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Defeating Islamic State

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Contrary to earlier assessment, the so-called Islamic State (IS) can be defeated. IS support can be contained, its membership can be isolated, and its leadership can be eliminated with the right resources.

Commentary

SINCE ITS rise in Iraq and Syria, the so-called Islamic State (IS) managed to change the global threat landscape dramatically. Although the IS core in Iraq and Syria is under threat, IS has expanded worldwide and created a series of provinces. IS global expansion has increased its resilience to destruction and contributed to the durability of the movement. However, like other threat groups, IS is not invincible.

The key to defeating IS is coordinated and collaborative action and innovative leadership. To mobilise support, it is crucial for governments to forge and sustain partnerships between government, private sector and community to prevent attacks, protect targets and pursue terrorists.

The Battlefield Context

In the battlefield, international coalitions in Syria and Iraq should raise national capabilities - both general purpose forces and special operations forces - to fight back. Coalition forces should continue to target high profile leaders, active advocates, facilitators and directors of attacks worldwide, using drones and airstrikes. The kinetic or militarised phase should be followed by a stabilisation phase and post-conflict peace building phase where areas recovered from insurgent and terrorist control should be restored to normalcy.

During this period, many countries, especially those countries fighting IS, will suffer. Observing the European experience it is evident that only half of the IS attacks could be disrupted. This suggests that governments should work with partners to anticipate likely attack scenarios and develop contingency and crisis management plans following a successful attack. Other lessons learned include the necessity of increased security and police visibility to prevent attacks.

In light of the reduced flow of foreign fighters to the IS heartland, the timing is right for governments and their community partners to develop strategic capabilities in rehabilitation and community engagement. In this case, the approaches of rehabilitation are religious, educational, vocational, social and family, creative arts, recreational, and psychological. Engagement strategies to build relationships and integrate individuals through ideology and psychotherapy, are powerful tools in transforming IS fighters.

Managing the Foreign Fighter Threat

Moreover, in designing strategies to reduce and manage the foreign fighter threat, governments and partners should also consider the threat posed by both IS and non-IS fighters. In addition to rehabilitating those who have surrendered or become captives governments should create platforms to engage Iran's militias, Shia fighters, and Hezbollah along with Sunni opposition groups.

The Shia fighters are estimated to be in the thousands and the potential threat of Shias has to be managed carefully. The Jabhat Fateh Al Sham (JFS), previously Al Nusra, the Al Qaeda branch in Syria, poses a long-term threat, along with other ideologically indoctrinated and battle hardened groups.

Rehabilitating and reintegrating fighters and supporters should be a priority. However, in parallel, there should be a robust community engagement strategy to counter extremism and promote moderation. In order to prevent radicalisation, governments and their partners should focus on the physical and cyber space as well. The online and offline community engagement initiatives should address extremism both within and outside the Muslim community. This should also include right wing and anti-Islamic groups, which are on the rise.

The emergence of right-wing anti-Islamist populist movements coupled with hate crimes and Islamophobia will only worsen the situation and play into the hands of IS and Al Qaeda (AQ). These groups want to see inter-communal discord and clashes which permits them to gain new recruits.

In this regard, such over-reactions will justify the IS war narrative against the West and non-Muslims. Particularly, there is need to temper and rein in the animus by more constructive efforts such as inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues, peace movements and goodwill groups.

Strategic Communications

The complex and fluid threat environment is strengthened by the growth of IS virtual

communities collaborating across regions sharing information. Like AQ, IS too misinterpreted and misrepresented Islam to advance a political project. It is imperative to highlight that both these groups killed, maimed and injured more Muslims than any non-Muslim State.

In addition to influencing the human terrain, engaging the media, the education and religious sectors are vital. For instance, the immense suffering of Muslims both in the battlefield and off-the-battlefield attacks has not been adequately portrayed. The media was unable to shed adequate light on the fact that a third of those killed by Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel - the Tunisian behind the 2016 truck attack in Nice - were Muslims. Overall, to manage the IS threat, the response should be multi-pronged, multi-agency, multi-dimensional and multi-national.

With IS struggling to survive in its heartland, a heightened security environment will prevail throughout 2017. In August 2016, according to the Pentagon, the number of foreign fighters entering Iraq and Syria diminished from 2000 to 200 in early 2015. Similarly, West Point's Combating Terrorism Centre reported that IS official online postings dropping from 700 in August 2015 to 200 a year later. Thus through sustained military action, the IS operational threat is likely to diminish in the short-term (1-2 years) and the ideological threat will possibly reduce in mid-term (5 years).

The greatest impact of IS is the damage it inflicted on communal harmony – on Muslim-non-Muslim relations. As was evident following the Paris attacks, the relationship between the French Muslims and non-Muslims suffered. In the long term (10 years), governments working with community organisations will be able to reduce the suspicion, prejudice, anger and hatred precipitated by IS. However, in the meantime visionary and steadfast counter insurgency and terrorism leadership is essential to fight and defeat IS.

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