



THE GLOBAL TERRORIST THREAT FORESCAST IN 2023

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Abstract:

The article presents three significant developments in the global terrorism landscape: Far-right terrorism, the growth of al Qaeda, with Taliban patronage from Afghanistan, and the persistence of the Islamic State as the most dominant threat in the world despite the successive decapitation of its leadership. The article notes the importance in this context of political Islam and the spread of "jihadist" doctrines both from the Gulf and from conflict zones supplanting traditional and local Islam. The article also notes the potential impact of the radical environmental movement and the growing problem of the use of violence by other radical groups.

Key Words: Terrorism, Taliban, al Qaeda, Islamic State, political islam, far-right terrorism,

Titulo en Español: Previsiones sobre la amenaza terrorista mundial en 2023

Resumen:

El artículo presenta tres acontecimientos significativos en el panorama del terrorismo mundial: El terrorismo de extrema derecha, el crecimiento de al Qaeda, con el patrocinio talibán desde Afganistán, y la persistencia del Estado Islámico como la amenaza más dominante en el mundo a pesar de la sucesiva decapitación de sus dirigentes. El artículo señala la importancia en este contexto del Islam político y la difusión de doctrinas "yihadistas" tanto desde el Golfo como desde zonas de conflicto que suplantán al Islam tradicional y local. El artículo también señala el impacto potencial del movimiento ecologista radical y el creciente problema del uso de la violencia por parte de otros grupos radicales.

Palabras Clave: Terrorismo, talibanes, al Qaeda, Estado Islámico, islam político, terrorismo de extrema derecha

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1. Introduction

The year 2023 is likely to witness a shift in the dynamics of terrorism. Three significant developments in the global terrorism landscape are: First, far-right terrorism will supplant incidents of Islamist terrorism in the west in 2023. The number of plots disrupted and the successful attacks by right wing extremism will exceed the attacks by Muslim religious extremists in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Motivated by white supremacy, Neo-Nazi and Christian nationalism, both groups and individuals will engage in shootings and bombings of non-whites, minorities, migrants, and LGBTQ communities. Unless addressed decisively by the authorities, terrorism, the vicious by product of exclusivism, will pose a long-term threat to the west.

Second, with Taliban patronage of al Qaeda core in Afghanistan, al Qaeda movement will grow in size, strength and influence worldwide. Despite the death of its leader Dr Aymen al Zawahiri in a US drone attack in Kabul on July 31, 2022, his propaganda continues to resonate among followers. The return of the Taliban-al Qaeda alliance to Afghanistan on August 15, 2021 strengthened al Qaeda-Taliban affiliates: al Shabab in Somalia to Hurras al-Din in Syria, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. Taliban is also the model for the ideologically akin and diplomatically aligned Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the largest threat group in Syria and a growing regional threat. Global terrorism will reach a new level if Taliban is permitted to continue to host al Qaeda leadership. Foreign terrorist fighter recruits continue to travel to Afghanistan and other theatres where al Qaeda affiliates are active.

Third, Islamic State will remain the most dominant threat group in the world despite the successive decapitation of its leadership. Both Islamic State and its rival al Qaeda and affiliates recruit and radicalise Muslims largely influenced by Salafi Wahhabism, Ikhwan-ul Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood), Jamaat-e-Islami and other ideological variants of political Islam. These political entities build support to sustain Islamic State groups, networks, cells and personalities underground and in isolated enclaves. After gaining political power, these entities slowly and steadily penetrate their ideologies. Referring to democracy as man-made law and Sharia as god's law, the ecosystem nurtured by the Islamic State and al Qaeda promote extreme versions of Islamic law from stoning, amputations and gruesome punishments. Both in the territorial and diaspora and migrant communities, their front, cover and sympathetic groups separate Muslims from non-Muslims by Islamising their followers through a dress code, halal food, Madaris education and Islamic banking. Eventually, their directing figures prime their followers to attack by indoctrinating and instilling suspicion, prejudice, resentment, anger, and hatred against both mainstream Muslims and non-Muslims. The machete attack by the Islamic convert Trevor Bickford, 19, injuring three police officers near Times Square on New Year's Eve 2023 demonstrated, the threat is both ideological and operational. The political Islam and "Jihadist" doctrines are spreading from both Gulf and conflict zones supplanting traditional and local Islam. Unless governments regulate religious, educational and communications space, the exclusivist and extremist ideologies will manifest in the forms of terrorist and insurgent violence.

A frequently overlooked threat come for the radical environmental movement. The increasing rhetoric from a range of environmental groups, emphasizing the existential nature of the threat to the planet from what they see is profound failure to act may accelerate the move from non-violent direct actions from groups such as Extension Rebellion, to a more terrorist style violence.

Finally, there is a grown issue of violence from a community of self-identified Involuntary Celibate Men (Incels), against women. The primarily internet base community has



in Europe, North American and even Singapore. The misogynistic group blames women for being over selective and not interested in dating Incels. While there is some overlap with far-right groups, the wider movement has yet to ideologically coalesce, however there have been cases of individual violence in Canada and the United States, associated with this growing phenomenon.

2. Trends and Patterns

Terrorist attacks occur in two principal theatre - the global south and the global north. The Middle East, especially the Levant, Asia, mostly in South Asia, and Africa, increasingly sub-Saharan Africa suffer from most terrorist attacks. Nearly 80% of attacks take place in Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Yemen. In these existing and emerging conflict zones where security and intelligence is weak, divisive ideologies spread reinforcing threat entities. About another 130 countries in the global south of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America suffer from about 20% of the attacks.

The west suffers from less than 1% of the attacks. Due to well established security protocols including information and intelligence exchange, North America - US, Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand - witness the least number of attacks. In addition to sharing with their partners, the Five Eyes monitor the threats worldwide and exchange information and intelligence with their domestic sister services and foreign counterparts. The international security and intelligence community prevent and preempt more attacks than successful attacks.

With the lack of Muslim leadership to regulate the religious space, the acts of contemporary domestic and foreign terrorism will be advocated, supported and perpetrated by Muslim threat groups. Most of the Muslim threat entities will be Sunni although Iranian sponsorship of Shia groups have increased after the US assassination of Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. Dependent on the approach of the West and their partners in the Muslim world, Iran will determine its support for both Shia and Sunni threat entities. In addition to sharing drone, mine, missile technologies, Iran will step up training and transferring lethal capabilities to non state armed entities.

Over 90% of the far right and Islamist attacks will be using the gun and the bomb. Nonetheless threat groups are becoming interested in chemical, biological and radiological weapons. With the spread of far-right ideologies, right wing terrorism will gather momentum in the western world.

3. Disengagement from Conflict Zones

As witnessed during the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations, terrorism is no longer the top national security issue. With the rise in risk and threat of international conflict, the renewed US strategy is to contain Russia and outbid China. With the US containing China and confronting Russia, non-state threat entities will grow especially in the global south. Their ideologies will spread in the west precipitating lone wolf and wolf pack attacks. Governments should create contingency plans as not all attacks including catastrophic attacks are predictable and can be stopped.

There is no substitute for stabilising neighbouring and distant conflict zones, the crucibles for extremist ideologies, fighting, internal displacement, refugee flows and production of terrorists. God driven movements as opposed to leader driven movements are resilient to eliminating leaders. Despite a US drone killing Dr Zawahiri in Afghanistan on July 31, 2022 and US Joint Special Operations Command hunting Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi in Syria in February 3, 2022, the threat from these battlefields will persist. Over the horizon and forward basing counter terrorism strategies are no substitute for boots on the ground. The US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan has led to the recuperation and revival of the degraded



Islamic State and al Qaeda. The Taliban-al Qaeda alliance in August 2021 led Afghanistan to re-emerge as a terrorist sanctuary for both local and foreign fighters.

After the US and European withdrawal violence and terrorism will endure in the theatres of conflict in Middle East (notably Iraq), Asia (notably Afghanistan), and Africa (notably Mali). Emboldened by western drawdown and withdrawal, the reach of threat entities has grown. Some threat entities have started to operate behind the national and others, even across regional borders. Facebook, Twitter and other platforms needs to be better regulated to contain the extremist ideologies driving violence.

To fight back, a counter ideology strategy is central. By establishing robust capabilities to influence, shape and dominate information domain, the threat can be mitigated. In parallel to strengthening counter terrorism law enforcement and intelligence capabilities on the ground, a legal and policy framework to strengthen gun control is essential. If governments overreact to the threat, the far-right political parties will gather momentum. The response should be appropriate with neither underreaction nor overreaction.

4. Defending the State, Securing the Nation

Unless governments and partners replace political Islam with local and traditional Islam, Muslim exclusivism, extremism and terrorism will pose a long-term threat to global harmony. Unless government leaders develop a zero tolerance and dismantle the subcultures of Salafi Wahhabism and Jamaat-e-Islami, the threat will persist. Since 2018, Prime Minister and crown prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud has imprisoned 6000 including 2000 violent and radical preachers. However, in countries where these hateful ideologies have already taken root, this threat continues to be suffered.

As long as the vicious ideologies are not robustly countered by leaders and rejected by the elite, they will manifest time to time in the form of graphic violence. The decisive state and societal response to terrorism and violence is compromised by conspiracy theories and fake news fabricated for personal and political advantages. To prevent polarisation, political fragmentation and harm to social stability, it is vital to influence and shape the human terrain. Unless governments dominate the information space, both perpetrators of violence and supporters of extremism will prevail. By building a norm and an ethic against exclusivism, extremism and violence, a resilient society can be built and threats thwarted. As terrorism impacts on social cohesion and has far reaching implications for national security, maintaining bipartisanship is essential. Fighting extremism and terrorism in a complex and volatile environment is a combined effort by law enforcement authorities, military forces, intelligence services, national security community, and political leaders. To defend the state and secure the nation, relentlessly hunting the ideologues, operatives, and supporters; incarcerating the deviants; rehabilitating the misguided; engaging vulnerable communities; mainstreaming religious and ethnic institutions; and updating the policy and legal framework is central.

5. Conclusion

The extraordinary and challenging events of 2022, from the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 20 and Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on August 2, polarised and fragmented the world. In some theatres, the state and non-state actor interests are converging. There is a dramatic increase in state sponsorship of terrorist, extremist and other non-state entities leading to instability and insecurity. In addition to enlisting fringe groups to pressure inimical governments, state actors are mounting information and influence operations to sow discord and driving protest movements to destabilise constitutionally elected governments.

Two pivotal events shaped the overall pattern of global terrorism. First, the rise of al Qaeda in the 1990s culminating with the iconic attack on America's landmarks on September



11, 2001. Second, the rise of the Islamic State occupying a third of Syria and 40% of Iraq and its declaration of a global caliphate on June 29, 2014.

The threat posed by al Qaeda was contained with the US invasion of Afghanistan. However, the US invasion of Iraq perceived as unjust led to a steadfast growth of threat and an upsurge of threat due to Islamic State's global expansion. Due to enhanced security, the number of exceptionally lethal attacks (where over 100 perish in one single attack) have declined. Nonetheless, the threat of mass fatality and casualty attacks by the Islamic State and al Qaeda including by entities inspired by these deadly movements persist.

With diversification of threats, the global security environment is transforming into an increasingly complex landscape. To manage contemporary security, it is vital for national security practitioners to develop competencies and capabilities to respond to both traditional and non-traditional threats such as cybersecurity threats, epidemics and others by integrating social and engineering solutions. In addition to maintaining military, homeland and other established domains of security, it is vital for governments to address health, environmental, energy, food, and the other new security domains.