

## Essay

Terrorism has emerged as a serious threat to public safety, particularly in the last century, and has involved various strategies, tactics and attack methods across different decades and terrorist groups. Terrorism is defined by the Crown Prosecution Service as “the use or threat of action, both in and outside of the UK, designed to influence any international government organisation or to intimidate the public” (CPS, 2020). They also detail that the motive must be to advance a cause, either “political, religious, racial or ideological”. Examples of terrorist acts include being violent towards people or damaging property, putting the lives of others in danger, risking the health and safety of the public, or an interference or disruption to electronic systems.

In this essay, I will hone in on the ways in which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have built their reputation as one of the most infamous terrorist groups of the twenty-first century, drawing inspiration and members from similar groups such as al-Qaeda. ISIS was formed in 1999, widely believed by most Islamic state historians, to be escalated by the US invasion into Iraq in 2003 (Hassan et al., 2015). It is believed to have been primarily founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist and the leader of the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). As a Sunni extremist, Zarqawi’s motives for founding the organisation was to initiate a civil war between Shiites and Sunnis, to form a caliphate. A ‘caliphate’ refers to a state ruled by a single ruler, and successor of the prophet Muhammad, known as a ‘caliph’ (Alokozay, 2016). The Shiites hold the belief that Muhammad appointed Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor, to lead after him, but was unable to fulfill this role due to the incident of Saqifah. Conversely, Sunni Muslims, holding the majority belief, recognize the first four caliphs as Muhammad’s rightful successors. Following the invasion, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, and formed the AQI, which eventually branched into the overarching organisation of ISIS after his death in 2006 (Walker, 2002). Leadership of the organisation was then passed over to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2010.

People around the world identify ISIS as one of the leading threats to national security. ISIS was named as a top threat in a total of eighteen countries mostly in Europe, Middle East, Asia and the United States. A substantial number of these countries have endured terror attacks claimed by the Islamic militant group. ISIS shifted its focus from Iraq and Syria to North Africa and South Asia. Their goal was to claim religious, political and military authority over Muslims worldwide. Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khifawi was described as the strategic head, and wanted their spies

to find out what families lived there, who were religious, even down to details such as wanting to know how many wives men had and how many children they had. Following receiving this information would come murder and kidnapping, first dozens of people disappeared and then hundreds of people disappeared.

Martin Reardon (2015) described ISIS' strategy as to “break” those under its control, to ensure their absolute loyalty through complete fear and intimidation, while simultaneously generating hate and vengeance to its enemies. Additionally, another strategy of theirs was to intimidate civilian populations and catalyse rash decisions to be made by governments. Finally, another strategy and goal of ISIS was to make a new Islamic caliphate and to plan attacks outside its territory where their fighters would widen their attacks even outside of the Islamic states, to try and disperse the enemy and to drain them to the greatest extent possible (Wright, 2014).

These strategies provoke governments to take action by sending members of the army to retrieve abductees, or pay their ransom, sometimes of multi-millions. This makes this a very difficult decision for the government as it is a battle of hearts and minds; whether to pay the ransom to save the lives of their citizens, while potentially risking the money being used to fuel their future terror attacks. ISIS would continue to try and convince their supporters and enemies online and through video streams that their commitment and capacity is greater than the states ability to continue to resource its countermeasures. Despite the government's best efforts, they were unable to take down all the social media accounts and reclaim everything that had been hijacked or to protect the civilians in the affected states. This can appoint some blame to the government for the fear and intimidation caused from the exposure to the attack methods implemented by the terrorist group, and can cause controversy upon decisions made. For example, whether to pay ransom for hostages (Gander, 2015).

In their endeavor to establish power, terrorists use certain tactics which usually involve an international plan of practices adopted to achieve a specific social, political or psychological aim. The more manipulative the tactics and strategies the more overpowering they are. Their aim is to adopt specific behaviours and to intimidate to fulfill their needs of the manipulator. ISIS relies on ideological, financial, military and operational capacities. ISIS is the first organisation to exploit advertising like internet websites, journals and social media, this method of communication enabled them to recruit new participants from different countries and to encourage people to join the battlefield in Syria and Iraq and to carry out terrorist attacks in the

West. Apart from online communications ISIS broadcasts on radio stations, broadcast high quality pictures, videos and graphics regarding terror attacks, brutal executions of hostages as well as attacks against enemies.

Tactics refer to the specific actions carried out by an individual or group to achieve a goal or fulfill a strategy (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). The Operations Security (OPSEC) Intelligence Threat Handbook outlines basic tactical categories adopted by terrorist organisations. The first they mention is hijacking. ISIS have adopted this tactic in order to fulfil their strategy of creating new Islamic caliphates and to try and “terrorize, mobilize [and] polarize” (Gude, 2015). These tactics also overlap with the attack methods used by the terrorist group, referring to procedures they undertake to impose violence or aggression against people or places (Oxford Dictionary, 2020).

ISIS hacked and hijacked dormant social media accounts, such as popstar fan accounts, to spread their terrorist propaganda and monger fear amongst followers of the account. They would do this by threatening to kill the original account holder, and by posting disturbing content from beheading videos, to full-length documentaries (O’Brien, 2017). Equally, they would use these accounts as a tool to target young, vulnerable Muslims for recruitment, both from the Middle East and Western Countries. Quantum lists nine main characteristics of individuals vulnerable to ISIS recruitment: “status seeking, identity seeking, revenge, redemption, thrill, ideology, justice, and death”. This was an effective tactic because it enabled them to reach a large scope of people on a global stage, to impose their presence not only in Iraq and Syria, but internationally. This platform would facilitate them to reach people they wouldn’t have had access to otherwise, including young people from many ethnographic backgrounds, such as age groups, ethnicities, nationalities, genders and socio-economic statuses. This also helped them achieve their strategy of inflicting fear and intimidation into their recruits to ensure their unwavering allegiance, as well as inflicting this fear into the general public to prime them for their intended global domination. This could also be considered an attack method, through traumatizing and intimidating the public upon seeing these unforeseen, graphic posts. However, this would not allow them access to entire populations, as some people don’t have access to social media. For example, they may have been able to recruit people living in extreme or relative poverty if they were able to access them, but because they primarily used this tactic of hijacking social media accounts with lots of followers to recruit people from all over the world, they would’ve missed the opportunity to recruit those who were impoverished and had no access to social media.

Another tactic highlighted by OPSEC is kidnapping. ISIS carried out multiple kidnappings of Western journalists, civilians, military and aid workers. In the November of 2012, journalists James Foley and John Cantlie were abducted by ISIS members, in northwestern Syria on their way to the border of Turkey (Warkum, 2015). This kidnapping led to the beheading of Foley and the alleged death of Cantlie, in an effort to negotiate with the British and American government, to fulfill their strategy of intimidating civilian populations and forcing the hands of the governments in question to make impetuous decisions. This tactic was effective because it led to some governments negotiating them in ways they may have refused to otherwise, such as paying multi-million ransoms for the safe return of their hostages, such as the Spanish and French governments, which would enable them to progress their agendas and implement more strategies to fulfil their ultimate goal of creating a new Islamic caliphate. Furthermore, it can be considered an attack method because it causes serious violence against people, through using forceful methods to capture these individuals, endangering their lives and safety. Despite being strong tactics to achieve their strategies of fear-mongering, it was not as effective at achieving their goals of pushing all governments to make rash, illogical decisions, as not every government, including the British and American governments, complied with their demands for payments of multi-million ransom sums. It also didn't effectively meet their strategy of creating a new Islamic caliphate, because they didn't receive payments for all of their hostages, meaning they wouldn't receive any financial benefit from doing so, to further their domination.

Assassinations are another tactic utilized by ISIS, as shown in the kidnapping and beheading of James Foley. The assassination techniques they have used are primarily beheading, immolation or shooting, and according to a 2014 United Nations report, they assassinated over a thousand civilians and hundreds of prisoners of war, during the Syrian Civil War, and thousands more on different occasions. Some of their most high profile assassinations were recorded and posted to the internet, being popularized by their first leader Zarqawi. The first video of their assassinations was that of American journalist Daniel Pearl, in 2002, which showed his slow, torturous decapitation (Brecher, 2014). The primary purpose of this tactic or attack method, was to cultivate fear amongst the general population, to deter Western civilians and news reporters from entering the states under their domination, to report on their operations to media outlets, or for government agents to investigate them to gather information that could be used against them. This would work towards their strategies of intimidating the public, and expanding their rule, by discouraging governments around the world from sending journalists or agents to gather intel about the group, with the aim of eradication. Equally, these assassinations would set an example of the consequences of their followers disobeying their commands, or not

complying to their rule, to ensure absolute allegiance. Also, as previously stated, this would develop their strategy of provoking rash government decisions from the target enemy, as they would be faced with difficult moral decisions of choosing between serving justice to the group which could potentially ignite a war, or allowing them to seemingly keep getting away with the assassinations. However, this attack method can catalyse more negative than positive repercussions. The UK government implemented more serious action following assassinations of British citizens, including military action, stifling their finances, intercepting recruits from that UK, and dunking their “poisonous and false narratives” (Gov, 2016). This counter-terrorism would hinder their development as an organisation and prevent their strategies from being successful.

A more obvious attack method utilized by ISIS, as well as many other terrorist organisations over the centuries, is the use of bombings. ISIS have used suicide bombings as a tactic to reach their three overarching strategies as previously mentioned, especially throughout the Middle East and the UK. One of the most notable bombings that ISIS were responsible for was the suicide bombing of the Manchester Arena of May 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2017 (BBC, 2017). The bomber was a British born Muslim, 22-year-old, Salman Ramadan Abedi. The attack resulted in the deaths of twenty-three attendees of the Ariana Grande concert, including children, as well as wounding over eight hundred others. The tactic of bombing is one of the most severe attack methods to further their agenda of inflicting fear into the general public by significantly putting national security at risk. This method can cause a lot more destruction and devastation than alternative methods to put the lives of the public at risk such as stabbing or shooting, which harvests more terror and intimidation amongst civilians and governments. However, this comes at the cost of the lives of their members, as they must sacrifice their own lives for the cause, which few would be willing to follow through with. Equally, it can be difficult to successfully conduct, due to high security in large events, such as most concerts, festivals and air travel. This may lead them to be captured by authorities and interrogated for details about the group, which they may disclose to the law enforcement officers if offered plea deals etc., which would be detrimental to their agenda.

Armed assaults are another tactic and attack method adopted by ISIS. This tactic was put into practice on June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017, when a group of ISIS members deliberately drove a van into pedestrians on the London Bridge, and proceeded to stab people in the surrounding market, pubs and restaurants. Eight civilians were killed by the attackers, four police officers were injured in attempts to stop the assailants, as well as forty-eight civilians (Opus 2 International,

2019). This resulted in the Prime Minister at the time, Theresa May, presenting a four-point plan to the country in a speech delivered on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2017. The PM called for cooperation between allied governments to combat these incidents with tighter regulation of cyberspace to minimize the spread of extremism and the planning of attacks. As with their other tactics, this contributes to their strategies of causing psychological distress and fear amongst the general public, especially to those affected. In addition to this, these types of attacks prompt fast responses from governments, as depicted in May's speech just a day after the attack, detailing the counter-terrorism measures the British government implemented, which they may have revised and constructed more thoroughly if they had more time to do so. Contrastingly, this would hinder their goal of expanding their caliphate, as they drew more attention to themselves, leading to a united response from governments worldwide, to shut down their advancements.

The final tactic highlighted by OPSEC, is barricade-hostage incidents, which refers to situations where a person maintains a position of cover, and resists law enforcement personnel upon unlawfully holding a person or multiple people against their will (Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, 2015). This attack method was used by an ISIS sympathiser, Man Haron Monis, on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014 in a Lindt Chocolate Café in central Sydney, Australia. Seventeen people were taken hostage, two were killed, and images of hostages holding a black flag with Arabic script was released as a self-declaration of belonging to ISIS. Then, a month later, similar sieges took place in the Bataclan Theatre, resulting in a mass shooting, killing one hundred and twenty people and causing a further one hundred and twenty casualties (Chedid, 2014). This is another highly destructive attack method and fear inducing tactic adopted by ISIS leading to high death tolls in some cases. This tactic addresses all three of the strategies previously detailed, by prompting a fear response from the general public, not only for the victims involved, but the wider communities, as demonstrated in Sydney, with a decrease in attendance of local shops, restaurants and bars for weeks following the attacks (Chedid, 2014). Equally, the government had to act quickly and make rash decisions as the terrorists wanted, to pressurize them into potentially making decisions which would benefit their agenda in some way, such as negotiating with them for the safe return of the hostages. On the contrary, this tactic also hinders their goal of expanding their caliphate, as these incidents lead to higher national security measures, such as more random searches of suspicious individuals by the Sydney Police Force (Chedid, 2014).

As a result of their attacks, ISIS have influenced the British parliament to pass a series of Terrorism Acts in from 2000 to 2015, likely catalysed by Islamic terrorist acts. Examples of these

would include the assassinations and the kidnappings that they committed, such as that of James Foley, which would have played a role in these legislations changing. This is reflected in the fact that they were aimed at terrorism in general, rather than specifically focusing on the workings of the Irish Republican Army as they were previously. They provided a definition of terrorism that made it possible to establish a new and distinct set of powers for the police, beyond those related to ordinary crime, which could be applied in terrorist cases. The Terrorism Act 2006 government had asked for this to be ninety days, but was defeated in a vote. The Terrorism Act 2000 gave a broad definition of terrorism for the first time, it allowed Police to detain terrorists suspects for up to seven days it also allowed Police to stop and search anyone who was in designated areas without the need to suspect that person. As a result, this country has more anti-terrorist legislation than almost any other developed democracy (Walker, 2002).

Considering this, it is reasonable to conclude that ISIS have used successful strategies, tactics and attack methods over recent decades. Their strategies were similar to those of most terrorist organisations that have challenged national security, however the tactics they employed to fulfill them were amongst the most sinister in the history of terrorism. The tactics they employed, specifically, bombings, assassinations and barricade-hostage incidents, proved to cause the most destruction and fear about the public and governments across the world. Even leaders of the most notorious and callous terrorist groups of this century, such as Osama Bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, expressed his disapproval of some of the attack methods employed by ISIS. These would include but not be restricted to posting recordings of their beheadings on the internet, and they were denounced against Islamic law amongst Islamic scholars (Zelin, 2019). It must be considered however, that ISIS has not remained as much of a prevalent threat to national security past 2019, the year in which they were claimed to have lost their final territory in the caliphate after a five-year time span. The Syrian Democratic Forces raised flags of victory in Baghuz, being the final stronghold of the Islamic extremists. This demonstrates that the efforts of the extremists didn't hold longevity in the face of the united military forces from countries all over the world, and that their strategies and tactics were not sustainable in the long-term, as with most terrorist groups. Despite this, their defeat is not assured according to the reports of Speckhard (2017).

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