The Logic of Insanity: Why Groups Like ISIS & Hamas Strategically Court with Self-Destruction

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November 2023

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Hamas' multipronged attack on Israel last month was shocking in not just its scale and brutality but in the ruthless targeting of women, elderly, and children. Mass casualty terrorist attacks have become the standard for jihadist groups and, with that evolution, the threshold for capturing global media attention has increased. But Hamas' attacks went much further than simply maximizing lethality with a bloodlust that has drawn parallels with Al-Qaida and Islamic State's worst atrocities. In the aftermath of such attacks, the instinctual response is to dismiss these groups as irrational zealots driven as much by self-destruction as the destruction of their enemies. After all, don't they understand that such brutality committed against far more powerful adversaries all but assures their own destruction? Almost certainly. But there is a logic to the insanity. And understanding that logic is crucial to predatorily destroying these groups.

Figure 1. A rally in support of those taken hostage. Hamas and other Palestinian groups are believed to be holding more than 200 people as hostages. Image from Amit Elkayam for *The New York Times*.

A mix of ideological and strategic compulsion

Since Al-Qaida's attacks on New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, there have been dozens of terrorist attacks that captured the world's attention due to a combination of scale, brutality, audacity, and ruthlessness. In more recent years, Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's 2013 hospital attack in Yemen, Pakistan Taliban's 2014 Peshawar school attack, the Islamic State's slaughter of minority communities in Iraq and Syria, and Islamic State Khorasan Province's (ISKP) targeting of Hazaras are reminders that such attacks are seen by jihadist groups as merely another option to escalate their forever wars. Ideology clearly plays a significant role as a justificatory mechanism that compels "true believers" to engage in extreme violence as a sacred duty. A disproportionate focus on ideology alone can be problematic.

Of at least equal importance is the strategic rationale; the alignment of tangible ends and means that underpins the decision to act. Jihadist groups are acutely aware that their violence will incite the wrath of adversaries that enjoy almost incalculable conventional advantages. This is the point. Attacks of the most extreme brutality – public beheadings, violations of innocents, maiming and mutilation of bodies, genocidal slaughter – are designed to act as triggers to incite the stronger adversary to deploy their overwhelming conventional advantage. It is now that their propaganda machine shifts up a gear as the narrative war takes center stage to help fuel the psychosocial and

strategic conditions that, in the calculus of the terrorist group, are to its advantage and the disadvantage of their adversaries. So, what characterizes those strategic conditions?

Figure 2. Smoke rises from the Defence Ministry's compound in Sanaa, Yemen after it was attacked on Dec. 5, 2013. Image from Khaled Abdullah/*Reuters*.

Intractable Cycles of Violence

For all the rhetoric about protecting their fellow Muslims, jihadist groups purposefully seek to create and fuel perceptions of acute crisis amongst their constituents. At no time is this clearer than when jihadist groups engage in acts of barbarism that are unashamedly designed to trigger cycles of violence and polarize the conflict environment. By targeting civilians, especially those belonging to certain identity groups or the most vulnerable, the attacks seek to evoke a visceral reaction from the adversary and the international community. This reaction, in turn, provides the perpetrators with additional narrative ammunition, reinforcing their portrayal of the 'enemy' as a brutal and immoral force.

With time, violence tends to transform from being a means to an end to becoming an end in itself—a defining feature of the group's collective identity and the individual identities of its members. The dilemma for civilian populations is that they become caught between lethal terrorists and lethal counter-terrorists. This was the experience of Mosulis who found themselves trapped between the lethal certainty of Islamic State's draconian governance and the lethal uncertainty of death as collateral damage in coalition efforts to free their city. This is the predicament that faces populations around the world living under regimes of terror. It is imperative for operational and strategic decisionmakers to carefully consider what mix of kinetic and non-kinetic activities will simultaneously

apply sufficient pressure upon those who may actively or tacitly support the regime or insurgency while creating opportunities for those who wish to escape to be treated humanely. After all, actions can be the most powerful messages in the ongoing influence struggle.

The Narrative Wars

Propaganda is afforded a central [role](#) before, during, and after the attack to shape how target audiences perceive unfolding events and its actors. Prior to the attack, there may be a shift in the propaganda output of the group although operational security often requires any flagging of what is to come to be subtle. Once the act of terror has been committed, the propaganda machinery kicks into higher gear, seeking to control the narrative that emerges from the chaos. First and foremost, the extreme violence is framed as a virtuous act of urgent necessity. These narratives inevitably seek to lionize the perpetrators and provoke adversaries into actions that could be portrayed as overreactions further legitimizing the terrorist group's initial act and ongoing campaign. With time, propaganda around the attack and its aftermath will seek to create a legacy narrative and ingrain the story, its heroes, and antagonists into folklore.

Counterstrategy Implications

Three important counterstrategy lessons emerge from the preceding analysis. First, targeted counter-terrorism operations are a crucial component of a holistic response. At a minimum, the terrorist group's ability to sustain its operations in the short-medium term must be destroyed. Of course, targeting is only possible with access to accurate intelligence, and relationships with allies are a force multiplier in this regard. Kinetic counterterrorism operations in response to a terrorist attack should also be designed to deter future attacks but not at the expense of fueling the conditions that may increase support for the group.

Second, the narrative war needs to be centralized in tactical, operational, strategic, and policy considerations. It is too easy to fall into a false sense of security that national and international sympathy and goodwill can be sustained. The reality is that the expectations for the rhetoric and behavior of state actors are higher than that of violent non-state actors; and it should be. A holistic approach to strategic communications is crucial. This involves engaging in defensive efforts via counternarratives but prioritizing offensive efforts that use messaging to project and shape the information environment. One of the easiest messaging principles to apply in a multifaceted strategic communications effort is the say-do gap or credibility gap principle. Put simply, use messaging to narrow one's own perceived say-do gap while maximizing the say-do gap of adversaries. This is

particularly useful because say-do gap considerations can help decisionmakers to better synchronize actions and messaging.

Finally, severing the relationships between the terrorist organization and the population is of paramount importance. To achieve this, policymakers must include programs for winning the "hearts and minds" of the population, thereby decoupling the symbiotic relationship that often exists between the terrorist regime and the people. While kinetic operations clearly have a role to play, humanitarian (e.g. aid distribution) and community outreach (e.g. support to civil society) activities are even more important. Every act of the counterterrorism and humanitarian effort is an opportunity to win another battle in the narrative war.