



Centre for Air Power Studies

ISLAMIC STATE PROPAGANDA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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Introduction

Islamic State (IS), formerly known as ISIS, a Sunni terrorist organisation is headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Islamic State's occupation of large territories in Sunni dominated areas of Iraq and Syria has created a storm in the world. The hallmark of their success has been their social media blitz and participation of foreign fighters. The incident of Indian youth raising ISIS flags or wearing ISIS T-Shirts and distribution of ISIS literature appear to have been influenced by IS propaganda. These incidents though isolated do raise questions in the minds of Indian Security Establishments. The use of social media for propaganda by ISIS has caught many countries across the world by surprise and has forced them to look for answers to this ISIS media blitz. The exploitation of social media for propaganda and recruitment by terrorist organisations has implications for India and needs due attention.

Islamic State

ISIS had moved away from Al Qaeda due to its extremely violent activities. The alienation and exploitation of Sunnis and atrocities by Iraqi and Syrian rulers forced even the moderate Sunni population to look at ISIS as an alternative to their existing rulers¹. This fact has been effectively exploited by ISIS to recruit the youth from these areas. The differences between ISIS and Al Qaeda have increased due to insistence of the ISIS on establishing Sunni superiority and on formation of Islamic State². This aspect surprisingly has found favours with many Muslims across the world.

The capture of certain territories of Iraq and Syria by ISIS has given it confidence and it declared formation of an Islamic Caliphate and nominated Baghdadi as Caliph³. The ISIS is aiming to erase boundaries and establish an Islamic State in the entire world. Their plan to establish Islamic State in some parts of northern Africa, Middle East region and Asia in the next five years reportedly covers parts of India⁴.

ISIS victories were achieved in a much shorter time period and are being held in awe by the Sunni people, who were facing extreme discrimination and were being suppressed in Iraq and Syria. Sunni people were facing alienation within their own countries and were suspicious of the intentions of their rulers. The Shia rulers of Iran and Turkey are providing support to Iraq and Syria to quell the Sunni insurgency.

ISIS Propaganda and Recruitment

The professional and effective utilisation of social media by the Islamic State has been an issue under deliberation and discussion across the world⁵. ISIS has highlighted the atrocities of the Shia rulers, aiding and abetment of excesses by Shia rulers of Iraq and the killing of innocent civilian women and children by US drone attacks through social media. The ease with which ISIS has been able to influence people from across the world to join them and fight has been astonishing. The quality of propaganda on social media has been so good that some analysts have compared it with Hollywood movies. There are indications of involvement of specialists/ experts from the field in designing of websites, videos, pictures, messages, social media sites in view of the quality of material being put on the social media sites. They have effectively used social media to recruit youth not only from Middle East but also from US, UK, Europe, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc. The videos and photographs of its fighters from Western countries have been posted on the social networking sites as part of their strategy for attracting youth from across the world.

The capture of Uyghur extremist fighting alongside the ISIS has pointed towards likely implications for the China⁶. The US and UK youth, who had joined ISIS ranks and were seen tweeting on the social networking sites, made the American and British governments appear to be losing the information battle. These governments have since gone on overdrive to monitor such traffic on social media and remove them at the earliest to reduce

the damage from such propaganda. In addition, there has been a flurry of activities by these governments, think tanks and other government supported organisations to neutralise the adverse effect. The recent photograph of a Chechen rebel with ISIS fighters indicates that the advent of social media has removed the territorial boundaries and as a result individuals, organisations and countries are able to invade and establish contact with the population, without the necessity of physical presence. Russia would be watching these developments closely. The western media is highlighting the presence of Chechen rebels to put pressure on Russia to stop aiding Syria and at least get on a common platform with US in anti ISIS operations.

Offensive Propaganda

ISIS has been using Social Media to soften potential targets and demoralise them with propaganda. ISIS success in Mosul, Iraq, is largely attributed to victory through effective utilisation of social media and offensive propaganda. They successfully used social media to inflate the strength and capabilities of ISIS soldiers and soften the opponents. The video clip 'Flames of War' highlights the ISIS victory while showing the brutalities of the ISIS resulting in instant and cruel killing of Iraqi and Syrian soldiers fighting against them⁷. The ISIS tweet "Baghdad, we are coming" has created fear in the minds of Iraqi soldiers as well as among the countries supporting the Iraqi government. Many Iraqi soldiers fled the battlefield leaving behind valuable weaponry, fearing an onslaught by ISIS. The western governments have been evacuating their citizens and embassy staff in anticipation of ISIS arrival in Baghdad. They are going overboard to block ISIS propaganda as well as launched their own propaganda in removing the fear from the hearts and minds of the people as well as the soldiers. The first battle of perception appears to have been won by ISIS.

Implications for India

The recent photograph of Tamil youths wearing ISIS T-Shirts⁸ and raising ISIS flags in the Srinagar valley has raised eyebrows in the India. The participation/ support being shown by the Indian Youth to ISIS activities, appears to be a result of extensive and effective propaganda by ISIS. The ISIS propaganda material, which was initially aimed at Middle East and Western countries, is now believed to have been seen in some parts of India⁹. The

declaration of support by Pakistani 'Tehreek-i-Khilafat' to ISIS has raised concerns in India¹⁰.

Today's youth are addicted to social media and find it difficult to live without. They are most likely to be exploited in their impressionable age. Youth have always been a target of terrorist organisations since they are most vulnerable. Their idealist approach, follies in the administration and alienation of the poor in the society make them the most likely target for such organisations. The terrorist organisations in Punjab, East Indian states, J & K as well as other insurgent organisations of India have recruited and effectively exploited youth for their ulterior motives in the past. The edited/ unedited/ doctored photographs, videos, stories, messages of isolated cases of exploitation, violence etc. are uploaded on the internet and passed through social media sites to incite religious and ethnic sentiments. The capability of social media could be a great enabler as well as a weapon in the hands of disillusioned individuals organisations or countries with ulterior motives.

In India, most religious organisations have not supported the call of ISIS to create an Islamic Caliphate and join ISIS. There are reported cases of young boys from Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, J&K, UP, etc supporting ISIS. It may be interesting to note that a few people, who are seen to be supporting it, are ones who are literate and have easy access to internet and appear to have been influenced by the propaganda of the ISIS. There are also isolated incidents of some Shia organisations calling on youth to join the fight against ISIS to protect the Shia Shrines.

There is a need to address the ISIS propaganda, which is aimed at creating a greater division between the Shia and the Sunni. There was a report of clash between Shia and Sunni youth in one of the cities indicating the adverse impact of the ISIS media campaign. In addition, there were also reports of some Shia organisations in some parts of India seeking volunteers to protect Shia Shrines in Middle East if need arises. There is need to nip it in the bud before it becomes a monster. The religious leaders and elders of the community need to be involved in preventing adverse effect of this false propaganda. In addition, there is a need to pro-actively monitor internet and social media traffic to prevent their misuse by the miscreants. A close watch must be kept on the people who thrive on such divisive

politics. Cases of attempts to disrupt communal harmony must be dealt with expeditiously and the law of the land should prevail. The media could play a constructive role in maintaining the harmony and preventing exploitation by people with ulterior motive.

The effective use of social media for propaganda by ISIS also has lessons for the Armed Forces. There is need to formulate a strategy to deal with situations, where social media could be used by opponents to create situations of communal disharmony, dissent or confusion within the organisation, especially in the backdrop of failure of their ulterior designs. They could use the fault lines in the society to create a wedge between the various institutions of the country. The use of social media as an offensive tool has been amply highlighted in the ISIS coercive strategy to mould the perceptions of the opponents to achieve their operational objectives. The emergence of new situations, use of new means for the conduct of war necessitate that Armed Forces review Doctrines and/ or Manuals to incorporate relevant lessons. The efficacy of social media in perception management to achieve operational objectives needs to be studied in greater detail by Armed Forces and relevant lessons must be drawn.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

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³ "ISIS: Creation of the Caliphate", in <http://www.trackingterrorism.org/content/creation-caliphate>, accessed on October 09, 2014

⁴ John Hall, "The ISIS map of the world", in <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2674736/ISIS-militants-declare-formation-caliphate-Syria-Iraq-demand-Muslims-world-swear-allegiance.html>, accessed on October 22, 2014

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⁶ Jack Moore, "Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims Receiving 'Terrorist Training' From Isis Fighters for Attacks in China", in <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/xinjiangs-uighur-muslims-receiving-terrorist-training-isis-fighters-attacks-china-1466594>, accessed October 10, 2014

⁷Ryan Mauro, "ISIS Releases 'Flames of War' Feature Film to Intimidate West", in <http://counterjihadreport.com/tag/isisal-qaeda-rivalry/> accessed on October 14, 2014

⁸ Prayaag Akbar, "Why a photo showing Tamil Muslims in support of ISIS is more troubling than any IB report", in <http://scroll.in/article/672341/Why-a-photo-showing-Tamil-Muslims-in-support-of-ISIS-is-more-troubling-than-any-IB-report> accessed on October 17, 2014

⁹ Ruchinka Upadhyaya, "Isis Using Pamphlets and Graffiti to Influence India's and Pakistan's Youngsters", in <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-using-pamphlets-graffiti-influence-indias-pakistans-youngsters-1464393> accessed on October 20, 2014

¹⁰ Muhammad Amir Rana, "ISIS's cascading effect", in <http://www.dawn.com/news/1118838>, accessed on October 15, 2014.

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