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The ISB Arrests: The Transnational Terrorist “Insider Threat”

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The recent arrests of an eight-man cell of Bangladeshi migrant workers calling itself the Islamic State of Bangladesh illustrates the reality and potential of the “insider threat” of transnational terrorism.

Commentary

THE DISCOVERY of an eight-man cell of radicalised Bangladeshi foreign workers in Singapore calling itself the Islamic State of Bangladesh (ISB) is unsettling. It is the second time Bangladeshi foreign workers have been implicated in activity inspired by violent Islamist extremism, following the announcement in January 2016 that 27 Bangladeshi foreign workers had been hauled up by the authorities for similar activities.

What is known is that the new cell had been put together in secret in March this year by one Rahman Mizanur, a 31-year old S-Pass holder who employed a tranche of extremist materials on Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to radicalise the seven work permit holders, aged between 26 and 34 and employed in the construction and marine industries. Materials on weapons and bomb-making as well as funds earmarked for purchasing weapons for use in Bangladesh were also seized.

Main Target: Bangladesh

To be sure, like the earlier group, the ISB cell had apparently no plans to attack Singapore, but had their sights focused on Bangladesh instead. The ISB cell in particular had found that it was impossible to join ISIS in Syria, and had instead

made contingencies to attack Bangladeshi government and military officials, “media peoples” and “disbelievers” with a view to toppling the current government in Dhaka and turning Bangladesh into a satellite of the so-called ISIS caliphate.

On the one hand, therefore, the latest arrests affirm that globalised, multicultural Singapore cannot insulate itself from developments elsewhere. In this case, the ongoing deadly struggle between violent ISIS-inspired extremists on the one hand and moderate civil society elements, minorities and the Dhaka authorities in Bangladesh quite obviously have had ripple effects in our own backyard.

This however is not the whole story. The Ministry of Home Affairs also reported that Rahman had expressed his willingness to “carry out an attack anywhere if he was instructed to do so by ISIS”. Thus, although the ministry reiterated that there were “no specific indications that Singapore had been selected as a target”, it has not been lost on observers that ISIS has identified the city-state as a possible target on social media postings as well as its online magazine Dabiq. In short, the arrests of radicalised migrant workers within local industries, reiterate the real challenge posed by what can be termed the “insider threat” of transnational terrorism.

The Insider Threat: A Manifestation of the ISIS Indirect Strategy

In September 2014, ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani – reacting to the Obama administration’s commencement of airstrikes against it - called upon ISIS supporters worldwide to engage in so-called “lone wolf” attacks within the homelands of the US-led coalition. The strategic logic of ISIS “external operations” is to compensate for its steadily eroding territorial holdings in Syria and Iraq due to Western-led military pressure, by striking back “indirectly” at the “soft underbelly” of the coalition – its population centres.

This means mounting mass-casualty attacks on civilians in airports, shopping malls, train stations and other public places so as to both undermine coalition public appetite for the war effort as well as shore up the morale and enthusiasm of current and future ISIS recruits. Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016 exemplify this ISIS indirect strategy.

This strategy can be executed by cells of returning foreign fighters hardened by combat in Syria and Iraq - as the Paris and Brussels attacks attest - or by other means, such as “lone wolves” and “wolf packs”. The latter refer respectively to individuals and groups of individuals radicalised at a distance by immersion in virtual extremist communities and materials culled from social media platforms online.

Lone wolves and wolf packs may take the form of “insiders” - people who can harm a society, not from without like returning foreign fighters, but from within the system. Insiders have arguably demonstrated their terrible cost-effective potential to the ISIS and wider violent Islamist cause. In October 2015, a Russian Metrojet commercial aircraft flying from Sharm el Sheikh to St Petersburg crashed in the Sinai, killing all 224 passengers. An Egyptian ISIS affiliate claimed responsibility and Western investigators surmised that a bomb had been smuggled onboard either via airport baggage handlers or even staff at the hotels where the passengers had been staying in.

Further Examples of the Terrorist Insider Threat

Then in February 2016, a Daallo Airlines flight from Mogadishu to Djibouti was struck by an apparent suicide bombing onboard. Fortunately, because the plane had not reached cruising altitude, the flight avoided the catastrophic decompression that had befallen the ill-fated Metrojet aircraft a few months before. Hence only the suspected suicide bomber was killed when the blast created a small hole that caused him to be sucked out of the aircraft. Investigations revealed that the suspected bomber had been handed a package by someone beyond the security checkpoint just prior to boarding. Meanwhile Abdirahmaan Muhumed, an American ISIS fighter who was killed in Syria in 2014, once worked as a cleaner at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport in Minnesota.

The insider threat has manifested over the past year in Southeast Asia as well. These have included radicalised armed auxiliary airport police at Kuala Lumpur International Airport; Malaysian military personnel and even Indonesian commercial airline pilots. The Soufan Group observed in February this year that aviation aside, the insider threat is equally real for “power grids, water supplies, and other critical infrastructure”.

Moreover, radicalised insiders need not even have to resort to complex attacks. Even kitchen knives may be employed with telling effect: one calls to mind the horrific knife attack by Uighur extremists that killed 31 people in a Kunming train station in March 2014. In Bangladesh itself, some secular figures have recently been hacked to death by extremists wielding machetes. Thus the candid admission by ISB leader Rahman that he would “carry out an attack anywhere if he was instructed to do so by ISIS” is anything but innocuous. As noted, Singapore, a part of the anti-ISIS coalition, would constitute a legitimate target for radicalised “insiders”.

A Calibrated Response Needed

The detection of the ISB cell is therefore a significant development that deserves a calibrated response. First, stringent security screening of migrant workers from particular countries of concern is warranted. In the ISB case, this requires enhanced information exchange between local and Bangladeshi security agencies to clarify the possible reach and appeal of ISB and similar groups amongst the migrant worker community here.

Second, closer co-operation between government, employers, religious community leaders, civil society and migrant worker groups is needed to help “immunise” the Bangladeshi migrant worker community against ISIS and related violent extremist appeals. Third, all necessary steps should be taken to dampen any utterly self-defeating, Islamophobic knee-jerk response to what is by and large a peaceful, hardworking constituency. Tarring all Bangladeshi workers with the same brush of suspicion is precisely what ISIS would want as it strengthens its twisted narrative.

In sum, the episode should offer a necessary corrective to overly sanguine commentators who suggest that the threat in Southeast Asia is overblown. One successful iconic attack by radicalised foreign “insiders” could have enduring

political, psychological, economic and social effects on the globalised, multicultural milieu that is Singapore. Ongoing vigilance, therefore, remains the only prudent response.

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