

Annual Threat Assessment

GLOBAL THREAT FORECAST

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand

SOUTH ASIA

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA

China (Xinjiang), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Turkey and Yemen



Annual Threat Assessment 2017

2016 saw the so-called Islamic State (IS) in retreat following sustained bombardment and military attacks and airstrikes by the US-led coalition as well as Russian and Syrian forces. It has conceded large swathes of territory, towns and cities, and lost some of its top commanders and strategists and more than 25,000 fighters. The group's revenue has declined and so has the flow of new fighters. It has to contend with desertions, in-fighting and scarce resources. Its fall-back wilayats (provinces) in Libya have been lost and many in the liberated areas of Iraq and Syria are jubilant at its ouster after holding sway for more than 20 months. Its declaration of the caliphate is rejected by the Muslim world, which has denounced its acts of violence and misreading of religious texts. Since its formation, IS remains the object of condemnation and denunciation by the whole world.

Even so, the terrorist threat posed by IS and its decentralised networks in 2016 shows no sign of abatement. Throughout the year, IS' active worldwide networks demonstrated the ability to plan, direct, train, recruit and radicalise from abroad, operating with impunity and surpassing the threat from Al Qaeda's old guard. The year saw a number of IS-directed or IS-inspired attacks by terror cells or 'lone wolves' in major cities like Brussels, Nice, Orlando, Istanbul, Dhaka, Jakarta and Berlin resulting in thousands of casualties. Its propaganda machinery and online presence remain formidable, exploiting technology for communications, recruitment, finance, training and terrorist operations. IS has caused the displacement of millions and triggered a humanitarian crisis among refugees and in the battle zones. The group's extremism and violence have contributed to inter-religious tensions and discord, and strengthened anti-Islamist movements in the West.

The stage is therefore set for 2017 to be a portentous and decisive year for IS and countries afflicted by the threat of terrorism. As IS loses control of Mosul and Raqqa in coming months, it will change strategy, focus and priorities. How it will change and what the impact will be are issues addressed by **Rohan Gunaratna** in his article on *Global Threat Forecast*, as well as in accompanying articles on the terrorism situation in selected countries and regions.* As IS continues to lose ground in Iraq and Syria, it will transform itself from a caliphate-building entity to a terrorist organisation. It will seek refuge in its many wilayats and enclaves, and consolidate, expand and use them as launching pads to mount terrorist attacks. The group will continue with its strategy of expanding the 'battlefield' to the West and elsewhere, and hit 'soft' and easy targets. Overall, the terrorist threat will endure in the New Year and will continue to require effective counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and counter-violent extremism measures.

* All articles last updated on 27 December 2016.

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Global Threat Forecast

Rohan Gunaratna

Introduction

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, the death of either IS' leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi or AQ's leader Ayman al Zawahiri may lead to collaboration or possible unification of the most powerful terrorist groups. This is possible because the discord between IS and AQ is not ideological in nature but over the issue of leadership. 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. Fourth, the rise of far-right, ethno-nationalist, anti-Islamist populist movements, particularly in the US and Europe is a pertinent development. The response by 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.

The Context

Insurgency, terrorism and extremism will continue to characterise the international security landscape in 2017. Against 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 (Gaouette 2016). 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 event 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 (Katz 2016). 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.

Background

The genesis of IS can be traced to Afghanistan where the patronage of AQ enabled the formation and sustenance of a group of fighters from the classical Levant. After the US intervention in 2001, the group relocated to Iraq in 2002 and after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the group eclipsed its mothership, AQ. The influence of IS supplanted AQ and steadfastly grew among a segment of Muslims and diaspora communities and inspired converts after its declaration of a caliphate in June 2014 (Bradley 2014). IS violent ideology crystallised in the form of personalities, operational cells and facilitation networks willing to work with IS Central through its control over of the cyber space. With a cautious Zawahiri in the background, IS managed to aggressively exploit the opportunity of co-opting AQ groups and their remnant networks that had been disrupted by authorities. With the IS spokesperson Abu Mohamed al Adnani (killed in August 2016) calling for attacks since 2015, the threat steadily escalated (Schmitt & Barnard 2016).

The broader coordinated strategy developed by IS from 2015 to 2016 was to direct and inspire its operatives and supporters to mount attacks worldwide. Handpicked foreign and local fighters with communication skills and commitment were trained and co-located in Syria and Iraq, to advocate and enable attacks in their homelands by providing technical and financial support. Presently, with the disruption of oil infrastructure controlled by IS in 2015 and the weakening of its financial infrastructure in Turkey in 2016, IS external operations wing is investing in other sources of revenue in its target countries (Hughes 2016). Like AQ, IS also remains engaged in credit card, bank, and cheque fraud, bank robberies, and kidnapping-for-ransom or execution operations as sources of finance (CAT 2015).

During the last three years, IS Central trained between 50,000 to 60,000 local and foreign fighters with access to skills, networks and resources. Considering their relocation to their home countries in the global north and south, they present a real threat to national security. Although a third of these fighters have been killed, maimed or are disillusioned, the threat from indoctrinated operatives and supporters continues to grow. Here, in addition to IS operatives who travelled using legitimate travel routes, IS also dispatched a tiny percentage of

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operatives through refugee routes. A small percentage of combat-hardened fighters use forged, adapted and fraudulently-obtained genuine documents to travel home to conduct attacks.

As various IS-controlled towns and cities in Iraq and Syria come under attack over the last two years, IS has called for worldwide attacks. This is evident in the IS-directed or -inspired attacks in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Istanbul, Berlin and elsewhere. In addition to its suicide attackers and storming units, IS encouraged immersing fighters deep into the enemy frontlines where the *inghimasi* fights until their death. IS also intends to replicate these battlefield capabilities in off-the-battlefield arenas, indicating a shift in the theatre of operations from the deserts to the cities. IS has also expressed interest in using biological agents, after experimenting with radiological devices and using chemical weapons in the battlefield (Bloom 2015).

The dispersal of thousands of ideologues, financiers, combat tacticians, operations managers, and explosives experts (with the knowledge to build large devices) will heighten this threat in the foreseeable future.

Decentralisation of Threat

IS will compensate for the loss of territory by expanding horizontally and strengthening its existing wilayats 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 (Rahmani & Tanco 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 travelling to Iraq and Syria (Walsh 2016). However, the group has now been defeated and ousted from Sirte in Libya as well (Wintour 2016). 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 (Liljas 2016). 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. 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 (Korybko 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. Contrary to assessments by some, IS will survive as long as the civil war persists in Syria and will remain a relevant threat to the West and other countries confronting IS. 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 Straits Times 2016a). The overall threat landscape is unlikely to change as the ground situation in Syria will not alter dramatically in the short term.

IS Strategy

It is evident that the IS threat grew beyond Iraq and Syria in 2015 following coalition intervention. However, it should be noted that one of the first important attacks abroad was in May 2014, when

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a French national of Algerian heritage Mehdi Nemmouche, 29, killed four at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels on 24 May 2014; he was the first IS operative to strike Europe (Rawlinson 2014).

The battlefield is expanding to the West with the low-cost high-impact attacks in countries such as Canada, US, France, Belgium, Germany and Denmark. The shift from *Dabiq* to *Rumiyah* (Rome), visually appealing magazines for consumption by supporters, demonstrates the evolving IS strategy (McKernan 2016). The content within these magazines urges attackers trained both in the heartland and target countries to strike. The world is at an early stage of witnessing the dual targeting strategy, as practiced by IS. As such, in addition to IS instigating and inspiring strike within Iraq and Syria, IS Central exploits those who travelled to the theatre to direct, enable and facilitate attacks in their homelands and other countries. Through their propaganda, AQ and IS legitimised inflicting mass fatality and mass casualty attacks at general gatherings. The Belgian citizen of Moroccan heritage, Oussama Ahmad Atar, masterminded the Paris attacks in November 2015 and the Brussels attacks in March 2016 killing 162 people (Samuel 2016). While Atar directed the attack from Syria, both Europeans and Iraqis trained in Syria, participated in the attack.

In addition, while battlefield targets are both hard and soft, off-the-battlefield attacks are mostly soft targets. It is apparent, based on the target selection in successful, aborted and disrupted attacks, that the future likely targets are bars, clubs, restaurants, hotels, malls, sports stadiums, schools, places of religious worship, hospitals, and transport hubs. This category of soft targets permit easy access and are too vast and numerous to protect. As such, IS will stage

attacks and glamorise their horrific acts to threaten their enemies and deter the international community against continued intervention. The twin threats are from the motivated and trained returnees and from those radicalised online, especially those who were prevented from travelling or were otherwise unable to do so. In one case, Tamim Chowdhury, the Canadian citizen of Bangladeshi heritage, and IS Bangladesh leader, travelled to Syria and masterminded the Dhaka attack that was conducted in July 2016, killing 22 (Dearden 2016). Tamim also recruited Major Syed Mohammad Ziaul Haque as a trainer for local Bangladeshis to stage the attack.

In order to engage the returnees who are radicalised at home or in Iraq and Syria, governments must have the legal frameworks, comprehensive programmes and targeted interventions for custodial and community rehabilitation and reintegration. While half of the fighters are likely to return home, those wanted by the authorities are likely to relocate to third countries. At the same time, it is possible that the returnees are unlikely to engage in violence, unless they are hailed as heroes and re-recruited as mentors by the next generation.

Most IS-directed complex attacks will take place in conflict zones. IS will stage attacks off the battlefield when the group is strong numerically and possesses access to weaponry. Due to the challenges of transporting fighters from theatre to target location, most IS-inspired attacks beyond the conflict zones use basic weapons. In one such case in August 2015, a high speed train from Amsterdam to Paris carrying 554 passengers was attacked by Ayoub Khazzani armed with a Kalashnikov assault rifle, 270 rounds of ammunition, a Luger pistol, a bottle of petrol, a box-cutter and a hammer (McGuinness 2016). Passengers disrupted the attack preventing a large-scale impact and casualties. In the case of Paris, IS dispatched trained attackers and strike teams from its heartland of Iraq and Syria to target countries that are a part of the coalition. In countries where access to weapons is relatively easy, such as the US and continental Europe, terrorists including 'lone wolves' will use both firearms and commercial and homemade explosives to conduct attacks.

The Future

Worldwide IS operatives and supporters possess the intent and capability to mount attacks. In the

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future, it is likely that these threat groups will recruit serving security forces personnel, private security guards, airport personnel and others who have either access to target and weapons storage facilities. As such, IS will conduct both large-scale complex and basic attacks in 2017. However, in the past IS has conducted complex attacks in the battlefields and basic weapon attacks off-the-battlefield where access to weapons is difficult. The use of motor vehicles, knives, poison and items for conducting basic attacks has been practised by AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS. These attacks will continue to gain momentum and will remain an effective tactic. IS has attempted to conduct at least a dozen attacks or attempts to run down pedestrians since 2013 after AQAP introduced the tactic in its English-language magazine "Inspire" in October 2010. After the July 2016 attack in Promenade des Anglais in Nice that killed 86 and injured 434 others, an article in "Inspire 2" titled "The Ultimate Mowing Machine" discussed the idea of attaching a camouflaged wide sharp blade to the front of the vehicle to increase deaths and injuries (Richter 2016).

With the international coalitions stepping up operations against IS in Iraq and Syria and in its backup bases in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan-Pakistan and elsewhere, IS operational focus will continue to shift. Instead of inviting men, women and children to its heartland in Iraq and Syria, IS will urge its operatives and supporters to attack coalition countries including security forces personnel and government leaders in their home countries. IS will direct its supporters to target Shia and non-Muslim symbols and communities in order to disrupt harmonious relations between communities. Other prominent IS religious targets include Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs and their places of worship along with religious gatherings.

It is possible that IS and AQ may infiltrate peaceful rallies, demonstrations and protests to conduct violence, as demonstrated during the Arab Springs in the past. In order to instil a culture of hatred between the state and the

Muslim communities, terrorists will narrow in on special religious events on landmark dates as likely targets. This remains a possibility because IS will continue to seek global media attention, as it did with attacks such as in the one in Nice when an attacker careened two kilometres through a crowd gathered to celebrate the French National Day in July 2016. Similarly, IS declared a “Ramadan jihad” (The Straits Times 2016b) in 2016 precipitating 17 attacks in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Bangladesh, Israel, Iraq, US, France, Egypt, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Turkey and Indonesia. Thus, IS will also step up attacks during the religious month of Ramadan in the upcoming year as well.

In countries where the security apparatus and infrastructure is weak, both IS, AQ and their associates will compete to strike attractive targets. A few of such attacks conducted in the past include the downing of the Russian Metrojet originating from Egypt in October 2015, which killed 217 passengers and seven crew members. In addition, an Al Shabab suicide bomber, Abdullahi Abdisalam Borle, exploded an IED laden laptop on Daallo Airlines flight DL3159 from Mogadishu to Djibouti in February 2016, piercing the fuselage, killing himself and injuring two others. Although there is no operational cooperation between IS and Al Shabab, there is considerable exchange of ideas and competition between both, due to the latter’s links with AQ (Laing 2016). For instance both IS and Al Shabab competed to attack targets in East Africa. Al Shabab also attacked the Beach View Cafe in Mogadishu in January 2016. In April 2016, IS detonated a car bomb targeting forces belonging to the African Union peacekeepers on the outskirts of the capital Mogadishu.

State and Societal Responses

As an active and strong insurgent and terrorist group, IS managed to change the global threat landscape dramatically. However, like other threat groups, IS is not invincible. IS support can be isolated by containing its membership and eliminating the core with the right resources, coordinated and collaborative action, and innovative leadership. As such, it is crucial to forge and sustain a partnership between the government, private sector and community to prevent attacks, protect targets and pursue terrorists. If the European experience is observed, it is evident that only half of the IS attacks could be disrupted. This is testimony to the fact that governments should work with

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partners to anticipate likely attack scenarios and develop contingency and crisis management plans in the event of a successful attack. Other lessons learnt in this case include the necessity for increased security and police visibility to prevent attacks.

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, prolific advocates, facilitators and directing figures of attacks worldwide using drones and airstrikes. The kinetic or militarised phase should be followed by a stabilization phase and post-conflict peace building phase where areas recovered from insurgent and terrorist control should be stabilised to achieve an extent of normalcy.

The terrorists conducting attacks make use of communications security, both private messaging and encrypted computer applications. As such, due to the use of end-to-end encryption and the limited coverage of threat groups in planning attacks, only some of the attacks will be disrupted. Governments should simulate attack scenarios and conduct exercises to prepare both the emergency services and the public. It is pertinent that the attacks are developing in terms of their complexity, yet the response strategies of most governments are not in sync with the IS attack methodology. IS focuses on the following strategies in conducting attacks:

(a) herd the victims and achieve mass casualties;

- (b) take the remaining hostages, prolong response and gain maximum publicity;
- (c) invite the security forces for a showdown where the attacker(s) fight to the death with the belief of "attaining martyrdom".

In certain situations counter-terrorism tactical teams are unable to reach the target zone fast enough to stop the attack during the herding phase. In order to facilitate quick response, the main intervention units should rise from within local police units and first responders. Through decentralisation of the response, the probability of disrupting an attack increases. As such, the attacks in Bataclan, Dhaka, and Orlando offer a template for future targets and possible responses. In June 2016, Omar Mateen attacked the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando (Florida) and killed 49 and injured 53 others. US did not take into account the incident in Paris as a warning. The US intervention units claimed that the American Muslims were better integrated, the threat was low, and did not prepare for a Bataclan-type scenario. It should be noted that before the advent of IS, the early examples of no-surrender attacks are Mumbai (2002) and Westgate Mall in Kenya (2013).

In light of the reduced flow of foreign fighters to the 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 over ideology and psychotherapy are powerful tools in transforming IS fighters. 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 surrendered and captured Jabhat Fateh Al Sham (JFS, previously Al Nusra; the AQ branch in Syria), 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 (Nader 2016). JFS poses a long-term threat, along with other ideologically indoctrinated and battle-hardened groups that should not be underestimated.

“ Rehabilitating and reintegrating fighters and supporters should be a priority. ”

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-Islamist 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 AQ. The resultant inter-communal discord and mayhem will enable jihadists to gain new recruits as it will justify their 'war narrative' against the West and non-Muslims. Governments should therefore invest in more constructive efforts to promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious dialogues, peace initiatives and goodwill groups.

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 its political project. It is imperative to highlight that both these groups killed, maimed and injured more Muslims than any other government. 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 in 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 Bouhlef in the Nice truck attack were Muslims (Rubin & Blaise 2016). Overall, to manage the IS threat, the response should be multi-pronged, multi-agency, multi-dimensional and multi-national.

Conclusion

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 dropped from 700 in August 2015 to 200 a year later. As such, through sustained military action, IS operational threat is likely to diminish in the short-term (1-2 years) and ideological threat will possibly reduce in the mid-term (5 years).

The greatest impact of IS is the damage it inflicted on communal harmony, specifically Muslim-non-Muslim relations. As was evident following the Paris and Charlie Hebdo attacks, the relationship between 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 creative and steadfast counter-insurgency and -terrorism leadership is essential to fight and defeat IS.

In the coming year, IS, AQ and their associates will gravitate to permissive environments and flourish. In the case of IS, the core is the strongest followed by its wilayats worldwide. These wilayats are situated from West Africa to North Africa and East Africa, throughout the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, and in parts of Asia. In the case of AQ, its associates in Syria (JFS), Yemen (AQAP), Sahel (AQIM) and Somalia (al Shabab) are significant. As such, there is a resurgence of threat from AQ and their associated groups. With governments worldwide planning to step up their campaign against terrorism, the probability that both IS and AQ will work together is high. The dispute between AQ and IS is a leadership conflict and not an ideological conflict. If al-Baghdadi or Ayman al Zawahiri dies or is killed, IS, AQ and their associates - at least some of them - are likely to come together, a scenario that will further heighten the threat level.

As the reach of IS is global, the potential for IS and AQ to remain dormant in one region and re-emerge in another is likely. In addition, the capacity of IS to replicate through re-organisation and re-recruitment is high. Unlike AQ and their associates that recruited discretely, IS recruited both openly and covertly. Moreover, unlike AQ, IS has developed expertise in exploiting social media and can reach out to millions generating thousands of supporters and sympathisers. The reliable and fledgling support networks enhance the endurance and sustenance of IS. Although IS presents the most dominant threat, the threat by AQ should not be underestimated. Presenting a graver long term threat, AQ demonstrated patience and persistence and is likely to avoid open conflict with IS. However, while on the run, making use of their communications platforms IS, AQ and their associates will provide ideological inspiration and practical guidance to supporters to mount attacks.

Overall, the terrorist threat will endure in the year ahead despite progress on the military front, greater cooperation and collaboration among countries, and counter-ideology efforts. Raising and expanding specialist counter-insurgency (COIN), counter-terrorism (CT) and counter violent extremism (CVE) capabilities are central to defeat IS. The international community should be prepared should IS take on new forms as it did from 2004 (AQI) to 2014 (IS) or turn present wilayats and enclaves into new 'Iraqs', 'Syrias' and 'Libyas'. Lastly, at the heart of winning the fight against IS is enlightened political leadership willing to work in partnership with their majority Muslim populations,

and global political will to fight the threat of extremism and terrorism.

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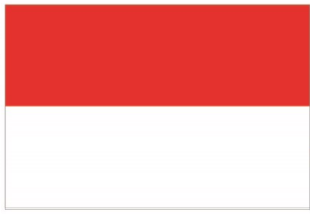
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SOUTHEAST ASIA

- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- Myanmar
- Philippines
- Singapore
- Thailand



Introduction

The continuing terrorism threat afflicting Indonesia was exemplified early in 2016 by the terrorist attack in Jakarta on 14 January. 8 people (including 4 attackers) were killed and 23 injured in multiple explosions and shootings. The so-called Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack, the first major terrorist incident since the 2009 suicide bombings in Jakarta. There were several more attacks and plots right up to the end of the year. Anti-terrorism force Densus 88 disrupted an IS plot to attack a police post in West Java on New Year's Eve, arresting two terror cell members and shooting dead two who resisted arrest during the raid (Soeriaatmadja 2016). A few days earlier, three suspected militants were killed in a raid, with police recovering 6 packets of bombs; they too planned to attack a police post. Indonesia has prevented at least 15 attacks this year and arrested more than 150 suspected militants (Allard & Kapoor 2016). As in the Jakarta attacks in January 2016, many of these plots can be traced back to IS.

Islamic State's Active Networks in Indonesia

The spread of IS' transnational tentacles across the country in 2016 was evident from the number of pledges of allegiance coming from several Indonesian militant groups, and the series of terrorist incidents in the country. Besides the January attack, IS claimed responsibility for the stabbing attack on three police officers in Tangerang in October 2016. There were also other attacks conducted by IS supporters in Indonesia in Solo in Central Java (July 2016) and Samarinda in East Kalimantan (November 2016). IS supporters also carried out an assassination attempt on a priest in Medan in North Sumatra (August 2016).

These attacks were perpetrated by individuals linked to existing local militant groups as well as IS-affiliated networks, indicating the co-existence of both old and new jihadi networks. For instance, the attacks in Jakarta, Samarinda and Tangerang were linked to Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD). Aman Abdurrahman, leader of the JAD, had reportedly received instructions from Abu Jandal, an Indonesian IS fighter based in Syria, to carry out the Jakarta attack (IPAC 2016a). The perpetrators of the attack in Solo and the plot to assassinate a priest in Medan were linked to Bahrun Naim, an Indonesian IS fighter based in Syria (Prastiwi and Fauzi 2016).

Police also uncovered multiple pro-IS cells linked to Bahrumisyah, the leader of Katibah Nusantara (the Southeast Asian IS fighting unit in Syria and Iraq). These cells were planning attacks across the country, indicating an appreciable expansion of the threat of IS' international networks within Indonesia. Terrorist cells led by Bahrun Naim include the Batam-based Katibah GR (KGR), Dwiatmoko's cell based in Lampung, one based in Majalengka in West Java and a Solo-based cell.

These Indonesian terrorist cells intended to hit domestic and international targets. KGR's plan was to launch a rocket attack against Singapore, while Dwiatmoko's cell, also comprising Nur Rohman – the suicide bomber of Solo police post – planned to attack Bali (Okezone News 2016). The Majalengka cell had built a home-made bomb-making laboratory and planned to bomb parliament buildings, police

headquarters, foreign embassies including the Myanmar Embassy, religious buildings, and two TV stations in Jakarta in December 2016 (Soeriaatmadja 2016). The Solo-cell comprised at least 8 people, including, for the first time in Indonesia, two females who were deployed as suicide bombers. Indonesian authorities foiled their attempt to carry out an attack with a pressure cooker bomb on the Presidential Palace in Jakarta on 11 December 2016 (Chan 2016a). The involvement of Indonesian women in combat was also detected in early 2016, when three wives of the leaders of pro-IS Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) joined their husbands to fight against Indonesia's security apparatus in Poso (Antara News 2016). Authorities also foiled planned attacks by Bahrumisyah's operatives in Indonesia, including the one led by Hendro; they had planned to attack Bali, Jakarta International School, and Soekarno-Hatta Airport in early 2016 (Chan 2016b).

IS has been particularly active on the propaganda front to win supporters via Bahasa videos and magazines like *Rumiyah* (or Rome in Arabic) since September this year and *al-Fatihin* (or The Conqueror in Arabic) in June. While not referencing Indonesia specifically, in its inaugural issue *Rumiyah*, IS hinted at its plans for global expansion, moving outwards from Dabiq (northern Syria) to Constantinople (Istanbul) and Rome (representing the West) towards an alternative or new battle space outside the Levant (*Rumiyah* 1 2016). *Al-Fatihin's* tagline, "Surat Kabar Bagi Muhajirin Berbahasa Melayu Di Daulah Islamiyyah" (newspaper for Malay-speaking IS fighters), indicates its intention is to serve the existing Southeast Asian "foreign fighters" who are mostly from Indonesia and Malaysia. Additionally, in IS latest video entitled "Al-Bunyan Al-Marsus" (A Solid Structure) released in June 2016, IS fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines called on all groups in Southeast Asia to unite.

Notwithstanding these active networks, police have made headway in terms of disrupting key members of the older groups. With the death of its leader Santoso in July 2016 and second man in command, Basri in September 2016, the threat from the Poso-based, Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia/MIT) is thought to have declined substantially.

Al Qaeda and other Groups

Al Qaeda still retains support from Jemaah

“ IS has been particularly active on the propaganda front to win supporters via Bahasa videos and magazines like *Rumiyah* (or Rome in Arabic)... ”

Islamiyah (JI) and related organisations such as Jamaah Ansharusy Syariah (JAS). They focus mainly on expanding their ideology through religious outreach (*dakwah*). In March 2016, police arrested Siyono of JI who was in charge of the group's weaponry, security and recruitment. Siyono was eventually killed by police as he fought during interrogation (Kompas 2016b, Gunawan Wibisono, and Ambaranie 2016). Police also arrested Gatot Witono alias Sabarno, a member of JI's logistic division in Magetan, East Java (Detik News 2016).

In addition to the threat from an active network of IS terrorists and JI members in Indonesia, petty crimes and attacks were also carried out by the separatist Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka/OPM) in Indonesia's easternmost province in Papua. While the threat from the OPM remains, some factions, including those based overseas, are inclined to struggle for Papua's independence through peaceful political means, including calls for a referendum to separate Papua from Indonesia (BBC Indonesia 2016a and 2016b, Triono Wahyu Sudibyo 2015).

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Indonesian security apparatus have been successful in mounting several counter-terrorism operations to capture and kill terrorists, and thwarting a number of plots. On the legal front, the Indonesian government and parliament discussed the proposed revision of the Anti-Terrorism Law. One of the clauses discussed included extending the duration (30 days) for detaining a terrorist suspect, prior to bringing official charges against him. The current law only allows police to detain a suspect for seven days. Parliament members and human right

organisations voiced objections for fear this would lead to the abuse of power and human rights by Indonesian security agencies (Erdianto 2016, BBC 2016c and 2016d).

The National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) continued to conduct a series of deradicalisation seminars featuring repentant terrorist inmates. BNPT also provides vocational training and venture capital for former terrorist inmates to help them integrate back to the society (Tribun News 2016 and Kabar24 2016). Recognising the potential threat posed by second generation IS fighters and terrorist inmates, BNPT plans to work further with various government agencies, including developing religious rehabilitation programmes with the Ministry of Religious Affairs, for the terrorist inmates, IS returnees and their families (Tempo 2016b).

Moving ahead, BNPT should improve the programme and go beyond “ceremonial” seminars (Siroj 2016) to invest more on robust one-to-one deradicalisation programme in prisons, given a number of recidivism cases. The current deradicalisation programme does not include personalised religious counselling to discuss religious concepts and debunk extremist teachings. Prisoners are left to discuss religious teachings between themselves. A recent IPAC report identified how structural problems of prisons systems in Indonesia (overcrowded and under-staffed) will continue to undercut efforts in deradicalisation, disengagement and rehabilitation.

Indonesia will need to take measures to their prisons from becoming fertile breeding grounds for terrorist inmates to recruit and radicalise fellow inmates with impunity, and to direct attacks from cells. This was already evident by the attack in Jakarta in January 2016 which was said to have been ordered by Aman Abdurrahman from behind bars (The Straits Times 2016). The attacks killed 8 people, including the 4 perpetrators (IPAC 2016b). Hardcore pro-IS ideologues such as Aman Abdurrahman have been able to exploit the inadequacies in Indonesia’s prisons system.

Looking Ahead

The recruitment of new members by IS supporters in the country indicates IS’ continued appeal. Indonesian foreign fighters such as Bahrun Naim remain able to inspire terrorist attacks and disseminate tradecraft manuals,

“ Hardcore pro-IS ideologues such as Aman Abdurrahman have been able to exploit the inadequacies in Indonesia’s prisons system. ”

signalling the ability of Indonesian terrorists and groups to instruct attacks to local terrorists from abroad. Although they are deprived of firearms and ammunitions and lack capacity to mount a large-scale attack, this may change if they manage to acquire firearms domestically or from southern Philippines, smuggled via Sangihe in North Sulawesi and Sebatik in East Kalimantan, routes used by Indonesian jihadists since the late 1990s (Inilah.com 2010, ICG 2012, Lumbanrau 2016). Due to the lack of robust anti-terrorism legal instruments, Indonesian authorities could not prosecute around 53 IS returnees with terrorism-related offences under the current law (Berita Satu 2016 and Kompas 2016c). To effectively prosecute these returning fighters from conflict in Syria and Iraq, the Indonesian parliament must ensure the swift passage of the revisions to the current anti-terror laws. This is a matter of urgency as 2017 is set to become a challenging year as the country grapples with several networks of active terror cells plotting attacks and the return of battle-hardened fighters steeped in suicidal jihadist ideology.

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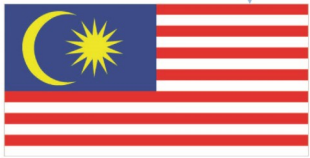
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Introduction

The threat of terrorism in Malaysia continues to pose a serious challenge as authorities grapple with the problem of growing radicalization and strive to stay ahead of terrorists plotting attacks in the country. Over 260 people have been arrested for terrorism-related offences since 2013 and at least 14 planned terrorist attacks had been averted according to the authorities. In January 2016 for instance, police arrested a potential suicide bomber planning an attack on a popular entertainment outlet in Kuala Lumpur. Later in the month, police foiled an attempt by jihadists to kidnap government leaders including the Prime Minister himself. However, not all the plots could be averted. On 28 June, an 'Islamic State' (IS) terror cell mounted a grenade attack on a nightspot in Puchong, injuring 8 people. The attack, masterminded by Malaysian jihadi leader Muhammad Wannady Mohamed Jedi, was IS' first successful terrorist attack in the country. The Puchong attack was probably part of a series of IS-directed and -inspired 'Ramadan' attacks in several countries such as the attacks at Istanbul Airport (45 killed) on the same day as the Puchong attack, the Gulshan attack in Dhaka (29 killed) on 1 July, the Baghdad bombings (325 killed) on 3 July, the Medina bombings (4 killed) on 4 July and Solo (Indonesia) suicide attack (1 killed) on 5 July.

IS Threat

Malaysia is among the key countries in Southeast Asia targeted by IS. In January 2016, IS released a video warning of an imminent attack against Malaysia. Posted by the Malay-speaking armed unit of IS, Katibah Nusantara, the video, titled "Mesej Awam Kepada Malaysia" (Public Message for Malaysia), directly challenged the Counter Terrorism Division for hindering the group's recruitment strategy (The Star 2016a). It warned that continued counter-terrorism operations in Malaysia will only result in an increased IS threat to the country. IS released another video in June in which a former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) detainee, Mohd Rafi Udin, made an explicit threat to MSB and Malaysia.

IS has made good on its threats as evidenced by the Puchong attack and 14 terrorist plots thwarted. In January 2016, Malaysian police arrested 7 suspects who had plans to launch attacks in the country; some of them were tasked with acquiring and distributing funds for recruitment and terror attacks in Malaysia (The Malaysian Insider 2016). Along with the arrests, 30 bullets of different calibres, jihad books, IS flags and a propaganda video were seized (The Star 2016a). In an arrest operation after the Puchong attack, police seized a ready-made improvised explosive device (IED) meant for attacking high-ranking police personnel (AsiaOne 2016). Police believed the terror suspects have 8 more grenades to possibly stage further attacks (Goh 2016). Two of the Puchong attackers had received instructions to attack senior Malaysian leaders and police officers as well as judges "because these three groups are the ones who are trying to block militant activity" (CNA 2016). Police revealed that two cell members were waiting for fresh orders to attack a Johor entertainment outlet with an M67 grenade which was seized. A third man had received orders to attack the police headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, and government complexes in Putrajaya (The Straits Times 2016a).

Malaysia also has to contend with the growing number of terror cells and thousands of IS online

supporters and sympathisers led by Wanndy and several other Malaysian militant personalities who have developed a cult-like following online. This large following was nourished through the constant updates of news which the fighters provided in the Malay language. Wanndy had been particularly active in recruiting new members and providing instructions to IS-inspired cells in Malaysia via social media. These cells have been instructed to collect funds, go to Syria or mount attacks. In March 2016, Malaysian police detained fifteen suspected IS militants, including a policewoman across seven states (Zolkepli 2016). Similar to the January arrests, this cell was also receiving instructions from Wanndy, to carry out attacks in the country. The suspects were involved in fundraising for a terrorist group in the Philippines and for IS fighters in Syria, collecting materials for bomb-making, hacking several government websites, forming links with terrorist groups in the region, recruitment and making travel arrangements for new recruits to travel to Syria. The suspects were believed to have arranged the entry of two Uighur militants into the country before securing safe passage for them to Indonesia (Polis Diraja Malaysia 2016a).

Malaysia also faces security threats from IS-linked militants in the Philippines and foreigners. In mid-2016, IS Philippines declared a new “brigade” in southern Philippines for Indonesian and Malaysian jihadists, known as the Katibah Al-Muhajir (Singh & Haziq 2016). IS-linked fighters also operate in the tri-border area between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, including in the eastern coast of Sabah, where local governance is weak. Since 2013, 29 foreigners have been detained for joining IS; they include fifteen from Indonesia, five from Iraq, and two each from the Philippines and Russia (The Straits Times 2016b).

AQ Threat

While the threat to Malaysia appears to be IS-centric, the threat from Al Qaeda (AQ)-linked groups and individuals in the region has not been entirely wiped out. Malaysian fighters in Syria and Iraq include ex-detainees who had previously been aligned with Al Qaeda, especially those who were members of groups such as JI and Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM). Malaysia has arrested individuals with links to either IS or AQ on its home soil. They include a 44-year-old European temporary teacher arrested in Malaysia in December 2015

“ Malaysia also faces security threats from IS-linked militants in the Philippines and foreigners. ”

(Menon 2015) and Mohamad Hidayat Azman, 20, a college student who studied in Egypt. They were sentenced to 12 years in jail for joining AQ-linked Jund Al-Aqsa (Al Bakri 2016). Although IS is holding sway now among many jihadists, AQ continues to exert some degree of influence in the region due to its historical links with regional militant groups, particularly those in Indonesia.

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

To counter the evolving threat of terrorism, Malaysia has put in place counter-terrorism legislation that includes the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012 (SOSMA), Prevention of Terrorism Act 2015 (POTA) and the Prevention of Crime (Amendment and Extension) Act (POCA) 2013. Many have been arrested and successfully prosecuted. Beyond “hard” legislative measures, Malaysia has also adopted “softer” measures to deradicalise militants. These include counselling, spiritual guidance to counter misinterpretations of religious texts and vocational training (Ng 2016). Families are also given counselling and religious education. The Government has also involved the religious authority to address misconceptions about jihad. Efforts are also made to counter extremist narratives through public talks and publicity materials (Ng 2016).

Looking Ahead

Despite various counter-terrorism and counter-ideology measures, the terrorist threat shows no sign of abatement as the year ended in December 2016. Datuk Ayub Khan who heads Malaysia’s Counter-Terrorism Division warned that there were “scores of Malaysians” trying to evade the police to go Syria and Iraq to fight for IS (The Straits Times 2016c). The number of people arrested for wanting to go to Syria has increased from 82 in 2015 to 112 in 2016; nine however managed to slip out. A number of newly

-established extremist groups and formerly neutralised terror cells are actively recruiting members. One of them, Kumpulan Gagak Hitam, has 38 members, and a new group, Kumpulan Fisabilillah has 13 “ready-to-die” fighters (The Straits Times 2016c). More than 110 Malaysians have left for Syria to join IS (Goh 2016). Should IS lose more ground in Iraq and Syria, some of these experienced fighters are likely to return to Malaysia or take refuge in IS enclaves in Indonesia and the Philippines. They are ideologically-hardened, having absorbed IS ideology of perpetual conflict and violence. At least 2 of them had been involved in gruesome beheadings and 9 of their comrades had died as suicide bombers. The latest was a 25-year-old militant, who had detonated his vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, killing 14 Kurdish fighters and injuring scores more (The Straits Times 2016d). The return of these fighters will increase the threat level in the country and the region should they join existing fighters or terror cells to push IS religio-political agenda. Another major challenge for Malaysia (and other countries as well) is to counter and neutralise the spread of IS extremist ideology which continues to influence vulnerable segments of the population.

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MYANMAR

Introduction

Although the threat from a majority of the country's ethnic armed groups has subsided to some extent, Myanmar faces a serious challenge from Rohingya armed groups along its north-western border. On 9 October 2016, 200 armed attackers from the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO)-linked Aqa Mul Mujahidin, led by 45-year-old Havistoohar, carried out a surprise attack on Myanmar's police at the Maungdaw border, killing 9 police officers. The attackers, who were from Myanmar's northern Rakhine (Arakan) state, seized weapons, ammunition, bayonets and magazines. According to the Myanmar government, the attackers received funding and support from foreign terrorist organisations to carry out the attacks. Since the October attacks, reports have emerged of serious human rights abuses and heavy-handed counter-insurgency campaign by the Myanmar national army; soldiers have been accused of killing Rohingyas and burning their villages. The Government has denied the allegations. The state media has put the death toll at almost 100 people (17 soldiers 76 suspects) although advocacy groups claimed hundreds had been killed; more than 20,000 Rohingyas have fled to neighboring Bangladesh in the last two months (Channel News Asia 2016b). The crisis has focused attention on the Rohingyas who are denied citizenship and viewed by the government as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh; tens of thousands of internally-displaced Rohingyas, following ethnic violence in 2012, live in what is said to be decrepit camps where travel is restricted (BBC 2016). Following regional and international protests over the Rohingya issue, the government called for an emergency ASEAN meeting in December to discuss the crisis.

Islamic State and Al Qaeda Exploit Issue

The plight of the Rohingya minority has attracted the attention of regional and international extremist and terrorist groups. The so-called Islamic State (IS) has expressed its intention to target Myanmar via Bangladesh (Furat Media 2015). In the fourteenth issue (April 2016) of IS' propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, a Bangladeshi jihadist called on others to join him to help the oppressed Rohingyas and warned about an attack to Myanmar by IS militants in Bangladesh (Dabiq 2015, 2016). Myanmar's State Counsellor and Foreign Affairs Minister, Aung San Suu Kyi was also singled out by IS as one of its possible targets in a 'kill list' sent to Malaysian police on 1 August 2016 (Radio Free Asia 2016, Myanmar Times 2016). In November 2016, Indonesian police thwarted an attempt by a local pro-IS extremist group to carry out a bombing attack on the Myanmar Embassy in Jakarta.

If IS were to firmly establish a foothold in Bangladesh, it will not be geographically difficult for the group to expand its operations into Myanmar. The porous Bangladesh-Myanmar border provides a suitable terrain for insurgent operations between Bangladesh and Myanmar, in addition to being a profitable drug trafficking route. Should IS declare a new *wilayat* in South Asia, it is likely to include Myanmar's Rakhine state. IS may capitalise on its contacts with the Bangladeshi militant group known as Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which already has a pro-IS faction.

The Al Qaeda has also shown interest in the Rohingya issue. In 2014, Al Qaeda's South Asia chapter, Al

Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) listed Myanmar as one of its key targets. Abu Zar al-Burmi, a key Pakistani Taliban leader of Burmese origin, condemned Myanmar's new government for failing to protect Rohingyas and called for armed jihad. A new AQIS magazine released in September 2016, *Al Balagh*, also made reference to the Rohingya issue; the publication, which is targeted at Bengali speakers, urged Muslims to join their fight against oppression (Singh and Haziq 2016b). Through its Bangladeshi affiliate, the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), Al Qaeda has provided training and support for the Rohingya militants and maintained ties with RSO. Both IS and AQIS have a common interest in the Rohingya issue and are vying for international recruits to boost their numbers.

In cyberspace, regional online extremists have sought to capitalise on the issue, pledging their support through profile pictures with the IS flag and a hashtag saying “Pray for P_A_R_I_S” which refers to the conflict areas of Palestine, Africa, Rohingya, Iraq and Syria (Singh and Haziq 2016a). Online extremists in Indonesia have expressed desire to mount ‘jihad’ on behalf of the Rohingyas and made reference to their hopes of bringing the ‘mujahidin’ (jihadi fighters) into Myanmar. Other users on social media in Indonesia have even expressed readiness to be suicide bombers for the sake of the Rohingyas (Singh and Haziq 2016a). Muhammad Wannady, a Malaysian IS fighter linked to the Puchong (Malaysia) grenade attack in June 2016, has instigated his supporters to prove that they are not keyboard warriors by killing any Buddhist-Myanmar person they may find in Malaysia or Indonesia. These online jihadist flare-ups suggest that the Rohingya issue is being associated with other international jihadi causes, raising the possibility of the Rohingya issue being hijacked by global jihadism.

Myanmar’s Rohingya Conflict: New and Old Groups

A group that has recently come to the fore is the Harakah al-Yaqin, or the Movement of Certainty/Faith Movement, which is said to consist of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who had crossed the border into northern Arakan. Videos of the group first surfaced on the internet in October 2016. The men spoke in a mixture of Bengali, Arakanese and Arabic and were armed with AK-47s. They also made reference to the plight of the Rohingyas around the world and

“ Al Qaeda has also shown interest in the Rohingya issue. ”

called on foreign Rohingyas and jihadists to join them in northern Arakan to resist Myanmar's forces. Videos by the group were also uploaded on their IS and Al Qaeda-affiliated Telegram channels (Singh and Haziq 2016b). The existence of the Harakah al-Yaqin in the region may lead to a potential escalation of the conflict between the Rohingyas and the armed forces, increasing the security threat there.

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), which has been blamed by the Myanmar government for recent violent attacks, is a little-known militant group with an active regional and international presence. Based in Karachi, its members also operate in countries in the Middle East as well as in Bangladesh and India. A significant faction of RSO has close operational ties with fundamentalist extremist and terrorist groups, namely Laskar-e-Taiba in Pakistan, Indian Mujahideen in India and Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in Bangladesh. Some of the RSO's leaders received combat training in Pakistan and are active along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. RSO also reportedly received bomb-making training from JMB (The Daily Star 2009).

Looking Ahead

Active networks of IS, as well as AQIS, currently pose a threat to Myanmar's stability and security. A festering Rohingya crisis coupled with deep-seated tensions between the Muslim and Buddhist communities will create opportunities for exploitation by regional and international terror groups like IS, AQ and JMB, and put at risk the peace and stability of the region. The presence of online extremists in the region has seen the rise of jihadist propaganda, including Rohingya-related propaganda, which could fuel the crisis in Rakhine state. Myanmar must develop a robust counter-terrorism strategy and beef up its counter-terrorism intelligence to enable authorities to prevent and thwart future terrorist attacks. It will also have to bring the Rohingya community on board to facilitate their

counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts, namely by co-opting them as strategic partners to alert authorities of terrorist or insurgent activities, and to facilitate conflict resolution. Myanmar must urgently deal with the Rohingya issue on two fronts: addressing the plight of the impoverished Rohingya minority as they struggle to fulfill their basic needs and livelihoods, and managing relations between the Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar.

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PHILIPPINES

Introduction

In the clearest indication of the rising terrorist threat in the Philippines, 2016 saw newly-elected President Rodrigo Duterte declaring a state of national emergency for the whole country on 5 September 2016 on account of “lawless violence”. The declaration follows a huge bomb explosion at a busy night market in Davao City, Mindanao, on 2 September that killed 14 people and injured more than 60. The declaration was to enable the armed forces to conduct law enforcement operations and give the authorities powers to impose curfews in certain areas (Hume, Zdanowicz & Ellis 2016).

Three months later on 1 December, Philippines police raised the terror alert to its highest level across the country after investigations revealed that ‘Islamic State’ (IS)-linked militants had planned to detonate a bomb in a park before depositing an improvised explosive device (IED) near the US embassy on 28 November; the IED was subsequently detonated by the police (Sidhu & Westcott 2016). The heightened alert meant more stringent checkpoints, random searches and raids on suspected terrorist hideouts. Two of the 5 suspects implicated in the foiled bombing were arrested; they belonged to Ansar al Khilafah, a southern Philippine militant group which had pledged allegiance to IS.

IS Threat

The so-called Islamic State (IS) poses the biggest terrorist threat to the Philippines. Its growing ideological appeal is evidenced by the number of terrorist groups in the Philippines pledging their loyalty to IS and its caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Sixteen militant groups have pledged allegiance to IS and united behind Isnilon Hapilon, leader of the splinter group of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Formerly aligned with Al Qaeda, the ASG splinter group posted a video on YouTube in July 2014, shortly after IS declared the establishment of the caliphate, declaring the group’s realignment with IS. In June 2016, IS released a video of four different battalions making a pledge of allegiance to Hapilon (Weiss 2016b). Earlier in December 2015, IS released a video featuring four battalions – ASG, Maute Group, Ansar Khilafah Philippines (AKP), and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), led by Hapilon, pledging fealty to IS (Weiss 2016a). Hapilon’s pledge to IS signaled a shift in the alignment of many southern Filipino militant groups – many of these IS-aligned groups are splinter groups formed in the last year or two, and included previously Al Qaeda-linked groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) operating in the southern islands of Sulu and Basilan.

The IS has accepted their pledges and shown considerable interest in the Philippines, appointing Hapilon as emir and proclaiming his group “Islamic State Philippines.” A June 2016 IS video called on those who could not emigrate to Iraq and Syria to go to the Philippines. The possibility of the Philippines serving as a sanctuary for Southeast Asian returning terrorists and those who are unable to make their way to the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, has increased with the formation of a new brigade for prospective jihadists from Malaysia and the Philippines known as the Katibah Al-Muhajir (KaM) or The Brigade of Migrants. IS has also stepped up its propaganda efforts to target Malay-speaking Southeast Asians

through the release of its first Malay-language newspaper *Al Fatihin* (The Conquerors) in southern Philippines in June 2016.

The “Soldiers of the Caliphate” as pro-IS militants in southern Philippines are called by IS Central, have been involved in a number of skirmishes with the security forces with heavy casualties on both sides. The most deadly was the ASG clash in Basilan in April 2016 in which 23 soldiers died. A week-long offensive in Sulu and Basilan in July saw 40 ASG militants killed. A month later, 15 soldiers were killed in an offensive in the island of Jolo. Another major offensive in November resulted in 11 militants being killed in the town of Butig in Mindanao. Reports of IS groups’ encounters with the armed forces are subsequently reported in IS publications.

The most serious terrorist attack by pro-IS militants in 2016 was the bomb attack in September in Davao City. The blast was masterminded by the Maute Group which has about 100 members and was one of the first groups to pledge allegiance to IS in 2014. They have been involved in many kidnappings, bombings, and attacks on the military. Most notably, they staged the Marawi City jailbreak on 27 August 2016, freeing 8 of their members who were arrested only several days earlier. Another dangerous group is the Ansar Khilafah which was implicated in the foiled bombing of the US embassy in Manila. The group had released a video in April threatening the Philippines government and US soldiers in the country; its spokesman had threatened to deploy suicide bombers and make the Philippines a “graveyard for American soldiers” (Weiss 2016).

Growing militancy in southern Philippines has increased the threat to the tri-border area which includes the Sulu archipelago, Sabah and Sulawesi. The area, known for smuggling networks, arms trafficking and kidnappings, has become a hotbed for extremism and jihadism. From March to July 2016, ASG conducted a total of five separate kidnap-for-ransom attacks in the area. The most recent case involved the hijacking of a South Korean cargo ship sailing through the Sulu Sea and the abduction of the ship’s captain, a South Korean and a Filipino crewman (Agence France-Presse 2016b). Two Canadian nationals John Ridsdel and Robert Hall, kidnapped by the ASG in September 2015, were beheaded by ASG members in April and June 2016 after their families failed to come up

“ Growing militancy in southern Philippines has increased the threat to the tri-border area... ”

with the ransom money (Ullah, Luu, and Dewan 2016). Their deaths generated an international outcry against the terrorists who show no sign of slowing down their kidnapping operations. Transnational criminal activities sustain the group’s operations; ASG is reported to have amassed USD 7.3 million in ransom money just in the first half of 2016 (Associated Press 2016).

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

In the first half of 2016 under the administration led by President Benigno Aquino III, government officials denied the existence of IS-linked terrorist groups in the Philippines reiterating that terrorist groups in the Philippines do not receive direct support from IS (Cabacungan 2016). In downplaying the IS videos wherein Philippine jihadists were seen pledging allegiance to IS, they have underestimated the possibility of IS expanding its regional network in Southeast Asia and using southern Philippines as its epicentre.

Under the Duterte administration, the military has taken a more active role in law enforcement and security. Since the 2 September bomb blast in Davao City, Duterte’s hometown, the president has pushed for an all-out military offensive to crush the terrorists. In September 2016, 7,000 soldiers were deployed in Sulu to counter the 400-strong ASG (Santos 2016). 94 ASG members have been neutralised by the military in the first 100 days of Duterte’s administration (Laude 2016). This has driven the ASG to splinter into smaller groups to escape the military’s onslaught (Pareño 2016). Duterte has also been strengthening its trilateral military ties with Malaysia and Indonesia through joint military patrols of its seas to quell maritime crime and terrorism (The Straits Times 2016).

Looking Ahead

Counter-terrorism efforts under President Duterte have put the militant groups on the defensive.

However, with IS in danger of losing Mosul and Raqqa, IS will compensate its losses in Iraq and Syria by seeking refuge and strengthening its positions in IS wilayats and enclaves such as the Khorasan and southern Philippines. That these areas will be a destination for returning fighters is a cause for deep concern. These battle-hardened combatants will regroup with and strengthen existing armed networks in the Philippines, and establish new connections with emerging groups, and build networks. Maximum effort is needed to neutralise the militant groups in southern Philippines and secure the area before it becomes a full-blown training ground and launching pad for terrorist attacks in the region.

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SINGAPORE

Introduction

With the global rise of terrorist attacks inspired or directed by the so-called Islamic State (IS), the threat of a terrorist incident in Singapore increased appreciably in 2016 compared to 2015. Apart from the detention of several individuals who had become radicalised through online extremist propaganda, Singapore was a target of a terrorist plot by a little-known Indonesian terror cell based in Batam. The Syrian-based Indonesian leader directing this cell has been implicated in a number of terror plots in Indonesia, among the latest being a planned attack on the Presidential Palace in Jakarta that was averted with timely arrests by Indonesian authorities in mid-December. The transnational nature of the terrorist threat is also evident with the discovery of a pro-IS jihadist terror cell comprising Bangladeshi workers in Singapore who were planning to set up an Islamic State in Bangladesh by violent means; dozens more had been arrested in late 2015. Singapore also faces the threat from experienced and ideologically-hardened fighters returning from battlefronts in the Middle East to the region.

Islamic State: A Three-Dimensional Threat for Singapore

As IS loses ground in Iraq and Syria, it has turned its attention to its *wilayats* (provinces) and enclaves in northern Africa, the Khorasan and Southeast Asia. IS' increasing interest in Southeast Asia is evident from its establishment of Katibah Nusantara (a Malay Archipelago military unit for IS) in Syria, acceptance of *bai'ah* (oath of allegiance) from numerous terror groups in the region, appointment of an emir for 'IS Philippines' and the production of online propaganda magazines (*Rumiyah* and *Al-Fatihin*) and videos in Bahasa.

IS' online radicalisation efforts are clearly targeted at Southeast Asia. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appealed to the "Soldiers of the Caliphate" to "remain steadfast" and "not [to] flee when engaging the enemy" (*Rumiyah* 3 2016), he made it a point to mention the Philippines. The rise in extremist rhetoric available on social media and encrypted mobile-messaging platforms such as Telegram and Whatsapp indicates that the online domain has become a prized choice for extremist communication (Baharudin 2016). Southeast Asian jihadists have made appearances in propaganda videos, demonstrating IS' aggressive media outreach to radicalise and recruit (Mahzam 2016).

Indeed, online radicalisation has become a growing area of concern for Singapore as authorities detained or placed a total of 9 people under Restriction Orders (RO) in 2016. One of them, a 44-year-old self-radicalised Singaporean named Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, glorified IS and its acts of violence on Facebook, encouraged Muslims to wage militant jihad, and radicalised two other Singaporeans. In March 2016, the Government also announced the earlier detention of two men for voluntarily fighting in the sectarian conflict in Yemen where they were prepared to kill and be killed as 'martyrs'.

The discovery of a jihadist terror cell comprising foreigners in 2016 presents a new terrorist challenge to Singapore. In March 2016, Singapore authorities arrested 8 members of a clandestine terror cell of Bangladeshi foreign workers called the Islamic State in Bangladesh (ISB). To further its aim of setting up

the Islamic State, members of ISB disseminated radical propaganda, discussed potential targets to attack in Bangladesh, and had material on sniper rifles as well as information on making bombs. Six of them were prosecuted under the Terrorism (Suppression of Financing) Act (TSOFA) for intending to purchase firearms for attacks back home and were sentenced to between 2 and 5 years' jail. The discovery of ISB came in the wake of the arrest of 27 Bangladeshi foreign workers in November-December 2015 for involvement in extremist activities in Singapore. The group supported the militant ideology of terror groups like Al Qaeda and IS and had quantities of radical and jihadi-related material. Some of them believed in waging armed jihad and considered taking part in the armed conflict in the Middle East. All 27 men were repatriated to Bangladesh, one after serving a 12-week jail term for attempting to leave Singapore illegally. While there was no indication that the ISB was linked to the 27 Bangladeshis, some of them were personally acquainted with members of the group.

Singapore also faced the threat of attacks from terrorists operating within the region. In August, Indonesian authorities arrested six members of Katibah GR after they were found collaborating with the Indonesian IS militant, Bahrun Naim in Syria, to mount a rocket attack against Singapore's Marina Bay area from an island south of Singapore.

Counter-Terrorism Initiatives in Singapore

Singapore has continued to implement a series of measures to combat terrorism in a holistic manner. On the domestic front, Singapore has adopted both a community-driven approach and various protective security measures to counter the threat. To prevent radicalisation, Muslim community leaders and *asatizah* (clerics) play a leading role in providing religious guidance and counter-narratives to refute extremist teachings in cyberspace. The Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a voluntary group of religious scholars and teachers formed in 2003 to counsel detainees and their families, has introduced a helpline and a mobile application to reach out to those who are in danger of being self-radicalised. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) has released a toolkit "Resilient Families – Safeguarding against Radicalisation" that illustrates the circumstances which can lead young people to become radicalised. A mandatory Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS)

“ Singapore also faced the threat of attacks from terrorists operating within the region. ”

has been introduced to provide the Muslim community with a reliable source of reference for religious teachers and prevent the spread of extremist teachings by unqualified teachers.

To strengthen community vigilance, cohesion and resilience, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) launched the SG Secure movement in September 2016 to educate Singaporeans about the terrorist threat and train and rally the people to play a part to prevent and deal with a terrorist incident. The movement entails crisis preparedness exercises and a mobile application that broadcasts emergency alerts. The National Security Coordination Secretariat (NSCS) collaborates with multiple partners to promote public awareness of security issues and strengthen social resilience. Singapore has also introduced new initiatives such as the PolCam 2.0 programme, and set up new Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) and Rapid Deployment Troops to respond to a terrorist attack. The PolCam 2.0 programme helps to provide greater security vigilance through increased CCTV coverage across Singapore, giving the Police better sense-making and situational awareness to deal with terrorist incidents more effectively.

Singapore continues to work closely with counter-terrorism partners in the region and internationally to deter and disrupt terrorist networks. Singapore also recently pursued deeper cooperation with its regional neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia, when it mooted the systematic exchange of biometric information of known fighters and persons convicted for terrorism, and institutionalised the sharing of best practices in winning the fight against terrorism.

Looking Ahead

2017 is set to be a challenging year for Singapore and other countries in the region facing the escalating threat of terrorism. Singapore and the region must be prepared for

the return of well-trained and battle-hardened fighters who may strengthen jihadist terror cells and networks as well as enclaves in Indonesia and the Philippines. Terrorist groups in the region pose the most serious threat as seen in the plot by the Batam cell to attack the Marina Bay area last year. Back in 2001 and 2002, the Jemaah Islamiyah regional terrorist group had plotted to blow up several targets, including embassies, in Singapore. Continued exchange of intelligence and cooperation between the security agencies are crucial to stay several steps ahead of the terrorists and avert terrorist attacks. On the counter-ideological front, it is important for religious leaders to continue their efforts to actively counter the ideological narratives of IS' in the online domain, given the large percentage of youth who regularly access information over the internet and the widespread use of mobile messaging platforms. Continued capacity building and education on countering terrorism would be imperative for academia, policy and law enforcement sectors dealing with regional security matters, particularly as the terrorism threat magnifies in scale and in scope.

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THAILAND

Introduction

Periodic attacks in Thailand's Muslim-majority southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Songkhla and Narathiwat are a reminder of the ongoing insurgency and outstanding political issues there. On 11 and 12 August 2016, a series of deadly bomb and arson attacks rocked Thailand's southern Hua Hin, Phuket, Trang, and Surat Thani provinces, killing four civilians and wounding more than 30 others. Two more bombs exploded in Phang-nga province but no injuries were reported. Days after, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN/National Revolutionary Front) claimed responsibility for the attacks (Murdoch 2016, Benar News 2016). The blasts were the first major attack in the country and came just days before the first anniversary of the last major attack on tourists in Thailand on 17 August 2015 – a bomb attack on the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok that killed 20 people, mostly ethnic Chinese tourists – and days after the country voted on a constitution that would grant the Thai military greater power. In November 2016, Thai police arrested three men suspected of planning bomb attacks at tourist sites in the capital, Bangkok, and nearby provinces, but ruled out any links to the southern Thai insurgency (The Straits Times 2016).

IS Threat in Thailand

Thai police have traditionally denied the existence of links between southern Thai insurgents and the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the Deep South (Corben 2016). However, in November 2016, Thai police acknowledged that there were IS links and supporters among residents in southern Thailand, raising the possibility that the threat from a predominantly localised conflict in the south could very well transform into a conflict involving IS-directed and IS-inspired elements (Asian Correspondent 2016).

In November 2016, Thai police received a tip-off from the Australian police who revealed that some Thais were providing IS with financial assistance (Bangkok Post 2016) and that more than 100,000 Facebook users from Thailand had frequented IS-affiliated online communities over the past year (Bangkok Post 2016). These reports emerge in light of the presence of Thai IS supporters and sympathisers detected on social media platforms as well as other attempts by southern Thai insurgent groups to link themselves with the discourse of IS' international jihad appearing on virtual platforms.

In April 2016, a Facebook account featuring the trademark black flag symbol of IS superimposed on a map of the Isthmus of Kra surfaced. In addition, IS flags and symbols were featured on the various social media accounts affiliated with Thai insurgent groups, with numerous videos and messages propagating autonomy or secession from Thailand constantly being posted online and shared. The theme of these posts calls for "Fathoni Merdeka" or Freedom for Pattani, evoking the historical memory of the Muslim Sultanate of Pattani that existed before it came under Siamese rule (Rajakumar 2016a, 2016b). In late 2015, reports indicated that Russia's security services warned Thai police about the entry of 10 IS-linked Syrians into Thailand (Dawn 2015). These as well as more ominous indications in the online domain suggesting an alignment towards IS' decidedly violent jihadi terrorist ideology, could provide impetus for the insurgents on the ground and lead to an increase in the frequency and scale of attacks. IS' rhetoric thus far is to not only restore Muslim territories to the 'glory' of their pre-colonial past before they were

seized by their colonial oppressors, but similar to Al Qaeda, to embed itself in local conflicts worldwide, expand its reach and appeal by capitalising on their grievances, and to carry out deadlier and more sophisticated attacks (Batchelor 2016).

Multinational Criminal Networks

This year, Thai authorities arrested several members of criminal syndicates complicit in facilitating terrorists' travel, suggesting the strong nexus between transnational criminal networks and terrorism in the region. In October 2016, two Americans and a British trio were arrested during a fake passport raid carried out by Thai authorities at a Bangkok home. During the raid, police uncovered handguns, passport-printing equipment and chemicals with at least one of the passports found with travel stamps for Malaysia and Singapore. Apart from the trio, Pakistanis were said to be involved in the fake passport ring and "linked to at least one individual, Atiq ur Rehman... [who is] suspected of having provided passports to the Al Qaeda operatives who set off a series of coordinated bombings on commuter trains in Madrid in 2004" (Ghosh 2016). These reports, including the arrest of other individuals in Bangkok on charges of running a fake passport syndicate previously in 2010 (a Pakistani with links to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba) and 2014 (Pakistanis and Thais), raise concerns about the existence of multinational criminal networks feeding terrorist elements with travel documents to facilitate their movement.

Peace Talks

Originally a century-old ethno-nationalist conflict waged between Malay Muslims and the predominantly Buddhist Thai central state, the unrest in southern Thailand has acquired an increasingly transnational dimension with terrorist groups like IS seeking to capitalise on existing grievances and appeal to the local militant groups throughout the *Ummah* (worldwide Muslim community). Continuing attacks carried out by southern Thai insurgents could be seen as attempts to delegitimise the Thai military by undermining its ability to bring security and stability to the country and to gain leverage in the ongoing peace negotiations (Abuza 2016a).

Thai authorities have engaged the southern insurgent groups in peace talks, most recently in October 2016, but reconciliation would not be so

“ Thai authorities have engaged the southern insurgent groups in peace talks... ”

soon given the longstanding trust deficit between Thai authorities and the southern insurgents (The Sun 2016). The animosity is fuelled by memories of the Thai military's killing of southern Thai Muslims during the Krue Se mosque incident which saw the death of 32 assailants and the Tak Bai riots in 2004 in which more than 30 Malay-Muslims were killed. The Thai government also recently established a 13-strong "front command Cabinet" to tackle the unrest in the Deep South (Samerphop 2016).

Looking Ahead

Protracted violence in the south can be expected to continue, given the distrust between the current Thai military and the civilians. The passage of the constitutional referendum in August 2016 which will see the military strengthen its grip over civilians has also raised concerns about the increased use of heavy-handed measures by Thai authorities particularly in the restive south. Moving forward, the current threat in southern Thailand relates to the presence of groups in the south radicalised and given impetus by international jihadi terrorist groups (such as IS) seeking to undermine the peace and stability in Thailand.

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SOUTH ASIA

The image features a stylized map of South Asia. A teal-colored overlay covers the landmasses of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. A dark teal rectangle is positioned over the Indian subcontinent, containing a list of countries. The background is a light beige color with a faint outline of the South Asian region. A thin black line runs horizontally across the top, starting from the left edge and ending at the right edge of the teal overlay. The text 'SOUTH ASIA' is centered at the top in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh
- India
- Pakistan



AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

Afghanistan's security situation worsened in 2016. The Taliban increased their territorial gains amid growing divisions within the National Unity Government (NUG) emanating from disagreements over power sharing and divisions of key ministries. Additionally, the casualties of the civilians and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) witnessed a record increase since 2001.

Notwithstanding Taliban's tactical advantage and the internal weaknesses of the NUG, the overall deadlock of the Afghan conflict (strategically) persisted. The situation in Afghanistan neither plummeted to a level that the Taliban take-over looked imminent, nor showed any signs of improvement inspiring any confidence in the NUG.

Even though Afghanistan remained an ignored topic in the US Presidential elections, the 9,800 American troops continued assisting, advising and training the Afghan forces along with carrying out combat operations as and when needed. It remains to be seen what will be the policy of the US President-elect Donald Trump towards Afghanistan.

Resurgent Taliban

In the 2016 spring offensive, *Operation Omari*, the Taliban continued with the 2015 military strategy of capture-and-hold areas across Afghanistan. They further increased the pressure on major Afghan cities, breaching the frontline defences of the ANSFs several times. Presently, 35 of Afghanistan's 400 districts are under the Taliban control and 116 others are contested. Taliban's two-pronged north-south offensive neutralised the under-resourced and geographically constrained Afghan forces during the fighting.

The US airpower and the Special Operation Forces (SOF) blunted Taliban efforts to take over strategic Afghan cities. Without the help of US Special Forces, the ANSFs would have lost Farah, Kunduz and Helmand provinces to the Taliban this year.

During the combat, the Taliban frequently ripped through the security check posts and the regional headquarters of the embattled Afghan forces increasing their casualty and attrition rates. In the first eight months of 2016, the Afghan security forces suffered some 15,000 casualties, including more than 5,500 deaths. The desertion rate of the Afghan forces increased to 33 percent compared to 28 percent in 2015. As many as 2,199 Afghan security personnel quit their jobs leaving the military strength at about 170,000.

Stalled Peace Talks

Following the killing of the Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansoor in a US drone strike in Balochistan, the Afghan Peace Talks under the Quadrilateral Coordination (QCG) framework, comprising US, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, were scuttled. Since QCG's formation in December 2015, several meetings under its framework failed to break the deadlock over peace talks. In addition to Mansoor's killing,

Pakistan's deteriorating ties with the US and Afghanistan and the weakening influence of the Pakistani military establishment on the Taliban also contributed to the derailment of the peace process.

In October, the Afghan government covertly reached out to the Taliban's Qatar office to restart the stalled peace process without seeking Pakistan's help. Some exploratory meetings were held but eventually the Taliban refused to resume the negotiation. Taliban reiterated the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the Afghan soil as one of the pre-conditions for negotiations. In November, a delegation of the Afghan Taliban from the Qatar office also travelled to Pakistan to apprise it of the abovementioned developments. At the time of this writing, Pakistan, China and Russia have planned to hold meetings in Moscow to explore new options to kick-start the peace process.

Resilient IS-Khurasan

Since its formation in January 2015, notwithstanding several setbacks, the Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) has emerged as a potent conflict actor in the Afghan war. However, ISK's operational capabilities, agendas and goals cannot be compared with the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban are Afghan-centric and Islamist-nationalist, while ISK is a Salafi-Takfiri-Jihadist outfit. Still, the ISK's resilience to survive the US airstrikes, Afghan forces' ground offensive, and Taliban's reprisal attacks makes it a force to reckon with.

This year ISK also struck a tactical agreement with the Taliban to give up the inter-group fighting and focus on their enemies. Following this, ISK has shown extended outreach, sophistication, and growing cooperation with other militant groups like Lashkar-e-Islam, Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Jandullah. Unlike last year, when ISK came across as a divisive actor between various militant groups in Afghanistan, this year it emerged as a unifying force.

This allowed ISK to mount sophisticated and large-scale attacks in Kabul, Jalalabad and hit targets as far across as Pakistan's south-western Balochistan province. Currently, there are nine Pakistanis and two Afghans in ISK's Shura. The ISK leader Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai was killed in a US drone strike in July. Since then, an Afghan Taliban commander from the Logar province, Abdul Haseeb Logari, is running the

“ ...the Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) has emerged as a potent conflict actor in the Afghan war. ”

group. The current number of ISK fighters is approximately 2,000-2,500.

The group is getting its funding from Turkey, Syria and some Gulf countries through the *hawala* system. Currently, the areas under its control in Afghanistan account for more than 60 percent of the overall annual opium yield in the country. The group pays around USD400 monthly to its low-level fighters.

Silent Al-Qaeda

Throughout 2016, Al Qaeda central and its regional affiliate Al-Qaeda in South Asia (AQIS) kept silent on some major developments concerning the Islamic State's (IS) territorial losses in Iraq and Syria and growing number of IS-directed attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al Qaeda's reclusiveness in the face of losses complicates assessments of its present strength, capabilities and plans. However, background interviews with experts and old watchers of Al Qaeda unanimously indicate that the terror group is down but not out.

This year, AQIS did not carry out any attack in the Af-Pak region. Presently, AQIS is headquartered in the Bramcha area of southern Afghanistan's Helmand province. Likewise, most of Al Qaeda central leaders are in the north-eastern and southern parts of the country. In November, the US drones killed Al-Qaeda's *emir* (leader) for north-eastern Afghanistan Farouq al-Qahtani.

Al Qaeda's chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri renewed his pledged of allegiance to the new Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada in June. Some analysts believe that unlike IS-central, Al Qaeda does not have much differences with ISK. Reportedly, the two almost came close to a deal through the Haqqani Network this year. So, in future, if IS-

central implodes in Syria and Iraq, the reverse defection of ISK back into Al Qaeda's fold cannot be discounted.

Sectarian Violence in Afghanistan

Another worrying trend during 2016 was the increasing number of sectarian attacks in Afghanistan. Though sectarian violence has been present in the Afghan conflict in some form or shape since 2011, this year, the frequency and intensity of these attacks increased significantly. It is worth pointing out that ISK carried out all these attacks and in most cases, the ethnic Hazara Shia community was the victim of sectarian violence.

Part of this anti-Shia campaign by ISK resides in the militant group's extremist worldview and part of it has to do with the participation of the Hazaras in the Syrian conflict on behalf of Iran. Iran has been recruiting, training and sending the Hazara Shias from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria. As many as 4,000 Shias from Afghanistan are currently fighting in Syria under the *Li Wa Al-Fatimyun* (The Brigade of Fatima) militant group. As such, along with the sectarian dimension, the ethnic and geo-political factors need to be factored in to explain this trend.

Political Turmoil and International Community's Commitment to Afghanistan

NUG managed to muddle through the looming political and constitutional crisis in September, which many feared could have undone the government. Despite averting the worst, the crisis is not over yet.

In a positive development, the NUG succeeded in securing a pledge of USD15 billion until 2020 from the international community during the Brussels Summit in October. For the next four years, Afghanistan will annually require around USD4 billion to run its economic, security and other operations. The financial pledges by the donor countries in Brussels fall short of that figure.

President Obama's policy to keep 9,800 US troops in Afghanistan till the end of his presidency will expire in mid-January. Whether the President-elect Donald Trump will review the current Afghan policy or continue with the same remains to be seen. In any case, Afghanistan requires continued US assistance to avoid further destabilisation and devastation.

“ ...ISK carried out all these attacks and in most cases, the ethnic Hazara Shia community was the victim of sectarian violence. ”

Looking Forward

Presently, the conflict in Afghanistan is stalemated between the Taliban insurgents and the Afghan government. However, this summer the ANFs have struggled to simultaneously hold their defences and secure vast swathes of territory across Afghanistan. On several occasions, Taliban outgunned, outnumbered and outsmarted them.

If Taliban's resurgence continues at current scale and pace, it will make Afghan government's weak control appear more tenuous. This situation will afford enough space to transitional militant groups like Al Qaeda and IS to reconstitute themselves. The current circumstances in Afghanistan necessitates that all the stakeholders should return to the negotiation table to find a political solution, which may bring durable peace and stability in Afghanistan. The recently concluded peace deal with the former Afghan Warlord and head of the Hizb-e-Islami, Gulbadin Hekmatyar, can serve as a template.

While the Taliban should show more flexibility towards the Afghan government and constitution, the NUG should also grant some concessions to the former. Both parties will have to sort out what these should be with the help of intermediaries. Clichéd as it may sound, the regional peace in South Asia hinges on the stability in Afghanistan; so India and Pakistan would do well not to convert Afghanistan into another arena for their proxy battles.

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BANGLADESH

Introduction

2016 was a challenging year for counterterrorism forces in Bangladesh. The so-called Islamic State (IS) carried out a series of attacks, most notably the July attack on Holey Artisan Café in the capital city Dhaka. In response, Bangladeshi authorities conducted counterterrorism operations, thereby reducing to some extent IS' operational capability. However, its residual strength is still significant. Additionally, Bangladesh is facing a growing threat from Ansar al-Islam, the local chapter of the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), responsible for targeting bloggers and activists in Bangladesh since 2013. Local terrorist groups known as Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and Harkat ul Jihad al Islami-Bangladesh (HuJI-B) is also reportedly reorganising. All indications point to the threat landscape in 2017 being determined by domestic, regional and global factors.

Islamic State

The rise of IS in Bangladesh has significantly affected the threat landscape in the country. 2016 saw at least a dozen targeted killing of religious minorities such as Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Shias in various parts of the country, particularly in the north-western and south-western region. These attacks were important indicators of IS' growing influence in the country. IS conducted its most lethal attack on 1st July on the Holey Artisan Café in the diplomatic zone of the capital city Dhaka. 20 hostages, mostly foreigners, were killed during the attack, which initially appeared like a hostage-situation. The attack came at a time when Bangladeshi authorities were in a state of denial about the growing traction of IS in the country.

Investigations showed that the attackers were trained in Gaibandha, a northern district of the country, and that the firearms and materials for the grenades used by the attackers were manufactured in Munger, Bihar, India and smuggled to Bangladesh via the Chapainawabgaj border. It was an unprecedented attack and it is believed that terrorists might use it as a model for future attacks in the country. Earlier this year, IS' propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, in its 14th issue included an interview of a Bangladeshi IS leader Abu Ibrahim al Hanif, who died in Syria. In his interview, Abu Ibrahim al Hanif called on Bangladeshis and Muslims in the neighbouring countries to join IS. He also emphasised the geographic significance of Bangladesh to expand the group's activities to India and Myanmar. In the same issue *Dabiq* also carried an article on a Bangladesh foreign fighter who died in Syria. It is noteworthy that since September 2015 IS has been showing increasing interest in Bangladesh and there is active propaganda spread through articles and videos in Bengali, the local language targeted at Bangladeshis at home and overseas.

IS in Bangladesh has shown its ability to raise funds, both from domestic and external channels. Concurrently, IS has recruited from both urban and affluent class, and the often experienced and madrassa-educated members of JMB. As such, IS is sometimes referred to as "Neo-JMB" since a majority of its foot soldiers are from the local JMB group. IS' successful recruitment shows the traction of its message in different segments of the society. Bangladesh has also seen growing cases of recruitment of women by IS, with 30 members of the Sisters Department, Neo-JMB's women's wing currently at large

(Daily Samakal 2016). In addition, at least 20 female members of Neo-JMB were arrested from Dhaka, Tangail, and Sirajgonj districts this year. In December 2016 a female terrorist also blew herself up using a suicide vest during a counter-terrorism operation (BdNews24 2016).

At least 50 Bangladeshis have also travelled to Syria. As IS is losing territories in its heartland in Iraq and Syria, it is highly likely that they will shift to other wilayat (provinces), particularly in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Within Bangladesh, IS has 50-60 active members. Some of these are from Junud al Tawhid wal Khilafah (JATWK), which is a small but influential part of IS in Bangladesh. JATWK was the first group to pledge allegiance to the IS leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

Al Qaeda

AQIS remains a long term threat to Bangladesh due to its relatively wider network within the country and targeted killings. In Bangladesh AQIS is largely represented by Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)/Ansar al Islam. Concurrently, AQIS has connections with JMB as well as Harkat ul Jihad al Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), which is the oldest terrorist group in Bangladesh established by the returnees from Soviet-Afghan War. It is likely that AQIS will further deepen its ties with them both. Though the AQIS in Bangladesh has previously used cold weapons, it is rapidly developing its own capacity to produce explosives.

Since 2013 AQIS has carried out 12 attacks in Bangladesh targeting bloggers allegedly for blasphemy. In 2016, AQIS carried out an attack on a gay rights activist and his friend. The group was active in spreading its propaganda materials in the local Bengali language too. The first issue of this magazine, *Al-Balagh*, called on Muslim youth to “join the caravan,” threatened the US, and included an article about Al Qaeda’s “strategy” for Syria. It also calls on Bangladeshi youth to take Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar as their role models. Despite the clampdown by Bangladeshi authorities, AQIS propaganda is easily accessible in the internet, which is a key factor behind the growing radicalisation in the country. On 30 June, the US Department of State designated AQIS as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation.

According to the Bangladeshi authorities, all blogger killings claimed by ABT have been

“ AQIS remains a long term threat to Bangladesh due to its relatively wider network within the country and targeted killings. ”

instructed by the leader of the group’s military operations, Major Syed Ziaul Haque. Haque was dismissed from the army in 2011 after ABT’s failed coup and has been on the run since.

Other Groups

Bangladesh faces significant threat from various other groups, especially JMB. The group is raising funds, particularly through robberies and other crimes. A significant portion of its funds are going for procurement of arms and explosives from India. According to Bangladesh law enforcement agencies, there is a possibility of JMB reorganising itself. JMB is led by former Majlis-e-Sura member Salauddin, alias Salehin, who is believed to be hiding in India and leading both the Bangladeshi and Indian wings of the group. Salehin was declared the chief of the main JMB faction in a statement by the group in June 2016. The group’s activities continue even though many of the group’s key leaders are in prison. Meanwhile, the HuJI-B is also reportedly regrouping, mostly in the port city of Chittagong.

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Since the Holey Artisan Café attack, Bangladeshi authorities have taken some new initiatives to counter terrorism. The newly-formed taskforce, Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTC), became fully functional and carried out at least eight major operations in which at least 30 terrorists, including the IS leader in Bangladesh, Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury, were killed. Bangladeshi authorities also disrupted an incoming remittance of USD 50,000 sent from Spain by Ataul Haq via China. Ataul Haq is the brother of Saiful Haq Sujan, a British-Bangladeshi foreign fighter killed in Syria in 2015.

The law enforcement agencies, particularly the CTTC Unit of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), also launched mobile apps to help citizens provide terrorism related information to these agencies. The local police stations are also working closely with the residents of their locality's neighbourhood to collect information on suspicious persons and activities. Additionally, Bangladesh has launched a new programme of offering cash incentives to militants for renouncing radicalism but its effectiveness remains to be seen. The law enforcement agencies in collaboration with the Ministry of Education have also organised public lectures for raising awareness against terrorism and extremism in educational institutions. On the counter-ideology domain, a leading group of Islamic scholars in Bangladesh issued a fatwa (religious edict) condemning terrorism and militancy, including violent attacks on non-Muslims and secular writers and activists. Such attacks were labelled as "Haram," or forbidden and un-Islamic. The fatwa was signed by more than 100,000 Islamic scholars, legal experts and clerics.

However, Bangladesh has to scale up its Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT) and Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) capabilities of its police force, particularly the CTTC Unit. It is also important to further strengthen the CTTC Unit and make it a national agency for CT. Another key weakness of Bangladesh's CT policy is that it lacks a rehabilitation program for terrorist detainees and inmates.

Looking Ahead

It is evident that the Islamic State ideology will persist despite IS relatively weak operational capability. The IS cells will possibly remain in disarray for some time before they reorganise themselves. Additionally, the country is likely to see a gradual re-emergence of AQIS to reclaim its turf in the country. It is also likely that both groups might try to exploit the plight of the Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar. Bangladesh-Myanmar border areas are a vulnerable place that needs to be closely watched. It should be noted that almost all terrorist groups in Bangladesh use the Rohingya crisis in their rhetoric to recruit. According to unofficial estimates nearly 100,000 Rohingyas have crossed over to Bangladesh. It is highly likely that the upsurge of violence in western Myanmar will play a key role in boosting the capability of the Bangladeshi terrorist groups in terms of funding and manpower. There is also a possibility of revenge attacks on Buddhist temples in Bangladesh.

The terrorist threat to the country will remain and possibly grow in 2017. The targets of terrorist groups have clearly expanded and so has their recruitment pool, which includes a vulnerable segment of Bangladeshi diaspora. For instance, eight Bangladeshi men working in Singapore, inspired by IS ideology, were detained for planning an attack in their home country. It is likely that diaspora recruitment will grow as they are seen as a potential source of funds. Bangladesh needs to ensure a sustained and long term investment in scaling up its counterterrorism capabilities. It must also actively engage its diaspora population and deepen its collaboration with the host countries to respond to the phenomenon of diaspora radicalisation.

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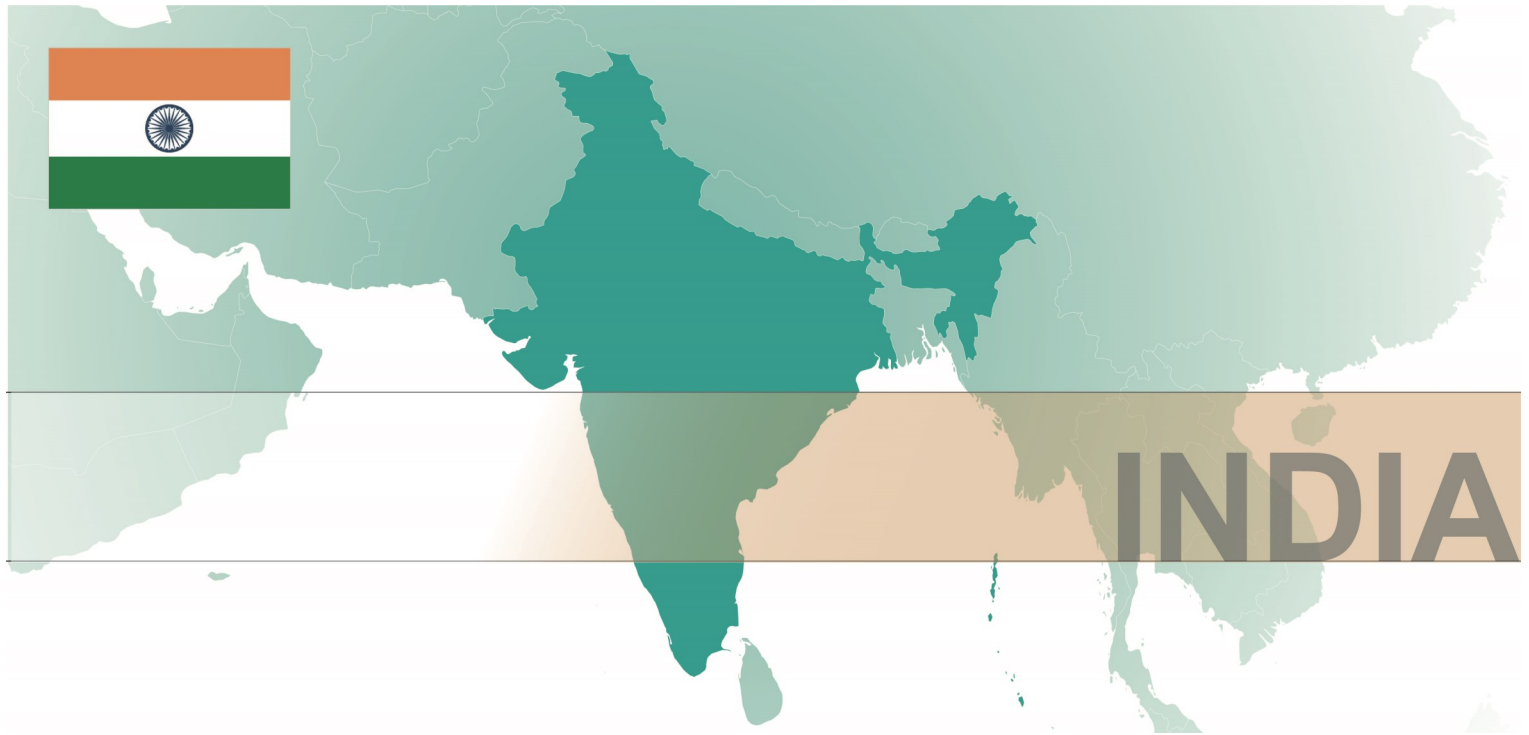
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Introduction

India faces threats from growing online radicalisation, the so-called Islamic State (IS), Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), and the volatile Kashmir valley. 2016 saw three major terrorist attacks in India, which included the attack on a prominent air force base in Pathankot in Punjab on 2 January in which 7 soldiers and a civilian were killed, the Pampore attack in Jammu and Kashmir on 25 January where 8 officers were killed, and the Uri attacks, also in Jammu and Kashmir, on 18 September where 19 soldiers were killed. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal, as of 11 December 2016, the total number of terrorist-related casualties of civilians and security force personnel this year stands at 364, a rise from 336 casualties in 2015. Terrorist attacks in India are of deep security and political concern not only because of the casualties they caused but also because they raised tensions between India and neighbouring Pakistan, nuclear armed states which have fought three major wars in 1947, 1965 and 1971 and smaller and localised battles in Kargil, Siachen and elsewhere. Past attacks like those on the Indian Parliament in 2001, the train bombing in 2007, the Mumbai attacks in 2008, and the Pathankot attack this year had raised tensions and disrupted relations between both countries.

IS threat in India

The involvement of Indians in IS was realised in May 2014 when four Indian youth travelled to Syria to join IS. This revelation led to a series of investigations by Indian intelligence agencies that unveiled IS' network within India. The first IS cell was dismantled in the town of Ratlam, Madhya Pradesh, in May 2015. This cell was a splinter of the Indian Mujahideen and its discovery revealed the penetration of IS in the Indian jihadi landscape.

In 2016, two more IS-affiliated cells were dismantled. One was discovered in January in Karnataka and the other in September in the southern state of Kerala. According to open source information, the total number of IS-related arrests for this year stands at just below 50. Additionally, it has been confirmed by the National Intelligence Agency that the 22 Keralites who went missing in June left India to join IS in Afghanistan.

Another significant development is the formation of a new IS affiliate in South India called Janood-ul-Khalifa-e-Hind (JKH). Little is known about this group which is separate from the Ansar-ut Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind (AuT) that was formed in 2014. Arrested members testified during interrogations that their instructions were to read up on IS literature such as *Dabiq* magazine and other online publications. It is believed that JKH could be an IS recruitment wing.

AQ's threat in India

On 3 September 2014, Ayman Al Zawahiri, the current leader of Al Qaeda Central (AQC), released a video announcing the formation of AQIS. Zawahiri emphasised that AQIS will encompass all the jihadi groups operating in the region from Pakistan and all the way to Myanmar. Security analyst Jordan

Olmstead suggests that this was a deliberate move by AQC to announce that it is still present and active in the region. Its formation represents an attempt by AQC to put its claim on South Asia.

While IS has not conducted any attacks in India, AQIS-affiliated groups have had some success. The aforementioned attacks in Pathankot, Pampore and Uri were in fact carried out by groups affiliated with AQIS. It shows that AQIS possesses the capability and expertise to mount such attacks against the Indian army and police. More importantly, the attacks were focused on domestic issues, demonstrating AQIS willingness to align itself with local causes, specifically involving Kashmir.

Threat from other groups

Maoist Threat

In 2006, then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called the Maoist insurgency the biggest internal security threat to the country (The Economist 2009). The Maoists had launched attacks against security forces, public and private infrastructure, as well as civilians and inflicted heavy losses to the Indian economy. Affected states also included Chhattisgarh, Bihar, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. However, support for the Maoists has been declining due to various government measures; the Maoist groups too are weakening with reduced operational capabilities and strength.

The Northeast Insurgency

The insurgency in the seven states, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Tripura that make up India's northeast has been on the rise, even as the support base of the insurgents has declined. Communities that traditionally supported the insurgency have withdrawn their support due to the rise of basic income and education, providing the populace with socio-economic alternatives that negate participation in violence. However, insurgents are increasing the frequency of their attacks to demonstrate that they are continuing in the struggle against the government. The region is still particularly vulnerable to attacks by insurgents, due to weak governance, poor security apparatus, and the volatile geopolitical environment (Hussain 2016).

“ Although the insurgency in Kashmir has remained largely localised, IS has begun showing interest in the controversy. ”

Unrest in Kashmir

On 8 July, the Indian security forces killed Burhan Wani, a commander from the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (Party of Holy Fighters), a Kashmir separatist group (Kaura 2016). His killing sparked protests across the Kashmir valley, as Wani represented the political aspirations of the young generation of Kashmiris (Bukhari 2016). Violent clashes between protestors and security forces resulted in the death of at least 90 civilians with thousands injured and hundreds among them blinded, due to the use of shotgun pellets by security forces (Al Jazeera 2016).

Although the insurgency in Kashmir has remained largely localised, IS has begun showing interest in the controversy. In 2016, multiple reports of IS flag raisings in the Srinagar area of Kashmir emerged (Indian Express 2016). On 19 January, IS English language magazine, *Dabiq* revealed IS' interest in expanding into Kashmir and including it as part of Wilayat Khurasan (the 'official province' of the group for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region). It is evident that the group understands the importance of Kashmir in light of the active insurgency, but it has not yet made significant inroads into the area.

Counter Terrorism Efforts

The emergence of IS cells and evidence of local militants travelling to Syria to fight alongside IS pose a threat to national security, especially when these militants return to the country. Current counter-terrorism efforts undertaken by India are not strong enough to ward off long-term threats. Political disagreements have prevented the establishment of the centralised National

Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) – a nodal agency responsible for tackling all terrorism-related cases in the country. This has been a major setback in India’s fight against terrorism and insurgency. In August 2015 the government started the initiative to rope in National Informatics Centre (NIC) to create a “state-of-the-art” system data and behaviour patterns to generate actionable inputs for investigative agencies. The NIC has proved fruitful in the cyber domain where the fight against terrorism had previously not seen significant progress (NIC.in 2016).

Looking Ahead

Insurgencies and terror attacks pose a major challenge to law enforcement and counter-terrorism efforts in India. Local issues and grievances such as the issue of Kashmir present opportunities for international terrorist groups, specifically IS and AQ, to exploit, expand their influence and perpetrate acts of violence. Regardless of the AQIS-IS competition for supremacy in South Asia, IS is not likely to replace AQIS even though it has made inroads into the sub-continent. This is because AQIS has been able to infuse jihadism with local grievances and has established a firm base since the 1990s (Twitter 2016). AQIS is thus a more dominant threat to India than IS. It is not unlikely, however, that IS will attempt to make inroads into Kashmir in the year ahead in view of the group’s territorial losses in Iraq and Syria. IS could attempt to win over a section of Kashmir’s insurgents, and project itself as the liberator of oppressed Muslims (Iqbal 2016). In this regard, one successful attack by IS against Indian targets could allow the group to win over the support base of local jihadist groups in the area.

Much more needs to be done to counter the threats posed by IS and AQIS. In terms of policy measures for the year ahead, the Indian government needs to develop socio-economic policies related to employment, welfare services and education, the lack of which are key motivators for those partaking in violence. In particular, there is an urgent need to develop infrastructure in areas such as the Kashmir valley, in localised communities within Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Andhra, as well as the northeast region. This will improve communication, bring development and employment to the impoverished areas, and raise the standard of living of the local populace, thereby reducing the grievances of the local

“ AQIS is thus a more dominant threat to India than IS. ”

populations towards the state. More determined efforts should also be made by all parties to resolve the Kashmir issue as it is open to exploitation by jihadists in India, Pakistan and beyond with serious consequences for peace and stability.

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PAKISTAN

Introduction

Pakistan remains an important arena of terrorism with an evolving threat landscape that is deeply troubling. In 2016, according to South Asia Terrorism Portal, there were 903 terrorism- and political violence-related fatalities of civilians and security force personnel. A worrying trend has been the resilience of Islamic State of Khurasan (ISK) to remain a potent threat notwithstanding neutralisation of its various cells across Pakistan. Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) however was relatively quiet throughout 2016 but maintained its presence on the internet. A number of attacks was carried out by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the umbrella movement of the Pakistani Taliban, and its splinter factions including Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA), and sectarian outfits such as Jundullah and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). The emerging tactical alliances between ISK and Pakistan's sectarian outfits are another worrying trend. Despite the operational successes of the military Operation Zarb-e-Azb, launched in June 2014, and decrease in terror-related fatalities, violence has continued in one form or other.

The Islamic State – A Resilient Low-intensity Threat

Pakistan has produced the highest number of IS supporters in South Asia. More than 150 IS operatives have been arrested across the country, while 1,200 Pakistanis have joined ISK in Afghanistan. Members of TTP, Lashkar-e-Islam, the Salafi Haji Namdar Group, LeJ, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizb ut-Tahrir and AQIS have all seen their members defecting to IS. Yet, Pakistan's top civil and military brass has consistently denied the operational and formal organisational presence of IS in the country. However, recent spate of IS-directed attacks, particularly in Balochistan and Karachi, belie their dismissive claims.

The major terrorist incident of 2016 was the 8 August suicide bombing at Quetta hospital that killed 70 people, mostly lawyers. Both IS-central and JuA claimed responsibility for the attack, signifying developing operational linkages between the two groups. Then on 24 October, three well-armed militants stormed a police-training centre in Quetta, killing 61 police cadets. IS' official news agency *Amaq* claimed the attack. At the same time, a faction of LeJ, known as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi Al-Alami (LJA) was also blamed. LJA spokesperson Ali bin Sufyan later confirmed the cooperation between his group and IS.

In addition to the two aforementioned attacks, an IS cell in Lahore and Peshawar were also busted in 2016. An IS operative from Peshawar also confirmed the use of Telegram, a heavily encrypted chat app, by the group's members for communication. The use of Telegram means that militants in Pakistan (and elsewhere) are becoming more adept at using technology, hence ensuring their anonymity. Law enforcement agencies further disclosed that IS members in Peshawar are paid between USD 200 to 300 every month. This underlines the financial capability of the group to maintain and support its recruits.

The presence of IS and the traction of its ideology in Pakistan's urban centres such as Lahore, Karachi, Sialkot and Peshawar is a worrying trend. IS, arguably, has mobilised some support among the middle and upper-middle class segments of the urban areas with college and university level education. It has expanded the pool of potential jihadists by using the internet to spread its propaganda.

The Reclusive AQIS

AQIS remained operationally quiet in Pakistan for the most part of 2016. No attacks were carried out by the group but it remained relatively active in the cyber domain. Most recently, AQIS released a *nasheed* (religious song) titled “How Unfortunate You Are: To the Armed Forces of Pakistan”. The *nasheed* accuses the Pakistan Armed Forces of colluding with the US to wage war against “the soldiers of Islam” and equates the armed forces with the Pharaoh, a reference used in Islam for tyrants. It urges the soldiers to resign from the army and fight on the “righteous” side. Additionally, AQIS has released a magazine in Urdu, titled *You Must Continue Jihad in Pakistan*. The magazine discusses why jihad should continue in Pakistan.

Pakistani Taliban and its Splinter Groups

The operational capability of TTP and its splinter groups have been reduced due to the military’s Operation Zarb-e-Azb against militant groups. Most of the group’s leaders, including TTP leader Mullah Fazlullah, have been pushed into Afghanistan from where they now plot and plan attacks in Pakistan. Despite the military’s offensive, the Pakistani Taliban was able to stage two major attacks during the year. The first attack was on the Bacha Khan University in January 2016, resulting in the death of 22 people. The attack was orchestrated by militant commander Khalifa Omar Mansoor, the mastermind of the Army Public School massacre in December 2014 who was killed in Afghanistan in a US drone strike in July 2016.

The second major attack was launched in March by JuA in Lahore. The suicide attack targeted Christians celebrating Easter in a public park, killing 72. Attacks against religious minorities, especially Christians who make up 2% of the country’s total population, are not unusual. There is a history of such attacks by militant groups and this trend is likely to persist.

TTP also continued to maintain its presence in the cyber domain by releasing a number of propaganda videos through its media wing, Umar Media. TTP even released its first magazine, titled “Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan Magazine, Issue # 1”, reiterating the group’s position and aims of waging war against the Pakistani state and army to establish their “Islamic system.”

“ AQIS remained operationally quiet in Pakistan for the most part of 2016. ”

Sectarian Violence

Pakistan is plagued by sectarian violence. In 2016, 33 sectarian attacks resulted in 176 dead. Pakistan is now experiencing resurgence in sectarian violence largely because of geo-political changes in the Middle East. The revival of Shia politics in the Middle East and the sectarian dimensions of the conflict in Iraq and Syria have had an effect on Pakistani sectarian landscape too.

For instance, it is noteworthy that Shias from Pakistan, particularly the Shias from Parachinar region and Hazara Shias in Quetta, have joined pro-Iran Shia militia, the Zainabiyoun Brigade, in Syria on the side of Assad. In response, LeJ attacked a bazaar in the Shia-dominated bazaar of Parachinar. The return of these Shia should be monitored as it will further disturb the sectarian dimensions in Pakistan.

Other sectarian attacks, both in October, include the targeted killing of four women of the ethnic Hazara community and a grenade attack, claimed by LJA, on a Shia Imambargah in Karachi, which killed a child and seven people. Additionally, sectarian groups such as Ahle Sunnat Wal Jammāt (ASWJ) have been allowed to run for elections. In fact, Masroor Nawaz Jhangvi, son of Haq Nawaz Jhangvi who founded the sectarian outfit Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), won a by-election for the provincial assembly of Punjab. Sectarian rhetoric, therefore, has become mainstream and IS message can also find traction amongst such anti-Shia people.

Sectarian violence also includes the conflict between the Sunni-Deobandi and Sunni-Barelvi sect. The biggest sectarian tragedy this year was witnessed against the Barelvis on 12 November 2016 at the shrine of Shah Norani in Balochistan. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed 52 people. The inclusive Barelvi/Sufi Muslims, who form 50-60 percent of

Pakistan's Muslim population, have traditionally remained peaceful and account for less than one per cent of the country's militancy. However, 2016 also saw the politicisation of some Barelvis. In February and March, thousands of Barelvis protested against the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri who murdered the governor of Punjab Salman Taseer in 2011. The protests are worrying because it shows the prevalence of extremist ideology, mostly found in Deobandi militants, in some Barelvis too. The government must empower the otherwise moderate Barelvis before they too become influenced by the more extreme narratives of Salafi-jihadists and Deobandi groups.

Militancy in Balochistan and Karachi

Ethno-nationalist militancy in Balochistan remains a prevailing problem in 2016. More than 664 civilians and security force personnel have been killed in Balochistan alone. While Northern Balochistan is being hit by Islamist militants, such as LeJ, TTP and IS, Southern Balochistan is under attack from separatist groups such as Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Tigers (BLT) and United Baloch Army (UBA). Additionally, the arrest of the alleged Indian agent Kulbhushan Yadav from Balochistan and Brahmdayg Bugti's (leader of BRA) request to seek asylum in India have created an impression of foreign hand in the unrest in Pakistan's largest province. At the same time, Pakistan should also understand the grievances of the Baloch in order to bring an end to the insurgency.

Violence in Karachi declined in 2016. However, ethnic tensions need to be resolved for a long-term solution. Ethno-political violence between the Muhajirs and Pashtuns have resulted in thousands of deaths. Even after the Rangers Operation in Karachi, kidnapping and targeted killings have continued. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a political party representing Muhajir interests, achieved electoral success despite suffering arrests of its party workers for being allegedly involved in violence. This underlines the grievances of the Muhajir electorate that ought to be understood and addressed in order to ensure peace in Karachi.

Looking Forward

The threat landscape in Pakistan has evolved drastically with growing cooperation between different militant groups and ISK and regrouping

“ Due to the history and penetration of Islamist militancy in Pakistan and the Khurasan region at large, Pakistan remains an attractive arena for IS.”

of the Pakistani Taliban in 2016. The ideological influence, operational outreach and sophistication of IS attacks is now more pronounced than ever before. As the IS Central's defeat in Syria and Iraq looks imminent, the group will be seeking bases elsewhere and will follow a strategy of decentralised jihad, as suggested in the latest issue IS propaganda magazine *Rumiyah*. Due to the history and penetration of Islamist militancy in Pakistan and the Khurasan region at large, Pakistan remains an attractive arena for IS. IS is cooperating with Pakistani militant groups to conduct attacks in the country by forming operational bonds without seeking a pledge of allegiance from proscribed Pakistani militants. The said strategy serves IS' agenda and local groups' interests; IS provides financial opportunities to local groups who are using the IS brand to remain relevant. As such, more of such “alliances” can be expected in the future.

Pakistan's policy of defeating militancy through overtly kinetic approach has had a significant impact on the operational capability of militant groups, and has reduced overall violence in the country. However, it is likely that violence will surge once again because the Pakistani Taliban has already reorganised in Afghanistan. As such, it is important to form a thoroughly planned out strategy to consolidate the gains made in Operation Zarb-e-Azb and counter terrorism and seek a regional effort to end terrorism.

The Justice Qazi Faez Isa Inquiry Commission Report probing the 8 August Quetta hospital attack also highlights the failure of the government and points out how the National

Action Plan (NAP) against terrorism is not a plan per se. Comprehensive counter-terrorism plan must be charted out, which should be monitored and reviewed periodically in order to have a desired effect. With the new army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa, it is likely that counter-terrorism policy will maintain the hard-hitting approach of the previous chief. At the same time, tensions with India might stretch the army even further. Therefore, the civil government ought to invest in civil security institutions and adopt more soft approaches in order to complement the military's offensive.

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CHINA & CENTRAL ASIA



- China (Xinjiang)
- Kazakhstan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Uzbekistan
- Tajikistan



Introduction

China has experienced long-standing inter-ethnic tensions between the predominantly Muslim, Turkic-speaking Uyghurs and the Han Chinese in Xinjiang with frequent episodes of violence, including the 2009 Urumqi Riots. Apart from the threat from the Uyghur secessionist movement known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (better known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP)), Uyghur militants have joined forces with Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS) under the TIP banner. According to one report by the Chinese government, the TIP, whose stated goal is the independence of East Turkestan (Xinjiang) from China, has carried out “200 acts of terrorism, resulting in at least 162 deaths and over 400 injuries” between 1990 and 2001 (Office of the State Council of the PRC 2002). There have been more attacks since then; for example, an attack on paramilitary troops in Kashgar in 2008 killed 17 (Wong 2010) and a suicide vehicle attack in Tiananmen Square in 2013 killed 5 and injured dozens (Kaiman 2013).

In addition, China’s Ministry of Public Security has also identified three other Uyghur ‘terrorist’ organisations, namely, the Eastern Turkestan Liberation Organisation (ETLO), founded in Turkey in 1996, the World Uighur Youth Congress (WUYC), and the East Turkestan Information Center (ETIC). Only TIP is recognised by the United States and the United Nations (UN) as a terrorist organisation. The Uyghur militant connection has brought about implications for China as well as countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East due to the presence of militant jihadi groups in Central Asia and jihadist factions affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan and Pakistan. Central Asian militant groups, with whom Uyghur militants have been linked in the past, also operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Evidence of Uyghur fighters aligned with IS and AQ has raised concerns that the localised Uyghur separatist militancy has effectively come under the influence of transnational jihadi cause (Clarke 2002).

Uyghurs Courted by IS and AQ

The growing rivalry between IS and AQ for leadership of the global jihadi movement has seen both groups intensifying their rhetoric to appeal to new Uyghur recruits. While AQ has been more successful in attracting Uyghur militants to its cause, IS has not held back from indicating an interest in the plight of the Uyghurs’ to expand its transnational networks. In a July 2014 speech released by IS Al Hayat media entitled “A Message to the *Mujahidin* and the Muslim *Ummah* in the month of Ramadan,” IS’ leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi alluded to China as a target for attack. He referred to the denial of ‘Muslims’ rights’ in China, and compared it to the Muslims oppressed in other countries.

The Uyghur-led Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) has aligned itself with AQ. This is evident from the release of its propaganda magazine known as *Islamic Turkestan* via AQ’s Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) outlet. In a 2 July 2016 video, AQ leader Ayman Zawahiri urged Uyghur Islamists to ‘strengthen the fire of jihad’ to deal with Beijing authorities. This rallying call is believed to have inspired the August 2016 attack on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek reportedly perpetrated by TIP.

According to a report by a US think tank in July, there are at least 100 Uyghurs in Syria fighting alongside the AQ-linked Al Nusra Front (earlier official Chinese reports have claimed that there are 300 Uyghur fighters participating in the conflict) (TIME 2016; Foreign Policy 2016). The threat of battle-trained Uyghur militants planning attacks in Xinjiang also warrants concern. In the near future, should an emboldened TIP seek to deepen its operational linkages with AQ, there would be an increased likelihood of terrorist attacks on Chinese citizens and investments in South Asia, Central Asia and Middle Eastern countries.

Transnational Uyghur Militant Connection

Uyghurs' presence has increased in Southeast Asia, notably in Indonesia and the Philippines. In early 2016, Indonesian authorities detected Uyghurs entering into the country to join the East Indonesian group, Mujahidin/Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). One of the Uyghur militants, Nur Muhammet Abdullah, was part of a terrorist cell led by Bahrūn Naim, a member of IS in Syria. At the time of his arrest, the Uyghur militant was being groomed to carry out a suicide bombing attack on Shia Muslims. He was sentenced to six years in prison in November this year.

In August, trial proceedings began for the two Uyghurs charged with the Erawan Shrine bombing attack in Bangkok in 2015 which killed 20 people including Chinese nationals. The attack was most likely motivated by the Thai government's crackdown on human smuggling routes and triggered by the deportation of the 109 Uyghurs a month before the attack (Kam 2015). In the same month, a 33-year-old Tajik national of Uyghur ethnicity carried out an IED suicide car attack at the Chinese embassy in Bishek, Kyrgyzstan, killing himself and wounding several others (Reuters 2016).

Katibah GR, the Indonesian Batam-based cell that had been planning to launch a rocket attack against Singapore's Marina Bay in August 2016, had also been reportedly receiving funds from TIP. The group was also responsible for "smuggling and sheltering" Uyghurs into the region (Rayda 2016). Since the death of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)'s leader in December 2015, TIP, led by Abdul Ahad Turkistānī (Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Turkistānī), has emerged as one of the key players in the Central and South Asian theatre.

“ One of the Uyghur militants, Nur Muhammet Abdullah, was part of a terrorist cell led by Bahrūn Naim, a member of IS in Syria. ”

China's Counter-Terrorism Responses

China's shifting approach to counter-terrorism is reflected in the country's tough posture towards terrorism (The Straits Times 2016c). Following the passage of the counter-terrorism law in December 2015, China has beefed up its counter-terrorism apparatus domestically and regionally. In August, prior to President Xi Jinping's appointment of a new party chief for Xinjiang (The Straits Times 2016d), China introduced its first local counter-terrorism law, which "details and supplements the national law in defining terror activities and terrorists, security precautions, intelligence, investigations, countermeasures and punishment" (China.org.cn 2016). Following a deadly blast in Xinjiang's Hotan prefecture, which left a deputy police chief dead and wounded 3 other officers, authorities moved in to detain 17 Uyghur suspects who were involved in the attack (Radio Free Asia 2016).

In addition, continued economic development in Xinjiang, which China views as the main battleground of terrorism, is seen as key in the fight against terrorism. As such, in November, Xinjiang's newly assumed party chief announced plans to "improve living conditions for the people and win the battle against poverty" (Global Times 2016). These domestic counter-terrorism measures were complemented by regional approaches to countering terrorism. In July, China conducted joint border patrols with Pakistan, a volatile region prone to militant infiltration and home to TIP's training bases (The Hindu 2016). In October, anti-terrorism drills were conducted with Saudi Arabia and alliances were set up with neighbouring countries with

extremist and militant presence, including Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan (Channel News Asia 2016b).

Looking Ahead

Continued instability in Xinjiang, the neighbouring Af-Pak region and Central Asia, as well as the growth of global jihadist networks and the transnationalisation of Uyghur militancy may see an increased likelihood of radicalisation and recruitment of Uyghurs.

In addition, an influx of Uyghurs into countries with porous borders and human trafficking routes remains a possibility. This will be the case should the conflict in Xinjiang worsen. In recent years, the preferred alternative route for Uyghurs to transit through before seeking political asylum or refuge in Turkey (their historical homeland), has been Southeast Asia and in particular Thailand. Given that the Thai government's crackdown on human smuggling routes is likely to continue, Uyghurs may be left with no choice but to remain in Xinjiang or to find alternative routes to Turkey. This might compound their sense of desperation.

On the international front, while China's newly-introduced counter-terrorism law authorises the Chinese military to participate in military operations abroad, the law is not likely to result in a shift in Chinese non-interference policy. Instead, Chinese overseas counter-terrorism efforts will likely take the form of peacekeeping operations in conflict-prone regions. Moreover, the movement of Uyghurs and their participation in militancy underscore the risks China faces as it increases its economic engagements overseas. There is a need to urgently strengthen existing counter-terrorism cooperation and collaboration with Southeast Asian countries and local governments in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) where Chinese infrastructure and projects are located, so as to better deter and disrupt terrorists from carrying out attacks to harm Chinese citizens and interests.

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Overview

In 2016, Central Asia saw a significant rise in the threat of terrorism from both transnational and home-grown militants. These militants have operational or ideological links to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda. Currently, nearly 3,000 Central Asians, including 1,100 Tajiks, 600 Kyrgyz, 400 Kazakhs, 360 Turkmens and 200 to 500 Uzbeks, are fighting alongside jihadists in Syria and Iraq. A vast majority of Tajik and Kazakh jihadists joined the IS ranks, while the bulk of the fighters from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan fight alongside militant units under Al Qaeda's former affiliate in Syria, al-Nusra Front.

Until recently, Central Asian groups largely confined their operations within the armed conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The involvement of Central Asians affiliated with IS and al-Nusra Front in the Istanbul airport attack (June 2016) and the Chinese embassy bombing in Kyrgyzstan (August 2016), respectively, underscored the increasingly important role of Central Asians in the two group's transnational operations. The June 2016 attack in the city of Aktobe by a group of local men inspired by IS ideology was the first instance of home-grown terrorism in Kazakhstan. This is significant as the authorities in Kazakhstan and the wider Central Asian region had believed terrorism to be a largely external threat.

KAZAKHASTAN

IS Threat

Kazakhstan is facing threats from home-grown terrorism, inspired by IS' ideology and its global terrorist campaign. In 2016, there were at least three major attacks and plots carried out by radicalised local Salafi-jihadist cells in Kazakhstan. The first and the most lethal attack took place in June 2016 when a group of 27 gunmen attacked two commercial gun stores and attempted to storm a military base in the western city of Aktobe. The attackers were inspired by the speeches of IS' spokesperson and top strategist Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (deceased). 25 people, including 18 attackers, were killed and 38 others injured. The authorities established that the perpetrators were aiming to obtain heavier weapons from the military base before proceeding to target local government buildings. In the following months, similar attacks were observed on a smaller scale in Karaganda and Almaty provinces. No groups have claimed responsibility for any of the three attacks.

The attacks in Kazakhstan are a reflection of IS' growing appeal among vulnerable segments of Kazakh society, especially the youth. Existing socio-economic issues in the country, such as high unemployment, is seen as one of the underlying causes that render extremist ideologies attractive. A sociological study conducted by a local scholar, Serik Beisembaev, suggests that 80 percent of terrorists and extremists convicted in Kazakhstan were unemployed. While Kazakhstan is considered as one of the more prosperous countries in the region, the recent drop in global oil prices has had a negative effect on its economy. The Kazakh government raised serious concerns over the rise of Salafism after the Aktobe attacks. It estimates that approximately 15,000 local Kazakhs now subscribe to Salafist ideology. In

Aktobe alone, there are 1,500 Salafists and 90 of them are “potential jihadists”. However, it remains uncertain whether or not they have organised themselves as a structured entity.

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

The Kazakh government has taken a number of security measures to curb the growing threats of terrorism and extremism. On 13 September 2016, the Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs was established to coordinate and implement the government’s soft approaches to prevent radicalisation through informational and educational platforms. It is tasked to focus on programmes countering extremist ideology, rehabilitation and social reintegration of extremists as well as economic, employment, and cultural projects. At the societal level, Kazakhstan has set up community-based terrorism-prevention measures. These include rewards of USD 4,650 to 6,200 to anyone who provides information on the detection and prevention of terrorist attacks in the country.

Looking Ahead

The Kazakh Government has blamed Salafism for undermining the secular nature of the state and society and has been considering banning Salafism in order to counter its spread. This approach may however be counter-productive as it may provoke some hard-line Salafists towards militant jihad. Such a ban would provide Salafi-jihadists with a perfect rhetoric to legitimise their allegation that the secular government is “suppressing devout Muslims”.

KYRGYZSTAN

Al Qaeda Threat

A vast majority of Kyrgyz citizens fighting in Syria have joined groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and al-Nusra Front. On 30 August 2016, a suicide bomber driving a minivan loaded with 100 kilograms of TNT attacked the Chinese embassy in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, killing himself and wounding six others. Security authorities in Kyrgyzstan revealed that the attack was a joint operation between Kateeba Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ) and Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), organised on the orders and financial support of “emissaries of al-Nusra Front”. However, none of the three groups have claimed responsibility for the attack.

“ A vast majority of Kyrgyz citizens fighting in Syria have joined groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and al-Nusra Front. ”

The Bishkek attack was planned and orchestrated by a transnational network of Central Asian and Uyghur militants with its presence in Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Syria. Although KTJ and TIP have been closely cooperating with each other in Syria for the past two years, it was the first time that they jointly conducted an operation in Central Asia with the authorisation and support of al-Nusra Front. This joint effort could be a signal of the start of a new and dangerous trend. The perpetrators were mainly ethnic Uyghurs and Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan, who arrived in Bishkek from Turkey with fake passports and managed to flee back undetected after the successful completion of the operation.

KTJ was founded in December 2014 and comprises predominantly ethnic Uzbeks fighting in northern Syria. Since its inception, the group is being led by Abu Saloh, whose real name is Mukhtarov Sirajidin, an ethnic Uzbek from Kyrgyzstan’s southern Osh province. Some believe Abu Saloh to be an ethnic Uyghur. He has also been identified as the mastermind of the Bishkek attack. The TIP, consisting of mainly ethnic Uyghurs from China’s Xinjiang province, is fighting on two fronts – Syria and Afghanistan. Operating under the protection and support of al-Nusra Front in Syria, both KTJ and TIP pledged allegiance to the Taliban.

The silence on the part of al-Nusra Front and its Central Asian allies on the Bishkek attack can be explained by al-Nusra Front’s recent efforts to project itself as a mainstream and legitimate insurgent movement in Syria – instead of a group affiliated with Al Qaeda and its global jihad. To this end, in July 2016, al-Nusra Front announced its split from Al Qaeda and renamed itself as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. In doing so, the group has attempted to avoid possible backlash from international coalition forces.

KTJ is now one of the most prominent foreign terrorist groups fighting in Syria. In March 2016, KTJ launched “a special unit” for “Inghimasi” operations. The Inghimasi refers to well-trained militants who carry light arms, explosives and suicide belts. However, the Inghimasi fighters differ from the Istishadi, whose sole mission is to conduct suicide bombings after reaching a certain target, without engaging in combat. The Inghimasi is assigned to blow up his explosive belt after fighting and only when death is inevitable. The main mission of the Inghimasi unit is to break through and hit highly-protected positions. KTJ described its fighters to be “the special ones who plunge fearlessly into any fortress of the enemy”.

IS Threat

A handful of Kyrgyz fighters have joined IS. The 28 June 2016 suicide attacks at Istanbul’s international airport by an IS cell included a Russian, a Kyrgyz and an Uzbek. It was the first time that Central Asian operatives from IS were implicated in the terrorist group’s overseas operations, highlighting the growing ambitions and international outreach of Central Asian fighters. In April 2016, IS released a video featuring a veteran Uzbek fighter from Osh province. The fighter, identified as Abu Amina Uzbeki, urged Central Asians to travel to Syria to fight for the “caliphate”. The video is an attempt by IS to replenish its manpower after heavy battlefield losses in Syria and Iraq.

Notable Kyrgyz individuals were found to have links to IS too. For instance, on 21 January 2016, Kyrgyzstan’s security services in the southern Kyrgyz region of Jalal-Abad arrested a senior police officer on charges of supplying small weapons and ammunitions to a local terrorist suspect with links to IS.

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

The Kyrgyz government has prioritised the prevention of radicalisation and terrorist rehabilitation as a crucial part of its current counter-terrorism strategy. In April 2016, it passed a law that proposes to segregate terrorist and extremist convicts from other prisoners in an effort to prevent prison radicalisation. In the same month, Kyrgyzstan’s State Commission for Religious Affairs launched a rehabilitation centre in Bishkek aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating extremist and terrorist convicts.

“ Tajik citizens constitute the bulk of the Central Asians fighting in Syria and Iraq. ”

Looking Ahead

The Bishkek attack was the first time that militants used suicide operation as a terrorist tactic in Kyrgyzstan. The replication of this tactic in the future cannot be ruled out. It is also noteworthy that it is the first time that the Chinese embassy has been targeted in Central Asia. Given the capabilities and intentions of the current network of Central Asian and Uyghur militants, more similar attacks can be expected. In the light of China’s expanding economic and energy interests in Central Asia, Chinese installations and citizens in the region will remain attractive targets for the militant network.

TAJIKISTAN

IS Threat

Tajik citizens constitute the bulk of the Central Asians fighting in Syria and Iraq. A number of notorious individuals from Tajikistan have been promoted to key positions in IS. For instance, in September 2016, Gulmurod Khalimov, Tajikistan’s former special operations colonel who defected to IS in May 2015 replaced Abu Omar al-Shishani (killed in July 2016) as the group’s ‘War Minister’. Khalimov’s appointment coincides with the US placing a reward of up to USD 3 million for information leading to him.

Khalimov’s promotion as the key militant commander appears to be a well-crafted strategy by IS. He is not only qualified being a former special operations colonel, but it is also meant to increase recruitment among Russian-speaking individuals, including Tajiks, for its ranks. By appointing a representative of the Russian-speaking contingent, IS is trying to project itself as a “caliphate” that will accommodate people from all nationalities.

In June 2016, Tajikistan’s security loopholes once again came into the spotlight of local and international media when a maximum-security

prison guard was killed in the northern city of Khujand and three high-profile prisoners broke out. Two of them were terrorist convicts with the experience of fighting alongside IS in Iraq and Al Qaeda in the tribal region of Pakistan. The trio were planning to flee to Afghanistan to join IS. However, all three fugitives were eventually arrested or killed.

Al Qaeda Threat

Threat from an Al Qaeda-linked Tajik group, Jamaat Ansarullah (JA/the Assembly of Allah's Soldiers), has been significantly reduced. The group has experienced heavy losses in terms of its leadership, manpower and logistics due to US counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan. In August 2016, an official in Tajikistan's Interior Ministry revealed that Amriddin Tabarov, the founding leader of the group, was killed by the Afghan security forces in Afghanistan in December 2015. JA received training and financial and logistical support from Al Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and carried out a series of terrorist attacks in Tajikistan in 2010.

JA is now attempting to reorganise itself under the Taliban and step up its fight against the Afghan government forces in the northern provinces of Afghanistan. The group has less than 100 militants, and a majority of them are ethnic Tajiks from Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This has serious security concerns for Tajikistan as it shares a 1,344 km-long porous border with Afghanistan that is open to cross-border movements of militants.

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

Fighting terrorism and extremism remains a top national security priority for Tajikistan. From May 2015 to May 2016, Tajik security agencies thwarted at least 50 terrorist plots. The Tajik government is now proposing to adopt a new national counter-terrorism strategy for 2016-2020. The proposed strategy includes the launch of a centralised state body, which will be in charge of coordinating the activities of the country's law enforcement agencies engaged in fighting terrorism.

The Tajik government has also strengthened its counter-terrorism cooperation with countries such as Japan, Russia and the US, as well as international organisations such as the OSCE, UNODC, SCO and INTERPOL. For instance, on

“ The great majority of Uzbek fighters have united under Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB), the most prominent Central Asian militant unit fighting in Syria. ”

9 March 2016, the Japanese government allocated USD 2.26 million to the project of the UNODC that aims to strengthen the capacity of Tajikistan's military and law enforcement agencies responsible for border control.

Looking Ahead

Tajikistan's current counter-terrorism approach relies primarily on law enforcement efforts with little attention given to soft measures. The Tajik government needs to invest in the prevention of radicalisation and countering extremism in order to effectively face the threat in the long run. Schools, mosques and the media are the best platforms to educate and warn the public on the dangers of extremism.

The country also needs to boost security along its borders with Afghanistan to counter the spill-over effect of militant offensives by the Taliban and JA. Any instability or rise in militancy in Afghanistan would spread into Central Asia through the porous borders. Due to its geographical proximity and inadequate protective security measures, Tajikistan will be the first country to be affected by it.

UZBEKISTAN

Al Qaeda Threat

The radicalisation and recruitment of Uzbek citizens by Al Qaeda and IS-linked groups remained a major security concern for the government of Uzbekistan. The great majority of Uzbek fighters have united under Kateebat Imam Al-Bukhari (KIB), the most prominent Central Asian militant unit fighting in Syria. Since its

establishment in 2013, KTB is being led by Salakhuddin Haji Yusuf, whose real name is Akmal Juraboev from Uzbekistan's Namangan province. In October 2014, Salakhuddin claimed that his group was a subsidiary branch of the Taliban in Syria. In July 2016, KIB renewed its pledge of allegiance to the Taliban.

Although KIB has not carried out any attack in Uzbekistan, it recently replaced the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) as a main threat group to the country. In July 2016, KIB announced the establishment of its "wing" in Afghanistan and named "Ustaz Commander Jumabay" as the group's leader. According to KIB, its Afghan wing is operating in the north of the country, adjacent to the borders with Central Asia. On 3 October 2016, Salakhuddin called on his fighters to move to Afghanistan from Syria after gaining fighting experience in the latter. Salakhuddin's appeal coincides with the recent surge in the Taliban's offensive in the northern Afghan provinces, including Jawzjan, Faryab and Kunduz.

KIB's expansion into Afghanistan appears to be a strategic move as it sees Afghanistan as a favourable sanctuary and gateway to conduct military incursions into Central Asia, including Uzbekistan. It is also likely that KIB is attempting to unite dispersed IMU militants under Salakhuddin's authority as the IMU has been inactive for the past several months. Doing so, KIB may overtake IMU's previous position of being a "frontrunner" of Central Asian militancy. The IMU was destroyed and dispersed in different parts of Afghanistan after its leader Usman Ghazi was killed by the Taliban in December 2015 for "betraying" the Taliban by pledging allegiance to IS.

Some Uzbek fighters have also been appointed as battlefield commanders in the ranks of al-Nusra Front. For instance, on 20 June 2016, Abu Bakr al-Uzbeki, a veteran Uzbek jihadist and reportedly a senior commander of al-Nusra Front, was seriously injured and might have been killed in the northern Idlib province of Syria.

Counter-Terrorism Efforts

The Uzbek government is concerned about the deteriorating situation in the northern provinces of Afghanistan due to the increased attacks and militant activities of the Taliban, KIB and JA against the Afghan military and security forces. In response, the government has strengthened border management and control along its borders with Afghanistan. Following the Aktobe attacks, Uzbekistan has tightened up its already strict restrictions on acquiring firearms in hopes of preventing such mass shootings. Citizens are only allowed to obtain hunting and sporting weapons, which are required to be registered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and stored in special, double-locked safes. In order to increase public awareness on the dangers of terrorist propaganda and recruitment, the Uzbek national media has broadcasted several documentaries about the devastating war in Syria and Iraq.

Looking Ahead

With the creation of its wing in the north of Afghanistan, KIB may expand its operations into Central Asia through the country's borders with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In order to get greater recognition from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, KIB may carry out attacks in the region in the short-term future. This would also allow the group to extend its social base among radical elements of the Central Asian populace.

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MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA



- Egypt
- Iraq
- Libya
- Syria
- Turkey
- Yemen



MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

Introduction

2016 was a year of relative success for US-led coalition forces seeking to degrade and destroy Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's terrorist movement and recapture territories which he and his group, pretentiously called the 'Islamic State' (IS), had controlled. The year saw IS declining from its position of relative military and political strength in Iraq, Syria and parts of North Africa. IS lost half its territory in Iraq, including the Sunni strongholds of Ramadi and Fallujah, and is now struggling to maintain its hold of the last major Iraqi city, Mosul, where Baghdadi had announced the resurrection of the so-called caliphate in June 2014.

Similarly, in Syria, IS has lost a quarter of its territory, including key towns such as Manbij, Jarablus and significantly, the town of Dabiq where IS believe the 'crusader armies' would be defeated in an apocalyptic final battle. This trend has been repeated in Libya which has witnessed the elimination of IS' territorial stronghold in Sirte. The group's franchise in Egypt, Wilayat Sinai, is still recovering from vigorous government security actions, while its affiliates in Yemen are still trying to establish themselves amidst competition from other groups including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

The sustained military assaults and airstrikes by US-led coalition forces as well as Russian, Syrian, Kurdish and rebel forces, have been effective in putting IS on the run. The US-led coalition in particular has conducted almost 17,000 air strikes releasing over 60,000 bombs and missiles against IS targets in Iraq and Syria since September 2014 (Airwars 2016). Although IS is putting up fierce resistance in Mosul and its capital Raqqa, analysts expect both to fall in a matter of months.

Besides the crucial loss of 'caliphate' territories which undermines its propaganda slogan of ever "remaining and expanding", and losing more than 25,000 fighters (Withnall 2016), IS also suffers from the loss of top commanders, strategists and leaders. In March 2016, the group's war minister, Omar al-Shishani (aka "Omar the Chechen") was killed in a US-led airstrike (the Guardian 2016). In the same month, US defence officials announced the death of Abd Al-Rahman Al-Qaduli, believed to be IS' senior leader and second in command as well as finance minister (Engel et al. 2016). IS spokesperson and top strategist Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani was also killed in an airstrike in August 2016 (Al-Tamimi 2016). Although IS has downplayed the losses and boasted about more formidable men replacing them, IS leaders are taking no chances; they have adopted elaborate security measures to avoid US drones and surprise attacks. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi for instance is reported to keep shifting his locations quite frequently to avoid detection by aerial surveillance (Nakhoul and Georgy 2016).

The gravity of the situation is reflected in Baghdadi's 32-minute long audio message on 3 November where he appealed to his fighters not to despair and retreat from the frontlines, saying "Holding your ground with honour is a thousand times easier than retreating in shame" and to "beware of any weakness in facing your enemy" (Anon 2016) As the battle intensifies, IS also has to contend with dissensions and infighting, prompting Baghdadi to appeal to them not to be in "disputation and disagreement between

yourselves”, and not to disagree with their leaders (Anon 2016).

Online Presence under Attack

The sustained military offensives against IS on the battlefronts have also begun to affect its presence in cyberspace where it has built up a strong online presence for the propagation of extremist narratives as well as for strategic communications and operations. Apart from Twitter, the group uses YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, and Ask.fm (The National Counterterrorism Center 2016). IS’ adept exploitation of various social media platforms facilitates direct interaction with aspiring jihadists and extremists and distribution of its jihadist propaganda to a wider audience. A study by RAND Corporation found that a supporter of IS produces 50% more tweets per day than non-supporters and non-sympathetic users (Bodine-Baron et al. 2016).

The military onslaught is now replicated in cyberspace. Many of IS dissemination platforms such as jihadist online forums and content websites have been repeatedly brought down (Azman 2016). Pro-IS accounts such as Facebook and Twitter have been continuously suspended and removed. The quantity of IS propaganda output has decreased since December 2015 (Zelin 2015). A recent Combating Terrorism Centre study shows that IS visual media releases have declined from 700 products in August 2015 to less than 200 in August 2016 (Milton 2016). IS glossy propaganda magazine *Dabiq*, which began as a monthly publication in 2014 became a quarterly by 2016 and appears to have ceased production since August (Azman 2016).

Despite various counter-measures, IS still manages to broadcast its propaganda online. It has replaced the quarterly *Dabiq* with a new shorter monthly magazine called *Rumiyah*. Its weekly digest *An-Naba* continues to report significant propaganda news and developments in Iraq, Syria and outside wilayats (provinces). Other outlets like al Furat Media and media offices of its ‘provinces’ also release propaganda news and videos. IS has also replaced its top propagandist al-Adnani with a new spokesperson, Abu Al-Hassan Al-Muhajir, who was quick to echo his predecessor’s statements. In his first speech, Al Muhajir called for increased attacks around the world, particularly on the West and Shiites (Joscelyn 2016).

“ Many of IS attacks were deliberately targeted at sectarian and religious targets ... ”

IS Attacks in the Region and Beyond

IS has compensated its battlefield losses by staging or inspiring terrorist attacks against the West and its supporters, seeking revenge for their bombardment of IS territories and the casualties caused. The attacks were also aimed at diverting attention from its losses as well as to assure IS supporters of its potency, lethality and operational capability, and reaffirming its position as the leading global jihadi movement. Some of the most impactful attacks were executed in the Muslim world such as the January bombing in Libya (Tripoli) that killed over 60 people, the July Baghdad attack that resulted in the deaths of 300 people and the August bombings in Aden (Yemen) that killed 71 soldiers (BBC 2016a; Sims 2016; Middle East Eye 2016). In Turkey, suicide bombers killed 13 people in January and 45 in June in attacks attributed to IS. Even the second holiest city in Islam, Medina (Saudi Arabia) was not spared from suicide bombing (suspected to be IS directed) that killed 4 security officers and injured 5 others in July (Moghul 2016; BBC 2016b).

Many of IS attacks were deliberately targeted at sectarian and religious targets such as the Shias, Druze and Christians, to sharpen conflict as well as to deepen sectarian strife and religious differences and discord. These attacks were best exemplified by the most recent Cairo (Egypt) Coptic Church bombing in December that killed 25 congregants. Others include the Hilla (Iraq) bombing in November that killed more than 100 Shia pilgrims (many of them Iranians), the close to genocidal killing of the Yazidis and many other targeted killings of Druze whom the group has termed as ‘an apostate sect’ (Dabiq 2015; Reuters 2016; Declan 2016; Wintour 2016). By attacking the majority Shias in Iraq, IS seeks to elicit a harsher response from them against the minority Sunnis which would in turn drive more Sunnis to join IS. This was a strategy that IS

founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (killed in 2006) resorted to after the US invasion in 2003 resulting in serious sectarian clashes; the current strategy has been no less successful judging by the brutalities committed by the Shia militia units fighting in Iraq (Amnesty International 2016).

In Europe, IS followed up its attacks on Paris which had killed 130 people in November 2015 with the carnage in Brussels in March 2016, killing 32 and injuring over 300 people. A number of IS-inspired attacks also erupted as seen in the Orlando shooting in the US in June that killed 49 people, and truck assault in Nice (France) in July that killed 86 people. IS claimed responsibility for the attacks to arouse the ire of the local communities and the state against Muslims (Soliev and Siyech 2016). The latest is the truck attack in Berlin in December which killed 12 people and injured 48. As stated succinctly by *Washington Post*, the objective is to spread “fear and chaos in a Western country in the hope of sharpening the divide between Muslims and everyone else”; the *Post* reported that “IS officials have in recent months urged supporters to launch attacks in Germany with the aim of creating an anti-Muslim backlash [as the] resulting crackdown would benefit IS ... by dividing Europeans and driving Muslims into the militants’ corner” (Straits Times 2016).

Al Qaeda Activities in the Region

In comparison to IS, Al Qaeda (AQ) has been comparatively less active in the Middle-East theatre and elsewhere. The group’s current strategy lies in working closely with local affiliates like AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Jabhat al-Nusra or Al Nusra Front (now Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham) in Syria and embedding themselves in the struggle of the local communities and espousing their aspirations. AQ is clearly changing its strategy and image by exploiting local issues, addressing local grievances and providing locals with services ranging from healthcare to social services and education. The group is attempting to win the hearts and minds of the locals and tribesmen and gain their trust and confidence. Basically, AQ hopes to provide a sense of security as well as potential liberation from ‘tyrant’ governments, and social and economic benefits.

In Syria, AQ masked its ideological goals under the pretext of localising the fight in the country against Assad’s regime. The group has managed to garner influence and support from within the

“ ... in Libya, AQ has embedded itself within the political system to gain more political legitimacy. ”

jihadi community and other opposition groups. Its foothold spans across much of the Idlib governorate, Aleppo’s southern countryside, northern Hama and in parts of northern Latakia (Lister 2016). In July 2016, Al Nusra Front changed its name to Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (JFS or Front for the Conquest of the Levant) and declared that they are breaking away from Al Qaeda Central and will henceforth be fighting independently in Syria.

In Yemen, AQ through its franchise, AQAP, adopted a similar strategy; it has been willing to share power with local governing institutions resulting in its rapid expansion across four out of 21 provinces in the country; all provinces are in the south, with Hadramaut being the largest province (Masi 2016). The execution of this strategy was seen when AQAP, after taking over control of the country’s third-largest port city, Al Mukalla, withdrew from the area, and said in a statement that the withdrawal was for the benefit of the populace – to protect them from the consequences of a battle (Finn and Hafez 2016). Such efforts to localise the group’s rhetoric and embed the group within the local population are seemingly effective and have contributed to IS’ consolidation in Yemen.

AQAP is also using different names in Yemen such as Ansar Sharia (Supporters of Islamic Law), Abna’ Hadhramout (Sons of Hadhramout), Abna’ Abyan (Sons of Abyan) as a ‘cover’ for its local activities (Al-Batati 2015). The localisation of AQAP is also manifested in these groups. In this regard, AQAP seeks to obscure its terrorist identity through these alternate groups whilst involving locals to pursue its goal of establishing strict governance based on Sharia Law in Yemen.

Similarly, in Libya, AQ has embedded itself within the political system to gain more political legitimacy. This is done through an alliance with

the Islamist parties in Misrata. In addition, AQ also coalesced with Ansar Al Sharia and the Mujahideen Shura Council in Derna. This resulted in difficulty for government forces to target the group (Joscelyn 2016). Apparently, this strategy has been adopted by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as well. AQIM, which operates largely in Mali, coalesce with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Al Sharia in Tunisia (Joscelyn 2013).

Whether it adopts a strategy of 'localisation' or 'detachment' from its affiliate (as in the case of al Nusra Front) or other forms of subterfuge, AQ poses a serious threat to security and stability. It is a Salafi-jihadist terrorist organisation seeking to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate (similar to IS) in the future by violent jihad which it claims is *fard 'ayn* (a personal religious duty). Its modus operandi includes suicide attacks and coordinated bombings of various targets, killing and injuring large numbers of civilians and wanton destruction of property. It is focussed against the 'far enemy' (principally the US), and eventually wants to 'liberate' 'Muslim lands' by removing 'apostate' rulers and Western influences and backers, and establish Shariah law (Byman and Williams 2015).

As the world witness the losses faced by IS and its possible decline, it is likely that AQ will emerge as a beneficiary, with its strategy of localisation and winning hearts and minds of the Muslim masses; it has refrained from attacking other sects, excommunicating (*takfirism*) Sunni Muslims opposed to AQ, or exhibiting excessive violence (unlike IS with its videotaped beheadings and gruesome executions). AQ may therefore resume its leadership of the global jihadi movement and emerge as the threat that it was before the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. AQ's ventures in Yemen, Libya and Mali among others attests to the effectiveness of its long term strategy. As counter insurgency expert David Galula (1964) states, waging a guerrilla war is easier than holding on to land. With persistent attacks on IS infrastructure throughout its territories, AQ's top command are probably celebrating its decision not to hasten its announcement of its own caliphate.

Other Insurgent Groups: Sources of Instability

Apart from IS and AQ, which are dominating the terrorism landscape, there are several local

“ In Yemen, the Houthis remain the main cause for the country's current descent into another civil war ... ”

actors operating within the respective countries worth mentioning as they determine to some extent the threat level in these countries.

In Syria, there are two important groups, Jaish Al-Fatah (JAF, Army of Conquest), a coalition group consisting of Islamist, Salafist and Salafi-Jihadist groups (France 24 2015) and Ahrar Al-Sham (AAS). JAF is strong and operationally capable as it had previously seized Idlib province from the Syrian government in June 2015 (Rifai 2015). As JAF also coalesced with the terror group, JFS, it highlights the potential of its fighters joining JFS in the future. The group was involved in the battle to defend Aleppo from falling to the Syrian government.

Ahrar Al-Sham (AAS) is another important political and military actor in Syria that possesses goals similar to those of JFS, IS, and JAF. However, the group seeks to separate itself from the Salafi-Jihadism of AQ and IS. AAS asserts that it is simply Salafist and that its military operations are limited to Syria and not elsewhere (El Yassir 2016). The group, which had controlled parts of Aleppo, is estimated to have between 15,000 and 20,000 fighters, which makes it one of the largest armed opposition groups in the country. The bulk of its fighters are Syrian although some are of foreign origin as well (El Yassir 2016).

Overall, the main threat from the groups beyond JFS and IS is their ideology of establishing a radical Islamic utopia, their close relations with terror groups, and the danger of being exposed to radical ideologies and being converted into terrorist groups.

In Yemen, the Houthis remain the main cause for the country's current descent into another civil war and pose a predominant threat to peace and security aside from IS and AQAP. The ability of the Houthis to successfully capture the capital

city is indicative of the operational strength they possess. In light of their control of the capital, the Houthis have also demanded greater political rights and are willing to share power with the government. Due to the series of unsuccessful peace talks, the Houthis and ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh's General Peoples' Congress Party (GPC) signed an agreement (AFP 2016) and formed a 10-member political council to run the country – five members from each side. The effort however, was condemned by the United Nations as it violates the country's constitution (Aljazeera 2016d).

Egypt has experienced the rise of two new groups, namely Hasm (Decisiveness) and Liwaa al-Thawra (the Revolution Brigade). Not much is known about the groups' objectives so far due to their limited activities. Hasm was allegedly responsible for the failed assassination attempts on former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa and a government prosecutor. It has been claimed that the group operated training camps but this remains unverified. As for Liwaa al Thawra, it has claimed responsibility for the daylight killing of a senior military general in Cairo. The group claimed that the attack was in response for the killing of a senior Muslim Brotherhood (MB) member by the military (Mehmoud 2016).

The MB however has denied any links to these groups and has maintained its traditional stance of 'peaceful' struggle despite being designated as a terrorist group by the government. The Egyptian administration blamed MB for the recent bombing of a Coptic church on 11 December, a charge which MB has denied and which IS has claimed responsibility for (Walsh and Youssef 2016). MB is facing its own internal restructuring currently and is unlikely to shift towards violence. The same however cannot be said of any breakaway factions that may want to retaliate against the military's mass repression of MB. This is possible given previous incidents whereby violent splinter groups of MB such as the Revolutionary Punishment and the Popular Resistance Movement attacked government targets after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 (Greene and Mcmannus 2016).

Libya faces other considerable challenges beyond IS and AQ. The Tobruk-based government, the House of Representatives (HoR), refused to endorse the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli. Additionally, the two major military forces which have fought IS so far including the Misratan militia and the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) have previously been at odds with each other. In addition, these entities do not possess a common post-IS plan in terms of governance and economic policies.

This complex situation is further exacerbated as the most powerful and well organised fighting force, the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by an ex-Gaddafi loyalist General Khalifa Heftar, had not been present in the anti-IS offensive. This was because General Heftar, who is under the nominal control of the HoR, is keen on grabbing power for himself rather than being controlled by any government (Bin Hassan and Siyech 2016). Heftar in fact created more chaos when he recently took over oil fields in Tobruk, which weakened the PFG as it was initially guarding the oil fields (Aljazeera 2016a).

Turkey continues to grapple with the Kurds who have been fighting the Turkish government for self-recognition and autonomy for over 40 years. President Erdogan had made some concessions to Kurdish demands since he became PM in 2005. However, a treaty that his government had signed in 2013 with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) unravelled and was formally broken in 2015 (The Economist 2015). Since then Turkey has been in an

escalating conflict with the Kurdish population, arresting many Kurdish citizens and pro-Kurdish lawmakers. The failed coup of July 2016 has given the government more reason to crack down on suspected colluders, which includes journalists, academics and Kurdish politicians (Shaheen 2016).

This clampdown has succeeded in alienating the Kurds and renewing past grievances with the government (Wise 2016). This will hamper peace efforts, embolden extremists and lead to a surge in violence. For instance, the Kurdish Freedom Hawks (TAK), a splinter cell of the PKK has taken responsibility for several attacks over the past year including the recent bombing outside a football stadium in Istanbul that killed 38 people (Aljazeera 2016b); they have warned the government of further attacks in the future (Akkoc 2016).

Conclusion

The civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya along with the instability in Egypt and Turkey have inflicted a heavy toll on the countries and their people. More than half a million people have died, with Syria having the largest casualties numbering up to 400,000 civilian deaths (Aljazeera 2016c); 12 million people are internally displaced (IDMC 2016), and another 10 million have become refugees in various countries. Turkey alone is swamped with about three million people, from mainly Syria, while Europe has to deal with close to 1.5 million refugees (Baral 2016).

The threat of terrorism arising from the MENA region will continue to be of concern to the international community in 2017. The terror attacks in Berlin and Jordan and elsewhere as the year came to a close presages the continuation of more terror attacks in 2017.

Although IS is expected to be defeated in the coming months, it will not be without military capability as seen in its recent capture of Palmyra and strong resistance in Mosul. Nor will IS be without other options. Local IS fighters may melt into the civilian population and be part of an insurgent force. IS is likely to escalate its acts of terrorism, mounting attacks against government forces and seeking to spark off sectarian conflict by attacking Shia civilians and mosques. Many foreign IS fighters may return to their countries of origins or to more 'hospitable' wilayats like Yemen, Sinai, the Khorasan and Mindanao (Philippines) where their presence will heighten the threat levels for these countries and their neighbours.

IS will also step up their propaganda war online, seek new converts, and instigate terror attacks against the West as well as Shiites and 'apostate' Muslims. In short, the terrorist threat will persist in the following year and countries facing this threat will need to devise effective counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and counter-violent extremism measures. It is also imperative that concrete action is taken to address the 'root causes' contributing to extremism and terrorism (such as misgovernance, unemployment, corruption and repression) in the Middle East.

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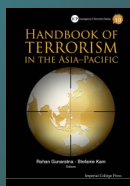
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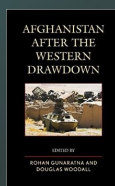


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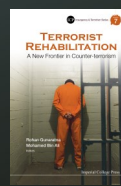
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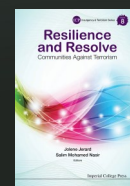
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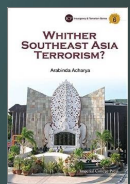
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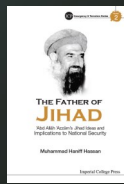
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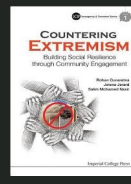
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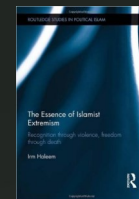
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