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Violent Extremism and its Continuum

By Rohan Gunaratna and Shashi Jayakumar

Synopsis

ISIS may have suffered battlefield reverses, but in some respects – not least ideologically – it is resilient. Analysts, academics and security officials should resist the impulse to call time on the study of these types of issues – this mistake has been made before.

Commentary

WITH THE so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seemingly in eclipse, many senior security officials and terrorism analysts we have interacted with around the world are saying that they have now time to think, attend conferences, and see to other security issues that loom large these days.

Case studies on lessons learnt can be compiled, loose ends (like the foreign fighter returnee issue) tackled and then, so the reasoning goes, we can all move on to other pressing concerns. We've actually been here before - sort of.

Misreading the Ground

It feels now like so long ago since May 2011, when the perpetrator of the 9-11 terrorist attacks on Sept 11, 2001, Osama Bin Laden, was killed by United States Navy Seals. The group he led, Al-Qaeda, appeared to have lost the capability to mount iconic 9-11 style operations, and was limited to localised attacks.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was deemed by many to be a localised force with the threat it posed under control. AQI's spawn, ISIS, did not yet exist. Even when it appeared on the horizon in 2013, it was memorably - and wrongly - dismissed by US President Barack Obama as nothing more than an amateurish 'JV' (junior varsity) outfit.

Just as the world did in 2011, we risk miscalculating again.

Islamic State in the Future

Even as ISIS' footprint shrinks in Iraq and Syria, it is making inroads to existing and emerging conflict zones including Asia. Extremists continue to travel to Southeast Asia to join ISIS-centric groups. As demonstrated by the Marawi siege (May-November 2017), ISIS' strategy of decentralisation works to destabilise Southeast Asia. Governments will have to contend with the possibility of more Marawis, and more Mautes.

And then of course there are longer-term issues. Tracking the fighters and family members (some young children born in Syria or Iraq) who return to their home countries will be important: for some the issue may be judicial process, for others, it may be aftercare or resocialisation, and efforts to prevent "re-radicalisation".

This itself is an endeavour which will be generational and which will continue to reverberate long after the embers of conflict will appear to have died down. All concerned parties will have to stay the course – because the adversary will.

Now What?

There is an urgent need to go beyond conventional metrics - how many joined ISIS, how many foreign fighter returnees, how many sympathisers arrested locally. An over-reliance on bean counting would serve to obscure evident truths: ISIS is transforming from a caliphate-building group to a global movement that, notwithstanding its battlefield reverses, has continued resilience ideologically.

In Southeast Asia, Muslims as well as other faiths have for centuries been tolerant, syncretistic, and have valued coexistence. In the present era, sectarianism, exclusivist thought, and intolerance is on the rise. From the western edge of the Rakhine to the eastern edge of Mindanao, ethno-political, politico-religious ideologies, fanned by their ideologues, challenge the security landscape of the region.

None of this is the same as terrorism. But at the extreme edges of this mental and physical geography, ideologues provide the mood music to create the atmospherics for extreme thinking, and, in some cases, violence.

We must ensure that this is not ISIS' legacy.

Building Partnerships

Governments alone cannot cope with the threat today.

The key is for governments to build partnerships with the community organisations, private sector and academia to prevent the radicalisation of communities and build community resilience among its vulnerable segments.

Three and a half years ago, the East Asia Summit on Religious Rehabilitation and

Social Reintegration was convened by the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) and the Singapore government, with the aim of sparking a conversation on developing a regional policy, plan and strategy by drawing both government and civil society partners.

Things have moved since then - the attacks in Surabaya and Marawi come to mind - but not just in terms of incidents or attacks. Trends in radicalisation are changing. As Singapore officials have revealed, online self-radicalisation is taking place among young people at a quicker tempo, and at a younger age.

The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) has found particular difficulties in getting through to these newer, self-radicalised individuals, with the deradicalisation success rate standing at 25 per cent (as opposed to close to 90 per cent for radicalised individuals from groups like the Jemaah Islamiyah). There are plenty of theories as to why this is, but no definitive answer.

Needed: A Different Type of Analyst

The recently-concluded 2018 Southeast Asian Track 1.5 symposium, organised as part of Singapore's ASEAN chairmanship, was timely in taking stock of the evolution of the range of counter-terrorism efforts since the 2015 symposium, while laying the platform for greater counter-terrorism cooperation in the region.

Key decision-makers and experts in the field from ASEAN and the wider world were present. In recognition of how far the field has developed, present too were speakers and representatives from social media companies.

As experts at the symposium argued, upstream efforts to combat extremist thought need to start at the earliest possible stage. The counter narratives themselves will need to be appealing, and informed by variegated perspectives.

In fact, it may well be that in time, a different type of analyst will be needed to look at the problem, which is a continuum that spans violent extremism, to sectarianism, to intolerance, to social media filter bubbles. Individuals versed in anthropology, sociology and ethnography will be crucial to complement orthodox perspectives. At present, we only have a few people who see the proverbial elephant in totality - most see only a part.

Trends and Evolutions

Trends are changing in the wider world, too. Radicalisation knows no colour. In the United Kingdom, the Home Office has announced that the number of white suspected terrorists being arrested in the UK has overtaken those of Asian appearance for the first time in more than a decade. This is in part due to the under-studied phenomenon of "reciprocal radicalisation", which sees the far right and Islamists feeding off each other in a negative spiral.

Traditionally, in Southeast Asia, governments and security experts have discounted the possibility of such a phenomenon, partly on account of the absence of a defined

far-right. But are we so sure there are no similar negative and self-reinforcing spirals here?

In 2011 there was a lot governments and security experts did not see. There were mental model of the way the world worked, and how the threat would evolve.

Many experts were wrong then. If we are complacent, we risk being wrong again in our approach to present problems in appreciation of future threats. We should use this window of opportunity to prepare for ISIS' evolutions, and for deep thinking about extremism itself. This may just be a lull in the next storm of violent extremism.

Rohan Gunaratna is Professor of Security Studies and Head of International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technology University, Singapore. Shashi Jayakumar is Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at RSIS. An earlier version appeared in The Straits Times, 11 October 2018.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg