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IS ‘Trojan Horse’: Seeing Wood for the Trees?

By Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

Western media reports have played up the threat of Islamic State “sleeper cells” infiltrating Europe with the recent refugee exodus. Do these reports reflect genuine concerns or over wrought fear-mongering? What are the deeper ramifications of this crisis and what should be the longer term reactions from governments?

Commentary

FEARS OF Islamic State (IS) “sleeper cells” infiltrating Europe with the recent refugee influx incubating, and later creating anything from lone-wolf to 9/11 style attacks, have been highlighted in recent weeks by the western media, rightist politicians and extremist groups. Although there have indeed been calls by IS in 2015 for sleeper cell attacks following US-led coalition airstrikes on IS-held territory, hard evidence of an organised attempt to plant cells within the refugee tidal wave is hard to come by; unpacking the actual facts behind the melange of rumour and scaremongering even more challenging.

Media reports have suggested a few arrests (none in fact confirmed) or else manhunts of false “asylum seekers” at borders or refugee centres, while other news outlets have surfaced “interviews” quoting a range of individuals (these include Middle East officials, activists and even IS operatives themselves) that IS “covert jihadists” have entered Europe, perhaps in cooperation with criminal gangs operating either in Libya or Turkey. Far more worrying, few appear focused on what this all means for Europe over the longer-term.

Implications and possibilities

Many of these reports can be put down to shoddy and alarmist journalism. In Germany, intelligence authorities have suggested that there is “no concrete evidence” of terrorist infiltration. Social media also has been abuzz with images apparently showing refugees brandishing IS flags and attacking police (right-wing groups responsible for its dissemination claim that this shows there are IS cells within the refugee groups). On closer inspection, these images appear to have been either doctored or taken out of context.

IS has not yet in its public communications threatened to leverage on the refugee influx (although it

could be argued that this is simply a matter of time). The most recent issue of the IS online magazine, *Dabiq*, makes threats against people who might be thinking of making the *Hijrah* to America or Europe from lands controlled by IS – a major sin as it means abandoning the nascent caliphate for the land of the *kufr* - Christianity, atheism, and liberalism. A depopulated caliphate would give the lie to claims of having a functioning state, a major plank of IS' propaganda.

It is unfortunate that there has been so little informed debate about the wider ramifications of the influx, and surprising that so little of the current soul-searching has extended to how these refugees can become part of real communities.

The arrival of the refugees will inevitably shift mainstream political discourse and shape the future socio-political landscape in some European countries. Right wing movements and their opponents (not just Islamist groups) are locked in a mutual embrace of reciprocal radicalisation. Norway's domestic intelligence agency has, for example, observed that the domestic threat level has increased, not because of the wave of asylum seekers, but on account of the visceral response of far-right groups, with the concomitant possibility of far-left extremist groups mobilising in turn.

All of them were quick to enunciate fears of Islamic extremism, while pointing to the spectre of young Muslims, many undocumented with unknown backgrounds, being received by a government taking irresponsible risks.

Measures against extremism

Those determined to pinpoint incipient, and genuine threats within the refugee influx might be better advised to examine the coming battle for the hearts and minds of these groups – a battle that will likely see split pathways of alienation and integration. Consider for example the warnings from intelligence officials in countries ranging from Germany to Norway, noting some refugees could be vulnerable to radicalisation.

Some reports (more credible than those suggesting that mass infiltration by IS cells has taken place) suggest that Salafists and other extremists in certain European countries such as Germany have attempted to reach out to, and recruit, recently-arrived refugees from Syria, and might even be doing so at government refugee shelters by warning refugees against succumbing to Western values in the state.

In response, the states taking in these refugees cannot simply be content to accommodate them, even though this is a useful start. Extraordinary measures will be required to facilitate the integration of these individuals who in many cases have been traumatised and persecuted. But even further, innovative steps will be needed now, that might serve to inoculate against extremism.

In many parts of Europe, there already exist upstream, early intervention community-level initiatives aimed at individuals and groups potentially at risk of radicalisation. The Channel Programme in the United Kingdom, part of the government's PREVENT strategy, is a case in point. These see the mobilisation of key influencers, local community actors, trusted NGOs, and social workers to act on, and influence, at-risk individuals.

Building resilient local-level networks

Useful parallels exist in some European countries, where there are ongoing attempts to build resilient local-level networks. Amsterdam has a programme leveraging on "key influencers" – young people who are in leadership positions within critical community networks (ranging from groups of females, informal sports clubs, to mosques). In some cases, these influencers are given a small amount of seed money to do what amounts to "diversion" community programmes.

These deflect and in some cases obviate the need to go down extremist pathways. Often, a key component is periodic consultations between multidisciplinary case management teams and local imams and mosque administrators, with a view to detecting signs of early radicalisation.

These initiatives should be expanded and repurposed to encompass the needs and particular circumstances of resettled refugees. They should also be introduced on a wider scale into countries

like Germany, now more preoccupied with first needs of housing a huge influx. That would help the authorities better understand how these people are coming to terms with their new reality.

What is clear is that a great deal can and should be done away from the sharp end of kinetic counterterror action. Increasingly, experts working in the field of deradicalisation have come to accept that counter-narratives in either the real or online space are just part of the bigger puzzle. What matters even more are early interventions aimed at building resilience of peoples, and even in enhancing critical thinking.

The real spectre of the so-called Islamic State ‘trojan horse’ is not so much sleeper cells but the fact that some of those who have arrived will not cohere into their new homelands. Governments and communities alike will need to experiment and adopt creative solutions to ensure that this does not become a problem that incubates.

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