

Understanding the changing tactics of so-called Islamic State

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The recent terror attacks in Paris and Brussels marked a change in the tactics of so-called Islamic State. So why did they happen, why now and – as a consequence – what would be the best strategy to defeat them?

The new tactics reflect changes in the group's recruitment strategy to adapt to new circumstances. The main goal of any insurgent group is to maximize its share of power. To achieve this goal, groups rely mostly on manpower – and both the quantity and quality matters. So for any rebel group it is vital to attract as many recruits and as good recruits as possible.

Groups increase their numbers by attracting three types of fighters:

1. Those motivated by a goal or a grievance
2. Those motivated by immediate profit
3. Forced recruits.

In Syria, throughout its history, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has used different tactics to recruit all three types of fighter. It is useful to look at changes in the group's recruitment strategy over time, so as to be able to identify possible windows of opportunity to defeat the group.

	Goal oriented fighters	Profit oriented fighters	Forced recruits
For fighters			
Motivation	Grievance	Greed	None
Material benefits received	Minimal	Maximum	None
Voluntary Exit	Yes	No	No
Willingness to take risks	Maximum	Moderate	None
For the group			
Monetary expenses	Minimum	Maximum	Moderate
Combat effectiveness	Maximum	Moderate	Minimal
Risk of members defection	Minimal	Moderate	Maximum
Strategy to defeat			
Chances of completely eradicating the group	Minimal	Moderate	Maximum
Example:	ISIL (2013-2014)	ISIL (2014-2015)	ISIL (2015-NA)

Goal-motivated fighters

The main human resources goal of any organization is to have only motivated members. For an insurgent group, these are the best fighters, the most dedicated to the group's goals, the least likely to defect and the most likely to take necessary combat risks (including participation in suicide missions). Such members also cost the group the least.

At the beginning of its existence, ISIL enjoyed an excess of devoted fighters. In addition to Syrian fighters, qualified foreign fighters were coming from all over the world, eager to join the fight and even die for the group's goals. One defected ISIL fighter recalls that, in the beginning, ISIL was receiving up to 3,000 new recruits and volunteers per day. With such a flood of applicants, the group was able to select only the most dedicated and qualified fighters. These fighters did not need a lot of supervision and managing them was easy, since everyone was working toward one goal. They were willing to take risks in combat, helping ISIL to advance quickly and take a lot of ground.

The defeat of a group with those kinds of fighters could happen one of two ways. Either the underlying grievance of the members could be addressed, or the insurgent group itself fails to support the grievances of its members – for example, the group shifts its goals or priorities, and members are not satisfied with this change. The latter happened with ISIL in 2013, when instead of fighting Assad (the original goal of many

fighters), ISIL became more concentrated on building the caliphate, a goal that some fighters did not agree with.

For-profit fighters

If a group does not have enough fighters interested in its goal but still needs to fill vacant positions, it has to rely on less dedicated people interested only in the material benefits the group has to offer. Before joining the group, those fighters are doing cost/benefit analyses and, if the potential monetary payoff from membership outweighs the risks involved, they enlist.

These fighters are less trustworthy. They work for the highest bidder, no matter its goals, and are very expensive. They are also not willing to take high risks. Of course, for-profit fighters are not the best option for any group but they could fill some job positions which do not require that much dedication (like truck driver or office clerk).

In 2014, while ISIL was controlling an extensive territory, the flow of foreign fighters started to dry up, and the group was suffering major casualties. Increasingly they had to rely on for-profit fighters. Existing fighters were being killed in growing numbers and it was harder for foreign fighters to get into Syria. As for the local Syrians, most were simply not interested in the goal of the group. As a result, ISIL had to rely on local fighters who were motivated by profit and joined because of the lack of jobs in Syria – and ISIL was paying its members a lot by Syrian standards. As one ISIL defector explained, although the group had some very dedicated foreign fighters, there were many, in particular local fighters, who joined for money and “would have converted to Christianity if it paid well.”

To keep those members interested, the group had to constantly provide them with everything they wanted from expensive meals and cars to a constant supply of women. During the last Ramadan, in Deir ez-Zor, ISIL fighters were demanding increasingly luxurious iftars of fish – a delicacy in a war-torn region whose access to the sea has long been blocked. And since the flow of woman to ISIL-controlled territories also decreased with time, they had to turn to enslaving Yazidi women.

To reduce the power of a group at this stage of its life cycle, it is important to provide outside options for people who are thinking of joining solely for money, while increasing the costs of joining (for example, by military means). This would shift the cost/benefit calculation of prospective members. If there were other less dangerous job options that paid the same, prospective members would take them instead and not even expose themselves to combat-related risks.

Forceful recruitment

Having to rely on draft is the worst possible scenario for any armed group. It means the group cannot fill its ranks and is desperate. Forceful recruitment happens when a group is running out of money to pay for-profit fighters or outside opportunities are drawing all potential recruits away.

People who were recruited by force are hard to control. From day one, they are thinking only of how to defect or even sabotage the group, so a lot of that group's resources must be dedicated to the control its own members. This is a last step in the group's fight for survival. However, it is important to note that a group can become very dangerous at this stage. A group that is “cornered” is the most likely to take all possible actions to survive – including terrorism, mass executions and such. In 2015, Western countries cracked down on foreign fighters and ISIL was defeated on several frontlines (affecting cost/benefit calculations); Europe opened its borders

for refugees (increasing availability for outside options); and successful airstrikes led to ISIL losing its oilfields (decreasing the main source of revenue).

Desperate measures

As casualties increased, and ISIL was not able to find enough people to take positions, they had no other choice than to declare a forced mobilisation across the territory it controlled. Although this strategy was a sign of a terrible weakness of the group, it also led to the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks.

The group was trying to decrease the outflow of its members. Fearing defection, ISIL began to shoot on sight any person suspected of leaving ISIL-held territory without a permit verified by one of ISIL's Emirs. At the same time, ISIL was desperately trying to increase the inflow of prospective members. To survive, the group needed immediately to increase the number of fighters, either dedicated or, at least, for-profit fighters. For that to happen, the group had to reduce outside options for the for-profit pool and, even better, stoke up civilian grievances in hope of increasing the number of goal-oriented people to recruit from.

First, ISIL needed to reduce the migration of Syrians to Europe that, over the past year, has been drying the pool of prospective members, whether for-profit fighters (who would have no other option to provide for their families) or goal-oriented fighters (if ISIL were able to increase the Syrians' sense of grievance against the West).

Second, ISIL also wanted to increase the flow of dedicated foreign fighters. For that, they needed to increase the grievances of Western Muslims who could potentially become fighters. France and Belgium were chosen for an attack because those are countries with large Muslim populations, some of whom had already been attracted to ISIL. The attack could increase anti-Muslim sentiment and, as a result, the grievance of Western Muslims, which could increase the number of potential dedicated foreign recruits.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that, while rebel groups and terrorist organizations are trying to increase their share of power, their main interest is their own survival. Everything an insurgent group does should be looked at through the lens of its survival (in particular its access to manpower). Also, since the recruitment strategies of the group change based on circumstances, they can be interpreted as a signal that helps predict a groups' behavior, which could present a window of opportunity to defeat the group. Manipulating the expected behavior of the group's manpower and modifying strategies based on changes in the group's human resources could significantly reduce the costs of defeating the insurgency – because if there are no fighters, the group does not exist.