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Author(s)	Muhammad Haniff Hassan
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THE FRAGMENTED TERRORIST ORGANISATION: LESSER OR LARGER THREAT?

Muhammad Haniff Hassan *

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Just recently, President Musharraf proclaimed Pakistan's success in dismantling Al-Qaeda's network. The same announcement was made earlier by President Bush and other heads of state. While all the announcements gave a sense of increased security, the threat posed by terrorists is far from over. Still, whatever the underlying reason the leaders might have for their pronouncements, an analysis of the effectiveness of their methods will help other states to devise similar, if not far more superior strategy to counter terrorism.

So far, the ongoing war on terror has managed to undermine the unity and cohesion of the terrorists, thus reducing their strength considerably. This makes it more difficult for them to operate in a coordinated and consolidated manner. The dismantling of terrorist training, operational and command bases has fragmented the groups further, thereby seriously curbing their ability to launch an attack of the same magnitude as 9/11.

The continued operations carried out by security agencies worldwide not only dispersed the terrorists further but also forced them to either leave their countries, or go into hiding and be constantly on the run. Added pressure from security agencies on the terrorists has created dissent and internal strife within their groups as they find difficulty in electing new leaders to coordinate and organise retaliatory strikes. Under such circumstances, it can be logically concluded that their capacity to sustain terror attacks has been disrupted.

There are, however, reservations whether all these successes have in fact diminished the terrorist threat to a negligible level. The fragmentation may have caused the groups to operate without a visible central command, but they are now more nimble and fluid. Only common goals bind them together. As such, engagement becomes more complex as the terrorist groups become more unpredictable.

There is currently an impression that all terrorist attacks seemed to have stopped, at least for now. If this is so, it would be an oversimplification to assume that the "war on terror" has been won. It is not an exaggeration to say that the terrorist groups are just hibernating, waiting for the cloud to pass before reviving their mission. In future they can even be expected to be more sophisticated, having faced numerous counter-terror strategies, which serve to increase their tactical knowledge and resilience.

In general, three factors can be cited to cause terrorism: motivation, capacity and opportunity. Counter-terrorism strategies must focus on eliminating these three factors to achieve a

significant success.

Motivation could come in the form of charismatic leaders who mesmerise the members of terrorist groups with their rhetoric. Their age-old argument which never fails to appeal rests on the thesis that Islam and Muslims are constantly under threat. One way to dilute their charisma is to ensure that issues that could fuel their rhetoric be kept in check. Also, whatever actions taken against terrorist leaders must never place them on a pedestal, thus making them heroes or martyrs.

Motivation may come from personal conviction that the group's ideology is premised on the truth. In this case, even when the leadership is eliminated or the organisation is disrupted, the individual will try to continue the struggle in his personal capacity and thus create a lone or freelance jihadist.

In this respect, the dismantling of the terrorist organisation and the fragmentation of its network of operatives will only be meaningful if these are supported by good law and enforcement measures by governments. Without them, a motivated terrorist will still be able to continue the struggle.

It is important to note that terror operations are not too expensive to fund. Money can always be obtained, even from a limited pool of sympathisers or donors who are made to believe that their contributions are to benefit the less unfortunate or fellow believers who are "oppressed". The source of the funding may even come from unlawful means, as was the case with the Bali bombing, money for which was obtained from breaking into a goldsmith shop.

In countries where security is lax and law enforcement weak or plagued with corruption, it is not difficult to obtain materials for bomb-making. They can be obtained from corrupt military personnel or are easily smuggled because of either porous borders or corrupt border guards. Smuggling becomes easier in places where weapons are easily available or are manufactured by amateurs in villages, such as in Mindanao and Pakistan.

The lack of legislation to support swift action against terrorists and their organisations is also a key problem that needs to be overcome if the disruption of terrorist groups is to have a positive effect. With no adequate legislation to apprehend and charge the terrorist, individuals, although dispersed, could still undermine national security.

In this context, it can be argued that the dismantling of terrorist organisations and the fragmentation of their members may worsen, not lessen, the security threat. A motivated operative, despite some hardship, will be able to continue with terrorism activities by exploiting weak security and law enforcement agencies. One single bombing a year, like that which hit Bali as well as the JW Marriott hotel and the Australian embassy in Jakarta is enough for the fragmented terrorists to convey the message that their struggle will continue.

The dismantling of terrorist organisations has disrupted terror operations in the United States, most of European countries, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia. Except for the Madrid bombing, most of these countries have not experienced any single attack after the tightening of security measures in the post 9/11 period. This is in contrast to Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan and Russia. A case in point is the reported escape of Dr. Azhari, the JI bomb expert on the run in Indonesia, who slipped past three road blocks by bribing officers.

The fragmentation of terrorist organisations in a weak security and law enforcement environment makes measures to combat them more difficult because the individual terrorists become more agile, mobile, nimble and difficult to track down. Putting this in the context of global terrorism, one should not quickly feel relieved and complacent with the news of the dismantling of terrorist organisations because weak states will always exist. These states provide the global terrorist movement with targets or opportunity for them to strike and get their message across.

When terrorists remain largely intact within the organisation or operate independently in smaller cells in the global or local context, one element is usually at play – ideology. It is ideology which motivates the terrorists to continue with their struggle in whatever conditions. As such the ideological battle becomes important in defeating the terrorists in all conditions.

The ideological battle seeks to educate the general public so they will not be easily persuaded by terrorist propaganda. This helps to minimise the sources of support for the terrorists and reduce sympathy for them. An ideological response to terrorist ideology may create doubt and shake the individual's confidence in the terrorist ideology which he subscribes to. Eventually this will lead to dissent and differences amongst the already weakened and fragmented terrorist cells.

In conclusion, news of the dismantling of terrorist organisations will mean nothing without adequate security measures, strong security agencies and strict and constant vigilance. Due to the nature of global jihad and the continued existence of weak states, the potential for terrorist attacks will always exist and thus the global war on terror, with all its implications, is unlikely to slow down.

* Muhammad Haniff Hassan is a research analyst at Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University