THE TERRORIST THREAT FORECAST IN 2021

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Abstract:

The pandemic year 2021 is likely to witness an overall decline in global terrorism. While the threat grew in conflict zones, it diminished off-the-battlefields. However, threat groups worldwide are expanding in cyber space during the pandemic. From Indonesia to Pakistan, Muslim majority countries, Arabization and Islamization of Muslim communities during the pandemic is disrupting national cohesion. To prevent, counter and respond to the recent developments of key terrorist organizations, governmental and non-governmental partners should understand the threat. The intelligence services, law enforcement authorities and military forces should move from counter terrorism cooperation to collaboration and partnership. Working with community, academic and private sector partners, governments should build the higher strategic and ground level operational and tactical capabilities

Keywords: Terrorism, al Qaeda, Islamic State, pandemic, cyber security, Afghanistan, Africa, Muslim countries.

Titulo en Castellano: Previsión de la amenza terrorista en 2021

Resumen:

Es probable que en este año pandémico de 2021 se produzca una disminución general del terrorismo mundial. Mientras que la amenaza ha crecido en las zonas de conflicto, ha disminuido fuera de los campos de batalla. No obstante, estos grupos se están expandiendo globlamente en el ciberespacio durante la pandemia. Desde Indonesia hasta el Pakistán, países de mayoría musulmana, la arabización e islamización de las comunidades musulmanas durante la pandemia está perturbando la cohesión nacional. Para prevenir, contrarrestar y responder a los recientes acontecimientos de las principales organizaciones terroristas, los socios gubernamentales y no gubernamentales deben comprender la amenaza. Los servicios de inteligencia, las autoridades encargadas de hacer cumplir la ley y las fuerzas militares deben pasar de la cooperación contraterrorista a la colaboración y la asociación. En colaboración con los socios comunitarios, el mundo académico y el sector privado, los gobiernos deberían diseñar las capacidades operacionales a nivel estratégico y táctico sobre el terreno

Palabras Clave: *Terrorismo, al Qaeda, Estado Islámico, pandemia, ciberseguridad, Afganistán, Africa, Estados musulmanes.*

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1. Introduction

The pandemic year 2021 is likely to witness an overall decline in global terrorism. While the threat grew in conflict zones, the number of terrorist attacks diminished off-the-battlefields.

However, threat groups worldwide are expanding in cyber space during the pandemic. The politicization and radicalization of ethnic and religious communities in cyber space presents a formidable challenge to governments affecting harmonious coexistence.

Ethnic and religious polarisation and radicalisation are fragmenting societies. Local and traditional Islam is being supplanted by Islamism, political ideologies from the Gulf. From Kenya to Pakistan and Maldives to Indonesia, Arabization and Islamization of Muslim communities is impacting on the very foundations of the countries.

The international community should work together to strengthen capacities of governments to stabilise conflict zones. Most terrorism is generated in the battlefields where virulent ideologies lead to communal clashes, internal displacement, refugee flows and production of extremists and terrorists. While strengthening existing coalitions to building national military capabilities in the battlefields to combat threat groups, government and partners needs to build far reaching initiatives to regulate the digital, religious and educational spaces. Visionary, collective and decisive leadership should formulate, update, and strengthen its policy and legal frameworks to promote moderation, toleration and coexistence. With threat entities developing mastery of cyber space, governments should disrupt the proliferation of online exclusivist and extremist content that spur and sustain terrorism and violence.

2. Background

Terrorism presents a tier-one national security threat to most governments and societies. Two global terrorist movements have been dominating the international threat landscape for several years. They are al Qaeda and Islamic State. Although core al Qaeda has been heavily attacked by the international anti-terrorist communities, its affiliates in Asia, Africa and the Middle East are still active and present a resurgent threat. The Islamic State threat has diminished from its peak in 2014 but is seeking to decentralise by co-opting threat entities and radicalising communities.

The Islamic State has suffered territorial losses in Syria and Iraq in 2019, but it has never stopped attempting in creating provinces (wilayat), groups, networks, and cells.

In 2020, the global threat landscape has been changed dramatically due to the pandemic. We see the number of attacks off the battlefield has diminished due to lockdowns and partial lockdowns, but the number of attacks in the battlefields have increased because governments are scaling down on operations.

To expand worldwide during the pandemic, both al Qaeda and Islamic State are disseminating its ideology in the physical and cyber space. They attempt to radicalise and recruit entire families although individuals are still their main targets. They target those vulnerable individuals who abandon culture and nation for politics under the guise of religion. Those people are indoctrinated and motivated to mount attacks against their own citizens and countries, to damage and destroy their own traditions and culture.

3. The Terrorist Threat Trends in 2021

In 2021, the global pandemic will continue. The lockdowns, partial lockdowns and other quarantine restrictions will keep the global threat of terrorism in low level. However, the elevated level of isolation, disillusionment, and economic hardship is making the vulnerable

susceptible to online extremist content. The polarisation and fragmentation of communities is exacerbating the threat outside the conflict zones.

The threat will grow in the battlefields worldwide from Iraq to Syria, West Africa and Somalia, Afghanistan and Mindanao in the Philippines. What is not visible is the growth of exclusivism and extremism, the precursors of terrorism and violence, during the pandemic. Restrained from mounting operations in the physical space, the threat groups harness the unique circumstances to expand online, radicalize and recruit expanding the supporter and sympathiser base.

3.1 Recent Developments of Key Terrorist Organisations

Both al Qaeda and the Islamic State have been militarily defeated by US-led coalitions but they have reconstituted their capabilities by co-opting like-minded entities - groups, networks, cells and individuals.

Islamic State is expanding globally. They are very actively expanding their network in Africa and the Middle East. They also show interest in integrating the various terrorism groups in South Asia and Southeast Asia . The highest threat from Islamic State will still be in Syria and Iraq. Afghanistan in Asia and both the Sahel and the Horn in Africa are becoming their emerging epicenters.

A resurgent Al Qaeda is challenging the Islamic State. The movements of Al Qaeda, Taliban in Afghanistan, al Shabab in Somalia and Hay'at Taḥrīr al-Shām (HTS) in the Middle East, are presenting a formidable threat.

While Afghanistan is emerging as an alternative Islamic State theatre to Iraq and Syria, the al Qaeda branch in Syria, the HTS is linking with all al Qaeda centric groups worldwide from China to Bangladesh and Yemen and Algeria. If the current al Qaeda leader Dr Aymen al Zawahiri dies, the HTS leader Abu Muhammad al Golani is likely to resume the mantle of the al Qaeda family.

The vacuum created by Islamic State is being rapidly filled by al Qaeda. al Qaeda is emerging in Syria with its affiliate HTS. HTS formed 12 new battalions both with locals and foreign fighters. Being the most powerful terrorist alliance, HTS has a strength of over 20,000 fighters. HTS administrative through its self-proclaimed "Salvation Government" in northern Syria. A breakaway from of the Islamic State, HTS is led by Abu Mohamed al Joulani (originally from the Golan Heights). Just like its rival, HTS also seeks to establish an Islamic state. HTS maintains a low profile but is strategic is like its parent al Qaeda. HTS is headquartered in Idlib and they fight against the Syrian Regime and its leader Bashar Assad.

Just like al Qaeda in the lead up to 9/11, HTS is building its global supporting network. With core al Qaeda diminishing, HTS is becoming active worldwide as the premier al Qaeda organisation. In the backdrop of al Qaeda resurging, HTS is emerging as a key target of US, allies and friends. The leaders of both al Qaeda and Islamic State are the priority targets of US.

3.2 Contours of Threat

In the battlefields and off-the-battlefields, two movements are likely to cooperate, collaborate and coordinate in the coming months. The Jihadi fraternity dream of partnership. The dispute between al Qaeda and Islamic State is not ideological but over leadership. With terrorists marking the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attack in September 11, 2021, governments worldwide should revisit aviation security enhancing the protection of both aircraft and airport security. Both the Islamic State and al Qaeda followers celebrated 9/11 demonstrating a common ideology. An al Shabab operator Cholo Abdi Abdullah was enrolled in All Asia Aviation Academy in the Philippines demonstrating the risk of another 9/11 style attack. The Islamic

State and al Qaeda supporters call to repeat the 9/11 style attack. As they envision a common threat, the animosity and the anger between the two movements are fading. With the changes in the al Qaeda leadership, it is very likely that in the future the world's two most dangerous terrorist movements will merge if not start to work together. Such a development will increase the global threat exponentially.

3.3 Operational Front

Al Qaeda associate groups will seek to conduct external operations in addition to the Islamic State. The best geographically positioned to mount attacks in the west are the self radicalized Muslims. The most capable group to mount long range operations against the west includes al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Although HTS located in Syria and Iraq is focusing on the internal battle, either HTS or its splinters will mount operations outside Iraq and Syria in 2021.

3.4 Ideological Front

On the ideological front, the Islamic State's ruling on killing old men, women and children is gathering traction with its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria. On the eve of 2021, the Islamic State's Sawt al-Hind instigated its followers that time for revenge has come.

"Coldly Kill Them with Hate and Rage" with the permission of Allah, Islamic State urged its followers to target Christian priests. The Islamic State also echoed in "Ruling on killing infidel, children and the elderly in war," the same judgments the Islamic State presented in Rumiyah. According to both articles, non-Muslim women and children may not be deliberately targeted, but if their deaths are unavoidable, or if the intent is to kill adult male, then it is accepted as collateral damage. Furthermore, the ideologues opined if the enemy does it, do it. The "Voice of Hind" states, for example:

> "Therefore, it is permissible to kill the old men, women and children
> of the infidels with other infidels without any intention, provided
> that they become targets with the fighters for which they cannot be
> identified, in such case it is permissible to kill them."

Such a judgement will give latitude to Islamic State followers to kill, maim and injure old men, women and children. Islam explicitly forbids killing old men, women and children. In 2021, it is very likely that threat groups will target houses of worship. In addition to counter attacks similar to Christ Church, it is likely that there could be anti-Muslim riots.

3.5 A new al Qaeda centre: Afghanistan

The Afghan Taliban, an affiliate of al Qaeda will expand its influence in Afghanistan. Unless the US and coalition forces remain in Afghanistan, the Taliban will manipulate the Doha agreement to put both military and political pressure on the Kabul government. The Taliban strategy is to remove the UN sanctions against its leaders and consolidate its power. Afghan Taliban has no interest whatsoever in disarming or abandoning the idea of an Islamic State and joining the mainstream politics. The strategy of the Afghan Taliban is to force the foreign troops especially US forces out of Afghanistan and take control of Afghanistan. Both politically and militarily, the Afghan Taliban is deepening its control in parts of Afghanistan challenging the government in Kabul. If western forces withdraw in 2021, the influence of both the Taliban and the Islamic State will grow in Afghanistan.

3.6 Africa: A New Epicenter

Africa is emerging as a new epicenter both for the Islamic State and al Qaeda affiliated groups. Although the threat persists in the Maghreb (North Africa), the threat is cascading to the Sahel.

Both West Africa and East Africa presents a growing threat. The most affected African country, Nigeria recorded 1,245 deaths in 2019. The numbers have not diminished in 2020.

3.7 Cyber Security: A New Challenge

People spend more time on internet during pandemic time than any time before. Cyber (digital or network) space has become critical to people's work and life. Researchers exchange works online. Governments use internet to trace social activities and store health information of people. All these valuable data may attract attacks from terrorist or cybercriminals.

4. The Response

To prevent, counter and respond to the extant and emerging threat, governmental and non-governmental partners should understand the threat. The intelligence services, law enforcement authorities and military forces should move from counter terrorism cooperation to collaboration and partnership. As operational terrorists and extremist supporters seek to infiltrate sacred spaces, institutions of learning, and cyber spaces, governments need to work with a range of partners. To regulate the religious, educational and digital spaces, government should first build a legal and policy framework, develop the resources and expertise followed by building the trained staff and infrastructure. Working with community, academic and private sector partners, governments should build the higher strategic and ground level operational and tactical capabilities.

To fight the contemporary wave of global terrorism, governments also need to develop upstream capabilities to prevent, mid-stream capabilities for direct action, and downstream capabilities in rehabilitation. A game changer in the fight against terrorism is community engagement to prevent and deradicalization to rehabilitate both extremists and terrorists.

4.1 Fighting the Threat

First, law enforcement authorities and military forces should build direct action capabilities to neutralise imminent threats.

Second, working with community, academic and private sector partners, government should build community engagement and rehabilitation capacities.

Third, intelligence, enforcement and military should build online monitoring capabilities as well as capacities to counter the extremist message and promote moderation, toleration and coexistence

Fourth, government should work with religious institutions to break the radicalisation pipeline, transform segregated schools into national schools, building educational policy, and the laws to protect the Infocomm space.

Fifth, disrupt institutions and monitor ideologies promoting discord and division and promote nationalism. Develop and instill a spirit of promoting local heritage and traditional practices to fight foreign ideologies that has surreptitiously infiltrated and supplanted Muslim heritage.

Sixth, develop deep expertise on threat groups; exchange personnel, conduct joint training and operations and share experience, expertise and resources.

5. Conclusion

In 2020, 60-70 countries suffered from terrorism resulting in 10-12,000 deaths. After Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan recorded the highest number of fatalities and injuries. An alternative theatre to Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan is likely to emerge as the single most important theatre if the US and other forces withdraw.

While the threat grew in conflict zones, it diminished off-the-battlefields.

All threat groups are expanding in cyber space during the pandemic. The polarisation and radicalization in cyber space presents a formidable threat in Muslim majority and minority countries. From Indonesia to Pakistan, Muslim majority countries, Arabization and Islamization of Muslim communities during the pandemic is disrupting national cohesion.