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Forecast 2016:
IS as a Networked Globalised Threat

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Global terrorism will continue to pose the pre-eminent national security threat to the world in 2016. The most severe and imminent will come from Al Qaeda led by Dr Ayman Al Zawahiri, and Islamic State (IS) led by Dr Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Its ideological and operational dimensions present a formidable challenge to both social stability and security of states.

Commentary

WITH THE rise of Islamic State in June 2014, the world faced an unprecedented and an ever-expanding global threat. Throughout 2015, IS operational capabilities and influence spread worldwide from its epicentre in Iraq and Syria. In 2016, IS is likely to expand its reach to Africa and Asia creating satellite provinces of the Caliphate known as wilayats. These provinces will seek to implement the IS rule of beheadings, mass executions, destruction of historical sites, and pillaging the world witnessed in Iraq and Syria.

In 2016, IS will inspire, instigate and direct attacks in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. In battlefields, IS will hit hardened targets and off the battlefields, IS will hit soft targets. To exercise and expand control in Muslim lands, IS will collaborate with local groups and individuals to hit Shia and Sunni coalition targets. IS will seek to strike targets outside the core area in the new year. Most governments are in denial of the IS threat, unprepared or underprepared to deal with the looming threat.

The IS-centric threat landscape

A new global terrorist threat landscape will emerge in 2016. The Al Qaeda-centric

threat landscape is being supplanted by an IS-centric threat landscape. IS rival Al Qaeda has not disappeared off the global terrorism screen, but it has diminished in size, strength and influence. Ideologically both groups are similar but IS is more brutal and barbaric especially against fellow Muslims who have resisted it, thus turning most Muslims and their governments against IS.

IS is likely to grow despite military, diplomatic, political, economic and information operations against it by coalitions led by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Russia. The sectarian and geopolitical rivalry between Saudi-Iranian and US-Russia coalitions in Syria created the opportunities for the rise of IS. While the West, with Turkey and Sunni states oppose the Assad regime, Russia, Iran, and Shia-dominated Iraq and Lebanon support the regime.

Ideology, legacy, and politics preclude a victory against IS and compound the threat. After losing their wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, western nations are reluctant to deploy ground troops. Despite the looming threat, IS cruelty and terrifying threats have deterred Arab countries from fielding ground troops. Except the weakened Syrian and Iraqi armies, the only ground forces effectively fighting IS are the Shia militia, Kurdish and Turkmen fighters.

Understanding IS strategy

Today, IS is a global movement of hundreds of thousand of followers and supporters, with an estimated 80,000 in the eight branches in the principal theatre. According to western security and intelligence estimates IS grew from 30,000 in 2014 to 50,000 fighters in the core area of Iraq and Syria in 2015. With IS declaration of new provinces, the number of branches will increase and membership will grow in 2016.

After reclaiming territory and proclaiming the Caliphate, the IS strategy is to govern the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria with strict Shariah law and expand in Muslim territories from Morocco to the Philippines. IS declared branches after it accepted the pledges of allegiance from local groups. With over 30 groups pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in Africa and Asia, IS is likely to accept and declare more branches in North Africa and Southeast Asia in 2016.

Today, IS HQ in Al Raqqah support eight IS branches. Of the IS branches, Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya (North Africa) is the strongest with 9000 members while IS Wilayat al-Haramayn (Saudi Arabia) is about 100 members. Between November 2014 and September 2015, the UK authorities recorded IS having staged 270 attacks. Of these 117 were in West Africa, 47 in Libya, 58 in Sinai, 28 in Yemen, six in Saudi Arabia, one in the Caucasus, eight in Khorasan and five in Algeria. IS iconography spread both in the virtual and real world creating pockets of self radicalised and militarised supporters worldwide.

IS strategy is to firstly, establish control of territory and administer the caliphate; secondly, expand the Caliphate into liberated areas; and thirdly, exploit and destabilise areas. By establishing the caliphate concept, IS is promoting the idea to generate more resources including manpower. By either undermining competing

groups and co-opting like-minded others, IS is creating support, resources and capability for future expansion.

IS co-opted likeminded groups and inspired individuals to attack both coalition and domestic targets. With challenges to foreign recruits travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the Caliphate, IS strategy in 2016 will be both vertical and horizontal from building the caliphate in Syria and Iraq to global expansion.

Response

National security agencies in partnership with law enforcement authorities and military forces should map the threat in the immediate (1-2 years); mid (2-5 years) and long term (5-10 years); craft national, regional and global strategies; and guide governments on how to fight the threat. Today, to protect their own countries, security and intelligence services are overstretched: they are diverting a bulk of their resources to preventing attacks.

The United Kingdom's Security Service Director-General Sir Andrew Parker said on 28 October 2015 that in the past 12 months, Britain had thwarted six plots in the UK and seven plots overseas. The heightened threat led to one fifth of MI5's 4000 strong staff focused on preventing attacks. Although the mandate of internal services has been traditionally limited to operating on domestic soil, it is essential for all services to function worldwide to counter the networked and globalised threat. Most affected nations doubled the numerical staff strength of their services to fight Al Qaeda after 9/11.

Considering the trajectory of the growth of IS and its influence in 2015, concerned nations should double their existing budgets in 2016 and increase the strengths of counterterrorism officers in the next decade. In preparation for a long war, governments should create counter terrorism divisions in their foreign ministries and justice departments.

While national security agencies should be in the forefront of the initiatives to fight the threat, governments should strengthen government-community partnerships to protect communities and build public-private sector partnerships to protect infrastructure as well.

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