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Transcript

The Changing Face of Islamic Terrorism

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Peter Taylor:

When the lights go down I'm told that we begin. Well, good evening ladies and gentlemen and thank you for coming and I hope that we're going to have a very interesting evening. We have three eminent experts in the subject that we will be examining this evening. I've been told to introduce myself first. I'm Peter Taylor, I work for the BBC. I have been covering terrorism and political violence for just over 40 years, would you believe, and I covered Northern Ireland, IRA, loyalist paramilitaries for 20 of those years, and the past 10 years plus, studying Al-Qaeda and Islamist extremism, although I wouldn't claim the expertise that my guests on the panel have, and I have also written eight books on terrorism. This event this evening is on the record so Chatham House Rules, the fabled Chatham House Rules do not apply, so have no anxieties about that or otherwise. Could you please all make sure that your mobile phones are on silent mode.

Why are we having this event? I think that rumours of the demise of Al-Qaeda are premature. Al-Qaeda central or core Al-Qaeda, as it used to be called by the intelligence services in the West, has been severely degraded by assassinations like the assassination of Osama bin Laden and by assassinations by lethal drone attacks, but it is still in existence although much diminished, and that's one of the things that we'll obviously be discussing this evening. But we've seen the phenomenon over recent years, before the demise of bin Laden and afterwards, of Al-Qaeda morphing into different related affiliated organizations; some of the affiliations might be more direct than the others. Obviously the recent attack on the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi carried out by al Shabaab in Somalia is one example of that affiliate. Other affiliates include Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb in North Africa, Al-Qaeda in the Sahel. You have also got in Africa other organizations, jihadist organizations, extremist organizations like Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Further afield you've got South Asia where, and in particular in Pakistan where the recent assassination by drone of Hakimullah Mehsud has resulted in upheavals within the sort of jihadi organizations in Pakistan, and perhaps most worrying of all in Syria, the dreadful bloody mess that is Syria, we have two increasingly powerful jihadist Islamic, and perhaps you should say Islamist organizations – groupings fighting the Assad regime in the form of the al-Nusra Front and – and I always get this wrong - the ISIS, which is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Closer to home, to my knowledge there's no Al-Qaeda in the United Kingdom, we have had various attacks by jihadists who subscribe to the Al-Qaeda

philosophy but we've also had attacks, or planned attacks, that were thwarted, by so-called lone wolves, individuals who are self-radicalized, invariably via the internet, like Andrew Ibrahim who was planning to blow up the shopping centre in Bristol and another young jihadist self-radicalized from Plymouth, who was planning to blow up the Giraffe restaurant in Exeter. And most recently, which is something I'm doing at the moment, we have the two young Muslims, born and bred in the UK, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale who are currently on trial, or the trial starts on Friday, with the murder of drummer Lee Rigby at Woolwich in May this year, which is something I'm covering for Panorama at the moment.

Well, that's quite enough from me. Just to introduce our speakers. First of all, Nigel Inkster. Nigel was director of transnational threats at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and a member of SIS, MI6, for over 30 years where Nigel became director of operations and intelligence. We're also very pleased to welcome Professor Stig Jarle Hansen, all the way from Norway, the author of this book that you can purchase on the table over there afterwards, which is bang up to date on Al-Qaeda in Somalia. And Shashank Joshi with whom I am sure you're familiar from his various television appearances. Shashank is a research fellow at RUSI and has been a teaching fellow at Cambridge and Harvard and Shashank's speciality is South Asia and the Middle East. So I'll call first of all upon Nigel Inkster to address the title of our evening, The Changing Face of Islamic or Islamist Terrorism. Nigel.

Nigel Inkster:

Thank you very much, and good evening everybody. I think if we look at this phenomenon of transnational terrorism, and particularly Islamist terrorism, for the last decade it's been framed very much in terms of the security preoccupations of the developed world and predominantly Western countries. I'm not saying that these concerns are misplaced or have gone away but, of course, these are the countries that are by definition best equipped to deal with problems of this kind and have to a significant degree done so. And I would say in parenthesis that, notwithstanding all the furore that there has been in recent months over the revelations by NSA contractor Edward Snowden, we are at risk of forgetting that the intelligence generated from some of these NSA programmes has been a resource that has been available to the planet as a whole, not just for the benefit of the security of the United States and its most immediate allies.

But although we've focused on this threat in terms of preoccupations about the security of the developed world, the action now is actually in the developing world. If you look at the statistics they are very telling. In the past year, 2012, some 8,500 terrorist attacks, 15,500 people killed, considerably greater numbers injured, all within really about eight countries; Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Yemen, and all within the developing world and that is where the action is. And this fragmentation of jihadism, of Al-Qaeda to use the shorthand term, that has taken place, is very much playing through into this agenda. We look at where these groups are now asserting themselves, exploiting ungoverned space and absence of effective governance and security mechanisms. We see that the Al-Qaeda jihadist ideology is an ideology that is very flexible in terms of its capacity to attach itself to local issues, local grievances and create some kind of connecting thread. Now, I'm not going to go through the alphabet soup of different jihadist groups that have emerged in various parts of the Sahel, North Africa and the Levant, and Shashank will talk about what we're seeing in South Asia so I won't do that, but I think there are some important questions that arise here.

To what extent is all of this connected or coordinated, if at all? And I think the answer is, to a degree at a top level it probably is. We're seeing, for example, evidence of Al-Qaeda central attempting to establish footholds and connectivity in locations like Libya, in locations like Syria with much less success, but in a sense it almost really doesn't matter because what is happening is really a phenomenon that is currently favourable to jihadism as an ideology, as a concept. We're seeing footholds being established in a number of different places. How that will play out remains to be seen and I suspect over time jihadism carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction but until that happens we're probably in for quite a lot of pain. But one or two things are worth highlighting.

Firstly, I think the jihadist narrative is becoming more sophisticated, the delivery vectors are becoming more sophisticated and collectively the governments of the world are having very little success in combating it. Secondly, I think what we're at risk of seeing is a competitive up-bidding in which different groups look at what the last lot did and tell themselves they've got to do something more spectacular and with greater impact in order to raise their threshold, and there is a degree of internal competitiveness here at work. It's not about coordination, it's about competition really. And the third thing is that in certain parts of the world, and this is particularly evident in places like Yemen and Libya, we're seeing some very sophisticated counter-intelligence activities being undertaken by jihadist groups focusing on

assassinations of key counterterrorism and security officials, and increasingly their families.

So the stage, I think, is set for considerable instability and for Western countries I think this poses a very significant challenge. States like the United States, the United Kingdom, face a really serious dilemma now. Do they intervene directly in some of these conflicts? Do they engage in capacity-building? Capacity-building can be very effective if done well but if done badly can be downright counterproductive. In the very worst cases you end up with Los Zetas, the Kaibiles in Honduras, or the Mali Army as was, so there are I think for Western States some real challenges here about how you actually deal, to what extent do you engage directly in some of these conflicts and if so how do you do it. And I think the final point that I wanted to make has gone completely out of my head!

Peter Taylor:

Because your seven minutes is up Nigel, that's why!

Nigel Inkster:

So, I will pass onto somebody who really knows what he is talking about!

Peter Taylor:

Because we want to give you plenty of opportunity to ask the questions, that's why, so forgive my impoliteness. Stig?

Stig Jarle Hansen:

Yes, definitively there is a new picture and definitively the nature of Al-Qaeda is changing and you have some kind of decentralization perhaps symbolized by the person of Ayman al-Zawahiri in one sense coming in from the periphery. My main research interest is in the Harakat al Shabaab and also the resurfacing of several jihadist groups within Africa, and I think one of the weaknesses that perhaps we are facing is more it's our old habitual thinking about terrorist groups, jihadist groups as consisting of small cells operating independently and clandestinely in an environment that's out to hunt them and where you have a police force who is actually functioning. In Africa what you see is organizations with territorial control and you have organizations with semi-territorial control.

Organizations with territorial control are facing a lot of possibilities and difficulties that other organizations don't encounter. Basically to be a jihadi in Africa can be quite profitable, that's something we should keep in mind. US\$25 million from coal trade in Kismayo in taxation, that's what they say Shabaab earns from that business. You will have export of cigarettes, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb controlling the smuggling highways between north and south in Sahara. So there are several examples of that, that you can have some kind of profitability. And when you have territorial control and profitability you will also recruit amongst people that perhaps you won't recruit amongst in the West. Shabaab for all its faults, it can give stable employment in parts of Somalia. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in some parts of Algeria and in some parts of Maghreb can give a stable income, so they can recruit basically opportunists but they will be put through a process of indoctrination very often and the question is where that leads to.

And that also opens up some other questions about poverty and radicalization that perhaps in the West, for example, you can envisage a small cell operating with dedicated fanatics because poverty is not so rampant here, that's the first issue. The second issue is that there are alternative sources of income but in Somalia, for example, you can face a dedicated Shabaab fighter who fights out of loyalty because somebody has been providing him an income for several years, and that's the case we are facing when it comes to organizations with territorial and semi-territorial control. And in one sense it's illustrated by the very strange encounters in Somalia, some very strange things happening like Al-Qaeda getting into development aid and humanitarian aid, this is quite strange. Just because Shabaab is their affiliate and Shabaab is doing these things and they want foreign support, and then you suddenly see Al-Qaeda during drought coming in and supplying food, very strange and very special. So this is something we should keep in mind and it gives us some possibilities and it gives us some challenges.

These organizations will definitely be vulnerable to some kind of ethnic hijacking. There might be ethnic or tribal or clannish manipulations of their organization and their organization will very often try to manipulate such entities in return which gives us possibilities, but also can create loyalty locally. And we should keep in mind that this doesn't mean that there won't be an ideological element to it. So these two things can coexist. A certain view of local politics can coexist with a certain view of the Umar as something under threat. It can coexist with the view that this should be international unification because it's simply very far in the future.

So when you examine these organizations you really have to look into a set of traits rather than one trait, and these traits, ideological traits within these various organizations, they can be quite common to us, not unexpected. As I said, the belief that you have some kind of Umar under threat and that you need to fight some kind of defensive jihad to protect it, can coexist with other interesting traits that we should be aware of, like the idea that basically Sharia produces a very good alternative to corrupt governments and lack of governance and justice, and this is something that you can observe in Mali and it's something you can observe in Somalia. Basically that you lack governance and you expect the religious authorities to take upon that governance because you expect the people that believe in Sharia to follow Sharia and really be thorough in implementing Sharia and then you have the expectation that Sharia is better than no law.

So this is something we should be aware of, that we should take with us and keep in mind that sometimes in their propaganda they will say that they provide some kind of alternative. In some cases, like in Kenya, you can see this propaganda even being used when you have an existing state, when there are state structures. The different actors trying to depict Islam as some kind of alternative to the corrupt state structures, and of course that's the second challenge that when it comes to Africa that the local partners don't necessarily function the way we want them to, giving advantages to the various radical organizations, giving advantages to the Shabaab for example, when the Somali police was unpaid for three years and started to pillage, this was heavily used by Shabaab in their propaganda. So it gives propaganda advantages. It gives far more than that. If you look at the various pictures coming out of the Westgate after the attack you see Kenyan Defence Force soldiers carrying out plastic bags from the shopping mall, so it basically weakens our local allies and their abilities to do intelligence operations, it weakens their abilities to control persons travelling in the area and it weakens their abilities to control weapons because these police forces are much more easily bribable.

So again you have a new set of opportunities for the jihadists and you have a new basis that can be used to train a new generation of jihadists, you have a new basis that can be used to really maintain some kind of propaganda effort. And this is also something we should think about because so far we expected the propaganda effort targeting United Kingdom, targeting the West, as emerging out of maybe Al-Qaeda central, Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula, these actors. What we can see now is that organizations like the Shabaab are basically putting up quite a good propaganda show. Recently, the last

autumn, Shabaab producing propaganda video on the Woolwich murders, Shabaab commenting upon things that go on in Denmark, Shabaab trying to create free movers, people acting independently without being in touch with the Shabaab organization, and this is something we should be aware of when it comes to Africa. With the Shabaab and perhaps Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, they are the strongest actors. Boko Haram produces videos but they are still a little bit special, yeah, so that's all I have.

Peter Taylor:

You reached your seven minutes beautifully, thank you very much! Shashank.

Shashank Joshi:

Sure. So from new bases to older bases in South Asia and that's where I'll focus on. I don't have the terrorism specialism of my other two speakers but what I will talk about is how this issue, changing Islamic terrorism, is viewed – exists in South Asia but is also viewed from South Asia, so South Asian capitals, notably Delhi, but also places like Kabul and Islamabad. And it's an interesting time to do this because some of you will have seen the Foreign Office research analysts recently starting publishing some declassified papers, some of their pieces of analysis. One of the first ones was why we should stop using the term Al-Qaeda core, which alludes to issues that Nigel and Stig have both discussed, the issues of Al-Qaeda's changing centre of gravity away from those bases in what was called AfPak, briefly Afghanistan-Pakistan, and westward towards the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. According to some of the estimates we have from military sources inside Afghanistan there are somewhere around 75 members of Al-Qaeda left within Afghanistan, probably far fewer than that.

What I would say is the lens through which Islamic militancy is being viewed in South Asia today is probably above all the drawdown of US forces next year. That's the issue that is framing many of the debates taking place around where Islamic terrorism is going, both in Pakistan, which of course will bear the brunt of this withdrawal, or drawdown I should say, India where it's viewed with considerable alarm, Afghanistan where the loya jirga convened by Hamid Karzai has pleaded with him to sign the bilateral security agreement with the United States and he in turn has continued his game of chicken. But that is the issue I think that frames how people are looking at issues of Islamic terrorism, not just to do with Al-Qaeda, also to do with Lashkar-e-Taiba, the

TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), and the various other alphabet soup of militants that exists in that broader South Asian area.

So just to begin with, Pakistan; Stig talked about territorial control, groups that have territorial control versus those that don't, he talked about profitability. I think in Pakistan with respect to all principal groups, both pro-Islamabad, pro-state and anti-state, we see that in buckets. They have strong territorial control, whether that's the TTP in the tribal areas, or whether that's Lashkar-e-Taiba with its considerable base, social base, political base, in the heartland of Pakistan, the Punjab. The TTP is a very interesting group to look at just now because it I think raises some of these questions about the changing nature of Islamic terrorism. The TTP have recently had their leader, Hakimullah Mehsud, killed in a drone strike a few weeks ago and the Pakistani response to his death I think signified this enormous confusion over how they should be dealing with these groups. There was enormous anger at the United States for violating Pakistani sovereignty. There was very little sense of happiness that the Americans had taken out someone who had inflicted such a huge toll on Pakistani civilians and the Pakistani state and it torpedoed the newly elected government's vision of holding talks with the TTP, holding talks with a terrorist organization that has killed so many Pakistanis.

So I think the Pakistani state is still coming to terms with how to deal with this. The new army chief who has just been announced today to succeed General Kayani did a great deal to pivot Pakistan's focus away from India and towards the internal challenge from the TTP, but I still think there is a deep sense of ambivalence over how the Pakistani state ought to be dealing with this group that does have connections to Al-Qaeda, that has of course attempted attacks abroad in the Time Square attack and so on. You're also seeing the TTP work more and more with sectarian groups inside Pakistan, groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and others who were massacring Pakistani Shia in very large numbers indeed, and that nexus is something that is of real concern. Those sectarian groups also have their own ties to Al-Qaeda within Pakistan, so there are increasing connections between those types of groups.

And finally you have potential fragmentation within Pakistani militant groups. In the last month or so we have seen a spate of killings of members of the Haqqani Network, the Haqqani Network being an Afghan insurgent group that is formerly technically part of the Afghan insurgency. It was described two years ago memorably by Admiral Mike Mullen, who was then the top US army officer, as a veritable arm of the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), so it is a group that has historically worked closely with Pakistani intelligence, and now

there are increasing suggestions that the Pakistani Taliban and the Haqqani Network may be at each other's throats.

So there are interesting realignments within the insurgent spectrum taking place within Pakistan and the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan is accelerating that sense of uncertainty as to what will happen. Will insurgents be pushed into Pakistan? Will they stay within Afghanistan? Will Afghan forces take matters into their own hands? We saw reports a few weeks ago that the Afghan intelligence services, the NDS (National Directorate of Security) was working with a senior TTP, a Pakistani Taliban leader to use against Pakistan, so the drawdown has introduced all of these uncertainties into the mix and that is having an interesting effect within Pakistan.

Peter Taylor:

Shashank, you have about a minute.

Shashank Joshi:

I have a minute left. I was going to say a lot on India but I have clearly used up all my time on Pakistan, so on India I'll just make a very brief point, which is, from the Indian point of view the drawdown is of considerable concern because they see the prospect of fighters moving back into Kashmir, as they did after the Soviet withdrawal at the end of 1980s, but they also look at Al-Qaeda within Pakistan and a phenomenon that Steve Tankel recently called the Pakistanization of Al-Qaeda, that is Pakistani nationals taking leadership positions within Al-Qaeda, working with groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba within Pakistan, working with indigenous Indian groups like the Indian mujahideen. So finally, the more we look at the changing centre of gravity of Al-Qaeda, look at it as moving away from South Asia, it does not mean these challenges have diminished in any way for the countries within the region where this is still very, very active indeed.