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Terrorism Threat in 2008

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2008 will test the political will of the international community to fight insurgency and terrorism especially in Iraq, Tribal Pakistan and Afghanistan. With the impending withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and the growing instability in Pakistan following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the terrorist threat is likely to spread in 2008.

AL QAEDA, its associated groups and its homegrown cells will pose the most dominant threat to the United States, its allies and its friends in 2008. The Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim countries will suffer the brunt of terrorism by Al Qaeda and its associated groups. Nonetheless, the US and their European and Australian allies will witness periodic spectacular attacks mounted primarily by homegrown cells. In the spectrum of Muslim and non-Muslim groups, Al Qaeda-directed and inspired groups will pose the single biggest threat.

Epicenters of terrorism

The principal ideological and operational threat will stem from two international epicenters of terrorism – Iraq in the Middle East and Tribal Pakistan. Although Al Qaeda has suffered significantly since 9-11, the group has been able to re-establish a presence by working with like-minded groups. For instance, Al Qaeda co-opted Tawhid Wal Jihad, now operating as Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Levant; Al Qaeda also co-opted the Salafist Group for Call and Combat, now operating as Al Qaeda organization of the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria, North Africa and in Europe. By co-opting, Al Qaeda transferred its operational practice of mass fatality suicide attacks and ideological reference of targeting the US, its allies and friends.

In the Middle East, the Levant, North Africa, and to a lesser extent the Arabian Peninsula will suffer from terrorist attacks in 2008. Likewise in Asia, South Asia will suffer most from terrorism followed by Central Asia and Southeast Asia. With the exception of Xinjiang in China, the threat of terrorism to Northeast Asia will be low. Similarly, Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Eastern and Horn of Africa, governments, the private sector and the society will suffer from intermittent terrorist attacks. Over

80% of the attacks will be using guns and bombs. With suicide being adopted as a popular tactic, more groups will conduct both vehicle-borne and human-borne suicide attacks.

Key Developments

Three key developments will characterise the global security landscape in 2008.

First, together with the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban, Al Qaeda has established an "Al Qaedaistan", an enclave in tribal Pakistan. Similar to Afghanistan under Afghan Taliban, the developments in this enclave will threaten the international community.

Second, with the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces, the Iraqi security forces and its intelligence community will not be competent to fight both foreign and domestic groups including Al Qaeda in Iraq led by Abu Ayub al Masri.

Third, outside conflict zones, the homegrown terrorist threat will emerge as the most dominant threat. Some homegrown cells will establish links with transnational groups for training, finance, and inspiration.

As result of the gigantic investment in propaganda by Al Qaeda, radicalism is moving from the periphery to the centre of the Muslim community. Furthermore, the suffering, humiliation and anger of the Muslims resulting from the US invasion of Iraq are being exploited by Al Qaeda and its associated groups to recruit and generate support. Both in the territorial and migrant Muslim communities, the scale of radicalisation is on the rise.

Driven by virulent propaganda disseminated by Al Qaeda and its associated groups, these self radicalised cells within the migrant and diaspora as well as territorial communities pose a vibrant threat. While well-structured groups such as Al Qaeda and its associated groups originating from the global South will pose an enduring threat, the homegrown cells present an equally sinister threat to the West. Unlike the well-structured groups with a leadership, membership and a support base, the homegrown cells are difficult to detect. Where well-structured terrorist groups are not operating, the more significant threat stems from homegrown cells.

Threat Trends

The ideology of so-called "jihad" advocated by militant Muslim groups will spread in the Muslim world. With the false belief spreading that the US is purposely killing Muslims and deliberately attacking Islam, waging "jihad" to defend the faith and the faithful is gathering momentum in parts of the Muslim world. The Western world, in partnership with the Muslim world, has not been successful in waging a sustained and a robust campaign to counter the ideology and propaganda of these threat groups.

With Al Qaeda seeking to unify disparate Muslim groups waging local campaigns, most threat groups are coming together. Al Qaeda has created a number of real and virtual platforms to promote cooperation and collaboration. These groups will share among other capabilities, human expertise (mostly trainers), technology (mostly bomb-making) and finance. By dispatching ideologues, combat trainers and financiers to conflict zones, Al Qaeda will increase the threat in 2008. As suicide attacks in Iraq have influenced Afghanistan beginning in 2004, Al Qaeda will transfer or influence other groups to emulate its operational practices.

Al Qaeda suffered the loss of its state of the art training infrastructure in Afghanistan. But Al Qaeda has created training opportunities in tribal Pakistan, Iraq as well as in conflict zones of Asia, Middle East and Africa. For instance, Mohamed Siddique Khan and Ibrahim Saeed, the leaders of the July 7

and July 21 attacks in London, trained in tribal Pakistan. With the rise of threat groups in Pakistan and Iraq, they have established linkages to radicalised segments of Muslim migrant and diaspora communities. Al Qaeda training, directly or through its associated groups and the Internet, is of a major concern and a challenge to governments.

To generate more recruits and support, the head of Al Qaeda's Media Committee Abu Abdel Rahman al Maghrebi, who is the son-in-law of Al Qaeda's number two Dr Ayman al Zawahiri, will invest more in propaganda. As in 2007, where Al Qaeda released a video every three days, Al Shahab, the video production arm of Al Qaeda's Media Office, will invest in propaganda to indoctrinate Muslims both in the Muslim world and beyond. By instilling the belief that "it is the duty of every Muslim to wage jihad," Al Qaeda seeks to radicalise the Muslim community. The mainstream Muslim leaders have failed to match the gigantic investment Al Qaeda has made to politicise and mobilise the Muslim masses.

Promote market economies, not democracy

Unless the West works closely with the Muslim world, the threat of terrorism and extremism will spread in 2008. Instead of promoting democracy, it may be more important for the US to promote market economies in the Muslim world. With economic growth and development, the people themselves will want greater representation. The partnership between the West and the Muslim world is crucial to reduce the misunderstanding between their governments and peoples.

At the tactical and operational levels, investment in intelligence has proved to be the most useful ingredient in fighting terrorism. As intelligence is the spearhead of counter terrorism, it will become important to continue to invest in developing human source penetration and technical intelligence capabilities. With high grade, high quality intelligence, especially human intelligence, the threat of terrorism and extremism can be managed.

While operational counter terrorism is essential to reduce the immediate threat, it is necessary for governments to develop strategic projects to engage the Muslim community. Without building bridges to the Muslim community, it will be difficult to contain and counter the spread of the virulent ideology spread by Al Qaeda and its associated groups. Working with the religious and educational institutions and the media sector, governments will be able to inform the community that groups such as Al Qaeda, Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, Hizbut Tahrir and Jemaah Islamiyah are not Koranic but deviant groups. For governments and communities under threat, a theologian is as important as a counter terrorism practitioner.

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