Terrorist Threat Assessment for 2019

By Rohan Gunaratna

SYNOPSIS

The global terrorist and extremist threat is likely to persist in 2019 as the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group goes through a phase of re-adaptation and de-centralisation. This threat will remain given the global failure to resolve the underlying causes of extremism and terrorism.

COMMENTARY

THE SELF-STYLED Islamic State (IS) continues to present an enduring threat worldwide despite the territorial losses it has suffered. The group has established clandestine and underground structures to survive in Iraq and Syria. Its ideology is still intact and continues to be propagated in cyber space. In the provinces, groups, networks and cells which have pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, are radicalising Muslims and conducting attacks.

Although the apex of IS leadership and many of the directing figures are on the run and likely to be eliminated in 2019, the penultimate leadership enabling the fight and supporting the infrastructure will continue to operate in the shadows as they become agile and more cunning. The IS and Al Qaeda-centric threats are likely to remain given the lack of an effective global counter terrorism plan and strategy, the continuance of superpower and geopolitical rivalry, and the failure to resolve the underlying causes of extremism and terrorism.

Three Major Developments

The global threat landscape in 2019 will be dominated by three major developments.

First, the IS is entering a new phase in global expansion. With the depletion of its rank and file in Iraq and Syria from about 60,000 to 5000-6000 combat fighters, the IS

territorial control in its main theatre has shrunk to 1%, east of the Euphrates River. In any case, outside of the physical "caliphate", the groups, networks, cells, and personalities loyal to Baghdadi are growing in their ideological and operational spaces.

These local entities are reinforced by IS virtual caliphate and emboldened by the dozens of IS affiliates and franchises known as wilayats or the external provinces of the caliphate. Driving the globalisation of IS is the media operations and battle-hardened Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) returning home armed with Jihadi ideology, active combat exposure, expertise in explosive-handling and links with underground networks.

Worldwide government counter-terrorism databases today list about 40,000 IS personalities in 102 countries operating in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and North America. Presenting a pre-eminent threat, IS and al Qaeda will continue to mount most attacks in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Similarly, radicalised personalities and cells of diaspora and migrant communities will strike in North America, Europe and Australasia.

Second, Afghanistan is emerging as an alternative theatre for foreign and local fighters in 2019. With the disruption in the flow of fighters to Syria and Iraq, and the dispersal of fighters from the IS core to the periphery, multiple centres of terrorism and extremism are emerging in the Middle East (Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt), Africa (West Africa, East Africa), Western Balkans, Caucasus and Asia.

Afghanistan a New Epicentre?

However, the IS theatre is more pronounced in the Af-Pak region with the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) threatening the Afghan Taliban, the Afghan government, and Pakistan. In addition to the impact on Central Asia, the threat is moving from tribal Pakistan to mainland Pakistan, Indian-held Kashmir, Xinjiang in western China and Iran.

The intermittent terrorist attacks in Kashmir, Xinjiang and Iran are likely to continue. Given the ongoing geopolitical rivalry, the flow of weapons and finance to, and the training acquired by the Afghan Taliban and ISK, Afghanistan is turning into a new epicentre of regional and global terrorism. Between December 2017 and March 2018, as many as 69 members of IS core, and between 200 to 300 fighters from Iraq and Syria have relocated to Afghanistan and this trend is likely to continue through 2019 as well.

Third, with the rise of ultra-nationalism, ideologies have come to the forefront. Communities based on ethnicity and religion are becoming more polarised, therefore making their peripheries vulnerable to hatred. It is not only the jihadists but political parties, threat groups, and personalities driven by extreme interpretations of their respective religions that threaten their opponents, communities and governments.

The intermittent communal clashes, riots and attacks in India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka demonstrate how Hinduism and Buddhism have been exploited by religious and political leaders and groups. Additionally, Islamophobia continues to rise in the West and even in countries with Muslim majority and minority populations. Similarly, Sunni-

Shia relations are further strained especially with the growing anti-Iran and anti-Shia rhetoric in the Middle East and other parts of the Muslim world.

While conflict between the Houthis and Saudi-led coalition in Yemen is likely to be mediated in 2019, it is likely that reciprocal intolerance, exclusivism, extremism and terrorism in both physical and virtual spaces will affect global peace and security. It is therefore crucial that world leaders make a concerted effort to unite divided communities.

US Troop Withdrawal and Its Impact

The recently announced withdrawal of 2,000 American troops from Syria and the possible drawdown of 7,000 troops (out of 14,000) from Afghanistan have been compared to past US military withdrawals that were exploited by terrorists. The IS had capitalised on the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 to expand its presence and influence in the Levant.

Likewise, terrorists and insurgents benefitted from the drawdowns of US troops in Afghanistan. Adequate security preparations will therefore be necessary to prevent terrorists from gaining any advantage from troop withdrawals or drawdowns.

Muslim insurgent and terrorist groups will dominate the threat landscape and mount attacks worldwide both in the battlefields and off the battlefields. The geography of the global terrorism map will not change dramatically with Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, India and Libya being the most violent theatres of conflict.

Due to inter-state rivalries, the threat will persist and even grow. Similarly, the ultra-nationalistic rhetoric by politicians will polarise communities making some vulnerable to greater radicalisation and violence.

The centre of gravity of IS will be its wilayats and the fragmented cyber caliphate, the IS cyber wing is re-emerging regionally. Despite government and technology firms working closely with each other, IS' virtual presence will endure and grow, compensating for the lack of presence and operations in the physical space. A decentralised IS will present a far greater threat than a centralised IS.

The group's operatives and supporters will continue to mount attacks and attempt to radicalise Muslim communities worldwide. Counter-terrorism efforts must therefore continue to include not only effective kinetic measures and P/CVE programs, but also a determined political effort to resolve underlying causes of extremism and terrorism.

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