Faint Signals and a New Form of Jihadism: Host Community- Supported Jihadism

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A NEW FORM of jihadism could be emerging in many parts of the world, with the leading examples being seen in Asia. It is an evolutionary type of organization which is growing out of the necessity to maintain some form of structure in a physical space while at the same time attempting to evade detection and disruption. If this trend continues, we believe that it will require a major rethink of how jihadist structures are organized. It may also affect the patterns of terrorist attacks in future.

Host Community-Supported Jihadism

One of the most significant and previously unreported phenomena is what we refer to as the host community-supported jihadism. This trend stands in contrast to the formally structured groups such as Al Qaeda or Jemaah Islamiyah, or the very loose structure and organisation of homegrown jihadism. As noted elsewhere, it is difficult for a terrorist group to exist and operate in a physical space. There are few, if any, nations willing to openly support such groups. But contrary to Mustafa Al-Suri's doctrine of *nizam la tanzim* (system, not organization) or the concept of leaderless resistance that was espoused by the extreme right wing militia movements in the United States, it is highly unlikely that a group or a network that exists in virtual space alone can have a strategic impact.

This creates the ultimate conundrum for a terrorist group that wants to have a transnational strategic impact. Inevitably, a group that wants to launch a major attack needs to have a variety of specialist skills. This was the case for the 9/11 attacks or the 1998 Embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya. These skills include planning, logistics, finances, transportation, weapons making, and surveillance. This would imply that the group must have some sort of formal structure and organization and it must exist, at various points, in a physical space.

The group or the network, however, could compensate the requirements of structural organization by galvanizing the support of a well-integrated and long standing host community. Signs of such a trend are rapidly emerging and developing in countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It may be spreading to Europe and beyond. The host communities comprise elements deeply agitated by the concepts of the global jihadi movement. As such, they have a transnational consciousness and do not necessarily associate with the state they live in despite the fact that earlier generations have lived and associated well there for hundreds of years or more. Interestingly however, while these communities subscribe to the concept of global jihad, they are acting out their grievances at the local or national level. Unlike some of the homegrown jihadists, they are not the product of failed integration. The members of the host communities are integral parts of the countries to which they belong.

The Case of India

Consider the case of India. With a population of more than 140 million Muslims, India has the third largest Muslim community in the world, after Indonesia and Pakistan. There has been a long history of mainly peaceful co-existence with the Hindu majority. An array of constitutional and statutory safeguards, as well as an enabling social environment, provides the avenues for the Muslims in India to be an integral part of the country.

This led to the perception that the well-integrated Muslim population in India was not prone to radicalism or political violence and had spurned the militant revivalist movements plaguing other countries. Paradoxically, even though the groups fighting for the liberation of Kashmir were the largest beneficiaries of the induction of Al Qaeda-trained mujahideen from Afghanistan, there was no manifest desire on the part of these groups to integrate their struggle with the global jihad. In Al Qaeda organization, there was only one Indian in a senior or leadership position. This was Dhiren Bharot, also known as Isa al- Hindi or as Isa al-Britani - a Hindu convert from the state of Gujarat.

There are indications that the seemingly integrated larger Muslim population in India is increasingly involved in Muslim grievances worldwide. Mainstream Muslims, especially those in the countryside who previously kept themselves away from the global Islamist agenda are now getting increasingly sensitized about global incidents such as the war in Iraq and the fighting in the Palestinian territories. There is evidence of increasing jihadist penetration as well, as seen in the April 2006 message from Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Describing Kashmir's struggle as a "reaction against Zionist-Hindu war against Muslims", bin Laden called upon Muslims in general and militant outfits with stakes in the Kashmir dispute in particular, to fight the Indian state.

The Case of Indonesia

Another example is Indonesia. Barring a miniscule number belonging to the core group of Jemaah Islamiyah, Muslims in Indonesia have projected a moderate face of Islam. However, a more violent tinge in Muslim psyche is getting increasingly discernible. Interestingly however, the focus of this radicalization is domestic grievances even as much of the rhetoric is international. These groups are also making use of natural disasters and other national tragedies to make a case that Indonesia needs to be ruled by Shariah law as a solution to its never-ending problems. It is too early to tell clearly, but many of the same areas of Indonesia that produced violence during the Communist insurgency now appear to be producing a higher degree of political extremism associated to the jihadist ideology.

Similarly Pakistan appears to be trapped in a cycle of extremism and sectarian violence. In the tribal areas for example, the social system based on family values are being replaced by the edicts of hard-line political extremism with religious overtones. This has been at the root of erosion of the authority of the tribal elders, who are being overwhelmed by radical clerics. One of the symptoms is the increasing sectarian violence in many parts of Pakistan. Though the sectarian violence is not new to Pakistan, there are now signs that outsiders are getting increasingly involved to create a civil war-like situation similar to what is happening in Iraq.

Shifting Trends

These trends suggest another generational shift in the global jihadist movement. The hitherto secular and integral Muslim communities are now being used as hosts by the jihadists for their operations involving recruitment, training and other logistical support. Basing in a

physical space is a necessity – notwithstanding the virtual opportunities that the Internet and technology provide.

From an analytical and intelligence perspective it is important to note that the host communities are not bringing jihadist groups together in a physical space like they did in Afghanistan or Sudan. Rather these communities are providing an operational base -- bringing them together in a series of nodes, which are connected, through the Internet and other means of communication. This involves travel, including circuitous routes to training and planning activities that run through countries as diverse as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Iran for example.

The jihadists appear to have learned the lesson that dense networks are easier to attack. A more decentralized network spread out over a large area, with a core community support, appears to be the jihadist strategy for survival and the maintenance of a more robust operational capability.

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