

The Ethical Sources of Terrorist Power: Understanding Asymmetric War

Author: Mervyn Frost

The world wars of the twentieth century shared certain key features that are conspicuously absent from a class of contemporary war often referred to as asymmetric war. It is crucial that we understand this modern form of warfare.

Conventional wars are typically fought between states (or alliances of states) and involve a military struggle between opposing armies, navies and air forces. Battles take place on various fronts and a key goal is to take and control territory. The final aim is to conquer the enemy. These wars have beginnings and endings. Once such wars are concluded, new international orders are established and institutions such as the League of Nations or the United Nations are created. In such wars, propaganda plays an important role. It sets out to demoralise or deceive the opponent. Winning conventional wars requires having the appropriate military apparatus. At the heart of such wars is the activity of fighting (or what the Americans call “combat”).

Asymmetric wars are different. They involve conflict between, on the one side, a state or alliance of states with a highly developed military apparatus supported by a strong economy and highly organised bureaucracies, and on the other side, a far smaller adversary (such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Al-Nusra Front, or ISIS) that does not have a conventional military machine at its disposal, with limited manpower, limited economic resources and is equipped with primitive weapons such as IEDs, suicide bombers and knives. The asymmetry measured by conventional military metrics (manpower, tanks, aircraft, helicopters, firepower, technological “edge”, resilience, and second-strike capability) is acute. On the face of the matter, the weak party should be powerless – an easy victory for the strong side. Yet, in many cases, David has proved to be powerful in the face of Goliath. The weak have caused the powerful to change their policies. The superpower and its allies were persuaded to withdraw (although not completely) from Afghanistan and Iraq. The USA and allies are still preoccupied with the ongoing fight against these small foes. They clearly fear these foes. Why? What kind of power do these small groups wield? If the conventional metrics such as military strength, economic strength and political support do not explain their power, what does?

A key part of an adequate explanation must refer to the use such groups make of social media. Their strategic communication strategies are central to the generation of power over their adversaries. With these, they counter the military and economic preponderance of their enemies. How is this seemingly impossible thing achieved? How can a communications strategy, delivered on social media, prove a countervailing force to huge military might? It is clearly not the case that these organisations convert hundreds of thousands to their religious cause, nor do they succeed in undermining the legitimacy of the democratic states opposing them, or in spreading terror in their target states. How then do they achieve their effect? Their strategic communications are not properly understood as mere propaganda. The method is far more specific than this.

Small “terrorist” groups achieve their effects through a process I call “ethical trapping”. Reduced to its basics, this is a three step manoeuvre. First, the group does something that is ethically obnoxious to the militarily powerful opponent. This could include killing innocent civilians by flying hijacked planes into high rise buildings; beheading captured soldiers in public or burning them alive; sheltering fighters in hospitals; or using civilian shields to defend its fighters, and so on. In this first step, the trick to be achieved is to provoke a response which itself is ethically obnoxious in terms of the fundamental ethical values held by the opponents. The responses that achieve this include: disproportionate retaliatory bombing raids that kill large numbers of civilians; re-introducing the use of torture to gain intelligence; denying prisoner of war status to captured fighters from the terrorist group; sending military forces to occupy the states from which the terrorists operate; using drones to kill “terrorists” allegedly hiding in third party states (and often in the process of doing this, killing innocent civilians, including women and children). By doing these things the great powers fall neatly into an ethical trap.

The second step in the trapping technique is to make sure that these unethical retaliatory actions are widely publicised on social media. These might be described in words or more vividly displayed in videos. The audience for these communications is global. What is put to the audience amounts to the argument: “Observe the hypocrisy in the actions of these states that claim to be defending the system of sovereign states, democracy, religious tolerance and human rights, while they are in fact violating the very values they claim to be protecting”. Crucial to this step is to show the great powers to be at war against Islam.

In a third step, these actors then seek to mobilise political support for their cause. Such support is sought in the very heartland of the great powers against whom these small groups are fighting. Once again, this is done through the use of social media.

There are lessons to be learned from this analysis. Firstly, these “wars” are not about achieving military victories, but are aimed at political outcomes. Secondly, in these asymmetric wars, the only source of significant power for such small “terrorist” groups derives not directly from their unethical acts of terror, but from ethically inappropriate reactions to these by the great powers. Thirdly, the new technologies of communication are central to this kind of war. The use of strategic communication strategies to ethically wrong-foot the great powers is the key weapon in their armory. Finally, to win these wars (or to at least, not lose them), the great powers must focus a great deal of attention on the ethical aspects of their retaliatory actions.