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Global Threat Forecast 2015

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

The al Qaeda-centric threat landscape has been eclipsed by an Islamic State (IS) insurgency. Today, an al Qaeda-IS hybrid influences and shapes the global threat landscape of political violence. IS will expand its international footprint in 2015.

Commentary

THE GALAXY of threat groups inspired and instigated by al Qaeda present a growing challenge to global harmony. Despite the presence of the world's finest standing armies in Afghanistan and Iraq, the insurgent, terrorist and extremist groups in the two most violent conflict zones survived. The unwillingness of Western and their Middle Eastern partners to deploy ground troops in Iraq, the pressure to pull out from Afghanistan, and the reluctance of more countries to join the fight perpetuate conflict. In a trajectory of growth, the ruthlessness and resilience of the violent actors threaten international security.

The international neglect of Iraq led to the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an episode likely to repeat itself in Afghanistan in 2015-6. Although the international coalition formed in September 2004 in Iraq and Syria offer hope, a greater commitment of its constituents to fight on the ground is needed. Unless there is greater will on the part of the community of nations to fight violent actors and commitment of capabilities to counter their vicious ideologies, the global threat of violence and extremism will spread in 2015.

The context

Today, the most violent theatres of conflict are in the Middle East (Syria-Iraq, Yemen); Asia (Pakistan-Afghanistan), and Africa (Nigeria and Somalia). With less than 200 members, al Qaeda itself has become exceptionally weak but its associates and affiliates have become strong. The most violent threat groups are Islamic State (IS), Taliban, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Boko Haram and al Shabab. While these high profile groups will continue to pose a threat in 2015, several existing groups in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia are likely to grow stronger.

They include al Nusra also known as al Qaeda in Syria, Turkistan Islamic Party in Western China, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. Although non-Muslim groups from the Philippines to India and Peru

to Colombia present a security threat, the ethno-nationalist and left/right wing groups present a localised threat.

The epicentres of global terrorism today are in the Levant, where IS is the lead actor, and South Asia, where Taliban is. In Africa, a new epicentre is likely to develop unless stability is restored in Libya, Egypt, especially in the Sinai, northern Mali/Southern Algeria, Somalia and Nigeria. At present, the threat in Africa's north is moving from Maghreb to the Sahel; in Africa's east, al Shabab in Somalia is disintegrating; and in Africa's west, Boko Haram in Nigeria is developing into a regional movement with cells in Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

Since June 2014, the spectacular military successes by the IS against the Iraqi and Syrian forces and continuing barbarism against Sunnis who resist them have shocked the world. The IS-generated fear psychosis paralysed Iraqi and Syrian forces from Mosul to Raqqa. While Iraqi and Syrian Sunni Muslims have suffered the most, the systematic killing, maiming and injury of Christians, Yazidis, Shia, Kurds and other faiths and communities by IS continues. The IS engages in the destruction of Islamic shrines and monuments, enslavement of women, beheading of regime elements and recruitment of children.

IS is creating an environment of fear, suspicion and prejudice between communities that historically coexisted. IS seeks to justify its actions through propaganda projecting itself as followers of Islam and enforcers of Sharia. IS activities find resonance among the radicalised, a narrow segment of Muslim communities vulnerable to recruitment.

Recent and likely developments

The 30,000 Shia and Sunni foreign fighters in the Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanon theatres not only threaten the Levant but their countries of origin. Just as the Afghan veterans formed the nuclei of the current wave of violence, the Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese returnees possess the experience and expertise to create and resource threat groups. They travel home with motivation, skills and a network to spread their ideology and conduct attacks.

With a fledgling external wing, IS is likely to target countries participating in the international coalition. The inspired, instigated and directed attacks are likely to occur both in third countries and on the soil of participating countries. As evident in Belgium (May), Canada (October), and Australia (December) in 2014, IS is likely to inspire more attacks against government and civilian targets in 2015.

Among the other conflict arenas attracting foreign fighters are Yemen, Somalia, and tribal Pakistan. The most active Asian threat groups - the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban - threaten to recapture Afghanistan. After relocation to Afghanistan, the Pakistani Taliban in particular seek to attack Pakistan.

The two Taliban entities have already established a presence in southern and eastern Afghanistan. The attacks including the suicide attacks targeting Kabul, the capital, are likely to gather momentum. Pakistani Taliban in tribal Pakistan and Afghan Taliban in mainland and tribal Pakistan aim to create Taliban style Islamic states in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although media attention is focused on Iraq and Syria, the developments in Pakistan and Afghanistan are threatening their neighbours. Threat groups from the Af-Pak theatre seek to infiltrate Central, South, Southeast and Northeast Asia. Like the Iraqisation of al Qaeda in Iraq produced Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the Asianisation of al Qaeda has produced al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), threatening South Asia and Myanmar.

After a hiatus of a decade, al Qaeda returned as AQIS. While al Qaeda was predominantly Arab, AQIS is staffed by Pakistanis but includes Indian, Maldivian, Bangladeshi and Myanmar (Rohingya) Muslims. AQIS is seeking to build a network in South Asia and Arakan region of Myanmar. In Southeast Asia, where over 200 recruits travelled to Syria and Iraq, 16 terrorist and extremist groups have expressed support for IS. The foreign-fighter recruits include both Central Asians and Uighurs from Northeast Asia. Increasingly, they travel with their families.

Confronting IS

The strategy to dismantle IS should be multi-pronged, multi-agency, multi-national, and multi-jurisdictional. What is needed is a bottom-up strategy of attrition of fighters, destruction of their assets especially logistics and supplies, and simultaneously impeding their capacity to replenish human losses and material wastage.

In parallel with targeting the middle-level leadership, experts and membership, it is paramount to engage supporters and weaken the support base. In Iraq, for instance, political and economic initiatives to wean away Sunni support and sympathy is essential.

As a third of the IS fighters are foreign, governments worldwide should criminalise advocacy, support and participation in foreign conflicts. As a fourth of the fighters who travel are disillusioned with IS, security and intelligence services directly and indirectly should reach out to those with second thoughts. The key is for governments to work with community partners, religious institutions, educational institutions and the media to create an anti-IS environment.

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