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The Global Terrorist Threat: Set to Grow in 2014

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

The past year has been the most violent since the beginning of the current wave of terrorism. Al Qaeda, though truncated, has become more influential globally via the web, guiding its associates to strike official and civilian targets. With the western withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 the Taliban-led terrorist sanctuary is likely to be revived to threaten stability and security worldwide.

Commentary

SINCE September 11, 2001 the global terrorist threat has been growing exponentially. According to START, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, there were 5,100 terrorist attacks in the first six months of 2013, following the 8,400 attacks in 2012, which killed nearly 15,400 people. "The wave of violence shows few signs of ebbing," reported the US-based START.

The western kinetic operations have failed to reduce the global threat. Indeed, the threat of international and national terrorism is projected to grow in 2014. With half of the countries in the world suffering from political violence and ideological extremism, terrorism will remain the Tier-One national security threat to the stability of most countries.

Hubs of global terrorism

Afghanistan and Syria are emerging as the two most important hubs of global terrorism that threaten the security of South Asia, West Asia and North Africa. Just as the anti-Soviet multi-national Afghan mujahidin campaign formed the foundation of contemporary terrorism, the blowback from the civil war in Syria is likely to produce the next generation of fighters – both guerrillas who attack government forces and terrorists who attack civilians.

The conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as India, are the most violent in South Asia. Next are the Middle East: Syria and Iraq; and Africa: Nigeria and Somalia. Since 9/11 over a million people, combatants and non-combatants, have been killed or injured, mostly Muslims, by terrorists and US-led coalition forces fighting insurgents and terrorists. According to START, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan suffered more than half of the 2012 attacks (54%) and fatalities (58%). The next five most targeted countries were India, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen and Thailand. The threat is projected to escalate in 2014 and grow even further following the US-led coalition's withdrawal from Afghanistan at year end.

Counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism efforts since 9/11 have had mixed results. Al Qaeda has weakened but the Al Qaeda family has grown in strength, size and influence. About 30-40 threat groups in Asia, Africa, Middle East and the Caucasus are emulating the Al Qaeda ideology of global violence and methodology of suicide attacks.

While the core Al Qaeda led by Dr Ayman al Zawahiri has transformed from an operational to an ideological and training organisation, the associate groups carry out the bulk of the attacks. Although the death of Osama bin Laden demonstrated that any terrorist can be hunted down, the death of the Al Qaeda leader did not reduce the growing threat.

Threat landscape

The deadliest terrorist groups in the world belong to the Al Qaeda family with the Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistan) heading the list. Others are Al Nusra Front in Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Al Shabaab in Somalia. The Al Qaeda ability to influence associate groups was brought to international attention by the brutal attack on the Westgate Mall in Kenya by Al Shabaab. With the decentralisation of the threat Northern Africa is emerging as a new epicentre of terrorism and extremism.

The “Arab Spring” has become a nightmare with multiple Al Qaeda-linked groups emerging throughout North Africa and the Middle East, including Al Nusra in Syria. With 12,000 Sunni and a comparable number of Shia foreign fighters in Syria the threat to the West and the rest of the world will grow.

Stemming from the developments in Syria, the Shia-Sunni conflict is threatening to break out into a regional conflict, involving Bahrain and Lebanon. Further afield in the Caucasus terrorists mounted year-end attacks in Volgograd, Southern Russia, hitting a railway station and a trolley bus. *Shumukh al-Islam*, the top forum for Al Qaeda-affiliated propaganda, praised the timing of the attacks. The *SITE* Monitoring Service reported the terrorists as saying Russians are not safe “since their country continues to supply arms to the malicious combatant regime of the doomed apostate Bashar”. From the Caucasus the terrorists are travelling through Turkey to Syria to fight against the Bashar al Assad regime.

Rise of violence in Asia

The South Asian sub-continent has been most violent in the past decade. In India ethno-political insurgencies and Muslim terrorists kill both Indians and foreigners. Although Sri Lanka experienced no revival of terrorism since the Tamil Tigers were dismantled in May 2009, the terrorists are reorganising in Tamil Nadu in South India. In Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives a wave of communal or religious extremism affected Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

Afghanistan has suffered increased insurgent attacks, mostly in the south and east, where US and ISAF forces have withdrawn from many bases, remaining in only a few cities. Taliban spokesmen claim the pull out was the result of strikes by the fighters while civilians’ support for the fighters enabled them to succeed in taking control of most areas of one province. Of the 7141 attacks in Afghanistan in 2013, 63 were suicide attacks and 27 were insider attacks. While 2730 Afghan security personnel were killed and 5169 injured, 2168 guerillas and terrorists were killed, according to the Afghan ministry of interior.

In Southeast Asia, Southern Thailand remains the cockpit of conflict. The threat in Indonesia remains significant with about a dozen threat groups operationally or ideologically affiliated with Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Although the peace process in the Philippines has stabilised the south, the threat from the Abu Sayyaf Group and the New People’s Army, a leftist terrorist group, is still significant.

The developments in Afghanistan also spilled over to Northeast Asia. The most violent group in China, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) is collaborating with the Al Qaeda family of threat groups such as the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, Islamic Jihad Union, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus and more recently the Al Nusra Front in Syria. ETIM, a medium-sized threat group of less than 100 fighters, has attacked not only the Chinese government and society, but also the security forces of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Syria.

While ETIM’s aim is to create an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang, it also collaborates with like-minded threat groups that seek to create a global Islamic caliphate. In 2013 ETIM conducted or inspired over 200 attacks in Xinjiang in northwest China, as well as mounting a vehicular attack in Beijing’s Tienanmen Square last October.

In the coming decades, in parallel to developing tactical counter-terrorism capabilities, governments should

build strategic capabilities to erode their support bases. The new frontiers in counter-terrorism and extremism such as community engagement and rehabilitation should be considered. Government and community leaders should develop a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. Unless governments take the lead and work with community leaders, societies will be threatened by the existing and emerging wave of ideologically-motivated violence.

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