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Radicalisation of Soldiers: Growing Threat from Within?

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

Cases of Islamic State radicalisation involving members and ex-members of military forces have been observed in various countries. How can this phenomenon be explained?

Commentary

RECENT MEDIA reports focused on military personnel and former soldiers who attempted to support Islamic State (IS). Malaysia and Germany appear to be particularly vulnerable. Malaysian Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Abdul Rahim Bakri declared in April 2015 that around 70 members of Malaysia's armed forces were found to be involved with IS. A year later the German Military Counterintelligence Service had identified 29 former soldiers who travelled to Iraq and Syria to join IS. Armed forces of Belgium, France, Georgia and the United Kingdom are also affected.

The phenomenon of former militaries taking up arms against IS has been documented, but little has been said on the processes that led some (ex-) troops to abandon their soldier's commitment and the values which they embraced and sometimes fought for. While it does not appear that IS and other Jihadist groups active in Syria attempted to recruit individuals with a military background, the numbers of radicalised soldiers show that all occupations may be infected by the virus of violent extremism. A strong proactive response is needed to protect the states and their citizens from those who might renege on their sworn duty.

Specific Dynamics?

The variety of national militaries involved does not suggest that some countries would be more likely to suffer from violent radicalisation among their armed forces than others. The high number of servicemen reported by the Malaysian authorities, nevertheless, contrasts with the non-representation of Indonesian soldiers. This could be the result of tight internal controls exerted by the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), as the latter have been reported to look for a greater role in Jakarta's counter-terrorism strategy.

Several special forces were singled out by the Malaysian and the French authorities. Some Belgian militaries were suspected to show "suspicious behaviour", as cited by the Belgian Minister of Defence Steven Vandeput, and soldiers in Malaysia attempted to channel funds to supporters of IS and to radicalise their comrades in arms through the dissemination of IS ideology.

The majority of Southeast Asian and Western European soldiers who attempted to migrate to the Syrian conflict zone were former troops who were discharged by their military hierarchies or left the armed forces voluntarily. Backgrounds of these individuals do not point to a distinct "military pathway" to violent extremism. However, it has been observed that the processes leading some people to enrol in the armed forces and to adopt radical beliefs and convictions may be close to each other. Sociologist Elyamine Settoul thus noted that both engagements can result from "a quest for positive identity in a structuring universe".

Implications and Possibilities

Three distinct security challenges surface. The first issue is a potential knock-on impact. Personal bonds between militaries, especially those who were engaged in combat operations together, could boost a "bunch of guys" effect. This expression is drawn from Marc Sageman's radicalisation theory which states that individuals embrace violent extremism on the basis of friendship and kinship rather than socioeconomic factors or ideological motives.

The second threat is the increasing possibility of "green-on-blue" or "insider" attacks carried out for terrorist purposes. Such operations originally refer to shootings on NATO forces by members of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) or insurgents posing as ANSF personnel. The majority of green-on-blue attacks happen on military bases where the concentration of soldiers in a territory they do not consider to be hostile makes them easy targets to enemy fire.

A high-profile terror attack led by a military on fellow soldiers outside a conflict zone was the 2009 Fort Hood shooting. The perpetrator, Nidal Malik Hasan, was a US army major and a psychiatrist who killed 13 people and injured 32 others. He had been in close contact with the late al-Qaeda recruiter Anwar al-Awalaki prior to the shooting.

The third and highest risk relates to the involvement of servicemen in terrorist activities outside the military environment, without leaving for Syria or upon their return from the Syrian conflict zone, and the provision of fighting techniques to would-be terrorists and insurgents. Some of the French ex-soldiers who joined IS

were explosive experts, which probably led them to exercise mentoring responsibilities within training camps of the organisation.

These individuals might radicalise during their involvement with the armed forces, but people with already made-up minds could also attempt to enrol to gain military skills. According to a German official, “Like all armed forces, the *Bundeswehr* [armed forces of Germany] may be attractive for Islamists looking for weapons training”.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell?

Management of violent radicalisation among the military is a sensitive process. Governments can be reluctant to publicly admit that individuals who were granted military security clearances evaded internal security surveillance procedures. The reputational impact may be high on an institution which is considered to be both society's first line of defence and a successful model of integration where socio-economic, ethnic and religious origins of soldiers are not supposed to make a difference.

Despite the fact that Nidal Hasan was considered to be a “religious fanatic” by one of his supervisors, no preventive action was taken against him. A senate report concluded that inertia was caused by “bureaucratic inefficiency and an unwillingness to confront home grown Islamic extremism”, as reported by the media.

Generalised suspicion on the basis of soldiers' faith or cultural background would be wrong, counter-productive, and ludicrous in countries where Islam is the official or the most practised religion. Different counter-strategies have been applied. France increased its recruitment of military counterintelligence personnel, while Belgium and Germany introduced stricter vetting processes.

However, it appears that only countries that have been directly exposed to multiple cases of “green-on-blue” attacks, whether motivated by terrorism, mental health issues or personal and cultural disputes, pledged to take the most vigorous counter-measures. The US Department of Defence (DoD) plans to have a Defence Insider Threat Management and Analysis Centre (DITMAC) fully operational by 2018 or 2019. Risk management initiatives within the armed forces are likely to become a common norm, as the expanding outreach of IS to soldiers and veterans will require some governments to bring their detection and data-processing capabilities to a much higher level.

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