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Editorial Note

Islamist Extremism – Threat and Response

We are pleased to release Volume 7, Issue 2 (March 2015) of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis (CTTA) at www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta (ISSN 2382-6444) by the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Despite military initiatives by the US and its allies, especially those from the Arab world, the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) continues to make its mark attracting recruits in numbers, and more importantly, outpacing Al Qaeda and its mutant affiliates for the leadership position in global jihadism. According to the 2015 Annual Threat Assessment published by the Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), almost all countries with a predominantly Muslim population, or with conflicts involving Muslims, are grappling with the ISIS-led threat. This is also the case with other countries, especially in Europe and North America, who face the radicalisation of a significant portion of their respective Muslim population in favour of ISIS. Notwithstanding its barbarity, wealth and a strong propaganda initiative highlighting the establishment of a Caliphate – the ‘Islamic State’ – continues to enable ISIS to radicalise and recruit individuals, and has motivated diverse groups all over the world to pledge their allegiance to ISIS.

In this issue, Rohan Gunaratna discusses the broad initiatives undertaken by Washington in its recent White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. He stresses that although the kinetic response against terrorist networks is necessary, a holistic and broad spectrum response against groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda needs initiatives to prevent the spread of radicalism which necessarily includes engaging the Muslim community, civil groups and the private sector.

Other contributors to this issue consider the influence of ISIS and extremism outside the primary conflict areas of Syria and Iraq. Salim Abbadi speaks of ISIS influence in Jordan which continues to bear the brunt of the crises in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria. Jordan is an active partner in the coalition against ISIS, but Salim Abbadi notes that Jordanians also contribute a large number of foreign fighters to the extremist groups in the restive region. Marc Andre Siegrist comments on how Lebanon – the Cedar Country – figures in ISIS’ plans. Siegrist highlights the role of Hezbollah in propping up the Syrian regime – combating rebel groups, including ISIS, and also discusses how ISIS can exploit sectarian schisms to spread its influence. Both authors also discuss the importance of refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, and the risks they pose in hosting large numbers of disaffected and marginalised populations from conflict zones, making them prime targets for recruitment by diverse terrorist groups.

Mohammed Sulemana examines the global, regional and local contours of Islamism in the Sahel-Sahara arc of West Africa, proposing contemporary, historical, geographical and socio-economic factors as key variables that have initiated and sustained a tectonic transformation in the security dynamics of the sub-region. He proposes that it is these factors that should form the core of any sustainable attempt at quelling the Islamist threat in this part of Africa.

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Combating Terrorism and Extremism: A Shift in US Approach?

Rohan Gunaratna

To counter the threats from groups like Al Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), Washington is now seriously seeking to build a global system that would be resistant to the pernicious ideology that these groups advocate, not only to justify their heinous acts of terror, but also to attract recruits. This was evident in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Summit convened by the US President Barak Obama in February 2015. This initiative, which seeks to create synergy between governments, the private sector and civil society, would be an invaluable addition to the overall counterterrorism toolkit.

Introduction

The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (18-19 February, 2015) is a turning point in Washington's fight against terrorism. Since 9/11, the US-led Western approach to fight Al Qaeda and the global jihadist movement has been predominantly kinetic with the use of lethal force. Although the use of force to 'degrade and destroy' the groups will inevitably continue, there is now an increasing focus on building governmental and civil society capacities to strengthen community resilience against the virulent ideology that is at the root of Islamist terrorism worldwide.

Radicalisation involving the Muslims, now more intense than ever before under the influence of ISIS, is being seen both as a national security challenge and a societal issue. Considering the severity and magnitude of the threat, governments recognise that they cannot fight the menace of radicalisation and extremism on their own. In this context, the CVE Summit rightly identified the importance of partnership between the government, the

private sector and civil society. This is especially important since groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda and their offshoots are increasingly exploiting modern technology, including social media, to seek out recruits in far-flung communities across the world.

Background

After 9/11, Al Qaeda and its affiliated and associated groups harnessed the media, especially the internet, to radicalise and militarise Muslim communities both in the West and the rest of the world. Even though many groups weakened organisationally due to robust kinetic operations by security agencies of diverse countries acting individually as well as collectively – the ideational aspect of the fight was sustained, or as with ISIS now, aggravated more than ever.

Over the years, governments and their security agencies have become adept at countering the operational aspect of the terrorist threat – killing or capturing key leaders of the groups, destroying their infrastructure including training camps, disrupting their sources of funding and disrupting major plots. However, the threat not only persisted but also metastasised into newer and more virulent forms. This was largely due to the neglect of, or the failure to, address the roots of radicalisation in Muslim communities, especially the youth, of different countries. The terrorist groups continue to exploit the anger arising out of discrimination and marginalisation – perceived or otherwise – to sustain their campaign of hatred against the West, especially the US, and to continue to recruit. These attempts by groups like Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS, especially their attempts to recruit educated Westerners, including women, have unfortunately been successful. Their success is not only because governments let their guards down in respect to the spread of radicalisation, but also due to their failure to effectively engage with the larger moderate Muslim community, which arguably is the most effective antidote against the radical narrative in religious discourse. Given the fact that radicalisation has spread through deviant messages churned out by pseudo and self-styled leaders of the jihadist movement, the failure to engage the moderate elements has now resulted in galvanising some in the community towards extremism by extremist and terrorist messaging.

In this context, ISIS has been able to heighten the nature and extent of the threat. The 2015 Annual Threat Assessment published by the Singapore-based International Centre for Political

“Terrorist groups continue to exploit the anger arising out of discrimination and marginalisation – perceived or otherwise – to sustain their campaign of hatred against the West...”

Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) catalogued how almost all the countries featured therein are struggling with the empathy of segments of their respective Muslim population towards ISIS. The same is the case with most European and North American countries. At least 40 or more groups outside of Syria and Iraq have either pledged support to ISIS or taken oaths of allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

The main elements of the attraction for ISIS have been a newer version of the ideology that is a lethal combination of an old narrative of Muslim marginalisation and discrimination and a new concept of the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate that ISIS claims as the Islamic State. This has attracted people who feel, or perceive themselves, as marginalised in their respective countries in particular, and also those who are fascinated by the religious concept of the Islamic State in general. While in the past the appeal of the Islamist radical ideology was galvanised by a sense of retribution and revenge, now it has a predominantly religious dimension – to migrate to the Islamic State and/or to defend it against its enemies. As a result, the pool of recruits for groups like ISIS has increased. Moreover, since ISIS’ growing influence challenges other groups like Al Qaeda and AQAP, there is intensification in the latter’s efforts to retain the leadership of the global jihadist movement, leading to increasing activism in terms of attacks or formation of new units like the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in 2014.

Thus, the real threat is not possession of territory,

brutal killings and attacks by groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda and its mutants: the threat is in fact the radical message and the success by these entities in disseminating and finally entrenching the same among the few disenfranchised elements in the community. Accordingly, the fight now is more about countering radicalisation and violent extremism, than just the killing and capturing of terrorists.

Therefore, to win, the fight needs to be conducted not only physically in the battlefields of Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria and other countries, but also in the realm of ideas which essentially means an effective combination of hard and soft power, that has so far eluded many governments and their agencies. Whereas the reluctance on the part of some of the governments including the US to put ‘boots on the ground’ continues to undermine the physical aspect of the battle, the neglect to recognise the role of community leaders, especially faith leaders and the civil society in general, to shape the moderate and correct understanding of religion, has been strengthening the radical agenda of groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Countering Violent Extremism Summit

The strategy to counter the radical narrative is not new, with many governments using the same with varying measures of success. What is unique about the CVE Summit is the importance now being given to the strategy and bringing all stakeholders – governments, the private sector and civil society – together. Considering the inherent public mistrust of the governments in some countries, the Summit urged the participation of civil society with private sector funding to formulate and lead initiatives in countering violent extremism. It also delineated the role of the family, friends and the community at large to identify early indicators of radicalisation.

From Washington’s perspective, the Summit was meant to be international in character, especially with the spike in the number of individuals joining or willing to join the ISIS and the increase in home-grown terrorist attacks or attempts worldwide. In addition to US delegates representing the government, the business community, civil society and the education sector, the Summit enlisted the participation of delegations from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Europe. The composition of the delegates to the Summit was very diverse

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with the participation of ministers, chiefs of security and intelligence services, business leaders including heads of technology companies, and heads of think tanks and research organisations. The Summit included government representatives at the ministerial level from more than 60 countries and the High Representative and Vice President of the European Union, the United Nations Secretary-General, the Secretaries General of the Council of Europe, the League of Arab States, Organization of American States, Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the African Union’s Peace and Security Commissioner.

The Summit not only discussed the strategy to deal with the threat of radicalisation, but also highlighted Washington’s commitment to provide resources to support deradicalisation programs worldwide by enlisting the support of the private sector and civil society, including stakeholders from technology firms like Google and Facebook, educators and faith leaders. Although it is difficult to assess how the strategy would be implemented, given differing priorities of the concerned stakeholders, this is an initiative that is worth working with today.

Crafting an Appropriate Response

It is just not enough for only governments to deal with the threat of radicalisation that feeds and

sustains on societal or community grievances. This brings the responsibilities of concerned societies to the forefront, especially from the perspective that ultimately it is the society or the community that bears most of the brunt of terrorism, which is a bi-product of radicalisation and extremism.

Although most nations understand the issue from this perspective, engaging the society broadly and the concerned community particularly has so far been ad hoc and hence limited in long-term impact. It is vital that the vulnerable segments of community are inoculated against the deviant religious narrative that encourages violence rather than tolerance. This is possible only through robust public awareness programs with the participation of mainstream community leaders and others with right religious credentials. Therefore, it is imperative to partner with community organisations, religious institutions, academia and the industry to counter extremist and terrorist ideologies both in the physical and cyber space. Community participation is paramount to disrupt radicalisation whether at home or abroad.

In sum, the CVE Summit is an appropriate and timely response against a multi-dimensional threat posed by terrorists, especially by groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. It is also a significant turning point in terms of Washington's fight against terrorism and extremism – a model which many other governments are most likely to emulate. The prospect of success of this initiative gains more currency with the fact that the US will host a leader-level summit on the margins of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015 to share and develop a comprehensive and multi-stakeholder action agenda against violent extremism.

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Jordan in the Shadow of ISIS

Salim Abbadi

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, thousands of Jordanians have joined the Sunni Islamist-led insurgency against President Bashar al Assad. More than 2,000 men, ranging from underprivileged youth to educated professionals have left Jordan for jihad in Syria. In September 2014, there was an estimated 1,800 to 2,000 Jordanians fighting alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al Nusra— a branch of Al Qaeda operating in Syria and Lebanon created with the objective of replacing Assad's Alawite sect led by a Shiite majority in Syria with a Sunni Islamic State. In late July 2014, in Maan, a tribal stronghold of over 50,000 people about 250 km south of the Jordanian capital city of Amman, supporters marched through the city, raising black battle flags of ISIS, chanting slogans in support of ISIS and declaring their restive city "Jordan's Fallujah"— a reference to the extremist stronghold in Iraq, the first city that fell to ISIS insurgents back in January. This article discusses the context of ISIS influence in Jordan and the challenges that the government confronts in responding to the threat, amid growing numbers of Jordanians going to fight in Syria and Iraq.

ISIS' Roots in Jordan

The roots of ISIS' influence in Jordan can be traced back to Abu Musab al Zarqawi, known also as Ahmad Fadiil Nazzal al Khalaylah, a Jordanian-Palestinian mujahideen leader born on 30 October 1966 in the city of Zarqa, Jordan. It was here that Abu Musab al Zarqawi founded Al Tawhid wal Jihad or the 'Organisation of Monotheism and Jihad', which in 2003 expanded to Iraq.. Following Abu Musab al Zarqawi's pledge of allegiance to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network on 17 October 2004, the group became known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) or 'Tanzim Qaidat al Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn' in Arabic. Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi came to be the leader of the militant group Jaish Ahl al Sunnah wal Jamaah ('Army

of the People of Tradition and Unification’), which was active in the provinces of Diyala, Samarra and Baghdad. He subsequently joined the Majlis Shurra al Mujahidin fi al Iraq (‘Consultative Council of the Jihad Fighters in Iraq’ or Mujahidin Shura Council: MSC), established in January 2006. The MSC, a conglomerate of jihadist groups led by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leaders Hamed Dawood Mohammed Khalil al Zawi, a.k.a. Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abd al Munim Izzidine Ali Ismail, a.k.a. Abu Ayyub al Masri, a.k.a. Sheikh Abu Hamza al Muhajir. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi served in the Shura Council of the MSC, and subsequently in the Shura Council of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) formed in October 2006.

On 7 June 2006, Abu Musab al Zarqawi was killed in a US airstrike. After he was killed, Abu Hamza Muhajir became the leader of AQI who pledged allegiance to ISI in November 2006. ISI was then under Sheikh Abu Omar al Baghdadi, who was subsequently killed as well. Following the deaths of Abu Omar al Baghdadi and Abu Ayyub al Masri, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi was appointed the leader of ISI on 16 May 2010.

In 2014 Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared the founding of a Caliphate, and called on all Muslims to swear allegiance to the group. The group now calls itself as the ‘Islamic State’ although names like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) are being used interchangeably. The group is known in Arabic as Ad Dawlah al Islamiyah fi allraq wash Sham leading to the derogatively used Arabic acronym Daish or DAESH.

Under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, ISIS grew rapidly with the recruitment of former Baathists and personnel from Iraqi military, law enforcement and intelligence agencies of the Saddam Hussein period. In February 2014, following months of infighting and dispute between members of ISIS and the Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaeda formally dissociated itself from ISIS. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi successfully exploited the widespread notion of Sunnis being dispossessed by the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq as well as by Assad’s Alawite-dominated regime in Syria. Furthermore, he capitalised on economic and political discrimination and the environment of instability and chaos to strengthen his movement including possessing territory both in Iraq and

“Jordan currently faces a myriad of complex security issues, including crime, smuggling and tribal disaffection...”

Syria with vital economic assets.

ISIS Challenge to Jordan

Jordan currently faces a myriad of complex security issues, including crime, smuggling and tribal disaffection, all of which have provided fertile ground for recruitment and radicalisation by extremist and terrorist groups, especially the ISIS.

According to official estimates, as of December 2013, more than 11,000 foreign fighters were in Syria. The largest contingent, numbering 2,000, hailed from Jordan. The *Jordan Times* reported that 80% of these Jordanians were associated with the Al Qaeda-linked Jabhat al Nusra. In July 2014, in Maan, a tribal leader from the group, ‘Sons of the Call for Tawhid and Jihad’, a youth movement, pledged allegiance to ISIS’ leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

ISIS is a Salafist group that follows an extreme interpretation of Islam that is anti-Western and promotes sectarian violence. ISIS has referred to those that do not agree with its interpretations as ‘infidels’ and ‘apostates’ (*takfiri*). Salafism first took on a theological meaning by *Ahl Al-Hadith* (partisans of the traditional accounts of the sayings and doings of Prophet Muhammad) during the Abbasid Caliphate. Deriving from the Arabic root word *salaf*, the term Salafist means ‘the past’, according to chapter “Al Baqara 275” of the Quran. This term initially signified the pious forefathers (*Al-Salaf Al-Salih*) who represented the first three generations of Muslims. At its root, Salafism advocates a return to a Shariah-minded orthodoxy with the aim to purify Islam from unwarranted accretions, heresies and distortions.

In July 2014, the Al Qaeda-linked militant and a prominent Jordanian leader of the jihadist movement, Mohammed al Shalabi, otherwise

known as Abu Sayyaf warned that the kingdom was "not immune" to the chaos befalling neighbouring countries. Given that Salafist recruitment for the Syrian jihad is not uncommon in traditionally tribal Jordanian areas like Zarqa, Salt, and Maan, the dangers of radicalisation by the extremist violent ideology advocated by ISIS constitutes a legitimate challenge.

Additionally, Jordan's security officials have stated that Jordan could be home to "hundreds, if not thousands, of potential sympathisers" who could turn into "potential sleeper cells and time bombs". Like Syria and Lebanon, Jordan has been a host country for both Iraqi refugees and Palestinians in the past decades. According to the UN Refugee Agency (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: UNHCR), since 2012, Jordan has taken in 622,000 Syrian refugees fleeing the civil war. Support for ISIS is also gaining traction in poor communities, such as Maan, and in the teeming northern refugee camps and border towns where most of the 1.3 million to 1.5 million Syrian refugees live. The Zaatari Refugee Camp for Syrians – where rows of tents stretch for miles – has become Jordan's fourth-largest city. With no access to quality education, employment or protection for their families, refugee camps are prime targets for recruitment and radicalisation by extremist and terrorists and as such have been a major source of concern by the government.

In June 2014, Jordan reacted swiftly to reports that the border crossing point of Treibel, on the Iraqi side, had fallen into rebel hands, including possibly ISIS fighters. Specifically, Jordan beefed up military presence on the eastern front and heightened the state of alert. The Jordanian military also reinforced its units along the 180 km long border with Iraq. It said that action was taken after the Iraqi army withdrew from the border crossing, and that the army and security personnel were ready to deal with any contingency. Given that ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi had hinted at the possibility of extending the group's control beyond Syria and Iraq and given Jordan's geographical proximity and shared borders with Iraq and Syria, there is a threat that insurgents and terrorist groups may infiltrate Jordan through these border areas. These considerations, along with the fear of 'sleeper cells' within the 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the kingdom, contribute to Jordan's security concerns about the threat of extremism and terrorism from groups like ISIS. Additionally, there are signs that more Jordanians are

“There are signs that more Jordanians are crossing the border to join the jihad...”

crossing the border to join the jihad. Currently there is an estimated 1,500 Jordanian citizens fighting in Syria and Iraq.

To reduce the potential of heightened terrorist activities since Jordan actively stepped up its efforts in the US-led coalition against ISIS, authorities have increased presence and vigilance at public areas and tourist spots, as well as through road checkpoints. Jordan has tightened security around sensitive government areas, stepped up surveillance of radicals and extremists and arrested activists seen as a threat. The government has amended its anti-terrorism law to minimise content that spreads radicalism and helps in recruiting young Jordanian jihadists. At least a dozen people have been arrested for expressing support for ISIS on social media.

ISIS' Brutality and Jordan's response

On 24 December 2014, a Jordanian F-16 aircraft crashed in the vicinity of the northern Syrian city of Raqqah. According to some reports, the F-16 being flown by First Lieutenant Muath al Kasasbeh, was shot down over Syria during a bombing raid on ISIS strongholds near the city of Raqqah. ISIS held the pilot hostage before brutally burning him to death in the early hours of 3 January 2015. Before the burning of Al Kasasbeh, ISIS had conducted negotiations with the Jordanian government to spare Al Kasabeh and release the Japanese hostage and journalist Kenji Goto in exchange for Sajida Mubarak – a failed suicide bomber who conspired to carry out the 2005 Amman hotel bombings in the Jordanian capital city of Amman. In February 2015, ISIS released video footage showing the brutal burning of Al Kasasbeh. In response, Jordanian authorities executed Sajida Mubarak and a senior Al Qaeda prisoner, Ziyad Karboli (who was an Iraqi sentenced to death in 2008) on 4 February 2015. Jordan also stepped up its airstrikes against ISIS.

Looking Ahead

The rise of the ISIS threat would appear to be a new test case for the Jordanian security services, a major US partner in fighting radical Islamists. The arrests of pro-ISIS supporters by Jordanian authorities and raids on hardliners emphasise the extent to which Jordan takes the threat of extremism and terrorism seriously. While these actions are commendable, continuing counter-narrative efforts to promote the moderation of Islam are also critical in the fight against the extremist ideological narratives of the ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates. With this in view, in June 2014, Jordan released an influential jihadist cleric and fierce critic of ISIS named Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi – one of the main figures in Jordan's Salafi-jihadist movement to speak out against ISIS.

Currently, Jordan, along with Turkey, Egypt and the UAE are the four Arab nations who have joined in the US-led coalition against ISIS. To be sure, Jordan's role in the US-led war on the group remains within the levels of intelligence and logistics cooperation. As a whole, Jordan's economy is among the smallest in the Middle East, with insufficient supplies of water, oil and other natural resources underlying the government's heavy reliance on foreign assistance. Jordan has strong connections with the Arab Sunnis in Anbar and other western Iraqi provinces who are fighting ISIS. With several Iraqi Sunni leaders already residing in Amman, Jordan can provide valuable intelligence to the anti-ISIS alliance. In addition, it would remain in Jordan's interest to ensure a strong, stable, moderate and unified Iraq in the long run, as it continues to work with Iraq, providing much needed military and intelligence support to combat extremist and terrorist groups operating in the country.

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Lebanon – Can the Islamic State Set the Cedar Country Aflame?

Marc Andre Siegrist

On 25 June 2014, Ali bin Ibrahim bin Ali alThuwaini, a Saudi Arabian national who was allegedly planning a suicide attack in Hezbollah's stronghold Dahieh, detonated a bomb in the Duroy Hotel located in Beirut's Raouche neighbourhood during a raid by the Lebanese General Security Department (GSD) forces. Both Ali bin Ibrahim bin Ali al Thuwaini and his associate, Abdul Rahman bin Nasser al Shunaifi were under attentive surveillance prior to the explosion. This incident, ordered by the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), marked the terrorist group's entrance into the Lebanese extremist and terrorist arena and preceded two suicide attacks against the police and the army. In recent years, Lebanon has seen an increasing number of extremist groups deploying the tactic of the suicide bomb attack, a trend which was largely absent from the Lebanese political scene since 2005, particularly after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

Background

Lebanon is not, a priori, a notable breeding ground for religious extremism and terrorism. Characterised by confessional diversity, Lebanon is a country with 18 officially recognised religious groups. Places of worship of every confession continue to exist side by side, reflecting the country's centuries-old heritage as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious intolerance. Although the country is no stranger to sectarian conflicts, the majority of the population in this small country supports peaceful coexistence. Modernisation and urbanisation has seen the movement of Lebanese Sunni community into urban centres. Lebanese Sunnis enjoy a much more open culture compared to other Sunni communities historically concentrated in rural regions like in Afghanistan or in the Iraqi 'Sunni Triangle' where traces of tribalism,

conservatism and fundamentalism are more significant.

The violent civil war, which began in 1975, lasted 15 years and took 120,000 lives, is a constant reminder that the coexistence between the 18 Lebanese sects is fragile and precious. The civil war was the consequence of numerous and inter-linked external as well as internal factors. External factors include the strong Israeli and Syrian involvement in Lebanese politics, the progressive militarisation of the Palestinian refugees since 1971, the spread of Pan-Arabism in the region, and the struggle for influence during the Cold War. Internal factors include the growth of Islamism in a country still largely led by Christians, the endemic distrust caused by relentless political alliances and betrayals, and the willingness or reluctance of sectarian groups to recalculate the demographic quotas to determine the balance of power in the confessional system. Some of these conditions are still present and could be exploited by ISIS in Lebanon to bring to surface sectarian tensions again.

Meanwhile, as ISIS is seeking to expand its foothold and territorial control across Iraq and Syria, Lebanon is an attractive target. Lebanon has served as an operational base for terrorists in the past. Throughout the 1970s, much of southern Lebanon was effectively under the control of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). From there, the PLO carried out periodic attacks against Israel until southern Lebanon was invaded by Israel in June 1982, in an effort to expel the group. Lebanon was also home to the Japanese Red Army, a communist militant group founded by Fusako Shigenobu in 1971 in Lebanon.

Lebanon: ISIS' Next Target?

ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi have been disavowed by many Islamists, especially for violent acts and discrimination and excommunication of Shias. From the ISIS perspective, challenging the Shias could bring it support, providing it with important gains to undermine the influence of Jabhat al Nusra in north Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley.

ISIS' stated goal is to establish a broader Islamic caliphate and to extend its territorial control beyond Iraq and Syria. With 7,000 to 20,000 Hezbollah militants fighting in Syria alongside the Bashar al Assad army since 2012, particularly in

“Lebanon has served as an operational base for terrorists in the past...”

areas such as the Eastern Ghouta region, Qalamou, Al-Qusayr, Deraa, Damascus, Homs and Idlib, Hezbollah has proved to be a serious threat to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's advance in Syria.

Due to its fighting experience, armament and large numbers, Hezbollah improved the pro-regime forces' effectiveness and helped Assad to retake certain areas held by the Syrian rebel groups. ISIS therefore seeks to weaken Hezbollah's popularity, legitimacy and potency, in order to negate Hezbollah's capabilities to intervene beyond Lebanon's borders. Its strategy has been to spread the conflict into Lebanon by first hurting the influence and reputation of the security forces, undermining the state's legitimacy and pushing the communities to organise into armed and anarchic self-defence groups.

Without state control, it would be easier for ISIS to ignite strife, inflame the latent sectarian tensions and raise the spectre of a civil war that may eventually force Hezbollah to leave Syria. Since July 2014, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) have been increasingly targeted by ISIS and its affiliates in Lebanon. Its strategy has been to spread the conflict into Lebanon by first hurting the influence and reputation of the security forces, undermining the state's legitimacy and pushing the communities to organise into armed and anarchic self-defence groups. Without state control, it would be easier for ISIS to ignite strife, inflame the latent sectarian tensions and raise the spectre of a civil war that may eventually force Hezbollah to leave Syria. Fighting on Lebanon's eastern border with Syria also continues to threaten stability, with on-going conflict in Arsal, in the Bekaa Valley bordering Syria.

Strategic Alliances and the Syrian Refugees

Despite its exceptional wealth, vast armament, considerable size (with an estimated 20,000 to 31,500 fighters) and the readiness to sacrifice of

its members, it is likely that ISIS does not have the necessary resources to stomach the costs of opening a third front in Lebanon to conduct large-scale military operations. Having found a common enemy in Hezbollah, ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra broke their traditional rivalries with their declared alliance on 25 January 2014. This alliance was confirmed with subsequent cooperation, sharing of hostages and the successive executions of the LAF and ISF members captured in Arsal. Encouraged and strengthened by its cooperation with Jabhat al Nusra, the Free Sunnis of Baalbek Brigade (a small pro-active home-grown anti-Hezbollah group which conducted several assassinations of Hezbollah operatives and suicide bombings in 2014) and the Abdullah Azzham Brigades - Ziad al Jarrah Battalion, ISIS has progressively engaged in more symmetric and direct fighting against the LAF and Hezbollah.

For example, the 7 August 2014 capture of 37 members of the security forces in Arsal, a Sunni town located near the porous Syria-Lebanon border, was carried out by the ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra and Abdullah Azzam Brigades, in a joint operation. In August 2014, ISIS beheaded two Lebanese soldiers in captivity. When ISIS militants beheaded the second of these soldiers, a Shia, on 9 August 2014, dozens of people took to the streets in an angry protest. On 19 September 2014, militants from Jabhat al Nusra executed an abducted soldier, the first instance of Jabhat al Nusra killing a captive. On the same day, a roadside bomb killed two LAF soldiers on the outskirts of Arsal leading to the arrest of more than 200 Syrian men most of whom had been sheltering in refugee camps, raising the refugees' anti-Sunni sentiment. On 24 September 2014, families and supporters of the abducted soldiers stepped up protests by blocking the main roads between Beirut and the Bekaa Valley to pressure the government to secure the soldiers' release.

Abou Talal Hamad's successor, Abou Abdel Salam al Ordoni had been appointed as ISIS's Emir in July 2014 in Lebanon. Abou Abdel Salam al Ordoni is a Palestinian who grew up in the refugee camps and directed several attacks in Lebanon, including the June 2014 Duroy hotel bombing. This Palestinian connection has generated a potential for ISIS to radicalise and recruit refugees in the camps. Firstly, the Syrian and the twelve Palestinian camps are nearly out of Lebanese jurisdiction and security forces' control due to their density, size and the presence of several terrorist organisations.

“Having found a common enemy in Hezbollah, ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra broke their traditional rivalries with their declared alliance on 25 January 2014...”

Traditionally, these terrorist organisations have used them as safehavens to conduct cross-border *fedayeen* (a type of voluntary militant group) operations in Israel. Secondly, despite the self-managed and carefully balanced peace, internal tensions among the refugees have proven highly inflammable as demonstrated by the violent 2008 clashes in the Ain al-Hilweh camp between Fatah al Islam (the main and moderate Palestinian political faction in Lebanon) and Jund al Sham (an anti-Fatah Salafist-radical group inspired by Al Qaeda). Finally, these camps, which are mostly populated by young Sunnis, suffer from overpopulation, unemployment and low education rates, making the inmates prime targets for ISIS propaganda. According to the Lebanese government estimate, there are now more than 1.6 million Syrian refugees, accounting for almost one-third of Lebanon's population. Besides the economic and social (particularly confessional) risks of instability brought about by the refugee influx, the indoctrination, mobilisation and armament of a small minority of them would pose a significant threat to the state's integrity. Many young Syrians have performed military service and are capable of handling weapons to potentially challenge the LAF.

Lebanon's Endemic Political Paralysis

ISIS will work at intensifying sectarian conflicts where the historical schism along Sunni-Shia lines has existed such as in Tripoli, Akkar, Hermel, the Bekaa Valley, Sidon on the Coastal highway, Tariq Jdeedeh and Corniche al-Mazraa in Beirut. Additionally, ISIS might carry out attacks targeting political centres, media outlets and embassies, soft targets like commercial and welfare centres in Christian, Alawite or Shia

strongholds like Dahiyeh, Ruwaiss and Bir al-Abed. However, it is not necessarily the violence of the attacks that is important, but rather the state's ability to prevent these attacks and manage the outcome if attacks take place.

Antagonism between the two rival coalitions, the pro-Assad 'March 8' alliance (led by the Shia Hezbollah and Amal and the Maronite Free Patriotic Movement) and the anti-Assad 'March 14' (composed of the Sunni Future Movement, the Maronite Lebanese Forces, Qornet Shehwan Gathering and the Progressive Socialist Party), and their efforts to accommodate their respective foreign patrons, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, has resulted in a serious political vacuum in the country.

In 2014, Lebanon's Interior Ministry, citing security concerns mainly from Islamist militants entrenched near the border with Syria, recommended against holding parliamentary elections. This prompted lawmakers to extend Parliament's mandate in November 2014 for two years and seven months. It was the second extension after Parliament voted to extend its term in May 2013 by 17 months on grounds that elections would constitute a major security risk given the fragile situation. From then, the Presidential seat has been empty since the end of Michel Sleiman's mandate in May 2014. Lacking national cohesion and strategic vision and unable to embrace essential reforms and take crisis-response measures, the Lebanese government appears deficient and uncoordinated, without the ability to promote a definite counterterrorism policy.

Besides, there is a lack of an efficient counterterrorism legal regime to counter the presence of ISIS' (and other extremist groups') infiltration into Lebanon. The capacity of the security apparatus to repel the wave of violence has also been compromised. While intelligence agencies hardly cooperate internally, they are being perceived as partial and affiliated with political parties from an external perspective. For instance, the LAF, long appreciated as the guardian of stability in Lebanon owing to its non-sectarian composition, has been accused of persecuting the Sunnis. ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra labeled the LAF the "Crusader Army" claiming that defection from an army traditionally commanded by a Maronite Christian, currently General Jean Kahwaji (who publicly expresses his admiration for Hezbollah) and with a mission to protect Shias and Christians is a religious

“ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra have tried to prevent the recruitment of Sunni conscripts and to lacerate the Lebanese army's reputation of sectarian neutrality by accusing it of collusion with Hezbollah.”

duty. ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra have tried to prevent the recruitment of Sunni conscripts and to lacerate the army's reputation of sectarian neutrality by accusing it of collusion with Hezbollah.

More concerning is the fact that the LAF is poorly armed and equipped, and had to rely on Hezbollah militants for several operations including border control. This has threatened the state's legitimacy and increased the feeling of humiliation and alienation of the Sunni community. In Aarsal, where 30,000 locals live alongside 120,000 Syrian refugees, there is an increased risk of the fall of the town to ISIS – similar to Mosul in Iraq in June 2014 – due to shortage of supplies, frustration and hatred of Hezbollah.

Building Trust and Increasing Legitimacy

Lebanon possesses several elements that could potentially lead to an explosive 'Iraqi scenario': weak security, inefficiency and disorganisation of state institutions, increasing economic impoverishment and political marginalisation of the Sunnis, radicalisation of Christian, Shia and Sunni communities due to the absence of a cohesive national identity, presence of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees and the formation of alliances among formerly rival terrorist groups.

Lacking the means to fight back a major attack, Lebanon would need to improve on its surveillance and interdiction capabilities in order to stop the infiltration of extremists, affirm its

legitimacy and diffuse sectarian tensions. This involves reforming and modernising the security apparatus with procurement of weapons, equipment and vehicles, training and balance of the confessional composition of the Lebanese Armed Forces. The LAF has been able to keep itself non-sectarian and secular even with the Hezbollah factor. Support for the Lebanese security forces has come from several countries, highlighted by a four-billion dollars Saudi grant aimed to equip Lebanon with American and French weapons.

Recognising the regional and international value of Lebanon's stability and the seriousness and imminent ISIS threat, the US, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria Hezbollah and Future Movement (the main Sunni political party in Lebanon), which usually have competing interests, have agreed to put aside their endemic rivalries. This cooperation is illustrated by unprecedented domestic and international intelligence sharing that has led to successful counter-ISIS operations. Domestically, the Sunni leaders engage in containing their community and bringing the Sunnis together in order to diffuse tensions and avoid sectarian clashes. For instance, Saad Hariri, the leader of the Future Movement (founded by Saad's murdered father Rafiq Hariri), who is regarded by many Lebanese Sunnis as their most charismatic and dedicated representative, regularly demonstrates his support to the LAF operations in Sunni strongholds while denouncing extremism and violence. On its own, Hezbollah also acknowledges that the assistance of the moderate, tolerant and pragmatic leaders and majority of the Lebanese Sunnis is indispensable to fight back extremism. The highly-publicised talks between the Future Movement and Hezbollah aiming at defusing sectarian tensions could be steps in the right direction towards cooperation among rival entities to build a stronger state capable of tackling the ISIS threat.

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Islamism in West Africa: Context and Enabling Factors

Mohammed Sulemana

This article examines the global, regional and local contours of Islamism in the Sahel-Sahara arc of West Africa and the variables that have initiated and/or sustained a tectonic transformation in the security dynamics of the sub-region making it a hotbed of militant jihadi activity of enormous geopolitical/geostrategic significance.

Introduction

West Africa is a vast expanse of ungoverned and dangerous spaces, making it a turf of political unrest and humanitarian and natural disasters. In recent years, however, it is religious extremism which has placed the sub-region under the global periscope. Although Ansar Dine in Mali seems to have been significantly contained, Nigeria appears to have no answer to Boko Haram, and the insurgency is unstoppable in its inhuman savagery. In Mauritania, there is an emergence of a nascent but dangerous wave of extremist thought, especially since 2007. While Malian and Mauritanian Islamism have links with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau has extended his global significance from having links with Al Shabaab in Somalia to declaring allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's Islamist vagabonds and execution squads in Syria and Iraq. It even makes sense to theorise that Islamist activities in West Africa have prompted a possible emergence of a 'new Middle East' in that part of the world.

'Africanistan', as an African replica of Afghanistan, refers to the Sahel-Sahara region due to the area's similarity in rugged, treacherous topography and climate to Islamist territory on the other side of the Red Sea. However, it is not climate and terrain alone that have earned the region this name. Islamists'

activity there does not occur in a vacuum, and there is a need therefore to genealogically examine the causal factors of this sudden geopolitical transformation.

This article examines the global, regional and local contours of Islamism in the Sahel-Sahara arc of West Africa. Four factors – the contemporary, historical, geographical and the socio-economic – are provided as the variables that have initiated and or sustained a tectonic transformation in the security dynamics of the sub-region, making it a hotbed of militant jihadist activity of enormous geopolitical/geostrategic significance. It is argued that it is these factors that should form the core of any sustainable attempt at quelling the Islamist threat in this part of Africa.

Contemporary Factor – Impact of 9/11

The events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) and the twin wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) did not mark the beginning of global jihad as we know it today. Rather these events pricked old wounds and accentuated the ideological hatred that would anchor global extremist thought in post-9/11 world. Over thirty years prior to these events, aggrieved elements in the Muslim world, such as Al Ikhwaan al Muslimoon (Muslim Brotherhood), had nursed the opportunity to contest what they considered ‘unjust’ creation of Israel in Palestine. More recent US and Western activities in other Muslim territories also reinforced the perception of deliberate subjugation by many in the Muslim world, including in West Africa. While it is true that African insurgencies are triggered by local factors, the effect of the global wave of militant thought is also crucial. What makes global jihad ‘global’ is an ideology that pays no respect to Westphalian notions of national sovereignty. Indeed, groups like Ansar Dine, Boko Haram and Ansar al Sharia have demonstrated willingness to identify with the global jihadist current represented by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). Ironically as well, intervention, especially by external powers, to counter these groups has been counterproductive, further hardening the jihadist tinge of Islamism in the region.

Historical Roots of Militancy

The Islamist narrative in West Africa has also tended to be a natural progression of historical events leading to their contemporary ideational

“Four factors – the contemporary, historical, geographical and the socio-economic – are provided as the variables that have initiated and or sustained a tectonic transformation in the security dynamics of the Sahel-Sahara arc sub-region of West Africa.”

resuscitation. As Ali Mazrui put it, generally, contemporary Islam has been described as ‘a lament of how the mighty have fallen’ and ‘a whimper for restoration and revivalism’. In West Africa, both the lament of ‘fallen Islam’ and hopes of reviving and restoring the glorious history of Islamic civilisation are very real. West Africa has seen some of the world’s mighty empires, and almost all were predominantly Muslim, if not Islamic. This history of ‘mighty Islam’ in West Africa resonates with the glory of more recent Islamic empires such as the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Sokoto Caliphate. Notions of the might of Islam have been a glorious and vivid part of collective Muslim memory in the region. The jihadist narrative in West Africa has positioned Islamism as the transition between humiliation and glory, between lament and hope. In this sense, like the belief that the establishment of a caliphate in Sudan would hasten the coming of the Islamic Mahdi (Messiah), religious fanatics in West Africa have tended to believe that the only way to hasten the return of ‘mighty Islam’ in the region is armed jihad.

Thus, in West Africa as elsewhere, Islamic revivalism has tended to be messianic, as Islamists believe their actions to be acts of absolution. In Nigeria, a demonstration of this is the Maitatsine Movement of the 1980s, led by

Cameroonian Mohammed Marwa who claimed to be an Islamic Mahdi, and the rescuer of Islam from the rotten entrails of Western democracy. The ongoing Boko Haram insurgency is a post-9/11 offshoot of Maitatsine. This is also same in respect of other terrorist groups in West Africa, i.e. in Mali, Chad and Mauritania.

Geography and Demography

Geography and demography also provide a regional context for the rise of Islamism in West Africa. This has two strands: cultural and religious. The cultural context is manifested in the affinity of the Sahel-Sahara sub-region to the Arab world through North Africa. An illustration of this geopolitical thrust of extremism is demonstrated by the 2011 Libyan revolution that toppled the Muammar Gaddafi government and impacted rather severely on the security of the Sahel-Sahara region. Proximity in terms of culture as well as the physical terrain has facilitated infiltration of Islamist fighters in to the region and the proliferation of unregulated weapons. At the same time, Mazrui writes that “West Africa is the heartland of Black Africa’s Islam”. The Sahel-Sahara region has fallen prey to the Islamist rhetoric just as other regions with large Muslim populations.

These links, combined with a wide expanse of de-securitized space and treacherous and hostile desert landscape, have made it rather conducive to a large-scale infiltration of extremist Islamist ideology. After all, if the turf of terrorism in the Middle East is a treacherous desert, so too are terror activities in the Sahel-Sahara. If the Middle East is predominantly Muslim and Arab, the Sahel-Sahara region is preponderantly ‘Arabised’ and Muslim.

Socio-economic Factors

Besides the above, socio-economic factors are also fundamental in explaining Islamism in the region. As the proponents of the relative deprivation theory argue, terrorism, especially in developing countries, thrives on socio-economic disenfranchisement of the local population. As Robert D. Kaplan reminds us, “Where there is mass poverty, people find liberation in violence”. Thus, in their desperation to find a livelihood and a source of income and belonging, those frustrated masses become easy prey to rampaging radicalism. The primary factor for the emergence of Boko Haram in Nigeria is the acute inequality in wealth, pervasiveness of

“In West Africa, supporters and adherents of militant jihad have tended to be aggrieved by contemporary and post-9/11 events both in the region and in the Middle East.”

poverty and resultant dissatisfaction especially and mostly of the youth in the North.

Conclusion

All the above conditions provide pieces of the jigsaw to fit an explanation for Islamism in West Africa today. In *What Terrorists Want*, Louise Richardson argues that terrorism requires three conditions to thrive: a disenfranchised and aggrieved set of individuals, a supportive group and a legitimising ideology. In West Africa, supporters and adherents of militant jihad have tended to be aggrieved by contemporary and post-9/11 events both in the region and in the Middle East. In venting their grievances, Muslim terrorism has drawn from Salafi-Jihadism as a legitimising ideology. This ideology’s defining characteristic is, as Christian Leuprecht says, its narrative of legitimising “violent struggle to defend Islam against the crusader West”. For this ideology to be effective, however, there must also be a “charismatic sender, a susceptible receiver, a powerful message, and internal and external contexts that support the transmittal”, according to Tito Karnavian. Whilst global factors such as the very nature of contemporary Islamism have bred limitless charismatic but heretical proponents of the Islamist message, local factors have created susceptible, poor and vulnerable receivers. While the message is militant, hence powerful, regional and geographical factors have provided “internal and external contexts” that support the transmittal of the Islamist message.

The lesson from the foregoing is that any policy package designed to respond to Islamism in this region of the world must be pursued on the premise that terror activities that dwell on religious puritanism have only been a strategy of mobilisation, and that the role of religion in the jihadi appeal of terror groups has an opportunistic ring of *realpolitik* to it. Thus, the above factors, especially the regional and local, must be at the core of any anti-jihadi policy if we are to extinguish the geopolitical and security threat posed by militant Islamism in West Africa.

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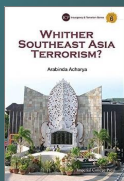
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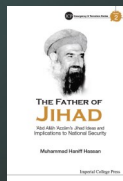
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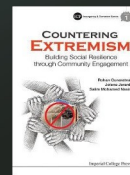
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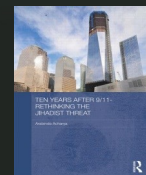
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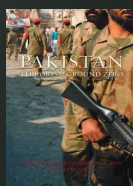
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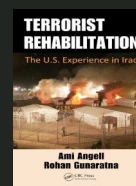
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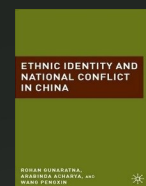
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