



IDSS COMMENTARIES (02/2004)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

TERRORISM OUTLOOK FOR 2004

Rohan Gunaratna *

7th Jan 2004

The new security environment

The threat of terrorism by AlQaeda and its associate groups will persist throughout 2004. After the AlQaeda attack on America's iconic landmarks on 9/11 a state of war has prevailed between the West and terrorist groups, with AlQaeda and its associates periodically striking targets of the US, its allies and friends. The pre 9/11 AlQaeda group which conducted an average of one attack every two years, has morphed into a movement in which AlQaeda and its associate groups mount an average of an attack every three months. AlQaeda is now developing an ideological role, mostly through the Internet. While western governments devote their resources to fighting AlQaeda the centre of gravity of the movement has shifted to its associate groups which pose varying levels of threat in different regions.

To compensate for the loss of its training and operational bases in Afghanistan AlQaeda established new camps in Yemen, Southern Philippines, Indian Kashmir, Pankishi Valley in Georgia and Chechnya. AlQaeda operatives and experts have dispersed from Afghanistan and Pakistan to lawless zones in Asia, Horn of Africa, Middle East and the Caucasus, thereby extending the boundaries of worldwide terrorism. Depending on the ability of the United States to manage the unsettled situation in Iraq and the willingness of Muslim governments to cooperate with the West the dispersed threat could either spiral up or down.

The security environment became more complicated with the United States' unilateral intervention in Iraq, a watershed event that has not helped reduce the threat of terrorism. In contrast to the highly successful US-led global coalition response that gravely weakened AlQaeda after 9/11, US intervention in Iraq has facilitated the growth of existing and emergence of new Islamist political parties and terrorist groups in the Muslim world. The resurgence of the Taliban, Hezbe-Islami and AlQaeda in Afghanistan and the post-invasion alliance between secular Saddam loyalists and Al Ansar Al Islami, an AlQaeda associate group in Iraq, spells continued violence for 2004. Further Iran is likely to develop into a haven for AlQaeda unless the western governments help to strengthen the hand of the moderates in Tehran by engaging with Iran.

In both Iraq's immediate neighbourhood and beyond with the rise of Muslim public anger against the US and its allies, Islamist groups are now able to exercise greater influence among the Muslim communities. AlQaeda and its associate groups are aggressively harnessing the resentment among the Muslims living in the west and in Muslim countries.

As the memory of 9/11 recedes the west is likely to witness another mass casualty attack. The suicide bombings in Istanbul last November is a grim reminder that despite security measures the terrorists can strike. AlQaeda's hallmark targeting of symbolic installations in the west is becoming more likely. As terrorists adapt to the post 9/11 security environment they are likely to identify the loopholes and gaps in western defences and breach its security and counter measures. The frequent attacks in the Middle East, Horn of Africa, Caucasus and Asia will continue but for greater impact they are likely to kill and injure more people. The terrorists will continue to attack economic, religious and population targets with coordinated suicide operations. The sustained global action against AlQaeda will further force the mother group to the background and push its associates to the foreground, making it more difficult for intelligence and enforcement agencies to monitor and respond to a bigger number of Islamist groups.

Likely developments in 2004

Although terrorist capabilities to attack North America and Western Europe have suffered the terrorist intention to mount an attack in the west has not diminished. As there has not been an attack in the west since 9/11 complacency is gradually setting in. As a result the opportunity for AlQaeda and its associate cells to mount a mass casualty attack in the west is steadily growing. The bulk of the terrorist attacks will be conducted by Islamist terrorist groups from Asia, Middle East, Horn of Africa and the Caucasus. Most of the attacks will be conducted in Muslim countries but against high profile, symbolic and strategic targets of the US, its allies and friends. Because of the hardening of American targets the threat has shifted to allies and friends of the US, eg the British in Turkey.

The threat is more to soft targets, ie.unprotected or poorly defended installations. Because of government hardening of military and diplomatic targets the terrorists will shift their attacks to economic targets and population centres. Almost all the attacks will be suicide vehicle bombings, another AlQaeda hallmark. Although the attacks will result in mass casualties including Muslims, the Islamist groups will find sufficient support to continue their fight against the US, its allies and friends.

Most of the attacks will be carried out not by AlQaeda but by associate Islamist groups. As demonstrated in Turkey, Pakistan, Iraq and Indonesia, groups trained, armed, financed and indoctrinated by Al Qaeda are able to mount attacks as lethal as those by AlQaeda. These groups including the Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia, will conduct AlQaeda-style attacks. AlQaeda will remain in the background inspiring and coordinating such attacks. The terrorist groups will seek to acquire dual-use technology to enhance the lethality of their attacks, including chemical, biological and radiological weapons. The threat of hijacking aviation and maritime transportation to strike human targets and infrastructure remains significant. AlQaeda and its associate groups have attempted several times after 9/11 to hijack aircraft with the intention of attacking ground and maritime targets. A weakness in the transportation chain in a target or a neighbouring country is likely to pave the way for success.

With the failure of operational agencies to disrupt the AlQaeda-linked fleet of merchant ships whereby lethal cargo can be transported relatively easily, the future threat posed by surface to air missiles(SAMs) remains significant. As hijacking of aircraft becomes more difficult terrorists are likely to invest in attacking aircraft when airborne or on the ground with other weapons such as Light Anti-Tank Weapons. As aerial and ground targets harden the vulnerability of the maritime domain to infiltration and attack has increased. An ocean going ship could be used not only to transport lethal cargo but also as a bomb to attack a port.

Regions of concern

Following the US-led coalition action in Afghanistan in October 2001 the threat posed by AlQaeda has gone global, with AlQaeda organisers, financiers, operatives and other experts linking up with associate groups in more hospitable zones in the Middle East and Horn of Africa. AlQaeda and its associate groups are now concentrated in four regions: Iraq and its border regions, Yemen and Horn of Africa, Pakistan-Afghanistan border, and Indonesian and Philippines archipelagos.

The Islamist ideologues have declared Iraq as a new land of jihad. In time the scale and intensity of the fighting in Iraq will increase with the unimpeded flow of mujahidin through Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia; collaboration between foreign mujahidin and Saddam loyalists; increased support from other Muslim countries and covert or overt sanctuary and support from Iraq's neighbours to the Iraqi fighters. Just like Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation Iraq is becoming the new crucible of jihad for the world's radicalised Muslims. While the bulk of the foreign mujahidin are from the Levant, with time Muslim youth from North Africa and the Gulf, Horn of Africa and the Caucasus as well as from Europe and Asia, are likely to enter Iraq. Just as Afghanistan produced the current generation of mujahidin, the next generation of mujahidin is likely to be produced by Iraq.

AlQaeda has developed significant infrastructure in the Horn of Africa, including Somalia, and is using that region as a base to launch operations both in the Gulf and in Africa. Several hundred AlQaeda members in Yemen are moving back and forth to East Africa to develop their organization. In the coming years East African Islamist groups influenced by AlQaeda will participate in international terrorism.

Although nearly 600 AlQaeda members that fled Afghanistan and its associates in Pakistan have been arrested the reservoir of trained mujahidin is still large, located along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. As Musharraf continues to target AlQaeda and Taliban members the support for Islamists and opposition to him is growing in Pakistan. To prevent an Islamist group coming to power sustained western assistance to Musharraf, improved Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and lasting resolution of the Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir are essential. As Hezbe Islami, Taliban and AlQaeda seek to develop Pakistan's northwest frontier province as a staging pad to conduct operations into Afghanistan (in a repetition of the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahidin model) Pakistan remains the most pivotal state in the fight against terrorism.

With the US in Iraq becoming Iran's immediate neighbour overnight, the hardliners in Tehran advocate support for anti-US insurgency in Iraq. Owing to sustained US-led coalition action in Afghanistan the bulk of the AlQaeda leaders and members moved to Iran and Pakistan. An estimated 500 AlQaeda members led by Saif Al Adil and Saad bin Laden are located in Iran. While the Iranian moderates call for tougher action against AlQaeda the hardliners with previous training ties to AlQaeda wish to emulate the Lebanese Hezbollah's coordinated suicide attacks on American and French forces barracks in Beirut in October 1983 forcing the Multi-national Force to withdraw.

Conclusion

The war against AlQaeda and its associate groups spearheaded by the US has met with both success and failure. Although going to Iraq could be seen as an overreaction to 9/11 for the US to withdraw now would be a fatal error. The deadlines for troops withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan are unrealistic. The western powers and their Muslim partners must remain engaged in these two theatres.

The effectiveness of the fight against AlQaeda and its associate groups is dependent on the long-term cooperation and coordination in sharing intelligence, conducting operations against terrorist groups and suppressing their support bases. To succeed it is paramount that the US maintain a robust anti-terrorism coalition, particularly the support of the Middle Eastern and Asian Muslim governments, and seek to change its image from that of an aggressor to a friend in the Muslim world.

* (Dr Rohan Gunaratna is an Associate Professor and Head of Terrorism Research at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies)