

COMMENT

Denying the Islamic State what it wants

DON'T DANCE TO THEIR TUNE: Their barbaric acts of terror may well be a devious strategy to treat all Muslims in Europe as suspicious

ONCE again, an Islamic State (IS) murder leads to fears that it is winning, and calls to do more. Fox News' Bret Baier captured the mood when he said of the latest video: "Horrific and barbaric, as well as calculating and skilled at high-tech propaganda."

The general feeling is that the IS is gaining ground with its brutal and diabolical methods.

But is it really? Let's examine the sequence of events that led to this latest gruesome video. The IS took as hostages two Japanese men — an odd choice given that Japan is utterly tangential to the Middle East.

The terrorists asked Tokyo for a staggering US\$200 million (RM710 million) ransom. This suggests that the much-vaunted moneymaking machine of the IS might not be working as well as many believe.

Tokyo refused to pay, so the terrorists were left with hostages who had no value. They executed one and then offered to release the other if the Jordanian government would set free a terrorist, Sajida al-Rishawi. This was a double head-



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scratcher.

Japan does not have any great influence over Jordan. And Rishawi was a largely forgotten, would-be suicide bomber from an episode nine years ago — before the IS even existed. It suggested a last-minute scramble to manufacture a new demand when their main one was denied.

Jordan considered making its captured pilot, Lt. Muath al-Kaseasbeh, part of the bargain, and the IS appeared to play along. Yet Jordanian officials now believe that the pilot had actually been killed weeks earlier.

The video of the pilot being burned to death may be a fancy cover to mask an operation that had gone awry. Certainly, the IS could not have imagined the response it has triggered in the Mid-

dle East, with Jordanians united against it, ulama across the region loudly and unequivocally condemning the immolation, and Japan ready to provide more aid and support against the terrorist group.

Meanwhile, news on the battlefield has not been good for the IS. Brookings Institution scholar Kenneth Pollack describes the "stunning reversal" it has faced in Iraq. This might help explain the brutality of this latest execution and the video. The group well understands the primary purpose of terrorism, which is to induce fear and overreaction.

When modern Middle Eastern terrorism first appeared on the scene in the 1960s and 1970s, the historian David Fromkin wrote an essay in *Foreign Affairs* that is perhaps the single best guide to understanding the phenomenon.

He pointed out that from its very beginnings, after the French Revolution, terrorism has been a strategy of the weak, designed to project false strength and, above all, make onlookers miscalculate.

Fromkin provided two examples that offer powerful lessons. He re-

counted a meeting in 1945, with a leader of the Irgun, a group of about 1,500 Jewish militants in Palestine, which was then part of the British empire.

The Irgun knew they could not defeat the mighty British army, so they decided to blow up buildings and create the appearance of chaos.

"This, he (the Irgun leader) said, would lead the British to overreact by garrisoning the country," drawing forces from across the empire. That would strain British coffers and eventually London would have to leave Palestine.

Fromkin noted that "the Irgun, seeing that it was too small to defeat Great Britain, decided, as an alternative approach, that Britain was big enough to defeat itself".

The IS's strategy surely is some version of this. The targeting of America and its allies, the videos and the barbarism are all designed to draw Washington into a ground battle in Syria — in the hope that this complicated, bloody and protracted war would sap the superpower's strength.

Another example from Fromkin: The National Liberation Front (FLN), the group of nationalists fighting to break Algeria free from France in the 1950s and '60s. The Paris government argued that Algeria was not a colony but part of

France, with all its citizens treated as French men and women.

So, FLN began a campaign of terror, in order to provoke a particular overreaction from the French government — getting them to regard all Muslim Algerians as suspects.

"(The French) thought that when FLN planted a bomb in a public bus, it was in order to blow up the bus," Fromkin noted, "whereas the real FLN purpose ... was not to blow up the bus, but to lure authorities into reacting by arresting all the non-Europeans in the area as suspects".

The many recent acts of terror committed in Europe don't have behind them a coherent strategy. But they could make European governments and people treat all Muslims in Europe as suspicious and dangerous — and then the jihadis and terrorists will have achieved an important goal.

These things do not have to happen. Fromkin concluded his essay by noting that "though terrorism cannot always be prevented, it can always be defeated. You can always refuse to do what they want you to do".

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