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“Shari’ah-Compliant Jihad”: A More Complex Post-ISIS World

By Jasminder Singh and Muhammad Haziq Bin Jani

Synopsis

In a post-ISIS world, some terrorist organisations have had to balance violence against rejection from the communities they operate in. Their paradoxical solution to increase recruitment is a terrorist re-interpretation of a more “Islamic” form of “jihad”.

Commentary

IN JUNE 2017, Al-Qaeda in the Subcontinent (AQIS) released a publication entitled “Code of Conduct” (COC) through the As-Sahab Media wing. The publication clarified the strategy that jihadists are to take in their respective theatres of jihad, from India to Pakistan and even Myanmar. AQIS “jihadists” are expected to be “bound to act in accordance with this Code of Conduct” and would be held accountable should they not comply.

AQIS put forward a restricted scope of work for the jihadists within what it defined as “Islamic” and “permissible in Shari’ah” so that jihadists do not conduct activities that are harmful for the jihadi movement. This new strategy involves a “Shari’ah-compliant” modus operandi and target selection for jihadism. With this strategic shift, AQIS revealed that it is relying on an image rebranding to improve relations between jihadists and the “Muslim masses” in a post-Islamic State world. AQIS hopes this new strategy will increase support and improve recruitment numbers.

“Shari’ah-Compliant Jihad”

What does AQIS mean by “Shari’ah-Compliant Jihad”?

Firstly, it opines that “Shari’ah-compliancy” requires Muslims not to be attacked

under any circumstance except if there are groups or individuals that participate actively in “war against the mujahideen”. It claims that every effort would be made to invite Muslims on the other side of the war to join it or to reconcile, such that AQIS would not end up having to fight Muslims.

AQIS recognises that fighting Muslims detracts it from fighting the “real enemy” – the United States of America (US) and its infidel allies. Only minimum force would be employed and there will be discrimination between fighters and non-fighters.

Secondly, AQIS intends to discriminate civilians from military personnel in its target selection, except civilians who are enemies of the Prophet (blasphemers), enemies of Islam (secularists) and enemies of the religious section of the society. The latter group was included to make AQIS seem like the defenders of the *ulama* or scholars.

AQIS now supposedly considers collateral damage of civilians to be “absolutely wrong”, to be “seriously avoided”, and subject to Allah’s punishment. The killing of civilians is to be avoided such that even wives and children of military personnel would be considered wrong to kill. Non-Muslim civilians and their places of residence or worship are also not to be harmed.

No Guarantee

There is no guarantee AQIS would ensure that its jihadists and affiliated groups toe its new strategy. However, regardless of whether the COC is more than just propaganda, its so-called shari’ah-compliant jihad would probably be the most deceptive terrorist ideology to date.

On the one hand, by downplaying the un-Islamic nature of terrorism and white-washing the extremism that AQIS propagates, AQIS has the potential to radicalise the naïve, vulnerable and action-oriented individuals in its recruitment campaigns and drives for support for Muslim fighters, supporters and financiers. On the other hand, any counter-ideological response that hinges solely on Muslims being victims or collateral damage would be rendered ineffective.

AQIS relies on the violence of others in countries where the US or its allies could be easily conceived as an occupying force, or where Muslims are unjustly treated, to fuel radicalisation and justify violence. The selective targeting of uniformed personnel is also a form of dehumanisation to allow terrorists, supporters and sympathisers to normalise and socialise violence in their respective societies.

Regional Security Implications

Besides AQIS, the Harakah al-Yaqin, also known as the Faith Movement, has equally undergone an image reform in its insurgency in Myanmar’s Rakhine State. Having been previously linked to al-Qaeda affiliated groups, the movement has renamed itself as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

On 30 May 2017, Ataullah, its commander-in-chief, denied and condemned any form of terrorism on civilians regardless of ethnicity or religion in a press release. Ataullah

also argued that ARSA is fighting a legitimate defensive war which he claims is backed by international norms and principles.

Through this rebranding, groups such as AQIS and ARSA, have launched a new propaganda of what they stand for and aim to achieve, including through violence. In fact, through their new declarations of target selection, it would make it harder for laypersons to differentiate between support for terrorist groups and causes with those groups that are fighting for democratic and inalienable rights.

It would also mean that terrorist groups would be able to disguise their claims and activities as championing of legitimate social causes, as seem to be undertaken by some radical groups in Indonesia. This was most evident in the role of groups such as Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) in the anti-Ahok demonstrations in November and December 2016.

More Complex Post-ISIS World

Through this new modus operandi, a net effect could be increased radicalisation of society. More people can be expected to join radical groups as they will have great difficulties in distinguishing between terrorist and radical groups from those that are legitimately championing bona fide causes.

In many ways, it is through championing of what appears to be innocent and legitimate causes that terrorist groups are formed with broad-based mass support. With the free flow of information that champions legitimate social causes, moderate leaders and groups would have to be careful about what they are accessing online.

While societal anger may be fuelled further through these means, at the same time, governments have to be determined and clear that no room should be given to these groups to develop, what more, gain support for violent discourses and actions.

Clearly, the post-ISIS world is likely to become more complex as terrorist groups become polymorphic by finding and developing new ways to survive and mobilise support. AQIS and ARSA have clearly confirmed that terrorist groups are 'learning organisations' and to neutralise these groups, the authorities must always be a few steps ahead in the learning curve.

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