



GLOBAL THREAT LANDSCAPE 2022

Liu Chunlin¹, Rohan Gunaratna²

K&C Protective Technologies Pte Ltd, Nanyang Technological University

Abstract:

Three trends will characterise the evolving global terror threat landscape in 2022. First, the cascading implications of the return of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance to Afghanistan on August 15, 2021. Second, the diffusion of the Islamic State threat from the Levant, notably from Iraqi-Syrian theatre. Third, the online surge of extremist and violent content especially of Islamist and Far Right entities on servers in North America and Europe mobilising and radicalizing especially youth. With lockdowns, partial lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions, the challenges facing government security forces - military, law enforcement and intelligence surged and both in resource allocation for training and mobility for operations hampered their performance and efficacy. The focus on humanitarian challenges by governments during the pandemic was ably exploited by threat groups to expand their support bases or capture territory. On the other hand, a range of ideological and material threats manifested in 2021. Some will institutionalise both in the physical and digital spaces in 2022. With radicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation of Islamists and Far Right threat groups, their networks, cells and personalities will stage attacks.

Key words: Afghanistan, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Islamism, radicalisation, digital space

Titulo en Castellano: Panorama mundial de las amenazas terroristas en 2022

Resumen:

Tres tendencias caracterizarán la evolución del panorama de la amenaza terrorista mundial en 2022. En primer lugar, las implicaciones en cascada del regreso de la alianza Talibán-al Qaeda a Afganistán el 15 de agosto de 2021. En segundo lugar, la difusión de la amenaza del Estado Islámico desde Oriente Medio, especialmente desde el teatro iraquí-sirio. En tercer lugar, el aumento en internet de contenidos extremistas y violentos, especialmente de entidades islamistas y de extrema derecha, en servidores de América del Norte y Europa, que movilizan y radicalizan especialmente a los jóvenes. Con los encierros, los cierres parciales y otras restricciones pandémicas, los retos a los que se enfrentan las fuerzas de seguridad gubernamentales -militares, policiales y de inteligencia- aumentaron y tanto la asignación de recursos para la formación como la movilidad para las operaciones dificultaron su rendimiento y eficacia. La concentración en los retos humanitarios por parte de los gobiernos durante la pandemia fue hábilmente aprovechada por estos grupos amenazadores para ampliar sus bases de apoyo o capturar territorio. Por otro lado, en 2021 se manifestaron una serie de amenazas ideológicas y materiales. Algunas se institucionalizarán tanto en el espacio físico como en el digital en 2022. Con la radicalización y la radicalización recíproca de los islamistas y los grupos extremistas de extrema derecha, sus redes, células y personalidades perpetrarán atentados.

Palabras Clave: Afghanistan, Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Estado islámico, islamismo, radicalización, espacio digital.

Copyright © UNISCI, 2022.

Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores, y no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. *The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.*

¹ Liu Chunlin is CEO, K&C Protective Technologies Pte. Ltd, Singapore. E-mail: <liu.chun.lin@kcpt.com.sg>

² Rohan Gunaratna is Professor of Security Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

E-mail: <ISRKGunaratna@ntu.edu.sg>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-137>



1. Introduction

An Afghanistan in turmoil descended to chaos on August 15, 2021. The international community was aware of the likelihood of the return of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance. Governments and their leaders were briefed by their intelligence communities. The United Nations Security Council Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in its July 2021 report warned of the presence of foreign terrorist fighters and the continuity of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance. With the return of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance, Afghanistan's neighbourhood especially its immediate neighbourhood will suffer from instability. With the growth of both Islamic State and al Qaeda in Africa, the continent of Africa will be gravely challenged. While the threats in the Middle East will persist, Asia and Africa will emerge as epicentres of threat.

An enemy and an adversary both of the Islamic State and al Qaeda, the Shi'a threat entities have persisted from the Levant to the Gulf and to Asia. The Shi'a entities are supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) especially its Quds Force responsible for extraterritorial and clandestine military operations. The IRGC have stepped up their operations after the US assassination of General Qasem Soleimani. While Yemen based Shi'a groups will continue to attack Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi based Shi'a group will grow in strength, size and influence. Likewise, other Shi'a groups in the periphery of Iran, notably in Lebanon as well as in Afghanistan and Pakistan will pose a threat to both Sunni groups and to governments. The surge in threat in 2021 will cascade and continue into 2022. The dissemination of exclusionary ideologies and the continuation of the vicious cycle of radicalization and reciprocal radicalization, attacks and counter attacks will persist.

2. Background

The security situation in Iraq and Syria is steadfastly improving after the Islamic State was dismantled by multiple coalitions. The vacuum created has been exploited by al Qaeda affiliates, notably Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Although the number of Islamic State attacks have steadfastly diminished during the last five years, there has been a revival of its mother group al Qaeda and al Qaeda centric threat groups worldwide. In addition to the institutionalisation of the threat of Salafi-Jihadist/Wahhabi groups in Afghanistan, its manifestations in the form of global threat entities, Islamic State and al Qaeda persist. Despite efforts to contain, isolate and eliminate these threats, they have displaced and dispersed. The Islamic State and al Qaeda movements will rival and compete in the global south. Although not in all conflict zones, Islamic State and al Qaeda fight each other in some theatres. Rather than weaken each other, these conflicts feed recruits and resources and influence followers and potential followers to join the fight.

With the fight between the Taliban and Islamic State continuing in 2022, Afghanistan is developing as a hub for foreign terrorist fighters. The number of al Qaeda and Islamic State foreign fighters are growing in Afghanistan.

With the Taliban leadership at its helm in Kabul, the very threat groups including al Qaeda that once harnessed Afghanistan to attack the US on September 11, 2001, have converged in Afghanistan. In the last quarter of 2021, nearly 40 al Qaeda centric threat groups congratulated the return of the Taliban to Kabul. Among them were Palestinian Hamas in Gaza in the Middle East, Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia, and Ansaru of Nigeria in Africa. With the return of the Taliban, diverse al Qaeda aligned threat entities are setting up their offices and basing their representatives in Afghanistan. This includes Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan that threatens both tribal and mainland Pakistan as well.

The manifestation of threat is not only in the physical space but in virtual space. Online radicalisation by a myriad of ideological and operational groups inspires and feed into each other's narratives.



Although the Islamic State has physically suffered both in the Middle East and in Asia, the threat has morphed into the cyberspace. The physical Caliphate has been dismantled but the virtual space, especially the deep and dark web, offers many safe havens. The digital Caliphate persists rejuvenating threat remnants and giving life to new threat entities.

3. Likely Developments in 2022

Insurgency, terrorism, extremism and exclusivism will continue to challenge many countries in 2022. Although many governments since 9/11 have built operational capabilities to fight the physical manifestations of threat, they lack the capabilities to prevent and counter the ideological manifestations of threat. Regulating the religious, educational and information domains to mitigate the threat posed by divisive and hateful ideologies remains a key difficulty.

Many threat entities will exploit political pathways, negotiations and dialogue to rise to power the very same way the Taliban harnessed the Doha declaration. Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a religious party in Pakistan proscribed for violence, was delisted after negotiations. Today, the fifth largest political party in Punjab, Pakistan, TLP's intolerant ideology is spreading both in Pakistan and overseas including among its workers overseas. Unless Pakistan takes decisive steps to curb radicalisation, arrest its directing figures and dismantle its infrastructure, there will be near 50% increase in violent attacks on Pakistan soil in 2022. In 2021, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies reported a 44% increase in terrorism in Pakistan. The spread of extremism especially the killing in the name of Allah, Islam and Muslims, is driving both violence and Islamophobia.

Since the Afghan Taliban unconstitutionally captured power, the stability and security of Afghanistan is deteriorating. With the rise of poverty, the Taliban regime, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, has not disrupted the cultivation, refining and transportation of the flow of opium. The Afghan Taliban is seeking to build international legitimacy by highlighting its confrontation with the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Desperate to gain ground, ISKP deride the Afghan Taliban of being a US ally. With flow of resources and fighters, ISKP remains a growing threat. Thus, Afghanistan will remain a source of narcotics and extremism in the long-term contributing to global instability.

The diaspora and migrant communities of the west that resist integration and assimilation will be influenced by ideologies emanating from conflict zones. To advance their interests, the threat groups will influence to various degrees these vulnerable communities in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. A grotesque mixture of ideologies of various violent extremist groups including Shi'a notably the Lebanese Hezbollah will persist.

In the global north, the threat posed by the Far Right will steadfastly supplant the threat posed by Political Islam. Although the threat posed by Islamist groups both Sunni and Shi'a streams will persist, the influence of white supremacist groups, including Neo-Nazis, will grow. The Far Right will influence both the core and peripheries of political parties, focusing especially on diasporas and migrant workers and anti-immigration.

The surface, deep and dark web will be sanctuaries to recruit, train and equip threat entities. State and non-state actors - terrorist and criminal entities - will harness technology especially the online space to advance their interests. To keep pace with technology, the threat groups, networks and individuals evolve. In addition to groups and networks operating in the global south of Asia, Africa, Middle East and Latin America, individuals will harness online content transforming into lone operators. The use of drones by threat groups both for surveillance and strike will become a common feature. A small number of threat groups will explore the CBRN spectrum.



4. Conclusion

With Afghanistan's emergence as an epicentre for the global alliance of terrorism, a scenario similar to 1996-2001 period is re-emerging. With Afghanistan as its headquarters, material and ideological support will revive and revitalise threat groups in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. With al Qaeda affiliates relinking with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, their call to enforce the Taliban-al Qaeda version of Islamic law, and no revision of their virulent ideology, the spill over effects will embolden threat entities around the world in 2022. In the coming decade, the capture of state power by an insurgent and a terrorist entity will have a profound impact on the terrorist threat landscape worldwide.

The tectonic development of the Afghan Taliban capturing power in Kabul demonstrates the current and emerging threat governments will face in the 21st century. The US and European security forces, the most powerful armies of the world, lacked the staying power and its leaders the will to remain and fight. After 350,000 Afghan police and military personnel with state-of-the-art equipment surrendered to the Taliban, there is no appetite for external intervention to change the Taliban regime. However, governments from UAE to Japan should form an intelligence coalition with the Five Eyes to monitor and mitigate the blow back of Taliban's return. Asia, the region hosting the world's single largest Muslim population, should play a frontline role.