

THE MANY AND DIFFERENT FACES OF TERROR

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of External State & Non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security incl. Terrorism & illegal Migration

Destroyed vehicles are seen in the final ISIL encampment in Baghouz, Syria on March 24, 2019.
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Terrorism is a well-recognised form of asymmetric warfare, and has been around for centuries. Some terror strikes tend to resonate more than others, for reasons that are inexplicable. The Munich Olympics massacre in 1972, the 9/11 terror attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, and the November 26, 2008 terror attack on multiple targets in Mumbai are, for instance, more deeply etched in the memories of people than many other terror events. It is important, however, not to take an episodic view of terrorism, since history is relevant to a proper understanding of the threat posed by terrorism.

Radical Islamist extremism has been the dominant terror narrative, post the 1980s. This was possibly an off-shoot of the decade-long Afghan war (1979-1989), which let loose an avalanche of 'mercenaries' who had honed their skills during the Afghan Jihad, and employed violence indiscriminately. Over time, terrorist outfits seemed to gain greater transnational reach, and were no longer fettered to geographical locations. New organisations, such as al-Qaeda and its acolytes, as also the Islamic State (IS), gained pre-eminence among a growing multitude of terror groups. Regional variants such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, the Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) in South Asia, and the Boko Haram in Africa were no less deadly.

More recently, especially in the West, a new narrative has been unfolding. Sporting different labels, extreme right-wing elements are proving to be no less violent and dangerous than jihadi terrorist groups. They appear, at present, less organised than many outfits, and the violence they perpetrate seems more random. Their targets, which included, for instance, a Jewish synagogue (in the U.S.), political personalities such as President Emmanuel Macron of France and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of Spain, members of immigrant communities and minority groups (in Europe) are, nevertheless, carefully chosen. Many do appear to be lone wolves such as the Norwegian Anders Breivik (2011) and the Australian man responsible for the March 15, 2019 Christchurch massacre, in which 50 people were killed. Non-denominational terror, loosely described as right-wing terror, has in the process become as threatening as jihadi terror. Clearly, the topographical anatomy of terrorism does not change, even if motivations differ.

The evolution of terrorism in the 21st century, and the constantly shifting tactics of terror groups, does make terrorism look like an 'existential threat'. This would, however, be too far fetched. What does need to be recognised is that the terror threat is rapidly transcending from what we see happening, to what we can imagine might happen.

Take, for instance, the year 2016 in India. Pakistani terror outfits randomly carried out daring attacks on the Pathankot Air Force base, an Army brigade headquarters in Uri, and an Army base in Nagrota. In February this year, the JeM carried out its most audacious attack to date, targeting a Central Reserve Police Force convoy, in which 40 personnel were killed, the highest casualty figure for security forces personnel in Jammu and Kashmir. The use of a suicide bomber, driving a vehicle containing a few hundred kilograms of explosives to strike a high-profile target, represents a new pinnacle in terrorist violence. It is representative of the newer breed of terrorists, as also the transmutation in the nature of terror.

Globally, spectacular jihadi attacks may be fewer, but attacks are on the increase. In January this year, Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, with links to the IS, killed 20 people attending a church service in Sulu province. In the U.K., on New Year's Eve (2018-19), three people were stabbed at a Manchester train station by an IS supporter. In March this year, explosives were found at transport hubs in and around London, and also at the University of Glasgow, leading to a major terror scare in the U.K. Also in March, the Netherlands witnessed a terror attack in Utrecht, when a jihadi suspect indiscriminately shot at commuters in a city tram.

Meanwhile, terrorists are further honing their skills, and are able to strike at targets at will. Cross-pollination of concepts and ideas among terror groups, and in many cases even pooling of resources, has made this possible. A decade of violence in Iraq and Syria has produced a reservoir of battle-hardened fighters, who are bolstering the capabilities of disparate terror groups in different parts of the world. As in the 1980s, we are seeing a majority of those who took part in the violence in Syria and Iraq currently adding to the cadres of existing terror groups in Asia, Europe and Africa.

It would, hence, be premature to celebrate the decline of terrorism, based on the so-called demise of the IS. The territory controlled by the IS Caliphate may have shrunk dramatically compared to 2014, but its obituary cannot be written just yet. The IS remains a fount of support and inspiration for several hundreds of fighters across Asia, Africa and Europe. Many IS networks are still operating clandestinely. Many of their dispersed supporters are ready to revive their activities once the pressure relaxes. There are unconfirmed reports already that the IS has directed several of its recruits to return to their country of origin and strengthen the nucleus of IS groups there. The estimate is that anything up to 20% of those who were part of the IS bandwagon in Syria and Iraq have returned to their homelands. As the IS declines in Syria and Iraq, other IS entities such as the Islamic State of Khorasan (which includes parts of India) will be the beneficiaries.

The Caliphate is an idea which is still relevant. The Internet remains its main vehicle for radicalising Muslim youth. What is most likely is that the IS will make a shift to guerrilla warfare tactics. It is likely to strengthen its 'Emni' (intelligence and security branch) to carry out reconnaissance before launching attacks. The lone wolf syndrome will be pursued with renewed vigour. Already, there are some indications of this. In December 2018, a lone IS gunman killed five people in Strasbourg (France); in January 2019, a suicide bomber at a restaurant in Manbij (Syria) killed 19, including four Americans. More such attacks could occur.

Al-Qaeda, the other leading jihadi outfit, is separately engaged in enlarging its global network. Violence by al-Qaeda affiliates might have been overshadowed by the IS more recently, but al-Qaeda affiliates in Africa, such as the Boko Haram, have not been far behind. Al-Qaeda affiliates in East and South Africa, the Sahel and Yemen are the largest and most feared terrorist groups in their regions. Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is said to be exploiting alleged incidents of violence against Muslims in the subcontinent to strengthen itself.

Al-Qaeda affiliate LeT (based in Pakistan) represents the main terror threat to India, along with the JeM. The rest of Pakistan's network of terror reads like an alphabetic soup, viz. HUJI (Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami), the (Harkat-ul-Mujahideen) and HM (Hizbul Mujahideen). Pakistan is also reportedly training outfits to carry out underwater operations.

Developments in technology, information and doctrine will in all likelihood alter the character of 21st century terrorism. In the Pulwama attack, the suicide bomber is reported to have used a 'virtual SIM' to contact his JeM handlers in Pakistan. It is difficult at this point to determine which of the disruptive technologies will turn out to be the most dangerous.

The concept of 'enabled terror' or 'remote control terror', viz, violence conceived and guided by controllers thousands of miles away, is no longer mere fiction. Internet-enabled terrorism, and resort to remote plotting, will grow as the 21st century advances. Counter-terrorism experts will need to lay stress on multi-domain operations and information technologies, and undertake 'terror gaming' to wrestle with an uncertain future that is already upon us.

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