



**COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND
POLICIES OF NON-STATE BELLIGERENTS**

**Abstract
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Two tendencies characterise present day conflicts. On the one hand, today's conflicts are predominantly asymmetrical in type, and as such they oppose traditional armies to non-state belligerents. On the other, those conflicts now take place in a very specific media environment, in constant evolution and marked by fundamental changes such as the proliferation of live satellite TV stations, or the advent of the *web 2.0*.

The strategic logic of non-state belligerents is based upon three principles:

1/ Non-state belligerents must take stock of their material weakness, relative to their opponents' material capabilities, and compensate it through an "asymmetry of wills". In other words, if non-state belligerents oppose the waging of a "total war" to their opponent's "limited war", their chances of surviving and, ultimately, of winning the conflict should be increased.

2/ In order not to be defeated prematurely, non-state belligerents must innovate, both strategically and tactically. Considering the power differential between the opposing forces, any classical military confrontation could, indeed, prove to be fatal to the belligerents. Irregular adversaries thus tend to avoid direct confrontation, preferring a wear-and-tear strategy through systematic harassment. Mao Zedong, who theorised and applied the strategic logic underpinning revolutionary wars, summarises this strategy in the following terms: "the enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue".¹

3/ If tactical and strategic innovations are necessary to prevent a premature defeat of the belligerent parties, they are not sufficient enough in themselves to guarantee victory. The key to success ultimately lies in the ability of belligerent forces to win both the confidence and the support of local populations. Hence the central importance of communication means and strategies, which enable belligerent forces to carry targeted messages through to local populations, but also to opponents, or individuals or groups not concerned *a priori* with the conflict.

¹ Mao Zedong, « Problèmes stratégiques de la guerre révolutionnaire en Chine (décembre 1936) » in *Ecrits Militaires*, Pékin, Editions en langues étrangères, 1964, p.122

The communication strategies of four groups are analysed in the present study: *Al Qaeda*, the Taliban, *Hezbollah* and *Hamas*. These groups have different approaches and takes on communication tools and strategies.

Al Qaeda, for instance, is impressive in its mastery of new communication and information technology tools. The group came to use the internet as a supporting tool in its decentralisation strategy, implemented, partly by default, after the blows struck by the American-led coalition on the wake of 9/11. But even before the bombings, Abu Mus'ab al Suri, one of *Al Qaeda's* main strategists, had started conceptualising and putting together this strategy. In 2000, he wrote: "*Al Qaeda* is not an organisation, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be. It is a call, a reference, a methodology."² This call has since been heeded. A number of regional organisations have joined the *Al Qaeda* network. If this tendency to decentralisation maintains itself, the functioning of *Al Qaeda* could become increasingly similar to that of the *web 2.0*.

If *Al Qaeda's* capacity to transform and sustain itself in time – a capacity one could call “resilience” – through its usage of the internet is remarkable, *Hezbollah* is noticeable for its mastery of a very large spectrum of communication tools, from the most hi-tech to the less sophisticated. *Hezbollah's* strategy is characterised, for instance, by a pervasive presence within the urban landscapes of Lebanon's Shiite zones (posters, wall paintings...). Beyond this local involvement, *Hezbollah* has also developed a regional communication strategy, through its satellite TV station *Al Manar*. The majority of the programmes on this channel are in Arabic, but some news programmes are broadcast in English and in French. Furthermore, short videos in Hebrew, destined to Israeli populations, are shown.

The example of the *Al Manar* channel is also an instructive one with regards to the need for modern armies and Ministries of Defense to find adequate responses to non-states belligerent's communication strategies. The Israelis reacted to the growing influence of *Al Manar* by bombing its premises during the 2006 war. In France and in various other Western countries, *Al Manar* was banned from broadcast on national airwaves, following lengthy administrative and judicial procedures. However, the channel remains available on the internet. What's more, a number of other similar channels – such as *Al Aqsa TV*, Hamas' station – escaped such interdiction measures, even as *Hamas*, rather than *Hezbollah*, appears on the list of terrorist organisations of the European Union. This example serves to illustrate the lack of coherence, and

² Lawrence Wright, « The Master Plan », *The New Yorker*, 11 Septembre 2006.

thus of efficiency, of some of the strategies put in place to respond to the communication strategies of non-state belligerents. A number of recommendations are outlined in the concluding part of the present study to address this issue and try to improve present-day strategies. A series of proposals is also put forward to encourage the amelioration of the communication strategies deployed by states in the context of an asymmetrical conflict. One of the crucial recommendations to emerge from this study, and which can be directed towards states as well as non-state belligerents, relates to the need for any communication strategy, if it is to be efficient, to be derived from a clear and precise overarching strategy.