



GLOBAL THREAT LANDSCAPE IN 2018

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Abstract

The global terrorism threat has become decentralised, unpredictable, hard-to-detect and resilient with regenerative capacities. The global jihadist movements, principally the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, have globalised to exploit indigenous grievances, recruit aspiring jihadists and fight for local and global causes. Overall, both IS and Al-Qaeda have become underground terror networks. In 2018, three trends are likely to define the global terrorism landscape: IS is transforming itself from a 'caliphate'-building entity to a global terrorist movement; IS is decentralising, shifting its centre of gravity from Iraq and Syria to its multiple wilayat and divisions in different countries; Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria will capitalise on the vacuum left by IS and exploit the fragile and unstable situation in post-IS Syria. In order to prevent IS' re-emergence and losing the hard-fought victory, it is imperative that the international community address the underlying conditions that facilitated the rise of IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups in Iraq and Syria, the issues that give sustenance to other terrorist and militant groups, and support governments that lack capabilities to fight terrorism.

Keywords: Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Iraq, Syria, global terrorism

Título en Castellano: El Panorama de la amenaza global en 2018

Resumen

La amenaza terrorista mundial se ha vuelto descentralizada, impredecible, difícil de detectar, resistente y con capacidades regenerativas. Los movimientos yihadistas globales, principalmente el llamado estado islámico (IS) y al-Qaeda, se han globalizado, explotan los agravios internos, reclutar a los yihadistas y luchan por causas locales y mundiales. En general, IS y al-Qaeda se han convertido en redes subterráneas de terror. En 2018, es probable que tres tendencias definan el panorama mundial del terrorismo: IS se está transformando de una 'entidad en construcción de un 'califato' a un movimiento terrorista global; IS se está descentralizando, desplazando su centro de gravedad desde Irak y Siria hacia múltiples wilayas y divisiones territoriales en diferentes países; Las filiales de al-Qaeda en Siria capitalizarán el vacío dejado por IS y explotarán la frágil e inestable situación en la Siria post-IS. Con el fin de prevenir su resurgimiento y la pérdida de una victoria duramente conseguida, es imperativo que la comunidad internacional aborde las condiciones subyacentes que facilitaron el ascenso de IS, al-Qaeda y otros grupos militantes en Irak y Siria, las cuestiones que dan sustento a otros grupos terroristas y militantes, así como apoyar a los gobiernos que carecen de capacidades para luchar contra el terrorismo.

Palabras Clave: Estado Islámico, al Qaeda, Iraq, Siria, terrorismo global

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1. Introducción

The global terrorism threat has become decentralised, unpredictable, hard-to-detect and resilient with regenerative capacities. The global jihadist movements, principally the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, have globalised to exploit indigenous grievances, recruit aspiring jihadists and fight for local and global causes. Overall, both IS and Al-Qaeda have become underground terror networks which will allow them to sustain themselves for longer and perpetrate more violent attacks. With a radical Islamist jihadist ideology, multiple wilayat (provinces), sleeper cells, lone-wolves, online radicalisation and skilful exploitation of modern technologies, the terrorism threat remains challenging despite the successful expulsion of IS from its heartlands in Iraq and Syria in 2017.

Moving forward, in 2018, the terrorist threat will be characterised by attacks mounted by politico-religious, ethnic-political and left/right wing groups. The major risk to the West, the Middle East, Africa and Asia will come from Islamist extremist groups with radicalised segments of migrant and diaspora communities perpetrating attacks in North America, Europe and Australia. Notwithstanding the operational and military setbacks IS and Al-Qaeda have suffered over the years, their affiliates in the global south will continue to mount attacks against military, diplomatic, political and economic targets. Despite security measures, threat groups will seek to hit aviation, maritime and land transportation targets. In addition, self-radicalised and directed attacks will focus on populated locations for large-scale impact, with suicide attacks as the preferred tactic. The favoured modus operandi of IS-inspired and directed jihadists in the West will be low-end terrorism relying on vehicle-ramming and stabbing as witnessed throughout 2017.

Broadly, the world has witnessed the rise of three generations of global terrorist movements. 'Global Jihad 1.0' emerged after Al-Qaeda attacked the US in September 2001 and captured the imagination of multiple militant groups in Asia, Africa, Middle East and the Caucasus. The second generation, 'Global Jihad 2.0', emerged after al-Baghdadi declared a 'caliphate' and announced the formation of the 'Islamic State' (IS) on 29 June 2014. The third generation, 'Global Jihad 3.0', represents the global expansion of IS outside Iraq and Syria. IS now relies on its wilayat as operational bases in the Middle East, Africa, Caucasus and Asia. IS and its affiliates control territorial space in varying degrees in countries with active conflict zones, and maintain a presence in cyber space. The group's strength also lies in affiliated and linked groups, networks, cells and dedicated jihadists who are willing to fight and die for IS.

2. The Shifting Terrorism Threat in 2018

In 2018, three trends are likely to define the global terrorism landscape. First, IS is transforming itself from a 'caliphate'-building entity to a global terrorist movement. In order to compensate for battlefield and territorial losses, IS is reinventing itself and seeking to expand globally in both the cyber and physical space. Despite defeats in Iraq and Syria, IS has been successful in directing or inspiring attacks in different countries throughout 2017 as seen in the Quetta, Pakistan church attack in December that killed nine people, and the truck attack in New York City in October that killed 8.

Second, IS is decentralising, shifting its centre of gravity from Iraq and Syria to its multiple wilayat and divisions in different countries. They include Libya (Barqa, Fezzan and Tripoli), Egypt (Sinai), Yemen, Algeria (Al-Jazair), Nigeria (Gharb Iriqiyah), Afghanistan/Pakistan (Khorasan), Russian Caucasus (Qawqaz) and the East Asia Division (mainly Philippines). IS' foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) in these wilayat will use the hubs as



bases to conduct attacks. In some of these wilayat, especially in Syria and the Af-Pak region, IS will face stiff competition from Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups.

Third, Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria will capitalise on the vacuum left by IS and exploit the fragile and unstable situation in post-IS Syria. Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQS) known as Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (JFS) has created a coalition - Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - and an 'army' referred to as Jaish al-Sham. HTS is headed by the former AQS commander Abu Mohammed Al-Julani and has at least 20,000 fighters. The coalition forces are likely to focus on HTS, leading it to splinter into constituents including Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra), the Ansar Al-Din Front, Jaysh Al-Sunna, Liwa Al-Haqq, and the Nour Al-Din Al-Zenki Movement. In light of IS' fall in Syria, HTS and its constituents will present a similar threat within the country.

3. Evolving Global Terrorist Threat Beyond the Middle East

IS footprint has shrunk in Iraq and Syria but it has grown outside the two countries. Although IS is primarily an Iraqi movement, it has been expanding to other parts of the Muslim world. IS first spread to Syria in 2011, and after its declaration of the 'caliphate' in June 2014, it expanded to nearby countries like Libya, Sinai, Yemen as well as other politically weak and unstable areas in northern Nigeria, Qawqas and Khorasan, designating them as wilayat. In order to assert its presence in Muslim majority and minority countries, IS is exploiting encrypted communication platforms and harnessing its returnee fighters to make inroads into Muslim communities to further recruitment, develop bases of operation and search for alternative battlegrounds. In 2018, it is likely that Afghanistan, Yemen and certain African countries could emerge as territorial strongholds for IS fighters and members.

The dominant actors in Afghanistan and Yemen include the Al-Qaeda centric groups - the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) respectively. Reports have mentioned that close to 35,000 Afghan Taliban, with 700 IS fighters down from 3,000 that are based mostly in eastern and north-eastern Afghanistan. Additional reports have revealed that close to 200 French and Algerian IS fighters from Syria had joined IS Khorasan (ISK) in Afghanistan and were conducting trainings in the Jowzjan province. The Salafi belt of Afghanistan that stretches from Kunar, Nuristan and Nangahar is being exploited as a ground for recruitment and operations by IS. Similarly, the ongoing conflict in Yemen has created sufficient recruits for AQAP and IS, reaching almost 4,000 fighters for the former and estimated few hundred fighters for IS. Despite the small numbers on the ground, IS is growing both in the physical and cyber space in Afghanistan-Pakistan and the Yemen-Saudi theatres.

As IS relocates to its existing wilayat and searches for new theatres in 2018, it will deepen its presence in African countries. IS is moving from Maghreb into Sahel, especially its networks in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria that are operating in the region. In addition, quite a few IS fighters have also relocated to West Africa and East Africa. In Nigeria, IS created its West Africa affiliate and transformed Boko Haram into a transnational movement. IS West Africa has managed to build a presence in Niger, Chad, Mali, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Similarly, IS is seeding a presence in Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda with a new IS centric threat landscape emerging in Africa. IS has also extended its presence in Somalia where the US conducted multiple drone strikes in 2017, targeting the group's members in the Puntland region. Even though estimates suggest that there are only a few dozen IS members in Somalia, it could increase if IS fighters from Iraq and Syria make inroads.

Comparatively, in Southeast Asia, IS suffered its most significant loss in Marawi (the Philippines) where it mounted a take-over of the city in May 2017. IS suffered a loss of over



950 local and foreign fighters, including the designated IS East Asia leader Isnilon Hapilon and several top leaders. IS Philippines is now headed by Ismael Abdulmalik alias Abu Toraype, a leader of a faction of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

In a further setback, the directing figure of terror attacks in Indonesia, Bahrn Naim, was killed in Syria. The Indonesian IS ideologue Aman Abdur Rahman is in prison and held in isolation. He nevertheless has been able to provide leadership to his followers and aspiring IS members. His writings continue to resonate among the 'jihadist' subculture in Southeast Asia as he wrote and translated works such as *Ya, Mereka Memang Thagut* (Yes, They are Indeed Tyrants) and *Merenung Sejenak Terhadap Hasil-Hasil Jihad: Antara Kebodohan Akan Syari'at Dan Kebodohan Akan Realita* (Reflecting on the Results of Jihad: Between Ignorance of the Sharia and Reality). The latter is a translation of a book in Arabic written by Abu Muhammed Al-Maqdisi, the mentor of Abu Musab al Zaraqawi, the founding father of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) that eventually became IS.

Like Bahrn Naim, the Malaysian IS leader Muhammad Wannady Mohamed Jedi was also killed in Syria. His associate Dr Mahmud bin Ahmed, who played a central role in uniting the diverse Moro groups, met the same fate during the Marawi siege. The employment of decapitation as a strategy has been successful in limiting the operational capabilities and influence of IS in the Philippines and broader Southeast Asia region. However, the threat from lone wolf and self-radicalised individuals is still present and could lead to attacks in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. IS has limited presence in Northeast Asia, besides its visibility in Xinjiang (where many Uyghur Muslims reside) in Western China. However, reports have revealed that more than 3,000 Uyghurs serve in the ranks of HTS, while a smaller number are linked to IS.

More than 4,500 Russian fighters travelled to Syria to fight for IS and HTS. In addition, most of the Russian and Central Asian fighters with IS were killed in Iraq and Syria. Overall, IS was successful in recruiting Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks when they were working as migrant workers and studying in Russia and Turkey. Reports mentioned that more than 2,500 Central Asians travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight and die while other reports have indicated that some of them might have started to relocate other theaters, including Afghanistan. Certainly, the threat of attacks by Russian and Central Asians outside their homelands has increased. This is best illustrated by the truck attack in New York City in October 2017 by an Uzbek, Sayfullo Saipov that killed eight people and injured 11. Earlier in April 2017, an Uzbek named Rakhmat Akilov, drove a hijacked truck into pedestrians on a street in Sweden, killing five and injuring 14.

In order to sustain recruitment and support, IS has continued to propagate its jihadist goal of establishing an Islamic State. Its strategy includes attacks against the 'Crusader-Zionist' enemy as well as Shias whom IS has condemned as apostates. IS targets of attacks over the years have consistently depicted attempts to cause enmity between Muslims and others, including Christians, the West and Shias. The latest anti-Christian attack was the suicide bombing during Sunday service at Bethel Memorial Methodist Church in Quetta, Pakistan, in December 2017 where nine people were killed and 57 were injured.

Earlier in November, after IS attacked the Rawdah Mosque in Egypt's North Sinai, IS supporters distributed a claim by a hitherto unknown group called Harakar Anna Yeshua (Movement of the Sons of Jesus). Shias in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere have also bore the brunt of IS attacks. For instance, in August 2017, 32 people were killed in a suicide bombing and shooting at a Shia mosque in Herat, Afghanistan. In North America, Europe and Australia, IS supporters are likely to mount intermittent attacks such as those seen in 2017, during the



Barcelona van attack in August that killed 14 and injured 130 and the Manchester attack in May that killed 22 and injured 119.

4. Online Threat

Despite the battlefield losses in Iraq and Syria, IS remains defiant and persistent. Putting up a bold front, its online propaganda narratives after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa continue to depict strength and eventual victory over the West and ‘disbelievers’. A video entitled ‘Inside the Khilafa 5’ released by IS Al-Hayat Media in December 2017, called on supporters to remain patient and steadfast as their sacrifice will not be in vain, and will lead to ‘a tremendous victory’. IS propaganda rhetoric not only attempt to rally and boost the morale of its supporters but also instigate them to mount terrorist attacks using whatever is at their disposal, including vehicles and knives.

Although IS online propaganda has continued, it has been adversely affected by battlefield losses as well as governments’ collaboration with social media technology firms to remove extremist propaganda and recruitment material. Since 2016 there has been a constant decline in IS-centric online propaganda activity in terms of quantity as well as quality. Its flagship online publication Dabiq went out of circulation in July 2016 and its replacement Rumiya has not been seen since September 2017. Social media accounts of avid supporters now have significantly less followers in 2017. Quite a few IS blogs and websites have ceased production due to strict regulation measures. Most other sites now recycle dated content or have not been updated for several months. The decrease in IS online activity is a positive development as it impedes recruitment and jihadist activities.

A new area of concern has however emerged. Terrorists are now communicating actively through encrypted platforms such as Telegram and Threema for propaganda as well as for terrorist operations. Indonesia in particular witnessed 14 attacks directed from Iraq and Syria where the terrorists used Telegram to communicate with local networks and fighters in the country.

A shrinking pool of jihadists now plays a critical role in maintaining an unofficial IS online presence that expands to several channels in encrypted platforms. They re-post and re-distribute old materials, including works by ideologues and propagandists. They also highlight the grievances of Muslim communities in Rakhine, Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere to inflame their followers with the spark of jihadism. These supporters also ensure that there is a regeneration of supporters and sympathisers online, providing platforms for interested and radicalised individuals to find other like-minded individuals who would reinforce their radical ideas, and engage in violence.

5. Way Forward

2017 has been a year of great achievement for the anti-IS coalition forces. IS has been militarily defeated in Iraq and Syria and its so-called caliphate destroyed. Many of its top leaders, commanders and fighters have been killed; some of its demoralised troops had absconded or surrendered rather than fight to the death. IS has also been deprived of its major sources of revenue from seized oil fields and illegal taxes. The battlefield losses and greater regulation of extremist content online have also affected the quantity and quality of IS online propaganda activities.

However, the IS threat is not over as IS core has not surrendered or conceded defeat. Its fighters could go to ground in remote pockets of Iraq and Syria to engage in guerrilla warfare



or retreat to several strong wilayat where its affiliates hold sway over large swathes of land. Its remaining fighters and affiliates retain the operational capability to stage or inspire terrorist attacks in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere as seen throughout 2017. Despite regulatory restrictions, IS still has a presence in cyberspace which it uses effectively for strategic communications, recruitment and propaganda.

In the final analysis, IS' ability to stage a comeback should not be underestimated. It has done so before when its founder Abu Musab Zarqawi was killed in June 2006 and when the Sunni tribal chiefs rose against the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in late 2006-2008. ISI came back in force to become ISIS and to eventually establish the 'caliphate' in June 2014 and hold territory in both Iraq and Syria over the next three years.

In order to prevent IS' re-emergence and losing the hard-fought victory, it is imperative that the international community address the underlying conditions that facilitated the rise of IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups in Iraq and Syria, and the issues that give sustenance to other terrorist and militant groups like the Taliban, Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab in other theatres of conflict. This would include addressing Sunni complaints about discrimination and marginalisation in Iraq and Syria and general grievances regarding unemployment, corruption, repression and misgovernance. Outstanding conflicts such as the Palestinian issue, ongoing war in Afghanistan, Rohingya crisis, unrest in Kashmir, Mindanao and elsewhere will also need resolution or they will become fodder for the propaganda machine of the terrorists and militants.

In addition, with the global expansion of IS, it is necessary for the international community to sustain and support governments that lack capabilities to fight terrorist groups. African and South Asian nations need resources to counter IS in the physical and cyber space. Africa is an important region in particular, as IS is moving from Maghreb to Sahel and further south, with close to 6,000 Africans who were fighting in Iraq and Syria. It is also paramount to counter the growth of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan where there are strong networks of militant groups. The worsening conflict there risks infecting nearby countries in Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The partnership between governments and Islamic experts to debunk IS' distortion and misrepresentation of Islamic doctrines and practices, and collaboration with Internet and media technology giants to remove extremist content online, would further contribute to containing the influence and reach of IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups. These measures should substantially neutralise terrorist influence and consolidate the breakthrough achieved in degrading IS militarily and putting an end to the 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. The international community must demonstrate strong political will to cooperate and collaborate not only in fighting terrorism but also in resolving the root causes of terrorism. IS must not be given another opportunity to stage a comeback as they did in 2014 or what has been achieved in Iraq and Syria will be in vain. In this respect, world leaders should take the long view. Rather than engage in geo-politics, their governments should take necessary measures to counter the emerging phase of IS and Al-Qaeda. Should the two powerful threat movements – IS and Al-Qaeda – unite, at least in some theatres of conflict, stability and security will be severely challenged.