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# Fellow Travelers: Managing Savagery and The Gerasimov Doctrine

B.A. Friedman (/the-bridge/?author=5670d33305f8e269f6ef95d2) · April 27, 2017 (/the-bridge/2017/4/27/fellow-travelers-managing-savagery-and-the-geramisov-doctrine)

*“The unformed matter of the world was a god by the name of Chaos.”*  
—Thomas Hobbes

Russia and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have little in common. Russia is undeniably a powerful country and has been for centuries, and Russians have contributed a vast wealth of cultural treasures to the rest of the world. ISIS, however, is not even a country, and seeks to impose a twisted version of Islam’s golden age and somehow appropriate its cultural glory even while destroying every historical artifact it can find.

Despite these differences, the two pursue military strategies that, while vastly different, share a common core assumption: political power can be acquired not only by imposing order where there is chaos, but also by creating that chaos in the first place.

We cannot know what is in the minds of the leadership of the two strategic actors, but we can read their documents. Those documents reveal different strategies built on a similar theory of victory, a theory that harkens back to western philosophical debates and leads both Russia and ISIS to an identical conclusion: information warfare is a central component of modern warfare.

**THE IMPOSITION OF SAVAGERY**

ISIS has a plan. The ultraviolence that characterizes the organization, far from being random, is a directed and integral part of their theory of victory (<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2016/12/9/the-strategic-calculus-of-mass-murder-why-genocide>). That theory goes back to the organization's roots as the brainchild of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and is captured in *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical State Through Which the Umma Will Pass* by an unknown author using the *nom de plume* Abu Bakr Naji. (A translation by Will McCants is available here (<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>) and the book itself is examined here. (<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2015/12/1/reviewing-isils-playbook>))

*THE VIOLENT CHAOS CREATED IN THE WAKE OF ISIS IS NOT A BYPRODUCT; IT IS A MEANS TO AN END, AN ATTACK AIMED AT A POPULATION'S BASE INSTINCTS.*

In the context of the book, *savagery* is a societal state of being: violent chaos and disarray characterized by pervasive violence, lawlessness, and a lack of even-rudimentary political infrastructure. The theory suggests the population of an area in a state of savagery will instinctively seek stability, order, and peace no matter the source. Therefore, rather than just wooing a population or convincing them of the righteousness of the cause, ISIS terrorists either exploit or create a situation so chaotic the population will accept any regime that can manage it. As Naji states, "The region of savagery will be in a situation resembling the law of the jungle, whose good people yearn for someone to manage this savagery. They even accept any organization, regardless of whether it is made up of good or evil people." [1] The violent chaos created in the wake of ISIS is not a byproduct; it is a means to an end, an attack aimed at a population's base instincts.

This strategy worked to greater effect in Syria than in Iraq, abetted in the former case by an ongoing civil war. Syria was particularly susceptible to the ISIS infection, and then was used as a base to conduct attacks into Iraq. That offensive broke open cracks in Iraq's political environment, particularly between Sunni and Shi'a Iraqis.

A completely different strategic actor employs a similar logic. Russia's actions in Ukraine and possibly elsewhere work in much the same way. Russian interventions in both Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) occurred during times when the target country was already experiencing some form of chaos or stress which was then magnified by the Russian interference. In the case of Georgia, it was increasing tension with Abkhazia and South Ossetian separatists. In the case of Ukraine, it was the Euromaidan movement leading to the removal of the pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich.





*General Valery Gerasimov (Sergey Guneev/Sputnik)*

Before the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian Federation Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, published an article explaining the General Staff's view of modern military operations. [2] One key point of General Gerasimov's views, later termed the Gerasimov Doctrine, is that non-military means to affect a target country or region such as "economic sanctions, disruption of diplomatic ties, and political and diplomatic pressure" are not means to reduce chaos or avoid war, but rather means to increase stress and support traditional military operations.[3]

The idea is that existing stressors in a target region combined with stressors introduced through military and non-military means shape the environment for follow-on decisive military operations. The doctrine features six stages.

1. Covert Origins
2. Escalations
3. Start of Conflict Activities
4. Crisis
5. Resolution
6. Restoration of Peace (Postconflict Settlement)

Descriptions of the early stages point to the existence or creation of chaos: "Emergence of differences of interest" are linked with "formation of political opposition," which lead to "intensifying contradictions." [4] These methods were clearly in action in Ukraine and to a lesser extent Georgia. [5] They also may already be at work in Belarus, as this article in Belarus Digest (<http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-russia-conflict-through-lens-gerasimov-doctrine-29252>) suggests.

While western nations typically view instability as a threat, both Russia and ISIS—although two vastly different strategic actors—seemingly view instability as an opportunity. Specifically, it's an opportunity to turn primordial human needs and desires towards their own ends.

### **THE STATE OF NATURE**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a familiar way to express the priorities of human life: physiological needs, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. When more basic needs are not met, individuals become desperate and focused on the satisfaction of those needs. What happens when an entire population experiences that desperation and need simultaneously?

The theory of victory in both of these cases is reminiscent of a centuries-old debate about the purpose and origins of society itself and the deep-rooted psychological drive of humans for peace and stability. In essence, when chaos threatens primal needs, those needs override every other

concern.

For Thomas Hobbes, society and government are a response to (and solution for) the state of chaos which would exist were it not for some form of earthly authority. Mankind, lacking society, is in a state of "...war, where every man is enemy to every man..." and life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." [6] But peace and stability are impossible where there is "no visible power to keep them [people] in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants..." [7] Chaos led to mutual contracts amongst men because peace and stability are preferable, at a deep psychological level, to chaos.

Montesquieu took on Hobbes and his belief that mankind without political authority is composed of brutes, but still attributed to fear of each other a reason for political community: "Fear, I have observed, would induce men to shun one another; but the marks of this fear being reciprocal, would soon engage them to associate." [8]

David Hume believed that a completely chaotic state was a hypothetical, because "[t]is utterly impossible for men to remain any considerable time in that savage condition, which precedes society; but that his very first state and situation may justly be esteem'd social. This, however, hinders not, but that philosophers may, if they please, extend their reasoning to the suppos'd state of nature; provided they allow it to be a mere philosophical fiction, which never had, and never could have any reality." [9]

*RECOGNITION THAT MANY HUMAN POPULATIONS WILL  
ACCEPT DOMINATION RATHER THAN CHAOS IS A SIMPLE  
IDEA, BUT A POWERFUL ONE.*

But for ISIS and Russia, it does have reality—if they can create it—and they count on the fact that humans cannot "remain any considerable time in that savage condition" for stability over chaos to shape the conditions for victory and control. Recognition that many human populations will accept domination rather than chaos is a simple idea, but a powerful one.

#### **INFORMATION WARFARE**

At the core of both of these strategies is an attempt to trigger a primordial response in humans, resulting in their support of a political actor, any political actor, so long as it can achieve stability and predictability. A result of this focus on local populations and the coercion thereof is the centrality of information warfare, not as an adjunct to military operations but as a central focus. The ISIS information warfare manual explicitly states that information warfare is just as important as military operations (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-i-learned-reading-islamic-states-propaganda-instruction-manual>). The manual details a three-part method aimed at local populations under actual or prospective ISIS control as well as actual and prospective enemies ("Crusaders"). The point is to enhance the attractiveness of ISIS while attempting to "shatter the morale of the enemy." [10] The manual reiterates Naji's belief in the strategic utility of sensational depictions of violence. For example, *The Management of Savagery* includes an entire section called "Using Violence" that details such methods. [11]

Russian methods mirror this belief in the importance of information warfare. Gerasimov thinks non-military means should be employed four times as much as military means. [12] Information warfare comes naturally for Russia as an extension of a strategic tradition rooted in Russian communist thought. For example, A.A. Svechin, an early Soviet strategic theorist, described the parallel but



coordinated efforts of military leaders and “political agitators” as a natural and necessary part of warfare.[13] That the Russian military sees such potential in information warfare fueled by modern, digital communications should come as no surprise.

## CONCLUSION

Both ISIS and Russia seek to present themselves as a solution to unbearable problems. If they are simultaneously the cause of those problems, or seek to exacerbate them, that is irrelevant. Especially in the case of ISIS, they believe that if they make life solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short enough, a given population will accept even draconian masters in exchange for peace and stability. To a lesser extent, Russian planners seek the same thing. The logic of the management of savagery leads directly to a focus on information warfare that frames the views and beliefs both local populations and third-party actors, leading to grudging support or acquiescence to their desired political end states. That two vastly different strategic actors see more opportunities than threats is no accident.

*Brett A. Friedman ([https://twitter.com/BA\\_Friedman](https://twitter.com/BA_Friedman)) is a wargame analyst and officer in the United States Marine Corps Reserve and a Featured Contributor for The Strategy Bridge. He's the editor of 21st Century Ellis: Operational Art and Strategic Prophecy (<https://www.amazon.com/21st-Century-Ellis-Operational-Strategic/dp/1612518079>) and On Tactics: A Theory of Victory in Battle (<https://www.amazon.com/Tactics-Theory-Victory-Battle/dp/1682471632/>) (forthcoming May 2017) from the Naval Institute Press. Brett holds a B.A. in History from The Ohio State University and an M.A. in National Security and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Naval War College.*

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*Header Image: Islamic State fighters paraded in northern Raqqa province in Syria in 2014. (Reuters (<https://static01.nyt.com/images/2015/11/18/world/18beatisis-web/18beatisis-web-superJumbo.jpg>))*

## NOTES:

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