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Crowdsourcing Local Attacks: ISIS Expands its Radical Reach

By Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff

Synopsis

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has taken to crowdsourcing local attacks to make up for its losses in the Middle East. This has become a major plank of the group's strategy to expand its radical reach and inflict global violence.

Commentary

ISIS WITH a self-styled caliph has been hierarchical in its internal command within Iraq and Syria, and the management of its wilayats (provinces). The group has a rank-and-file structure that directly oversees its members' activities. Yet somewhat paradoxically, it crowdsources for lone wolves to partake in violence in its name. Indeed its hierarchical approach and crowdsourcing endeavours are complementary. The weakening of its central command in the face of attacks will see a strengthening of its crowdsourcing strategy.

Crowdsourcing as a strategy fits well with the group's current objective. It can rely heavily on ISIS' transnational support network to obtain its needed service to inflict terror. Moreover, this mode of sourcing allows ISIS to divide the work between numerous participants to achieve an impactful cumulative result. The group can easily exploit its network by crowdsourcing from these radical milieus - those who share their perspective and objectives, who approve of certain forms of violence, and who (at least to a certain extent) support the violent group morally and logistically - to pursue its agenda.

ISIS' Framework of Offence

In an article from the January issue of *Rumiyah*, the ISIS magazine, the group

instructs its audiences the specific details of carrying out an attack. This includes how to leave evidence at the scene so that ISIS can claim responsibility. Apart from military-grade weapons, ISIS additionally promotes the use of light weapons such as knives in conducting terror acts. This makes weaponisation easy for its crowd-sourced “terror activists”.

Following the group’s losses in recent months, it is not surprising to see how ISIS has changed its strategy to stay relevant. ISIS’ adoption of crowdsourcing will inevitably strengthen the reputation of the group for being the dominant terror organisation on the international stage. The crowdsourcing strategy can also be proven effective because its members are no longer restricted geographically, and can execute attacks far beyond the physical radius of ISIS central. After all, ISIS’ targets, choices of weapons and radical milieus are ubiquitous. It is only a matter of time before an attack could happen that consequently will be claimed by ISIS.

ISIS’ conventional strategy is to promote the use of asymmetrical and guerrilla tactics in conducting terror attacks. *Rumiyah* not only echoes the same tactics, but also introduces the element of crowdsourcing terror in these tactics. The magazine teaches its supporters how to communicate with the group to claim responsibility after attacks have been conducted, especially if the attack is not ordered directly by the group. An example would be to place a symbol related to the group – like the ISIS flag – at the scene of the attack. In this way, ISIS easily gains and maintains its terror name through its crowd-sourced supporters.

Nature of ISIS’ Targets

ISIS has explicitly declared and widely publicised their targets through their propaganda. Analyses of ISIS’ numerous publications (*Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *An-Naba’*) and the group’s patterns in claiming responsibility for terror attacks show that four main points underpin what ISIS is essentially about:

- *Religious intolerance*. This manifests in attacks on religious shrines, places of worships, as well as places that are against the ISIS brand of religious values.
- *Sectarian discrimination*. ISIS espouses sectarian animosity among the Muslim and other communities. The group aims for a hegemonic presence, triumphing over other religious sects and communities.
- *Anti-West*. ISIS often blames the Euro-American power for the decline of Islam’s political position especially since the defeat of the Ottoman empire. This rhetoric is then compounded by its aversion to Western participation in any war in Middle-Eastern countries.
- *“Taghut” (transgressor) governments*. ISIS vilifies any government who are against them, and those who do not observe Islamic law according to the ISIS way. ISIS propagates the perspective of being victimised by these governments for obstructing its goal of erecting an Islamic Caliphate.

These four themes work collectively to imbue its audience with a clear order of ISIS’

targets. It is ominous that these targets are spread out and easily accessible in countries all over the world.

Implications of Crowdsourcing Terror

Countering ISIS is becoming more challenging. Its crowdsourcing strategy is blurring the lines between “lone wolves” terror acts and collective violence. The perpetrator is also not strictly bound by instructions from ISIS. Crowdsourcing of radicalism also accelerates the process of turning radicals into terrorists. ISIS members are no longer required to be attached to ISIS wilayats (provinces) or be present in Iraq and Syria.

Moreover, the association to the group through Bai’ah (pledging of allegiance) can also be done online. These easily manoeuvre around the tight security implementations by governments. They also highlight an emerging phenomenon where any ISIS supporter can conduct attacks anywhere and anytime without direct instructions or communications. Consequently, these will also increase ISIS’ recruitment rate.

Weaponisation of ISIS radical milieus is also becoming easier following ISIS’ numerous propaganda on self-made weapons – or any lethal weapons for that matter. The group’s current campaign of knife attacks facilitates the mobilisation of its crowd-sourced “terror activists” to strike. With this crowdsourcing strategy, radical milieus are more easily linked to the ISIS identity.

Going Forward

With the advent of ISIS crowdsourcing, countering ISIS will be an arduous task. ISIS is in dire need of support and manpower following its significant loss in and outside of Iraq and Syria. Policymakers thus need to discern any hint of changes in the group’s movement and strategy. Especially for the Southeast Asian region, the multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies are central to the ISIS’ framework of offence. Steps to preserve these societies’ social fabric are critical now that ISIS is expanding its radical milieus and tapping within them.

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