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The Paris Attacks: Ramping Up of ISIS “Indirect Strategy”?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

Synopsis

The recent Paris attacks claimed by ISIS may well represent an intensification of its indirect strategy of bypassing Western coalition military might and striking directly at the soft underbelly of coalition capitals: its civilian populations.

Commentary

ON 13 NOVEMBER 2015, the French capital city of Paris was rocked by bloody mayhem on a scale not seen since the Second World War. Three teams of attackers, employing urban swarming tactics of the kind last evidenced during the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, struck at separate locations, including a rock concert, restaurants and the vicinity of a soccer stadium where a match between the national teams of France and Germany was underway.

Almost 130 people were killed and scores more were maimed. The Paris attacks represent an intensification of the indirect strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). To appreciate this strategic thrust however one must first understand the goals of the ISIS leadership.

Raising the costs of involvement in Syria, Iraq

At one level, its key senior leaders are apparently driven by a puritanical religious zeal to ensure that their almost 18-month old Islamic Caliphate expands worldwide. They are grounded enough nevertheless, to equally acknowledge that such grand designs will mean nothing unless they are able to first consolidate their territorial writ in Iraq and Syria in the face of the US-led coalition – and most recently, Russian - air

campaigns that have helped prevent the collapse of the incumbent indigenous governments in both Damascus and Baghdad.

ISIS – which includes seasoned military professionals who once formed the backbone of the Iraqi Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein – recognise that it lacks the aggregate combat power to directly take on and defeat the combined military might of the US, UK, French and other coalition allies. Rather than a direct strategy therefore, ISIS has opted for an indirect one – where the military might of its enemies is bypassed and the politically vulnerable soft underbellies of the Western coalition – its civilian populations, are deliberately targeted instead.

The strategic calculation is simple: raise the domestic costs of Western coalition diplomatic and military involvement in Syria and Iraq - via unrestricted urban terrorism of the kind the world has just witnessed - to politically unsustainable levels and the anti-ISIS coalition might just fracture. This, it should be pointed out, is not an entirely a new idea. In 2004, following the Madrid train bombings by an Al Qaeda-linked terrorist cell, the Spanish authorities withdrew from involvement in US-led coalition operations in Iraq.

Origins of indirect strategy

The indirect strategy of ISIS was first inaugurated in September 2014, when its spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani – in response to the Obama administration's launching of airstrikes against it in August - called upon ISIS supporters worldwide to engage in so-called "lone wolf" attacks within the homelands of the Western coalition. This has been heeded.

A couple of months after al-Adnani's call, a 25-year old ISIS-inspired lone wolf, Martin Roulea, ran over two Canadian soldiers in a Montreal parking lot before being killed by police. In January 2015, 20-year old Christopher Cornell was arrested by the FBI for a plot to open fire on US government officials and the Israeli embassy. He claimed to have been acting on behalf of ISIS.

Six months later, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, al-Adnani urged ISIS supporters to turn it into "a month of disasters, defeats and disgrace for the kuffar [infidels] everywhere". Subsequently, in the Tunisian tourist resort of Port el Kantaoui near the coastal city of Sousse, 20-year old Rafik el Chelly shot dead 37 mainly Western civilians near the beachside Rui Imperial Hotel. Within three hours of this attack, in the French city of Lyon the manager of an American-owned firm was beheaded by a lone attacker; while in Kuwait City, a lone suicide bomber attacked a Shia mosque.

Major shift in ISIS strategy

By contrast, the latest Paris attacks seem a qualitative change in comparison with other lone wolf incidents since al-Adnani's September 2014 clarion call. There are four features. First, surviving eyewitnesses have described how calm, clinical and professional the assailants appeared to be, which suggests training rather than amateurish improvisation as would have been the case of genuine lone wolves.

Second, ISIS itself has claimed direct responsibility for the assault, declaring in a statement released on 14 November via Twitter and pro-ISIS Telegram channels – and verified by authoritative sources such as the SITE Intelligence Group. ISIS claimed that eight “soldiers of the Caliphate” attacked Paris, the “capital of prostitution and obscenity” and the “carrier of the banner of the Cross in Europe”.

Third, though police investigations in France and neighbouring Belgium are continuing, it seems clear that rather than a lone wolf operation, the Paris attacks were planned in Syria and carried out by a sleeper cell in Belgium, based within the widely acknowledged radical Islamist extremist stronghold of Molenbeek, “a run-down east Brussels commune that has long been a magnet for jihadists, gangs, drugs and lawlessness”.

Fourth and finally, it seems clear that the Paris attacks herald the start of a more concerted effort by ISIS to destabilise and if possible split the coalition arrayed against it, starting with France, in recent months the Western country that has been arguably the most aggressive in its attacks on the Al Qaeda offshoot. What should not be lost on observers is the warning in the ISIS statement that “this attack is the first of the storm and a warning to those who wish to learn”.

Harbinger of things to come?

As it turns out, a few days before the Paris attack, two ISIS operatives blew themselves up in a crowded marketplace in a Hezbollah stronghold in the multi-ethnic district of Bourj al-Barajneh in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 44 people. In early November, moreover, a Russian Metrojet commercial aircraft crashed in the Sinai, killing all 224 aboard. Analysts believe a bomb destroyed the aircraft in mid-air, and ISIS has claimed responsibility for this attack as well.

In short, rather than prosecuting an indirect strategy by just relying on isolated lone wolves inspired by the general ISIS message to conduct piecemeal attacks, Paris, and possibly the Metrojet and Beirut cases, hint at a significant refinement and intensification of this indirect tack.

ISIS may well have also decided to use trained sleeper cells, comprising a combination of homegrown extremists and returning, trained fighters from Syria and Iraq, to engage in sophisticated and purposefully coordinated urban terrorism, targeting soft civilian targets in various coalition capitals. The Paris incident may thus be the harbinger of what is to come. As far as the coalition is concerned, therefore, to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

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