

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Global Threat Forecast 2017

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

In 2017, the so-called Islamic State (IS) will decentralise posing a pre-eminent terrorist threat. To deter the international community against continued intervention in its heartland IS will stage attacks worldwide.

Commentary

FOUR SIGNIFICANT developments will characterise the global threat landscape in 2017. First, it is likely that the so-called Islamic State (IS) will transform from a caliphate-building entity into a global terrorist movement. In a manner similar to Al Qaeda (AQ) that had dispersed from its Afghanistan-Pakistan core in 2001-2002 to conflict zones worldwide, IS will refocus on consolidating the distant wilayats (provinces) to serve as bastions of its power.

Second, death of either the IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi or AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri, may lead to collaboration or possible unification of the most powerful terrorist groups. In this regard, the discord between IS and AQ is a leadership dispute and not ideological in nature. Third, IS, AQ and their associates will compensate for their losses in the physical space by expanding further into cyber space. Despite government and technology firms collaborating to monitor the cyber space, the battle-space of threat groups in the virtual communities will continue to operate and grow.

The Context

There is a fourth significant development which has emerged in response to IS. This is the rise of far-right, ethno-nationalist, anti-Islamist populist movements, particularly in the US and Europe. The response of governments and their societies to these

movements within their countries and ethno-nationalist challenges in the Middle East and elsewhere will determine the threat levels in the future.

Insurgency, terrorism and extremism will continue to characterise the international security landscape in 2017, exacerbated by the campaigns of the populist far-right movements. In the backdrop of intermittent threats and attacks, the new US leader Donald Trump is seeking to expand the coalition to include other partners to dismantle IS and AQ and decapitate their leaders.

Trump's target-centric approach of eliminating the enemy and its infrastructure will replace Obama's population-centric approach of engaging and empowering communities whilst adopting militarised responses. In the scenario that Trump and Vladimir Putin collaborate, the threat groups will suffer further loss of territory and operational capabilities.

However, the growing pool of supporters and sympathisers will replenish the losses allowing groups such as IS to fight back and recover. IS will transform into an operation-based movement. With the renewed global focus to destroy its infrastructure in Iraq and Syria, the goal of forming a caliphate will linger and live on in the cyber space and resonate among IS followers. Some will hark back at its brief history and others will strive to recreate it.

Contrary to popular opinion, IS will remain a threat as long as its ideology lives on in the cyber and physical space. IS will also continue to supplant AQ's influence operationally and ideologically. IS, AQ and their associated groups are likely to remain potent global actors in the domain of violence and extremism. The groups will frame the fight as a response to attacks against Islam and Muslims with their apocalyptic vision in mind.

Decentralisation of Threat

IS will compensate for the loss of territory by expanding horizontally and strengthening its existing wilayats (provinces) while declaring new ones. The wilayats are considered the "Pillars of the Caliphate" by the self-declared caliph Baghdadi and he referred to Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Yemen, the Philippines, Somalia and West Africa as some of the wilayats in November 2016.

The distant wilayats will serve as bastions of IS power and future launching pads to attack enemies. However, the regional wilayats in Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan support the neighbouring IS structures. The shifting focus of IS towards its wilayats became evident when Baghdadi urged supporters of the caliphate to migrate to Libya instead of traveling to Iraq and Syria. However, the group has now been defeated and ousted from Sirte in Libya as well.

In a further demonstration of the emerging decentralised threat, his message was preceded by his associates urging supporters of the caliphate to migrate to IS wilayats and enclaves. For Southeast Asian fighters, the regional hub is in Mindanao in southern Philippines.

The global pool of foreign fighters with expertise and experience are likely to gravitate to wilayats, home countries and other countries with familial links. In addition to the persistent IS threat in Muslim minority and majority countries, the dispersal of the IS core will threaten coalitions fighting IS. Directly and through proxies, IS will target coalition equities in the Iraqi and Syrian theatre and other countries.

Multiple Coalitions Against IS

In 2015 to 2016, multiple coalitions targeting IS contributed to the group's loss of territory. As such, with Russian airstrikes, Syrian ground forces took Palmyra in March 2016 and US-supported Kurdish and Arab groups attacked Raqqa, the de facto capital of IS in November 2016. US-supported Iraqi and Kurdish forces attacked Mosul in October 2016.

Both Raqqa and Mosul were used by the external operations wing of IS to plan, prepare and execute attacks. In his speech in November 2016, Baghdadi called for "attack after attack" in Saudi Arabia; he also urged his fighters and supporters to "unleash the fire of their anger" towards Turkey. The bomb blast and suicide bombing outside a soccer stadium in December 2016 in Istanbul that killed 29 and injured 166 is a forecast of what IS will unleash in Istanbul and elsewhere.

The overall terrorism threat landscape is unlikely to change as the ground situation in Syria will not alter dramatically in the short term. Contrary to assessments by some, IS will survive as long as the civil war persists in Syria and will remain a growing threat to the west and other countries confronting IS.

Rohan Gunaratna is Professor of Security Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore.
