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THE INTERNET AND DO-IT-YOURSELF JIHADISM Much Less Than Meets The Eye?

*Bernard Fook Weng Loo**

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THE RECENT cases of car bombs in the United Kingdom, two found in London before detonation and a third used to attack Glasgow Airport, appears to have forced security specialists to review the phenomenon of car bombs, itself not uncommon in recent human history. This episode has also given rise to speculations about the emergence of so-called do-it-yourself terrorism, of home-grown and amateur terrorists resorting to technologically simpler methods of conducting attacks.

Assessing the Phenomenon

The London and Glasgow cases really throw up two issues in the campaign against terrorist organisations. The first is the use of such technologically unsophisticated methods as car bombs. Accepting that this episode is an al Qaeda-inspired or motivated phenomenon, it is important to compare the tactic of car bombing this time to previous tactics elsewhere, perpetrated by other al Qaeda-inspired episodes of terrorist attacks. It seems clear that car bombing is indeed a less sophisticated tactic than previous terrorist attacks perpetrated by al Qaeda or its acolyte organisations.

Accepting that the recent London and Glasgow incidents reflect a less technologically sophisticated attempt at terrorist action, this highlights the second issue – the real cause for concern – brought out by this episode, which is the apparent phenomenon of do-it-yourself terrorism. This phenomenon is apparently driven by the terrorist organisations' use of the Internet: first, as a means of mobilising opinions, radicalising populations and recruiting new members to the cause; and second, as a means of disseminating information, either by providing information on impending operations or by acting as a repository of knowledge on the skillsets and toolboxes that terrorists need to carry out their missions effectively.

In the first instance, the argument is that Jihadists use the Internet as a mechanism to convey their radical messages in the hope of reaching and converting other people to their cause, in the process gaining new recruits. In the second instance, Jihadists use the Internet as a sort of virtual library, a place by which they can store their training manuals – a collection of literature of the type as 'How to Build a Car Bomb'; or 'How to Make an Improvised Explosive Device'; or (and this has been the nightmare scenario) 'How to Build a Nuclear/Biological/Chemical/Radiological Weapon'. And it is this last issue, the Internet as a repository of knowledge and skillsets, that seems to be causing alarm driven in large part by the amateurish nature of the London and Glasgow incidents.

Assessing the Threat

But how serious is this apparent threat? To understand the threat posed by this scenario of DIY Jihadism, it is important to address the two implications of the use of the Internet by terrorist organisations. It is important to remember that the use of terror has traditionally been seen by security practitioners and scholars as the instrument of the weak, that is, in comparison to the state apparatus these terrorists seek to oppose. Inasmuch as car bombs are seen as a technologically unsophisticated – yet potentially effective – weapon, it suggests that terrorist organisations are going back to proven methods of attack. If this is so, then this has implications for the various security measures that states have undertaken to prevent the possibility of such attacks. But the gut-level reaction is that if terrorist organisations are resorting to older, simpler, proven methods, it means that security measures to combat terrorist organisations' use of more sophisticated attacks – evidenced by the New York, London and Madrid bombings – must surely be working.

Two observations seem germane from the Jihadists' use of the Internet to spread their message and recruit new members on the one hand, and their use of it as a repository of knowledge to facilitate future terrorist attacks.

One, the idea that Jihadists would use the Internet to spread their message and recruit new members into the cause may seem, at first glance, a plausible enough scenario. However, these Jihadists' websites are not that easy to find. All one needs to do to verify this is to conduct a simple experiment: conduct an online search for 'Jihadist organisation' and identify the number of websites that actually emerge from this search. The answer is: not that many. There are many hits that point to online resources discussing the issue of Jihadist organisations, but just not that many Jihadist organisations' websites per se. So, how does one get one's hands on Jihadist propaganda from the Internet? It seems more likely that one has to know someone who happens either to know or is a member of some Jihadist organisation. If this is so, then 'spreading the word' via the Internet seems less efficient a method than the old fashioned way, word of mouth.

Two, constructing even technologically simple explosive devices such as car bombs and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) is not that simple a task, not one that can be easily learnt simply by reading an online manual. Reading a bomb construction manual does not make one a bomb expert. In the same way, reading cook books written by three-Michelin star chefs does not make one a three-Michelin star chef; to become a three-Michelin star chef, one has to undergo a long process of apprenticeship, learning the culinary enterprise in all its nooks and crannies, and years of constant practice and work, before one can even hope to gain one Michelin star. Similarly, bomb making is a highly skilled, technically demanding skillset, not one that comes about from simply reading a manual. One has to be trained, to be provided with the necessary engineering skillsets.

Assessing the Implications

What then does this mean for the authorities? Is the problem of home-grown or amateur Jihadists overblown, or is it real? And what can be done about it, assuming that the problem is real?

The first thing to note is that the use of the Internet by Jihadists, however minimal the actual impact may be, remains a potential problem that does require serious attention from the security agencies. At the very least, monitoring these websites, inasmuch as they can be

found, is a priority issue. Furthermore, such Jihadist measures require counter-measures in the form of a carefully thought-out, assiduously conducted counter-propaganda campaign. Furthermore, inasmuch as security agencies can locate the online manuals for would-be Jihadists, these manuals provide an invaluable intelligence source for gaining a sense of the preferred tactical options for these Jihadists.

That being said, the point made earlier still holds. Bomb-making is a technical skill that requires a fairly high level of engineering capabilities; these are skillsets that certainly not easy to acquire. Reading a manual may give one an appreciation, even an understanding, of the process; it does not make one a hands-on expert. Can one expect a medical doctor to master the engineering skillsets necessary to construct a car bomb? This clearly is something that cannot be altogether dismissed. Nevertheless, what this means is that the prospect of home-grown or amateur terrorist acts remains something that is less likely than originally feared.

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