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London March 2017: ISIS “Weaponisation of Everyday Life”

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The recent low-tech attack by a lone wolf in London may well be a harbinger of things to come in the struggle against ISIS extremism. Singapore must be prepared at several levels to meet the challenge.

Commentary

ON WEDNESDAY 22 March 2017, Adrian Elms alias Khalid Masood, a 52-year old British convert to Islam, drove his rented Hyundai 4x4 at high speed onto the sidewalk of Westminster Bridge in London, mowing down terrified pedestrians, killing three of them in the process. A fourth victim later died in hospital. Masood crashed his vehicle into the perimeter fence surrounding Westminster Palace, emerged with two large knives and entered the British Parliament grounds where he stabbed a police officer to death before being shot dead himself by other on-site security personnel.

The self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) through its Amaq news agency eventually claimed responsibility for the attack, calling Masood a “soldier of the Caliphate” and claiming that he had “carried out the operation in response to calls to target citizens of the coalition”. The early consensus appears that Masood had carried out the attack on behalf of ISIS, having been inspired – but not explicitly instructed - to do so by immersion in ISIS propaganda. Masood in short is very likely another example of the so-called “lone wolf” terrorist inspired but not necessarily directed by an organised terrorist network whose cause he had become ideologically committed to.

A Disturbing Recent Trend

In particular, the mode of Masood's action – a vehicle-ramming attack, sometimes accompanied by an on-foot gun and/or knife assault – appears to be in the process of becoming an ISIS trademark. On 14 July 2016, for example, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhel, a Tunisian who was resident in France, drove a 19-tonne cargo truck into crowds celebrating Bastille Day on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, killing 86 people and maiming 484 others, before being shot dead in an exchange of gunfire with police.

As in the latest London incident, ISIS claimed responsibility for the Nice attack, saying that Lahouaiej-Bouhlel had answered its "calls to target citizens of coalition nations that fight the Islamic State". Then on 19 December 2016, Anis Amri, a failed Tunisian asylum seeker, drove a truck into a Christmas market next to the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church at Breitscheidplatz in Berlin, killing 12 and injuring 56 people.

Amri had commandeered the truck after killing its driver but was shot dead by Italian police near Milan four days later. Yet again ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, saying the attacker had answered its calls to target the citizens of states that are fighting against it. That this vehicle-ramming-plus-knife assault tactic may well be coming into current ISIS vogue was further suggested by an incident occurring just hours after the London incident.

A 40-year old French national called Mohamed R. was arrested by police in the northern Belgian city of Antwerp for trying to enter the main pedestrianised shopping street at high speed. The police also found a rifle and bladed weapons in his car.

Cars, Trucks, Knives and ISIS: Nothing Very New

Some observers argue that the latest apparent shift in ISIS tactics is borne out of necessity. As the United States and Russian-led coalition continues to put the squeeze militarily on ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS leadership may be expected to take the strategic decision to begin preparations for a shift from a territorially-based entity to a global insurgency.

That is, instead of being physically concentrated around Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, the ISIS meme will be kept alive in the form of what FBI Director James Comey has called a "terrorist diaspora" - where thousands of foreign fighters will ultimately fan outwards from the Middle East, heading back towards Europe, Africa, as well as East Asia and even Southeast Asia.

One operational consequence of this strategic shift would be that complex, multiple-assault type actions like the devastating attacks on Paris on 13 November 2015 which were basically coordinated from ISIS Central, will become less likely. While returning foreign fighters may tap local black markets to secure the weapons needed for fairly sophisticated attacks, tightened security measures in the wake of Paris and Brussels may make that option less appealing.

Hence relatively low-tech measures – like what we witnessed in London – may make more tactical sense. Worse, one need not even be a trained fighter to perpetrate

such low-tech attacks – merely a fanatical lone wolf-type commitment to the ISIS creed would do. This is why the Soufan Group has warned of the “weaponisation of everyday life” - as exemplified by the use of cars, trucks and knives for terrorist purposes – as a dangerous emerging trend.

Genesis of the Lone-Wolf Idea

Reinforcing such an operational trend is the fact that ISIS and its Al Qaeda cousins have long prepared themselves doctrinally for such a shift towards decentralized action by a mix of trained local cells and lone wolves. In the mid-2000s the Syrian Al Qaedaist ideologue Abu Musab Al-Suri had famously argued against centralised direction from the core Al Qaeda leadership, favouring instead action by independent small cells acting on their own initiative to exploit local opportunities to strike at enemies.

Furthermore, capitalising on the rise of social media platforms in the mid-2000s, organs such as the online English magazine *Inspire*, the brainchild of the late “bin Laden of the Internet,” Anwar Al-Awlaki, the chief ideologue for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, promoted lone wolf action, calling on supporters to “do your own terrorism and stay in place”.

In 2010, moreover, *Inspire* urged followers to choose “‘pedestrian only’ locations and make sure to gain speed before ramming their vehicles into the crowd in order to ‘achieve maximum carnage’”. Hence, when the late ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani called on ISIS supporters worldwide in September 2014 to “single out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies”, and amongst other things, “slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car,” he was really stating nothing new.

What we witnessed in London last week was always going to be part of the ISIS terror toolkit. We are likely however to see more of such low-tech attacks.

SG Secure: Now, More Than Ever

Even the most casual observer will recognise that the densely populated urban city-state of Singapore is not immune to the type of low-tech attack London just experienced. While physical measures like concrete barriers and bollards are certainly part of the defence against such threats, they are insufficient. This is where the recently launched SG Secure national movement with its emphasis on promoting community cohesion, vigilance and resilience is timely.

At one level, the wider community must be prepared to know what to do in an emergency, and act as the security forces’ extra eyes and ears to detect suspicious activity suggesting terrorist incidents are about to occur. At a second level, being aware of telltale signs of radicalisation into violent extremism on the part of family members, friends and colleagues, is equally important to enable early intervention to prevent a vulnerable individual from acting out any lone wolf terrorist fantasies.

At a third and final level, security forces, no matter how well trained, cannot be everywhere at once. Hence perhaps the call in some quarters for suitable and willing

able-bodied members of the public to volunteer for training in self-defence techniques may be worth further exploration. After all, there have been low-tech terrorist incidents overseas where alert and courageous members of the public collectively disarmed lightly armed individual attackers before help arrived.

If Singaporeans can demonstrably live up to the moniker of “Lion City”, a layer of psychological deterrence may well be added to the SG Secure mix, further enhancing our nation’s security in the face of the emerging low-tech “weaponisation of everyday life”.

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