

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Soft power of terrorist organisationsEwelina Panas¹, Katarzyna Maniszewska²¹Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin, Lublin Voivodeship, Poland²Collegium Civitas, Warsaw, Masovian Voivodeship, Poland**Abstract**

The analysis of the soft power of terrorist organizations contributes to the broader debate on the transformation of power in contemporary international relations. Changes can be observed in the mechanisms controlling processes that occur in the international environment, as well as in the patterns of power distribution among various participants of international relations. Adopting the descriptive and correlational methods of research, based on desk research and literature review in this article the authors adopted a conceptual and analytical approach to examine the essence and specificity of soft power in the context of terrorist organizations. The analysis first explores the multidimensional structure of soft power and the concept of power diffusion, assuming that terrorist organizations benefit from these processes. Subsequently, it identifies the specific resources of soft power used by these actors and the mechanisms through which they are projected. The article elaborated on case studies to showcase that soft power is harnessed by terrorists across ideological hues. The case studies analyzed include: Red Army Faction, Boko Haram, ISIS. The study demonstrates that terrorist organizations systematically employ various soft power instruments and tools, including ideology, symbolism, media strategies, and community outreach, to enhance their legitimacy, attract recruits, and support political narratives. These mechanisms complement hard-power tactics and are increasingly professionalized. In conclusion, the authors state that soft power has become an integral element of terrorist strategy, operating alongside coercive methods. Thus, understanding the sources and applications of this form of influence provides insights into the evolving nature of non-state power in international relations and highlights the need for counterterrorism approaches that address both physical threats and ideological narratives.

Keywords

soft power, terrorist organisations, power, non-state actors

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Introduction

The activity of terrorist organizations and their use of power in the international arena symbolize important trends in contemporary international relations. The first is the development of spatial possibilities for the influence of terrorist organizations. Second, the transformation of power is expressed as a change in its distribution (an increase in the number and variety of actors wielding power in the international arena) and a change in the utility of its individual components.

Power is a dynamic process that is no longer identified solely by the size of an army, the quality of armaments, or the size of a country's territory - the so-called hard power attribute. "Soft" means of influence, such as an attractive ideology, culture, organizational efficiency, or inspiring values, are gaining in importance. Hard power, however, ceases to be the only point of reference when considering power in international relations. The beneficiaries of changes in power in international relations are actors who do not have resources such as territory or natural resources at their disposal, which have traditionally been associated with the ability to shape the international environment. Force, which used to be an exclusive attribute of the sovereign state, now includes the participation of non-state actors, including terrorist organizations. The growing importance of "soft" forms of power and the progressive diversification of its sources, have provided terrorist organizations the opportunity to acquire new possibilities to influence the behavior of other participants in international relations.

Therefore, the following question arises: what is the soft power of these entities and the characteristics of soft power belonging to them? The aim of this article is to analyze the essence and specific nature of the soft power of terrorist organizations. The first part of this article examines the multidimensional nature of soft power, and how it serves as a potential resource for these entities. This analysis also examines the diffusion of power since it is assumed that terrorist organizations benefit from it. Next, an analysis of the soft power inherent in terrorist organizations is carried out, including its resources and ways of projection.

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasize that the approach taken in this study to the issue of terrorist organizations and their soft power resources is a research model aimed at facilitating the analysis. It is also important to mention that the soft power components analyzed within the individual dimensions do not belong equally to all such entities.

The multidimensional nature of soft power

Traditionally, power has been conceptualized along the lines of hard power – the direct method of exploiting potential based on military and economic advantages. However, more recently, soft power has gained greater attention and is now recognized as the second face of power. Unlike hard power, soft power is more sophisticated, based on encouragement and persuasion, with the ability to shape the preferences

of others such that they favor the interests of the subject of soft power.¹ As Joseph S. Nye points out, there are three ways to model the behavior of others: coercion, payment, and attraction. Soft power refers to the behavior of attracting and making others desire the same results and pursue the same goals as a soft power holder. Attraction is a key element in the soft power operation mechanism. The source of this power is a certain type of attraction: ideas, political values, culture, or an attractive political project. Therefore, developing an action plan that will gain the approval and support of others is as important as forcing obedience, cooperation, or compliance. In this sense, soft power is the ability to attract people, which may result in complicity, acquiescence, or support.²

As Nye argues, soft power is not only inherent to states but also to non-state actors. It is worth referring to the phenomenon of diffusion of power in international relations. The transformation of power through its subjective diffusion has become a determinant of the development of the soft power of non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations. The phenomenon of the diffusion of power consists of a change in its distribution (structure) in the sense that it is dispersed among a variety of actors, both at the level of national political organization and in international relations.³

Researchers of the transformation of state power assume that the power and sovereignty of the state “leaks,” or “evaporates” to international organizations and non-governmental actors, such as civil society organizations or transnational corporations.⁴ As a result of this process, reflections are emerging on the nature and quality of not only the sovereignty of the modern state but also the nature and quality of the power of non-state actors. The discussion of the diffusion of power also includes observations by James Rosenau, who draws attention to the fact that the power of the state is increasingly contested by citizens who transfer their loyalty to social, ethnic, and religious groups. Those that advocate the idea of the collapse of state power argue that states have increasingly less power to act independently and shape the international environment.⁵

The concept of diffusion of power suggests that states are losing their ability to control not only economic or cultural exchange, but also gradually their ability to control political processes - one of the main harbingers of change in the mechanism

¹ J.S. Nye, *Soft power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, 2004), 5.

² J.S. Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts. An Introduction to Theory and History* (New York, 2007), 62; J.S. Nye, *Soft power. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej?* (Warszawa, 2007), 34; J.S. Nye, “Soft power and European-American Affairs,” in *Hard Power, Soft power and the Future of Transatlantic Relations*, ed. T.L. Ilgen (Ashgate, 2006), 26; J.S. Nye, “Foreword,” in *Soft power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States*, eds. W. Yasushi and D.L. McConnell (New York, 2008), 10; A. Wojciuk, *Dylematy potęgi. Praktyczna teoria stosunków międzynarodowych* (Warszawa, 2010), 105–108.

³ J.S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York, 2011), 113.

⁴ S. Strange, “The Defective State,” *Deadalus* 124, no. 2 (Spring, 1995): 37.

⁵ J.N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Princeton, 1990), *passim*.

of power distribution.⁶ The focus is shifting towards non-governmental actors. Powerful transnational corporations with enormous technological and financial potential are becoming new power players in international relations. Civil society organizations, whose strength lies in their innovation, flexibility, and capacity to organize on a global scale. The effects of diffusion of power were significant. Non-governmental actors are not only the source of new ideas and innovative solutions but also, in the case of transnational terrorist organizations, they represent new threats to international security.

Thus, a growing number of actors with asymmetric capabilities vis-à-vis states are able to influence the international environment with a wide range of tools and means. In this context, an important dimension of power transformation is the diversification of its sources. The utility of “hard” factors of power, such as population, territory, industrial potential, or military force, is changing in favour of “soft” attributes - scientific and technological potential, cultural or ideological attractiveness as well as organizational and institutional efficiency.⁷

Furthermore, the ‘soft’ attributes of force are increasingly at the disposal of non-governmental actors implying that the problem of power in international relations can no longer be considered only from a state-centric perspective. Rather, power is located in actors whose ability to influence the international environment is conditioned by resources that are different from those available to states. These actors can be considered both the “perpetrators” of the power transformation process and the main beneficiaries of this transformation. Undoubtedly, terrorist organizations with the ability to influence the international environment should be included. Naturally, a question arises about the attributes and resources that determine this capacity.

Soft power potential of terrorist organizations

The notion of “terrorism” is challenging to define. It is only possible to define a certain set of features that characterize this phenomenon. We live in an era that is sometimes referred to as the ‘era of terrorism, a term that gained popularity after 9/11 attacks.

To understand why this term remains overused and difficult to grasp, Bruce Hoffman, in his classic work “Inside Terrorism”, suggests that practically every act of violence is now popularly (also in the media) referred to as terrorism. Hoffman draws attention to the fact that the notion of terrorism has evolved and acquired new meanings, largely dependent on historical context. Since terrorism is an ambiguous concept and relativized to a historical place and time, there are problems with establishing a single definition. Moreover, the author argues that the changing

⁶ Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York, 2011), 113, 114.

⁷ S.P. Sałajczyk, “Zmierzch Lewiatana? Spór o pozycję państwa we współczesnych stosunkach międzynarodowych,” in *Państwo we współczesnych stosunkach międzynarodowych*, eds. E. Halizak and I. Popiuk-Rysińska (Warszawa, 1995), 166, 167; Nye, *Soft power. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej?*, 80, 131.

nature of the phenomenon makes it impossible to define it adequately. Hoffman nevertheless puts forward a definition of terrorism, stating it is the “deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change”.⁸ This highlights that terrorism has far-reaching psychological effects.

Bernhard Rabert in “Terrorismus in Deutschland. Zum Faschismusvorwurf der deutschen Linksterroristen”⁹ analyzes several definitions of terrorism, mainly by German researchers. He concludes that the conceptualization of terrorism is problematic. Walter Laqueur goes further and questions whether it is necessary to develop a definition of terrorism since paradoxically, it might make the phenomenon incomprehensible and falsify its meaning.¹⁰ However, the authors argue that it is crucial to create a definition of terrorism to bring greater understanding of this phenomenon and facilitate statistical research, academic analysis, and the possibility of creating a legal framework to counter terrorist threats.

The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) provides a useful and widely referenced definition of terrorism that states it is “the systematic threat or use of violence, by non-state actors, whether for or in opposition to established authority, with the intention of communicating a political, religious or ideological message to a group larger than the victim group, by generating fear and so altering (or attempting to alter) the behaviour of the larger group”.¹¹ It is important to clarify that jihadism and/or other religion-motivated extremism also fall into the category of political motivation, since the underlying impetus is not religion per se, but rather gaining power, and hence, achieving political objectives. Often, these objectives are closely combined with a certain political model inseparably related to religion, as is the case of jihadism.

Other efforts to define, coordinate, and develop a legal framework for terrorism to counter it include the European Union. In 2002, the EU called for the adoption of a similar definition for terrorist offences in all Member States. The Council Framework Decision of June 13, 2002, on combating terrorism proposed the following comprehensive definition of terrorism:

Article 1

Terrorist offences and fundamental rights and principles

1. Each Member State shall take the necessary measures to ensure that the intentional acts referred to below in points (a) to (i), as defined as offences under national

⁸ B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, 2006), 40.

⁹ B. Rabert, “Terrorism in Germany. On the accusation of fascism by the German left-wing terrorists.”

¹⁰ B. Rabert, *Terrorismus in Deutschland. Zum Faschismusvorwurf der deutschen Linksterroristen* (Bonn, 1991), 11–14.

¹¹ Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney,” March, 2023, <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>.

law, which, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organization where committed with the aim of:

- seriously intimidating a population, or
- unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act, or
- seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization, shall be deemed to be terrorist offences:

(a) attacks upon a person's life which may cause death;

(b) attacks upon the physical integrity of a person;

(c) kidnapping or hostage taking;

(d) causing extensive destruction to a Government or public facility, a transport system, an infrastructure facility, including an information system, a fixed platform located on the continental shelf, a public place or private property likely to endanger human life or result in major economic loss;

(e) seizure of aircraft, ships or other means of public or goods transport;

(f) manufacture, possession, acquisition, transport, supply or use of weapons, explosives or of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, as well as research into, and development of, biological and chemical weapons;

(g) release of dangerous substances, or causing fires, floods or explosions the effect of which is to endanger human life;

(h) interfering with or disrupting the supply of water, power or any other fundamental natural resource the effect of which is to endanger human life;

(i) threatening to commit any of the acts listed in (a) to (h). (...).¹²

This definition focuses on the aims of terrorists as the starting point for the legal framework.¹³ Included in this definition is the “serious intimidation of a population” that would not be possible without the use of mass media. One of the key characteristics of terrorism is its relationship with the media. In the 70s, Brian Michael Jenkins understood this and described terrorism as theatre. “Terrorist attacks” he stated, “are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press”.¹⁴ Terrorism garners a disproportionately large amount of new coverage (and public attention), which often helps terrorists achieve one of their main goals – to instill fear into the public. This phenomenon has been observed by many researchers and international organizations.

¹² “Council Framework Decision of 13 June 2002 on combating terrorism,” <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32002F0475&from=EN>.

¹³ At the European Union level the latest definition of terrorism has been codified in the Directive 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA.

¹⁴ B.M. Jenkins, “International Terrorism: A New Kind of Warfare,” Rand Paper Series, 1974, 4.

In the context of providing information on terrorism, the media can shape public opinion by reporting on attacks, events, or political postulates put forward by terrorist organizations. In his classic work “The Social Animal” Eliot Aronson asks the question, “are reporters trying to tell us something?” and replies, “Probably not. However, the producers of TV news can exert a powerful influence on our opinion, simply by deciding which events to show and how much time to devote to them”.¹⁵ Thus, prioritizing messages in the media translates into creating a hierarchy of information among recipients (“agenda setting”). Thus, the media influence public opinion, even if journalists shape it unintentionally.

The aspect of being something ‘spectacular’ makes terrorism attractive for the media; hence, reports from various attacks are often and willingly presented in the press, radio, television, and online. Meanwhile, if a topic such as terrorism is over-represented or rather over-reported, it may lead to an imbalance in the objective perception of reality by media recipients – for example, their fears of further terrorist attacks are not the same as a real or statistical threat. This problem was emphasized by the Council of Europe in its recommendation 1706 “Media and Terrorism” in 2005.¹⁶ The Council stressed that the media must not support terrorists by increasing public fear. As the authors pointed out, acts of terror aim to cause fear and chaos, and their dissemination depends largely on the images and messages published by the media about terrorist attacks and the threats related to them. The omnipresence of mass media – combined with the lack of critical thinking and media literacy (especially digital media literacy in the age of social media) – can exaggerate the effects of terrorist acts out of proportion.

Having highlighted various critical issues concerning terrorism, this study adopts the definition of terrorism authored by Katarzyna Maniszewska. She asserts that terrorism is the deliberate, politically motivated use of force or violence (or the threat of violence), with the intention of influencing public opinion through mass communication.¹⁷ Terrorists are aware of the media’s impact and use it to strengthen their soft power; therefore, one could even argue that the media are the backbone of terrorist soft power.

Soft power resources trigger the mechanism of “attraction”, making a particular value, ideology, or project more desirable to the recipient. The main point of reference for relationships based on soft power is attractiveness. According to Nye, the attractiveness of states is determined by their culture, political values, and foreign policy style.¹⁸ For obvious reasons, the soft power of terrorist organizations is specific and differs from the soft power of states. In both cases, similar mechanisms were at

¹⁵ E. Aronson, *Człowiek istota społeczna* (Warszawa, 2004), 63.

¹⁶ Council of Europe, Recommendation 1706, “Media and Terrorism,” 2005, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/Ref/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17343&lang=e>.

¹⁷ K. Maniszewska, *Pionierzy Terroryzmu Europejskiego: Frakcja Czerwonej Armii* (Kraków, 2014), 12.

¹⁸ Nye, *Soft power. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce*, 40.

work, but the sources of attraction were different. Before analyzing the potential resources that constitute the sources of the soft power of terrorist organizations, it is important to first identify towards whom it is directed. Stated differently, who is the subject of the soft power of terrorist organizations?

It is a form of political communication. Communication may include the projection of both hard and soft powers in different proportions. The message of a terrorist organization is addressed to different audiences (opponents, supporters, and neutrals). It seems that most elements that could be attributed to soft power tools are contained in messages directed at neutral audiences (soft power is then a tool for transforming neutral observers into supporters). On the other hand, passive supporters can be transformed into active supporters as a result of being subjected to soft power. The projection of soft power can therefore take place towards the members of an organization or its supporters (prospective members, people recruited into the organization).¹⁹

One of the dimensions of the “attractiveness” of terrorist organizations (the source of their soft power) is the goal that the organization intends to achieve. In this sense, a potential source of soft power may be an activity aimed at bringing about political change rather than economic gain, which by definition is not the primary goal of a terrorist organization, although the financing of terrorist organizations and their links to organized crime is one of their bases (providing the resources to carry out their activities). In this context, the soft power of terrorist organizations is based on the same resources as the soft power of non-governmental organizations (civil society), whose activities aim to secure specific public goods for a wider target group than the organization itself. The primary aim of activities is not to achieve financial gain but rather to inspire a certain kind of approval, confirm the credibility of intentions, and increase trust in terrorist organizations among neutral recipients and members of the organization itself. As entities, their motive for activity is the realization of the public interest of a specific social group.

Another factor that contributes to the growth of trust and may attract followers or consolidate attitudes of approval among members of a movement or group may also be the aspiration to realize a project whose final effect would replace previously known forms of organizing social life (e.g., a caliphate in the case of ISIS). The idea of creating an “Islamic State” has great power to influence audiences who desired a return to the tradition of the caliphate. The “Islamic State” is a symbol of a well-functioning and organized structure that can provide security and a sense of stability. In this case, terrorist organizations can also become attractive to audiences who have lost trust in state power structures. Thus, these entities provide a platform that serves as an alternative for those groups and individuals whose specific social needs are not fully met by the state (i.e., sense of belonging to a group

¹⁹ The authors would like to thank Prof. B. Bolechów, University of Wrocław for his valuable remarks and drawing attention to these issues.

and/or protection) or who are unable to identify with a state whose values or style of politics contradicts their ideology.

In addition, the symbolic projection of hard power can serve as a potential resource of soft power for terrorist organizations. Joseph S. Nye emphasized that resources usually identified with hard power (i.e., economic and military) may also serve as a source of soft power.²⁰ Therefore, it is crucial to identify the sources of soft power to distinguish the resources that can trigger certain behaviors of actors from the behaviors themselves. In this context, Nye draws attention to the role of the power conversion process, referring to “the ability to transform potential power, measured by the resources at one’s disposal, into the actual possibility of effective influence, determined by changing the behavior of other actors”.²¹ Whether a resource becomes a source of “hard” or “soft power” will be determined by how they are converted into power, the context, circumstances, and skills of the actor. Depending on how they are used, the same resources may favor the projection of both soft and hard power.²² In the case of terrorist organizations, hard power activities may be the source of their attractiveness and a means of attracting supporters.

An example of the use of hard power projection as a source of attraction can be found in ISIS activities, which are of an economic nature. The ability to provide its members with the benefits of participating in terrorist attacks and its supporters with protection should be considered not only in terms of a ‘carrot and stick’ strategy. ISIS, acting in this way, appears to be a powerful organization that cares for its members and ensures the survival and protection of individuals and their families. Moreover, it makes its followers appear as a platform to engage in glorious struggles and heroic endeavors.

Suicidal terrorist attacks are another example of the transformation of hard-power projections into a source of soft power. Terrorist organizations, as entities representing certain values, may use suicide attacks as proof of heroism and sacrifice in the name of defending these values, fighting forces against them, or whose actions contradict them. On the one hand, a terrorist act is a media stunt act aimed at instilling fear in the largest possible “audience”. Apart from this, certain audiences

²⁰ Treating military resources as a source of soft power is related to their direct and indirect use. Indirect impact may consist in promoting (increasing admiration of) the military potential of a given country. In this sense, the source of attractiveness may be efficient and well-armed forces, a victorious war campaign, the ability to defend allies against threats, military cooperation and training programs that can contribute to the creation of a network of international connections, strengthening the soft power of influence of a given country. Direct use of military potential can also be a source of soft power. For example, the offer of armed aid and the use of the army in regions affected by natural disasters can positively affect the image of the state, thus giving it soft power; See J.S. Nye, “Notes for a Soft-power Research Agenda,” in *Power in World Politics*, eds. F. Berenskoetter and M.J. Williams (Abingdon–New York, 2007), 165–168; J.S. Nye, *Konflikty międzynarodowe. Wprowadzenie do teorii i historii* (Warszawa, 2009), 100.

²¹ Nye, *Konflikty międzynarodowe. Wprowadzenie do teorii i historii* (Warszawa, 2009), 99; Nye, *Soft power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 12, 13.

²² Nye, *Soft power: The Means to Success*.

may perceive the same act of terror as an expression of sacrifice and heroism. However, for this mechanism (conversion of hard power projection into a source of soft power) to occur, hard power actions must be framed by an appropriate narrative. Therefore, it is important to build and disseminate an accurate message around the acts and actions of terrorist organizations, which can become a source of soft power. Nye argues that the key significance in the process of soft power, which consists of “seducing” and “inspiring,” is the appropriate creation of an image and its management in such a way that others want to engage in the realization of the intentions of the entity equipped with soft power.²³ Media outlets, including those directly controlled by terrorist organizations (e.g., Al-Hayat Media Center, published by ISIS’s media wing, Al Shabab’s social media accounts, and Hamas’s Hamas Al Aqsa TV), are excellent channels for such messages.

Constructing an accurate message comes down to assigning appropriate meanings - the perpetrator of a terrorist attack is not a madman or terrorist but a fighter and hero. To construct this message, organizations use methods, techniques, and tools known from marketing, advertising, and public relations.

Soft power of terrorist organizations: tools and mechanisms

When it comes to media coverage, the attack of September 11, 2001, may be regarded as the most “spectacular” thus far, however, the links between terrorism and the media started much earlier. Palestinian terrorists can be regarded as “pioneers” in using mass media to increase public attention. The beginning of such a strategy was already visible in 1968 when the media covered the hijacking of an El Al passenger plane. The real breakthrough, however, came on September 5, 1972, with the attack in Munich, a textbook example of using the media to draw the attention of the world public to terrorist activities. The purpose, time, and place of the attack were chosen consciously, ensuring that the Palestinians (at least in the propaganda dimension) were fully successful. Starting from the “Black September,” the Palestinian cause appeared in public consciousness, even though international public opinion strongly condemned the attack.

The Munich attack was also seen as a “model” by other terrorist groups, including leftist extremists active at the time. In November 1972, the Red Army Faction (RAF), the largest leftist terrorist organization in Europe, issued the statement “Black September Action in Munich. A strategy of anti-imperialist struggle” in which he expresses admiration and appreciation for the coup during the Olympics where they praised the organization, stating, “The Black September action showed the true face of imperialist rule and anti-imperialist struggle in a way that no action in West Germany and West Berlin has so far achieved. It was simultaneously anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, and international”.²⁴

²³ Nye, *Soft power. Jak osiągnąć sukces*, 36.

²⁴ *Rote Armee Fraktion. Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der RAF*, trans. K. Maniszewska (Berlin, 1997), 151.

Another example of terrorist action with large media coverage carried out by the Palestinians was the hijacking of the Lufthansa plane in 1977. This attack was synchronized with the actions organized in Germany – kidnapping by the aforementioned Red Army Faction of the chairman of the Union of German Employers, Hanns Martin Schleyer. These events are known as “the German Autumn”. The publication of photos of kidnapped H.M. Schleyer brings to mind contemporary publications (not only in the print press, but also on television and the Internet) in which hostages are presented. It is worth emphasizing here that the methods of operation of modern terrorist organizations had their roots in the 1970s. Of course, they evolved (also with the advancement of technology), but they are nothing new. These methods may also prove that terrorists are fully aware of the role of the media and the possibility of using them, creating public communication strategies for their own purposes. The PR approach is very specific because its main aim is not to gain broad social understanding and acceptance (but rather to instill fear). However, it represents an example of planned, persuasive communication that aims to influence significant social groups (the target groups), and its core element is cooperation with the media.

The communication activities of terrorist organizations also show many features of propaganda, because for terrorists it is not important to present facts (which should be characteristic for public relations activities, unlike, for example, advertising), but to achieve political goals. According to the definition proposed by Aronson and Pratkanis in “The Age of Propaganda,” the propaganda includes the skillful use of images, slogans, and symbols, referring to our prejudices and emotions, and represents a form of persuasive communication of a certain point of view with the aim of making the recipient ‘voluntarily’ accept it as his or her own.²⁵ It often uses fear. We find many of these elements in the press releases issued by terrorists, and it seems that, in the 1970s, these statements were not random, just as the targets of attacks were not accidental but carefully chosen to ensure maximum media coverage.

In terrorist communication strategies, the Internet (and the services and tools based on it) has become an extremely important medium, complementing existing communication channels and creating new ways to reach the target audience: the general public and sympathizers. Thanks to the use of new technologies, the collection of terrorist communication methods has expanded to include multimedia materials, audio and video recordings, blogs, websites, and many interactive tools, such as forums, mailing lists, chats, and instant messaging. The Internet is a channel of communication with supporters and a way to gain new supporters by recruiting new members. It is an important promotion and fundraising tool.

The so called “Islamic State” best illustrates how terrorist are taking full advantage of the Internet by creating their own complex media company. Its core

²⁵ E. Aronson and A. Pratkanis, *Wiek propagandy* (Warszawa, 2003), 17.

element is the Al Hayat Media Center, whose logo has a striking resemblance to Al Jazeera – a well-known brand—most probably in order to raise its credibility. It focuses on producing content in languages other than Arabic, targeting a foreign audience such as magazines in English (Dabiq), French (Dar al-Islam), Turkish (Konstantiniyye), and Russian (Istok). Other media owned and created by ISIS include the weekly news bulletin al-Naba', Al-Bayan radio (online radio station that issues daily news bulletins in several languages), Halumu, and Nashir news. A'maq News – a news agency linked to ISIS—is an interesting example in this context, as ISIS did not acknowledge it as an official media outlet to elevate it to the status of an independent information provider.²⁶ The media outlets by ISIS are professional in content and layout, that is, they are colorful, well-designed, and take advantage of new technologies. As Bruce Hoffman noted in 2006, the websites created by Islamic extremists “seem designed particularly to appeal to a computer savvy, media-saturated, video game addicted generation”.²⁷ This statement confirms that the media content produced by ISIS is intended to attract potential recruits and supporters. The content addressed to a broader international audience does not seek to attract but rather to instill fear. It illustrates a professional approach to production of targeted content.

Marshall Sella in his piece “How ISIS Went Viral” analyzes the process that led to the creation of the world scariest terrorist brand.²⁸ As he points out, videos produced by ISIS were anything but amateur, but, rather they were done professionally with high-quality video content that was meticulously directed to show the killings of hostages (i.e., beheadings), paying attention to details such as the orange uniforms that the victims were wearing. Although the majority of the public has not seen the entirety of these videos by ISIS, we have either been informed about them or viewed clips from them in the mainstream media. For example, a Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll conducted in September 2014 showed that 94% of Americans heard about James Foley’s beheading at the hands of ISIS,²⁹ illustrating the terrorist organization’s success in conveying their message.

The soft power of terrorist influence is, therefore, closely related to, and perhaps even dependent on, the ability to construct appropriate meanings, assign a symbolic dimension, and build an appropriate message to individual actions or events. The logic and mechanism of the functioning of power understood in such a way (as the ability to impose meanings and build narratives) can be found in the reflections

²⁶ “TE-SAT 2017,” 30, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2017>.

²⁷ B. Hoffman, “The Use of the Internet By Islamic Extremists,” Testimony presented to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, on May 4, 2006.

²⁸ M. Sella, “How ISIS Went Viral,” April 20, 2020, <https://medium.com/matter/the-making-of-the-worlds-most-effective-terrorist-brand-92620f91bc9d>.

²⁹ “ISIS Threat: Fear of Terror Attack Soars to 9/11 High, NBC News/WSJ Poll Finds,” September 10, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/isis-threat-fear-terror-attack-soars-9-11-high-nbc-n199496>.

of Antonio Gramsci, who analyzed the relationship between power and authority, paying particular attention to the role of ideology and “soft” forms of rule in the process of gaining legitimacy and stabilizing the political system. Gramsci argued that the most important element of political hegemony is the domination of the ideological sphere. The essence of ideological hegemony lies in the ability to create and evoke the feeling that certain ways of understanding the world become obvious and natural, whereas other alternative ways are perceived as absurd and nonsensical.³⁰ The soft power understood in this way is also close to what Steven Lukes writes in the context of the multidimensional nature of power. The researcher points to the existence of a third dimension of power, which consists of the ability to control thoughts and shape the desires of others through skillful management of information, control of socialization processes, and cooperation with others. From this perspective, the key element of power is the ability to ensure the convergence of interests. Lukes posits, “A can exercise power over B by making him do what he does not want to do, but he can also exercise power over him by influencing his desires through shaping or determining them”.³¹

The aim of terrorist organizations’ activities is to gain followers or transform passive members into active followers through message control around hard-power activities. This idea is also consistent with Bourdieu’s concept of power. He introduces the term “symbolic violence” in his analysis of power, referring to the ability to impose meaning, or a way of perceiving and understanding a given issue on dominated subjects.³² A prerequisite for the effective implementation of soft power by terrorist organizations, in this context, is their ability to construct an appropriate narrative to give specific meaning to specific actions in such a way that they bear the mark of martyrdom, heroism, and sacrifice in the name of values and ideology.

Constructing appropriate meaning through the use of symbols (“symbol strategy”) is a well-known tactic used by actors in international relations. Its essence lies in the ability to refer to symbols or events that give a deeper meaning to certain actions or claims.³³ The sense of community that underlies this strategy is based on values shared by a group, which in turn requires a visual symbol. Terrorist organizations use symbols to convey a specific message in a simplified manner. Being concise in form and appealing to the emotions that are key characteristics of symbols, they

³⁰ C. Barker, *Studia kulturowe: teoria i praktyka* (Kraków, 2005), 472; Cited in: J. Potulski, *Geopolityka w świecie ponowoczesnym* (Częstochowa, 2010), 141, http://geopolityka.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Potulski_J_Geopolityka_w_świecie_ponowoczesnym.pdf.

³¹ S. Lukes, “Władza w ujęciu radykalnym,” in *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne*, eds. A. Jasińska-Kania et al. (Warszawa, 2006), 507; J.S. Nye, “Power and the battle for hearts and minds: on the bluntness of soft power,” in *Power in World Politics*, eds. F. Berenskoetter and M.J. Williams (Abingdon–New York, 2007), 90.

³² P. Bourdieu and J.C. Passeron, *Reprodukcja: elementy teorii systemu nauczania* (Warszawa, 2006), 73.

³³ A. Brysk, “Hearts and Minds: Bringing Symbolic Politics Back,” *Polity* 27, no. 4 (1995): 360, 368–370; A. Kaniewska, “Rewolucja “miotły i goździka,” Czego potrzeba, by rozpętać rewolucję?,” September 25, 2011, <https://www.focus.pl/artykul/rewolucja-miotly-i-gozdzika>.

are used to mobilize individuals to take action, but the way they reflect reality must be concise and uncomplicated. Symbols are meant to provide a clear reference for specific ideas and values.

The use of symbols and symbolic interpretation of events help shape the perception of the recipients of terrorist messages. In this strategy, gaining influence over their views determines the effectiveness of the entire process of influencing their beliefs. Access to modern technological tools facilitates this task, especially the Internet, which increases the impact of symbol-based messages.

Symbols may become objects (logos and flags of terrorist organizations, e.g., Boko Haram, ISIS, RAF, ETA), persons (leaders of movements and groups, e.g., Osama bin Laden, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Andreas Baader, Anders Breivik, Che Guevara),³⁴ and also important events (e.g., the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, the attack in Munich in 1972). A resource with great potential in terms of constituting sources of soft power for terrorist organizations may be precisely the creation of leaders of individual terrorist organizations and movements (e.g. right-wing terrorists, although most often not operating within a terrorist organization, inspire each other and refer to terrorists who have become their “symbols”. For example, the perpetrator of the Christchurch shootings in 2019 referred to attacks by Breivik in Norway 2011).

One of the most striking examples of a resource with high symbolic power in the context of soft power is the flag of the so-called “Islamic State” containing a Muslim creed. The ISIS flag was popularized by the Al-Fajr Media Center, and the reason for its creation was revealed by the jihadists themselves. The idea of creating such a flag was linked to the need to unite all Muslims under one flag, which is “a sign of speaking with one voice and proof of the unity of their hearts. They thus form a single body, binding them together more firmly than the ties of blood”.³⁵ The ISIS flag, therefore, has a theological, psychological, sociological, and political function, providing a sense of unity and belonging to a community, and demonstrates the goal of rebuilding the caliphate.³⁶

Another visual example is the flag used by jihadists from Boko Haram,³⁷ one of the four deadliest groups in 2019 operating in Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria,

³⁴ The names representing different ideologies serving as examples to illustrate how people can become symbols for the supporters of their ideology.

³⁵ W. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York, 2015); Cited in: A. Wejkszner, *Państwo Islamskie. Narodziny nowego kalifatu* (Warszawa, 2016), 93.

³⁶ Wejkszner, *Państwo Islamskie*, 93

³⁷ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, November, 2020, 14, <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>; Also, the report *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* confirms that Boko Haram continue to pose a serious threat, although deaths caused by the group declined by 72 per cent between 2020 and 2021 from 629 deaths to 178 deaths, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web_110522-1.pdf.

and the only one to record an increase in the level of terrorism over the previous year. The ideology behind Boko Haram is the extreme Sunni Islam combined with hatred towards the West and its influence; the organization seeks to create a caliphate. The name Boko Haram translates literally to “Western education is forbidden”. The logo³⁸ presents a black flag with white letters, an open book in the center of the logo, and two machine guns below the book. The flag used by the organization is the same flag used by the ISIS: black background and white letters. The message of their flag reads, “There is no God, but Allah and Muhammad are Allah’s Messenger”. This black banner itself is a symbol for jihadists from different organizations, and is used by all four of the deadliest terrorist groups (as of 2022), that was, ISIS, Boko Haram, the Taliban, and Al Shabaab, but also by Al Qaeda and the Chechen jihad terrorists. Why is the same flag used by different jihadist groups? Mustazah Bahari and Muhammad Haniff Hassan explain in the article “The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies”³⁹ that the black banner goes back to Prophet Muhammad who used the black flag as his military flag, for the purpose of identification. The authors argue that there is no evidence to support the symbolic/religious meaning of the black flag in the Quran or the Hadith. They also state, “The black flag has no clear figurative meaning in Islam due to the absence of strong evidence to support it, as the authenticity of the narration is considered weak or is rejected by scholars of the Hadith”.⁴⁰ Why is it widely used? Our hypothesis is that has been chosen deliberately as an element of visual identification to consolidate the jihadist movements in different regions, reinforce the narrative, and enhance the message. Thus, it can be regarded as a soft power tool.

Although jihadist movements represent the best-known cases today, we must not forget that visual identification has always played an important role throughout the history of modern terrorism. This branding is similar to the strategies implemented by legally operating organizations, companies, and institutions to promote their activities and distinguish themselves from other entities that may be pursuing similar goals. An interesting overview of terrorist brands can be found in the book “Branding Terror: The Logotypes and Iconography of Insurgent Groups and Terrorist Organizations”.⁴¹

One of the first terrorist organizations to create a coherent strategy of public communication, previously mentioned in this paper, was the Red Army Faction. It was

³⁸ UN Dispatch, Boko Haram logo, accessed May 16, 2022, <https://www.undispatch.com/boko-haram-learned-isis/boko>.

³⁹ M. Bahari and M.H. Hassan, “The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 8 (September, 2014), 15–20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351277>.

⁴⁰ Bahari and Hassan, “The Black Flag Myth: An Analysis from Hadith Studies,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 19.

⁴¹ A. Beifuss and F.T. Bellini, *Branding Terror: The Logotypes and Iconography of Insurgent Groups and Terrorist Organizations* (London, 2013).

a German leftist terrorist organization active in the years 1970–1996. RAF regularly published papers and statements explaining their positions, ideologies, and motivations. Consequently, they used the logo presenting a red star with a machine gun, and the letters RAF.

Their activities were aimed against capitalism and the West for “the exploitation of the Third World, of Persian oil, Bolivia’s bananas, and South Africa’s gold”.⁴² They regarded themselves as part of a bigger international movement that had been happening in “Vietnam, Palestine, Guatemala, Oakland and Watts, Cuba and China, Angola, and New York”.⁴³ In April 1971, the paper “Das Konzept Stadtguerilla”⁴⁴ was published, where the RAF described their ideology in detail and called for the organization of an armed international resistance against capitalism and imperialism. The terrorists opted for the strategy of urban guerrilla as the chosen method of fighting: “The Red Army Faction organizes the illegality as an offensive position for the revolutionary intervention. To carry out urban guerrilla warfare means to lead the anti-imperialist struggle offensively”.⁴⁵

Throughout the years, the RAF has published over 50 statements, communiques, and papers. Some were inspired by other organizations (such as the aforementioned statement issued after the Munich attack in 1972) or even authored jointly. With Action Directe, the French leftist organization, they called for a “revolutionary front” in Western Europe, consequently building its international communication strategy. Its logo became a well-known symbol. It was used by terrorists on the backdrop of pictures of the kidnapped Hans Martin Schleyer during the 1977 crisis. The pictures were sent to the German Press Agency and published in the media.

The use of symbols, such as the logo, in addition to the functions discussed above, seems important for improving the functioning of the organization itself. For example, it may be more conducive to managing the network of relationships, deemed important in the process of communication within the organization, as it strengthens the bonds between members, shapes their awareness, helps to gain supporters, and enhances the sense of belonging. Symbols, therefore, also act as catalysts for organizational development.

The skilled use of symbols combined with effective media strategies makes an organization not only gain individual supporters and members, but also smaller organizations as affiliates that pledge allegiance to the umbrella organization. This is visible in the case of ISIS and its affiliates in Southeast Asia, that is, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines or East Indonesia Mujahedeen, who can harness the power of the already world-wide known symbol to their benefit.

⁴² *Rote Armee Fraction. Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der RAF*, 24–26.

⁴³ *Rote Armee Fraction. Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte*.

⁴⁴ “Urban Guerilla Concept.”

⁴⁵ “Urban Guerilla,” 20–27.

Apart from the use of symbols, values and religion are also sources of soft power for terrorist organizations. Their ideological and propaganda role is primarily to create a sense of connection and belonging to the group; they provide a common point of reference for members and supporters of the organization. For example, Antony Black draws attention to the role of Islam, which as a religion is a powerful instrument for interpreting and explaining human life and giving meaning to all human activities. Islam's role as a political ideology is to motivate individuals and social groups.⁴⁶

While referring to the considerations of O. Hanne and T. F. de la Neuville, M. Sulkowski notes that the determination and motivation of the members of the "Islamic State" is not always the result of desperation, frustration, or mental imbalance. Its motivation may be a sincere belief and conviction that temporal actions will be posthumously rewarded⁴⁷ or a desire to atone and take revenge for wrongs inflicted by the Western world.

The EU Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT) pointed out in 2017 that propaganda by ISIS shifted from the narrative of victorious Islam to the retaliation narrative.⁴⁸ The TE-SAT reports 2017–2020 also show that propaganda by ISIS continues to decline in volume, which, of course, does not mean it should be underestimated, as it was partly replaced by user-generated content.⁴⁹ In the case of user-generated content, it is harder for the organization to control the message; however, the users and supporters carry the ideology on. Thus, supporters are becoming one of the tools of terrorist PR, multiplying and disseminating its messages.

One of the sources of soft power may be the promotion of their own system of values as an alternative to the dominant ones. For example, the ideology of Salafi jihadist terrorists refers primarily to absolute respect for sacred texts in their literal interpretation and an absolute commitment to jihad.⁵⁰ The peculiar attractiveness of this ideology lies in the fact that it is a source of self-identification and provides a sense of belonging to a transnational structure, in which religion and shared values are the only common denominator.⁵¹

⁴⁶ A. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh, 2011), passim.

⁴⁷ M. Sulkowski, "Ideologia Państwa Islamskiego," *Chrześcijaństwo, Świat, Polityka* no. 22 (2018): 212.

⁴⁸ TESAT, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trends Report 2017," European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2017, 29, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/tesat2017.pdf>.

⁴⁹ TESAT, "European Union Terrorism Situation and Trends Report 2020," European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, 2017, 33, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>.

⁵⁰ G. Kepel, *Jihad: The trail of political Islam* (Cambridge, 2002), 220.

⁵¹ C. Drake, "The role of ideology in terrorists' target selection," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10, no. 2 (1998): 54, 55.

When trying to understand the popularity the “Islamic State” among young people, French sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar found ISIS’s appeal linked to a sense of crisis of values characteristic of the Western world, which has been unable to offer young people a political utopia that could become a source of fascination, causing growing frustration and disillusionment with the existing order and organization of social life.⁵² ISIS contrasts this with radicalism and offers the value of Islamic fundamentalism as a counter to “consumerism”, “debauchery”, and “greed” of Western societies or Arab elites. Radicalism, in this view, can be seen as a clear and precise system of guidelines, especially by those recipients who, for some reason, feel excluded and confused in their communities. Terrorism, through the skillful use of ideology, thus becomes a tool for educating and mobilizing specific social groups, and ultimately an instrument for attracting them to particular ideas, views, and actions.

However, this mechanism is not exclusively applicable to jihadism. We can observe it in the global extremist landscape – radicalization leading to terrorism has many common features. It often targets vulnerable individuals, such as young males, who are often frustrated and angry and are more prone to radicalization.⁵³

The attractiveness of certain principles, beliefs, and aspirations embodied by a terrorist organization serves as a source of legitimacy for its activities. This means that terrorist organizations have consent for their activities based on public recognition and unforced acquiescence, resulting in trust and persuasion. These actors create confidence among their followers that their activities are legitimate and justified. Endowed with such legitimacy, they even appear to be predestined to play the role of representatives of the interests of specific social groups and authorized, based on social acceptance, to take action on their behalf.

An interesting way in which terrorist organizations build soft power is through humanitarian aid activities. This activity is based on a mechanism well-known and described by international relations scholars, whereby actors that are not civil society organizations (or other actors of social trust) make efforts to “produce” a specific soft power appropriate to NGOs. For example, in the case of transnational corporations, this involves the creation of “fake” civil society organizations (so-called astroturf groups – organizations that are a kind of camouflage, usually created by

⁵² C. Traynor, “The Affected Ones: Why French teenagers are joining ISIS,” March 16, 2016, <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/why-french-teenage-girls-are-joining-isis-jihadi-brides-islamic-state/>.

⁵³ This is a conclusion to be found in various papers and reports, e.g. “Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures,” Counter Extremism Project, November, 2020; A.M. Möller-Leimkühler, “Why is terrorism a man’s business?,” *CNS Spectrums* 23, no. 2 (2017): 1–10; “Identifying Groups Vulnerable to Violent Extremism and Reducing Risks of Radicalisation,” https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d7f5b7c40f0b61c7cd6ffe9/VE_REA_Identifying_and_intervening_with_at_risk_groups_Sept_2019_FINAL_with_Annex.pdf.

professional public relations firms).⁵⁴ Entities that lack trust and legitimacy in society attempt to use the image of civil society representatives to achieve their own ends. By making themselves look like NGOs do, they pursue their own goals and interests. In a very similar way, terrorist organizations produce a “soft power version of NGOs”. Examples include the “taxation” of civilians by terrorist organizations, but also the “services” provided to local communities (from “security” services, which are more reminiscent of mafia-style extortion, to support education and humanitarian aid).

There have been many examples of such activities throughout the history of terrorism. The Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in the territory it controlled in Sri Lanka collected taxes and established some civil administrations, including postal services, courts, police, banks, and radio.⁵⁵ Hezbollah was among the most professional providers of health services in southern Lebanon,⁵⁶ the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) provided social services in the countryside in Colombia,⁵⁷ Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Mindanao, Philippines in the 90’s assumed many government functions in the controlled territories and offered “public services” including the issuing of birth certificates.⁵⁸ Within the framework of the so-called “Islamic State”, there are structures in place to meet the needs of the civilian population by guaranteeing relative stability, access to education, health services, the judiciary, and the provision of food and aid (donations from looting or aid organizations not linked to the “Islamic State”). These actions are being carried out in areas previously engulfed by conflict; thus, ISIS appears as a saviour, a source of aid, and a chance for stability, but above all, it is a manifestation of a real, functioning power.⁵⁹

The aim of terrorist organizations in such cases is to gain approval, trust, gratitude, and thus, social legitimacy for their actions. Additionally, this type of strategy is more profitable. By using soft power tools in this manner, terrorist structures can free up some of their resources, which would otherwise be used up by the need

⁵⁴ S. Beder, “Public Relations’ Role in Manufacturing Artificial Grass Roots Coalitions,” *Public Relations Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (Summer, 1998): 21, <https://www.sourcewatch.org>; K. Piórko, “Relacje organizacji pozarządowych i korporacji transnarodowych,” in *Kształtowanie się Nowego Ładu Międzynarodowego*, eds. A. Chodubski *et al.* (Gdańsk, 2007), 87.

⁵⁵ Mapping Militant Organizations, “LTTE,” Stanford University, last modified June, 2018, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/tamil-eelam-liberation-organization>.

⁵⁶ Mapping Militant Organizations, “Hezbollah,” Stanford University, last modified August, 2016, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/hezbollah>.

⁵⁷ Mapping Militant Organizations, “Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia,” Stanford University, last modified July, 2019, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/revolutionary-armed-forces-colombia-farc>.

⁵⁸ Mapping Militant Organizations, “Moro Islamic Liberation Front,” Stanford University, last modified January, 2019, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/moro-islamic-liberation-front>.

⁵⁹ B. Hall, *ISIS. Państwo Islamskie* (Warszawa, 2015), 233, 234.

to apply hard power. In other words, some terrorist organizations' strategies are much less costly if they are implemented through soft power rather than through intimidation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was not to determine whether terrorist organizations have soft power resources, since there is no doubt that they do. Rather, the task was to identify the potential sources and resources of soft power held by terrorist organizations and to understand the ways in which they are used. Although hard power is dominant in the activities and strategies of terrorist organizations, it is also possible to identify the essence of soft power in their activities. The boundary between soft and hard power in the case of terrorism appears quite fluid and ambiguous. Soft power can be seen as a complement to hard power in terrorist organizations and often precedes or complements the implementation of a hard-power strategy.

The sources of soft power of terrorist organizations include the following: first, ideology (including religion-based), values, and beliefs embodied by the terrorist organization; second, specific objectives of activity, including the terrorist organization's pursuit of state functions and entry into the role of the state; third, symbolic demonstrations of hard power; and fourth, intangible resources (symbol strategy).

The soft power mechanism is conditioned by the ability of individual terrorist organizations to construct an appropriate message, build a favorable narrative, and give meaning to certain events in such a way that they induce the audience to actively participate or passively approve of them. The media plays a key role here – not only the traditional media outlets, but also the media run by terrorists themselves as well as content disseminated by their supporters, especially through social media channels. The methods and tools used for brand building and communication by terrorist organizations have many features that are common to those used by legally operating institutions and organizations. It is noteworthy that, especially in the case of jihadists, these actions (aimed at communication, propaganda, brand building, recruitment, fundraising *et al.*) are characterized by a high level of professionalism.

The functions that soft power fulfils in the activities of terrorist organizations are varied: they can be used as a tool to attract recruits, raise funds, and build a political and social support base. They can also be used as complements to direct hard-power actions, such as terrorist attacks.

The effectiveness of the use of soft power resources depends, among other things, on the awareness of decision makers who influence the strategies implemented by a given movement or group. The question that remains is whether the use of soft power is an effect of a well-thought-out and premeditated strategy or rather a "side effect" of the actions taken. This analysis suggests that terrorist organizations are fully aware of their soft power potential and have become one of the elements in their strategies.

The presence of the virtual sphere has impacted the strength of terrorist organizations' messages, particularly in the dimension related to soft power. The effective use of modern technologies makes it possible to engage individuals on a global scale and create cross-border networks of supporters. Miron Lakomy notes that terrorist organizations have been using the Internet for propaganda purposes since the mid-1990s. However, a specific new quality in this regard can be observed since the turn of 2013/2014, when the later founders of ISIS launched a professional propaganda operation in cyberspace.⁶⁰

The analysis of the essence of soft power of terrorist organizations is also an interesting thread in the discussion on the 'morality' of force. Soft power appears to be the morally correct method. Its use seemingly does not involve dilemmas about the ethical rightness of the actions taken, which often accompany the use of hard power. However, considering the analysis conducted, the moral assessment of soft power is not as obvious as it may seem. J.S. Nye emphasizes that the term soft power is purely descriptive, not normative, and like any other type of power, it can be used to achieve various goals.⁶¹ Therefore, the moral assessment of soft power depends on the results of its use and purpose, which determines the use of this type of power.⁶² After all, as the author of the concept writes, "wringing minds are not necessarily better than wringing hands".⁶³ Furthermore, he argues that it was not a threat, coercion, or payment that drove al-Qaeda members to support Osama bin Laden's actions, but rather the conviction of the rightness of his goals – that is,⁶⁴ the soft power inherent in the al-Qaeda leader. As in the case of assessing effectiveness, in the case of assessing the degree of morality of force, only the effects of its impact can be a verification tool, whereas the a priori assumptions about the moral or immoral nature of soft power are based on erroneous premises.

⁶⁰ See also M. Lakomy, "Propaganda tzw. Państwa Islamskiego w Internecie: w kierunku upadku czy odrodzenia w World Wide Web?," *CyberDefence24*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.cyberdefence24.pl/propaganda-tzw-panstwa-islamskiego-w-internecie-w-kierunku-upadku-czy-odrodzenia-w-world-wide-web-analiza>.

⁶¹ Nye, *Konflikty międzynarodowe. Wprowadzenie do teorii i historii*, 101; Nye, *The Future of Power*, 81.

⁶² J.S. Nye, "Think Again: Soft power," *Foreign Policy*, February 23, 2006, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2006/02/22/think_again_soft_power?wp_login_redirect=0.

⁶³ Nye, *Konflikty międzynarodowe*, 101; Nye, *The Future*, 81.

⁶⁴ Nye, *Soft power*, 53.