



Why the UK Will Lose the Information War Against Terrorism

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If the government continues to refuse comment on most of its counterterrorism activity abroad it will struggle to win what is increasingly a war of narratives and the strategic use of (dis)information.

Terrorist groups around the world are increasingly placing as much emphasis on winning wars of words as they are battles on the ground. In fact, WIRED recently described ISIS as being “as much a media conglomerate as [a] fighting force.” It has revolutionised the dissemination of its radicalising material, shunning the secret and password-encrypted caution of predecessors such as Al-Qaeda, in favour of open-source social media posts and high-quality footage that is instantly accessible to anyone with an internet connection.

In contrast, the UK and its allies appear to be faltering in 21st century responses. In September 2015, the UK launched the “Counter-Daesh Communications Cell” and has, like the US, created a counter-Daesh twitter page to better communicate its policies in the conflict against ISIS. The US and partners have also met in attempts to establish “a messaging coalition, to complement what’s going on the ground.” The evidence, however, suggests that these efforts are not working.

A leaked internal assessment by the US State Department admitted to poor progress, concluding “the Islamic State’s violent narrative — promulgated through thousands of messages each day — has effectively trumped the efforts

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of some of the world's richest and most technologically advanced nations.” Charlie Winter and Jordan Bach-Lombardo recently concluded in *The Atlantic*: “As it stands, the international coalition is far from winning the information war against the Islamic State. Its air strikes may be squeezing the group in Iraq and Syria and killing many of its leaders, but that has not halted the self-proclaimed caliphate’s ideological momentum.”

But our research suggests that British efforts may be being thwarted, at least in part, by a peculiarly British problem – the culture of no comment that surrounds much of its counterterrorism activity abroad. There is an increasing trend in British defence and security policy of secretive yet growing military commitments in areas where the UK is not generally considered to be at war, but where it faces threats from terrorist groups. Not just against ISIS in Iraq, Syria and Libya but also al-Shabaab in Somalia, or AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) in Yemen. Instead of deploying regular British troops to the front lines, increasingly it is British Special Forces who can be found on the ground, with the UK’s armed drone fleet, intelligence agencies, and military advisers and trainers also playing important roles.

While conventional UK operations are increasingly open to Parliament and the public, comments on remote forms of warfare like the use of Special Forces are often denied, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of UK involvement.

For example, in April 2015 *Vice* described the UK’s role in US drone strikes in Yemen. Even as the UK Government was claiming that “drone strikes against terrorist targets in Yemen are a matter for the Yemeni and US governments”, it appears that UK Special Forces and intelligence agents were playing a critical role in the country. The MOD responded to the story with its standard line, that: “It is our longstanding policy that we don’t comment on Special Forces

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operations.” Similarly, the revelations of the Snowden documents – particularly descriptions of the UK’s role in gathering intelligence to inform US strikes – was extensively covered and comprehensively analysed in a variety of outlets, such as *The Guardian* and *The Intercept*. The government simply said: “It is the longstanding policy of successive UK governments not to comment on intelligence operations.”

As a consequence of the government’s refusal to comment in the face of overwhelming evidence, it has handed over the narrative to other groups. For example, in a *Sky News* report in December 2016, the leader of the Houthis – which are fighting the UK-supported and Saudi-led coalition in Yemen – accused the UK of “participating in the bombing of Yemen people.” In the same report, a local Yemeni man in Sa’adah was quoted as saying, “We used to think Britain was our friend...Now we think they are criminals because of what’s happening here. They’re committing crimes, killing our children and pregnant women.” Muhammad Emwazi, or Jihadi John as he was dubbed by the press, berated the UK for its “evil alliance with America, which continues to strike the Muslims of Iraq and most recently bombed the Haditha dam” in the gruesome beheading of David Haines and claimed these actions “will only accelerate your destruction.”

The UK Government clearly sees the importance of the information war. In its *2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review* the government stated that “the growth of communications technology will increase our enemies’ ability to influence, not only all those on the battlefield, but also our own society directly. We must therefore win the battle for information, as well as the battle on the ground.” Its twitter page, the improvements in its *transparency over airstrikes in Iraq and Syria* and the *Attorney General’s speech at IISS* outlining the legal

basis for targeting of non-state actors at the start of the year are all evidence of the Government's commitment to better its communication with Parliament and the British public. However, this progress could be undermined by the amount of UK operations it refuses to discuss or even comment on.

While the UK may not have experienced a scandal akin to the US's recent mission in Yemen which ended in the deaths of numerous civilians – including the eight-year-old daughter of Anwar Al-Awlaki, the US born Yemeni cleric killed by a US drone strike in 2011 – it is not immune to one. Its refusal to comment on its actions abroad, despite extensive evidence of its presence, hinders its ability to own its own narrative and allows groups like ISIS to define who is fighting the war and, perhaps more importantly, who is winning.

The government should not be afraid to articulate what it is doing and why. This is the only way to improve its dire performance in the information war against terrorism.

Image credit: Pixabay

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