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Terror threat: New approach needed

By Rohan Gunaratna

TERRORISM will continue to be the pre-eminent national security threat in most countries in 2009.

More terrorist groups will adopt Al-Qaeda's methodology and ideology. Using vehicle- and human-borne suicide attackers, terrorist groups in Asia, Africa and the Middle East will mount spectacular attacks against high profile, symbolic and iconic targets in urban cities.

The phased withdrawal of United States-led coalition forces from Iraq will create greater instability in that country and beyond. The Iraqi forces will fail to contain the violence. Iran will expand its covert and overt influence in Iraq. The threat from Iraq will spread to the Levant, Europe and beyond. Unless the US is pragmatic in its withdrawal plans, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates will use Iraq as a forward operational base to mount operations in the Middle East, North and Eastern Africa and the West.

Despite a dramatic increase in coalition forces in Afghanistan, the terrorist threat there will persist. Stability in Afghanistan rests on clearing terrorist enclaves on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area (Fata) remains the epicentre of global terrorism. Unless and until the international community assists Islamabad to dismantle Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taleban infrastructure in tribal Pakistan, the threat will continue.

Conflict zones in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and in South Asia will witness the highest level of threat. Groups operating in these zones will conduct Al-Qaeda-style long-range terrorist operations in neighbouring regions and countries in the global south. The terrorist threat will be lowest in North-east Asia (except Xinjiang) followed by South-east Asia (except Indonesia).

The threat to North America, Europe and Australia will largely stem from politicised and radicalised segments of migrant and diaspora communities. By increasing their penetration of radicalised segments of these communities, Western security agencies will be able to manage the threat.

The US-led coalition intervention in Iraq in March 2003 was a huge waste of resources - both human and material. US political incompetence distracted and diverted limited specialist military and intelligence resources from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Middle East. Seven years after the Sept 11 terror attacks, Al-Qaeda's leadership is still at large.

There are more threat groups and greater Muslim participation and support for violence today than was before Sept 11. The new US President is likely to invest in strategic counter terrorism - ideological, educational, developmental, media - aimed at winning Muslim hearts and minds.

The global terrorist threat stems largely from conflict zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Algeria, India (Kashmir), Russia (Chechnya) and China (Xinjiang) where Muslims are suffering. Both virulent ideologies and operational capabilities in such conflict zones spill over to neighbouring regions and countries. While the bulk of the terrorist attacks will be detected and disrupted in the planning and preparation stages, a few attacks will be successful.

Operating out of Fata, Al-Qaeda has been transformed from an operational organisation into a training and ideological movement. Using Al Sahab (The Cloud) - Al-Qaeda's multimedia arm - Ayman Al Zawahiri, the deputy leader of Al-Qaeda, and his son-in-law Abd-al Rahman Al Maghrebi, have radicalised Muslims both in the Global South and among migrant/diaspora communities in the West.

In 2009, Al-Qaeda will forge more partnerships with like-minded regional groups. Local groups adopting the name Al-Qaeda will become a trend.

A number of threat groups in the Palestinian territories will be inspired by Al-Qaeda. Although the bulk of the attacks will be mounted by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Al Qsa Martyr's Brigade, 2009 will witness both the emergence and strengthening of Al-Qaeda-inspired groups in the Palestinian territories, especially after the recent Israeli raids on Gaza.

The greatest security challenge for the world in 2009 is to counter political and religious extremism, the precursor of terrorism. Although operational and intelligence capabilities have been adequately built up in the Muslim world, the West now needs to build global capabilities to counter the extremist message. The most important ingredient in winning the fight is to restore the Muslim goodwill that the West has lost. The US especially should remove Muslim mistrust and suspicion of its intentions.

The terrorists won sufficient public sympathy and support largely due to misinformed and misguided Western actions, primarily the US-led invasion of Iraq. The US must convince the Muslim world that America under President Barack Obama will be significantly different. This will be a monumental challenge.

Instead of promoting democracy, investing in economic development will result in Muslims themselves wanting greater political participation and representation. The US, Europe and Australia will need to invest in initiatives and partnerships to prevent the political and economic marginalisation of Muslims both at home and abroad.

The key to winning the fight is to build lasting partnerships between enlightened Western and mainstream Muslim leaders and their institutions to counter extremism. As terrorism is a by-product of extremism, it is paramount to counter the misinterpretation of religious messages to justify acts of violence. Every Islamic and Muslim school can be tapped as a vanguard to build future peace.

The West will also need to be more sensitive to Muslim sensibility. The publication in Denmark of a caricature of the Prophet, the Dutch release of the controversial film Fitna and the American use of provocative terminology such as 'crusade' and 'Islamic terrorism' all work in favour of the extremists.

Without Muslim public support, the fight against terrorism and extremism will be lost. Without building an enduring partnership between the West and the Muslim world, the fight cannot be won.

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