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Terribly effective Islamic State propaganda draws the west into another conflict

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Just the excuse they need. Stefan Rousseau/PA Wire/Press Association Images

The horrific murder of British aid worker David Haines – and let’s call it murder rather than “execution” with its connotations of justice – is the latest instalment in what threatens to become a regular and dreadful occurrence.

But while Islamic State has succeed in many of its goals when producing these videos, it is also clearly drawing David Cameron and Barack Obama into further military operations in Iraq.

The video of Haines’ death fits a now familiar narrative. Like James Foley and Steven Sotloff before him, he kneels in the sand next to his masked captor.

First Haines speaks to the camera and, in obviously scripted terms, denounces the UK prime minister, David Cameron, and his government as responsible for his fate. His captor then says: "This British man has to pay the price for your promise, Cameron, to arm the Peshmerga against the Islamic State ... playing the role of the obedient lapdog, Cameron, will only drag you and your people into another bloody and unwinnable war."

It is after this, reportedly, that the beheading begins, but the camera cuts away before any blood is spilt. What it does show is the lifeless, body of Haines with his severed head on his back.

The end of the video shows "Jihadi John" placing his hand on the next intended victim who is named as British citizen Alan Henning. He states: "If you, Cameron, persist in fighting the Islamic State, then you, like your master Obama, will have the blood of your people on your hands."

This film, and its predecessors involving Foley and Sotloff, have been widely viewed online and the still images have been splashed over the front pages of newspapers around the world.

And while deciding whether to republish the content poses a dilemma for editors, there is no denying that there is public appetite for images of violent extremism. As psychiatry specialist Dean Burnett has argued, there are many reasons for this but the desire to derive excitement from vicarious situations is a powerful force and there are, he writes, "few things as bad as another human meeting their untimely end in deeply unpleasant ways".

In this sense, it is undeniable that IS propaganda has been extremely effective. It draws attention to the group's existence and causes and reinforces, for audiences, the traditional binary oppositions of civilisation versus savagery.

On at least one level, IS propaganda is highly sophisticated. The group has understood the power of social media as a tool for disseminating its message and as a result has won the attention of the world. But IS has also played straight into the hands of David Cameron and Barack Obama by releasing such violent and extreme content.

Military intervention in the Middle East has often followed a similar pattern. Western governments seek to demonise the enemy, communicate a moral obligation to act, highlight the widespread atrocities committed by the enemy and the threat they pose to national security and argue that intervention will benefit the people of the region.

The run-up to the gulf wars of 1990 and 2003, the removal of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011 and the debates around intervention in Syria in 2013 all saw governments trying to convince the public that military action was predicated on the above reasons. IS meets all the criteria too and the justification is right there in the videos.

There is already increasing public support on both sides of the Atlantic for military action in the region. On September 10, the Wall Street Journal published a poll in which two-thirds of respondents said they believed it was in the nation's interest to confront IS. Only 13% said action was not in the national interest.

In the UK a survey by **Opinium Research** yielded similar results – it found that 60% of people were in favour of taking action to deal with IS. The measures people were prepared to support ranged from a hostage rescue mission by the SAS to deploying soldiers on the ground inside both Iraq and Syria. Only 20% would not support military action of any kind.

Without wishing to credit IS with the complexity of propaganda it may not possess, maybe the point is to draw the US into a ground conflict. At the time of writing, the US had carried out 162 air attacks in

Iraq against IS but, as peace studies professor Paul Rogers has said, there are likely to be more. We are at the start of a war, not an in-and-out operation.

So both sides are following well-trodden paths and familiar arguments are being revisited. What remains startling about IS though is the simplicity of the murders it commits. The modern signifiers of warfare are absent from the films they broadcast – and the act of killing is stripped bare. The starkness of the imagery is matched by the starkness and rigidity of the rhetoric. If its primary purpose is to instill fear, revulsion and then retaliation, then that objective has been achieved.



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