of community. The message isn’t tailored solely to those who are overtly expressing symptoms of radicalization. It is seen by many who click through the internet every day, receive social media push notifications, and participate in social networks. Ultimately, many of these individuals are seeking a sense of belonging.⁵

Steinbach continues by saying that ISIS’ “widespread reach” through social media channels is “most concerning as ISIL has aggressively employed this technology for its nefarious strategy.”⁴

Federal law enforcement agencies and Cabinet-level departments remain in “hot pursuit” of ISIS’ social media administrators, but say the fight is an uphill climb. The FBI has said all 50 states have open investigations into suspected ISIS supporters. ISIS also has more than 25,000 English language followers on Twitter.⁵ According to Congressional testimony on June 3, 2015, the U.S. government



believes nearly 200 U.S. citizens, and nearly 4,000 Westerners, have traveled to Syria to fight. Chief among the government's concerns are Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) who learn tactics abroad and use them against U.S. interests, persons or facilities.

Efforts by the U.S. government and U.S. military have not been fruitless, however, as techniques by the U.S. State Department and Defense Department pioneer ways to impact social media becoming the future of war.

Confronting Challenges

When U.S.-led aerial bombings of ISIS targets began in 2014, United States Central Command released daily rollups of destroyed targets, along with video footage of bombs impacting their mark. The bombings were creating substantial leeway for Iraqi forces to regain territory and degrade ISIS fighters. By using outdated "b-roll" or stock video footage, however, of Islamic State convoys careening down Iraqi streets with their characteristic black ISIS flags, TV networks became a pivotal player in the accuracy battle between the U.S. government and ISIS. To counter claims the government was propagating its own successes, the international coalition battling ISIS argues the government's main objective is accuracy.

"We're here to help you get it right," Emily Horne, a spokesperson for the State Department's special envoy against ISIS said. "What we're pointing out is something that we think is inaccurate."⁷

Horne also said alternate imagery (usually provided by military public affairs teams), such as footage of U.S. troops training Iraqi security forces, would be more appropriate. In some cases, it appears that networks were using ISIS footage provided directly through propaganda videos.

Seeking to align the counter-terror communication strategies of the U.S. executive branch, President Barack Obama signed Executive Order 13584 two days before the 10th anniversary of 9/11. The order, originally intended to discredit the actions and ideologies of al-Qa'ida, brought together "expertise, capabilities, and resources to realize efficiencies and better coordination of U.S. Government communications investments to combat terrorism and extremism."⁸ Under this order, the U.S. State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications was established to coordinate government-wide communications targeted against violent extremists and terrorist organizations. The center was mandated to monitor and evaluate narratives and international events, identify emerging trends in extremist communications, and facilitate a wider range of communications technologies.



Facilitating counter-terrorism communications would prove problematic and muddled by differences in strategic communication strategy three years later with the release of the center's "Welcome to ISIS Land" video. The video, which showed graphic depictions of ISIS-led executions and attempted to subvert the organization's online propaganda efforts, garnered nearly 850,000 views on YouTube, but failed to show a measure of effectiveness. According to a Washington Post article, "critics at the State Department and White House saw the use of graphic images as a disturbing embrace of the adversary's playbook. And for all the viral success of 'ISIS Land,' even the center's defenders could never determine whether it had accomplished its main objective: discouraging would-be militants from traveling to Syria."⁹

While the center has downsized and the U.S. State Department now heads an Information Coordination Cell, the department plans to assemble U.S. embassies, senior military leaders and regional allies to create a worldwide messaging campaign to discredit and refute ISIS claims. A White House advisor, Rashad Hussain, said the plan is to be more "factual and testimonial," and will emphasize ISIS hypocrisy and accounts of its defectors, while also showcasing the group's battlefield losses. Absent from the latest trend of State Department messaging: regeneration of graphic imagery.¹⁰

Although the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications did not demonstrate a clear measure of performance or effectiveness, its efforts did not go unnoticed by Islamic State militants. ISIS followers created their own version of the "Welcome to ISIS Land" video, instead mockingly naming their video, "Run Do Not Walk to U.S. Terrorist State." Many ISIS fighters even tweeted death threats on the center's Twitter page, and in one case, an ISIS sympathizer identified one of the center's contractors by name and singled him out for death.¹¹ Not so widely promoted through media or diplomatic channels, the State Department also developed tactics to counter Islamic States claims about America's allure.

The department enlisted The Walt Disney Company to create a multimedia project entitled, "Welcome: Portraits of America," to officially welcome international visitors to U.S. airports and embassies. A press release on the project said the department's aims were to "create standards that ensure passengers entering the United States experience a process that is welcoming, understandable, respectful, time-efficient and less stressful. ... And will resonate deeply with citizens returning to their nation."¹²



While centralized efforts exist to discredit Islamic State media attention, there is more to be done. To ultimately defeat IS IS and future extremist organizations who threaten the United States, the Pentagon must embrace innovative, consistent and compelling resources.

Crafting Solutions

Inform and influence activities (IIA) are shaping operations that can motivate a global audience, and can be used offensively against enemy command nodes as a way to impact enemy morale. Impacting how our enemies recruit and retain fighters will impact how future wars are conceived. While the branches of the U.S. government have mastered the diplomatic, military and economic instruments of power, the information instrument still needs to be sharpened. Today's information environment is too powerful and world-changing to disregard, or mistreat.

Among other aspects, the U.S. Department of Defense should consider implementing the following recommendations to better target the expanding role of social media and misinformation:

- Create a strategic counterterrorism communication cell in U.S. Cyber Command or the Defense Intelligence Agency.
- Educate Public Affairs Officers and G7/S7s on properly countering enemy claims.
- Reduce the approval timeline to release factual information through Public Affairs channels.
- Train service members on the importance of Words-Deeds-Images principles.
- Bolster Information-Related Capabilities throughout the military branches of service.

First and foremost, the Pentagon should imitate State Department efforts to counter terrorist communication themes and messaging. The U.S. Cyber Command should foster cyber warriors dedicated to rooting out online terrorist propaganda and countering their claims. Military Public Affairs Officers and IIA officers could be used also to counter terrorist propaganda and let the facts speak for themselves.

The next solution would be increasing instruction to military communicators on properly countering terrorist/extremist communications. The State Department currently implements daily talking points from the Information Coordination Cell distributed to



U.S. embassies worldwide, urging them to accentuate a combined, joint set of themes and facts on ISIS.¹³ The military could utilize these talking points and modify them based on current operations on the ground. Public Affairs Officers and IIA officers must be better prepared to offer talking points to local national media and even stakeholders in the American military. These communicators must constantly have factual and ever-changing talking points to use in press releases and social media posts.

As in any bureaucratic organization, the approval authority to release a product often lags, effectively rendering the product useless. A Washington Times editorial said that military and diplomatic officials often want to prevent a blatant disclosure of American involvement in inform and influence activities: “U.S. information operations have been weakened and limited in conducting counter-information attacks because of concerns the American hand will be exposed. Another problem has been fear among U.S. higher-ups that IS will step up both information and kinetic attacks in response.”¹⁴ Combatant commanders must issue a top-down directive clarifying and expediting approval authority processes to subordinate commanders at the O-5 level. Operating at the tactical level, battalion commanders are often at the forefront of information operations. By reaching our external audiences as lightning-fast as the Islamic State, will we be successful in countering messages and propaganda.

Service members must be cognizant of the “Strategic Corporal” effect, and how strategic implications are rank immaterial. Junior-ranking Soldiers have as much, if not more, impact on consequential actions than the U.S. State Department or Defense Department. “Modern military experience, particularly in combat, is often characterized by rapid decision making in autonomous environments,”¹⁵ writes Rye Barcott in a Harvard Business Review editorial. The author continues by saying, “As young lieutenants, we learned that we needed to set the example, communicate the commander’s intent, and then empower our corporals and sergeants to operate in places where they may not be able to ask, “What do I do next?”¹⁶

Aligning the government and military’s Words-Deeds-Images under a top-down synchronization ensures the Soldiers with boots on the ground act professionally, competently, and situationally aware. Soldiers from private to general must train more in media interviews, facilitating media embeds, and understanding the Army is a profession. Additionally, Soldiers must be more culturally-aware and continually learning basic phrases in the host nation language.

Finally, Information-Related Capabilities (IRCs) must be bolstered across the U.S. military because these independent capabilities and techniques support lines of effort and can make significant strides against extremists. Whether it is public affairs, military



information support operations, combat camera, or Soldier-Leader Engagements, IRCs should be emphasized, planned and coordinated before, during and after an operation. These critical mission enablers and force multipliers serve as another source of non-lethal capabilities to meet a commander's objectives, while countering extremists' dishonest and deceitful releases.

Today's information environment has changed the course of modern warfare, and will transform future wars for generations.

Only by working together can we defeat our modern-day adversaries.

NOTES

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4. Statement of Michael B. Steinbach, Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 114th Cong. (2015) (testimony of Michael B. Steinbach).
5. Kara Foxx, "FBI Head warns of 'crowdsourced terrorism' and Online Predators," *Fox19 Now* (N.p., 14 Oct. 2015), accessed 16 Oct. 2015, <http://www.fox19.com/story/30264432/fbi-head-warns-of-crowdsourced-terrorism-and-online-predators>.
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14. Bill Gertz, "Pentagon Struggles to Counter Success of Islamic State Social Media, Info War," Editorial, *The Washington Times*, 13 May 2015. Web. Accessed 9 June 2015.
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