



Post Conference Report: The Issues of Strategic Psychological Warfare with Daesh

By Antonino Occhiuto

On 5 October 2018, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) hosted its third public lecture part of the Middle East in Crisis series. This series aims to provide knowledge and stimulate debate on the issues currently affecting the Middle East through an analysis of their root causes and implications.

To explore the complex issues related to psychological warfare and their importance in the fight against global jihadi terrorism, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre has invited Evgeny Pashentsev. Pashentsev is: leading researcher of the Diplomatic Accademy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, professor and Head of the MA project programme 'The modern and contemporary history of Europe and North America' at Moscow's MCPU, consulting visiting professor at Lomonosov Moscow State University, director of the Moscow based International Centre for Socio-Political Studies and Russia's leading expert in political communication strategies. Professor Pashentsev explained the importance of understanding those elements of psychological warfare that terrorist organisations use to remain a formidable threat to states both in the Middle East and beyond, in order to effectively counter them.

Professor Pashentsev began by defining psychological warfare as attempts by the state, supra-state or non-state actors to inflict damage against intangible assets of the enemy in order to gain a material advantage. Likewise, terrorist attacks such as suicide bombings, clearly aimed at damaging material, tangible assets, can also have a tremendous impact over the intangible sphere by spreading fear among ordinary citizens. Fear, in turn, can have a significant economic impact. For instance, a state which is deemed as dangerous and unstable due to a wave of terrorist attacks, is less likely to prosper economically and attract investments.

Delivering material damage in order to attack intangible assets of the enemy and vice-versa is part of a clear strategy of asymmetric warfare, often enacted by actors such as terrorist groups, which do not have the military capabilities to sustain a classic symmetric confrontation with more powerful state actors. Asymmetric warfare often requires a methodically and effectively prepared psychological strategy for its success. This is especially true for jihadi terrorist organisations as only an extremely convincing narrative can ensure the commitment

of a terrorist act without hesitation.

Ultimately, terrorism aims to liquidate the equilibrium between openness and closure that states should attempt to have and force states towards complete closure. Complete closure entails the suspension of democratic rights and civil liberties, effectively forcing society to live in police states which would not be every different from ideal Caliphate that jihadi terrorist have in mind.

A comprehensive information strategy is thus certainly key to win the psychological battle against terrorists and extremists. However, states have to date proven that they are not up to the task. In dictatorial regimes, especially in the developing world, citizens are inclined not to believe state provided information. As a consequence rumours, including the ones spread by the propaganda machine of jihadi groups, have the same impact of official sources, which were traditionally considered as more reliable. For this reason terrorist networks are specialising in targeting individuals originally coming from countries in which state media cannot be trusted, even in established democratic societies. They also rely on the fact that states are unlikely to offer counter radicalisation narratives in several languages, while the simple and blunt jihadi propaganda message is currently designed to attract speakers of all different languages.

From 2014 onwards the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant a.k.a. Daesh, has led a much more effective image propaganda war compared to its opponents. Journalists might post pictures of heightened security measures after a terrorist attack simply to highlight government's effort to prevent further violence. Those same pictures, especially if they include signs of popular fear, can be effectively exploited and used by the jihadi propaganda machine to underscore the outstanding effects of their criminal activities. Daesh has used visual propaganda effectively in all the phases of its existence. While in control of large portions of territory across Iraq and Syria, it documented life inside the Caliphate. When losing ground against international coalition's forces, it was careful to promote the mistakes and the brutality of the opposing side.

As the struggle against Daesh carries on, the armed group is likely to continue to use tactics of psychological warfare, often combined with an array of other asymmetric war tactics, further demonstrating its ability to constitute an ever-evolving threat. As argued by Professor Evgeny Pashentsev, jihadi organisations will always find a way to maintain their appeal and re-emerge under new forms, (potentially Daesh 2.0) unless action to tackle the major underlying problems affecting modern societies, such as corruption and widespread inequalities, is successful. Such underlying problems will be addressed specifically in EGIC's upcoming conference to be held in Prague on 2 November 2018 and titled 'Once and for All: Strategies to End the Scourge of ISIS.' This prominent international event will be characterised by a high level panel comprised by experts in different spheres who, having been at the forefront in the fight against terrorism, can now all contribute with a unique set of expertise to create a framework to ensure the ultimate defeat of Daesh.