RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 088/2013 dated 7 May 2013

From Global to Micro Jihad:
Three Trends of Grassroots Terrorism

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Synopsis

Three strategic trends- operational, ideological and technological-underlie the continued metastasis of the extremist ideology of Al Qaedaism. It will evolve further away from the original emphasis on centralised global jihad to a more decentralised micro jihad, which will take the form of grassroots-level small cell and lone wolf terrorism.

Commentary

METASTASIS, in the medical world, is the process by which a cancerous tumor spreads through the bloodstream to distant parts of the body from the original site of occurrence. In similar fashion, as argued by some terrorism scholars, the extremist ideology of Al Qaedaism, a "tumor" or "mutation" of non-violent political Islam, has likewise metastasized. That is, thanks to the cyber bloodstream of the Internet, the stock "Al Qaeda Central" narrative of a US-led international conspiracy against the Muslim world has diffused worldwide from its original locus in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) border region.

In this respect, three mutually reinforcing strategic trends can be discerned. These point to the continuing transformation of the original centralised global jihad vision of the founding Al Qaeda leadership into a much more decentralised, harder-to-detect, grassroots-driven *micro jihad*. These trends are operational, ideological and technological.

Operational Trends

Operationally, intensified law enforcement and military action against centralised extremist Islamist networks such as Al Qaeda Central in the AfPak region and its affiliates in Southeast Asia such as Jemaah Islamiyah have been very successful in disrupting their organisational cohesion and operations. More than a decade after the September 11 attacks, security and intelligence agencies worldwide have co-operated to develop generally effective legal, financial, administrative and coercive countermeasures to detect and thwart operations conceived and implemented by organised terrorist networks. This has made it far more difficult for surviving Al Qaeda Central leaders to plan and mount spectacular September 11-type operations.

On the one hand, forced operational decentralisation due to the hostile security environment post-9/11 has seen the emergence of regional Al Qaeda hubs such as in the Arabian peninsula, North Africa and Iraq. More significantly, Al Qaeda Central has also had to devolve operational planning for future attacks to harder-to-

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detect smaller cells and individuals scattered throughout the globe. To be sure, Al Qaeda Central still played a role in training some cells and individuals who were later involved in so-called homegrown plots such as the July 2005 London bombings and thwarted bomb attacks in New York City. The important point however is that apart from the occasional training and moral inspiration provided by Al Qaeda Central, such homegrown plots were not centrally planned and directed, but were largely developed by the local cells themselves.

Ideological Trends

Complementing the trend toward operational decentralisation have been ideological developments. In the past decade the Syrian Al Qaedaist ideologue Abu Musab Al-Suri published his well-known tract *The Call for Global Islamic Resistance*. Al-Suri argued against reliance on centralised direction from the core Al Qaeda leadership. He was instead in favour of action by independent small cells acting on their own initiative to exploit local opportunities to strike at enemies of the Muslim world wherever they were to be found. Al-Suri's tract found ready audiences worldwide, including in Southeast Asia, where his work was translated into Bahasa Indonesia and has had a discernible impact on the evolution of the micro jihad in that country.

Complementing the ideological emphasis on "small is better" has been the call for lone wolf action by organs such as the online English magazine *Inspire*, the brainchild of the late "bin Laden of the Internet," Anwar Al-Awlaki, who was the chief ideologue for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen. The ideological focus on lone wolf action has been effective - Major Nidal Hassan, who killed US servicemen at Fort Hood in Texas in November 2009, as well as the Tsarnaev brothers who perpetrated the bombings at last month's Boston marathon, were prime examples of individuals who took to heart the stock Awlaki injunction to think globally but act locally. Taken together, the ideological buttressing of small-cell and lone wolf micro jihad, has reinforced the trend toward grassroots-driven terrorism.

Technological Trends

It is however the third strategic trend of rapid technological innovation that best illumines the past and future evolutionary pathway of micro jihad. Central to this trend is the Internet. Both operational decentralisation of terrorist planning and action, as well as the ideological emphasis on small-cell and lone-wolf activity, rely on the Internet and social networking to function effectively. Nidal Hassan's email correspondence with Awlaki was crucial in his radicalisation process, while the Tsarnaev brothers apparently learned about the pressure cooker bombs they used from the AQAP *Inspire* magazine online. Ominously, Indonesian militants have also translated into *Bahasa Indonesia* the very same online *Inspire* edition on bomb making that the Tsarnaevs were said to have used. Moreover the increasing availability of cheap smartphones with highly affordable Internet broadband access mean that at-risk individuals globally can surf extremist websites without having to be bound to a desk – and having their surfing patterns detected.

Finally, a recent technological development is worth flagging: the rapid rise of 3-D printing. This is an additive manufacturing process in which a computer-controlled printer is employed to manufacture consumer items such as shoes, jewellery as well as industrial equipment. The idea behind consumer 3-D printing is straightforward: as the printers become cheaper, instead of buying goods from shops, people will instead simply download designs and print out the items at home. The problem is that 3-D printing can also enable manufacture of weapons or weapon parts in their homes as well. Just this week a US group called Defense Distributed, led by a self-styled crypto-anarchist law student at the University of Texas, successfully test-fired a plastic gun manufactured by a 3-D printer bought for US$8000 from the online auction site Ebay. The group even plans to make the blueprint for the plastic gun available online.

One US Congressman, Steve Israel has warned that once the technology improves and costs begin to fall, 3-D-printed weapons and parts could well fall into the hands of lone wolves. Technological analysts such as Sebastian Anthony point out that at the moment consumer 3-D printing works most effectively with plastic materials. It is when metal 3-D printing becomes more feasible and cost-effective, though, that he warns that: "the world will really change."

It cannot be overstated that the strategic confluence of these three historic trends - the operational, ideological and technological- points clearly to the continuing metastasis of the tumor of Al Qaedaism and the decisive shift towards grassroots-driven micro jihad. Effectively coping with this emerging, complex phenomenon demands that a stove-piped approach to national security be discarded as obsolete and even hazardous. Instead, the only way forward is to create a vibrant community of practice effectively bringing together local and international multi-disciplinary expertise, encompassing law enforcement and homeland security professionals, public and private sector technologists and academics.

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