THE TERRORIST THREAT ASSESSMENT 2020

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Abstract

The Islamic State (IS) centric threat has spread to Africa and Asia. In Sub Saharan Africa, the threat is growing in the Sahel and, in Asia, the threat is growing in South Asia. The IS influence in Africa is growing, with attacks in Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Somalia. The IS suffered very serious setbacks in Iraq and Syria throughout 2019 but expanded to other parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. All indications are that Afghanistan is likely to emerge as an alternative IS headquarters. Regarding the relations between al Qaeda and IS, the two movements, that are ideological akin, are likely to merge if not work together at least in some theatres. If so, the global threat to governments and communities will increase exponentially.

Keywords: Terrorism, Islamic State, Al Qaeda, threat assesment in 2020, terrorist operations in Asia

Titulo en Castellano: La Amenaza Terrorista en 2020

Resumen

La amenaza centrada del Estado Islámico (EI) se ha extendido a Africa y Asia. En Africa subsahariana, la amenaza está creciendo en el Sahel y en Asia, la amenaza está creciendo en el sur de Asia. La influencia de EI en Africa este crecimiento se puede constatar en los ataques en El Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Níger, Chad, Malí, Burkina Faso y Somalia. El EI sufrió muy serias derrotas en Irak y Siria a lo largo de 2019, pero se expandió a otras partes de Oriente Medio, Africa y Asia. Todo indica que es probable que Afganistán acabe siendo una sede alternativa de EI. En cuanto a las relaciones entre Al Qaeda y EI, es probable que los dos movimientos que son afines ideológicamente, probablemente se fusionen o al menos trabajen juntos en algunos teatros. Si esto tiene lugar, la amenaza global para los gobiernos y las comunidades aumentará exponencialmente.

Palabras Clave: Terrorismo, Estado Islámico, Al Qaeda, Amenaza terrorista en 2020, Operaciones en Asia

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1. Introduction

In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State (IS) suffered a series of battlefield defeats culminating in the loss of total territorial control. The IS lost its last stronghold, Baghuz, on March 23, 2019 to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), assisted by American-led coalition airstrikes, artillery, and special forces personnel. To survive and sustain the fight, the IS expanded its territories outside Iraq and Syria.

The global IS network did not only kill, maim, and injure, they also destroy and damage property and vehicles. Moreover, the eastward shift towards Asia – a region with a large Muslim population – became a fertile for radicalization and recruitment. IS restructured its Wilayat in South Asia by appointing new leaders or declaring new provinces following attacks in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, three countries with 300 million Muslims. In Asia, epicenter of terrorism is spreading to Afghanistan, an alternative IS base and the likely HQ of IS external operations in Asia.

2. The Context

A review of the attacks outside Iraq and Syria demonstrates that the IS centric threat has spread to Africa and Asia. In Sub Saharan Africa, the threat is growing in the Sahel and, in Asia, the threat is growing in South Asia.

The IS influence in Africa's deep south with attacks in Congo and Mozambique, is unprecedented. They have also claimed successful attacks in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Somalia. Additionally, they mounted a catastrophic attack against churches and hotels which disrupted social harmony. However, IS operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan resulted in the killing and injury of mostly Muslim civilians.

3. Background

The rise of Islamist groups in Asia is traced to the anti-Soviet multinational Afghan mujahidin campaign. After the defeat of the Soviets, the foreign fighters remained in tribal Pakistan and Afghanistan. They formed Al Qaeda in 1988 and Afghan Taliban in 1995, the main threat groups in Afghanistan.

With the rise of IS after 2014, the Taliban, a group aligned to al Qaeda, opposes IS. The Taliban remains the dominant actor. However, the recently established wilayah Khorasan in Afghanistan is gaining strength and is beginning to challenge Taliban's dominance in the region. The current strength of IS in Afghanistan is approximately 2,000 fighters, Taliban active fighters is approximately 60,000, and Taliban sympathizers and supporters at approximately 100,000. While the number of IS fighters are comparatively smaller, they are better organized and presents a growing threat to both the Afghan government and the Taliban. In the coming years, IS will diminish in Syria and Iraq and expand in South Asia. In the eastern provinces of Afghanistan, IS became a strong militant force to the extent of displacing the Afghan Taliban's militarily as they have driven the Taliban fighters out of some districts. With Pakistani security forces hunting IS actively on its soil, IS fighters of Pakistani origin are largely located in Afghanistan.

The IS presence in Afghanistan has implications for the Taliban peace talks with the US and Pakistan talks. The Taliban continued to emphasize that their aspirations for an Islamic government in Afghanistan. These demands would continue in the light of the growing IS strength and ruthlessness. The peace talks are unlikely to succeed in the near horizon as the Afghan Taliban is unwilling to compromise and accommodate the Afghan government in a power sharing arrangement.

The number of IS operatives in Pakistan is a few hundred, but the Islamist threat is significant in Pakistan. More IS fighters operate in Afghanistan. They operate openly, hold territory, and their strength is rapidly growing with several foreigners joining the movement. In Pakistan, the numbers are far smaller and run mostly in covert cells but they are the key thinkers and strategists. Although they are ideologically and operationally close, Afghanistan and Pakistan IS leadership operates independently.

3.1 Central Asia Threat

Increasingly, IS Khorasan is focusing on Afghanistan and Central Asia. About 5,500 Central Asian citizens and Central Asians living abroad joined the fight in Iraq and Syria. They include approximately 2,000 from Uzbekistan, 1,300 - 2,000 from Tajikistan, approximately 850 from Kyrgyzstan and 500 - 600 from Kazakhstan.

Most of the Central Asians recruited by IS and Hayat Takhir al-Sham (HTS) lived outside Central Asia mostly in the Gulf and Russia. With IS loses, the wives and children of IS fighters were repatriated to Central Asia. Although the Central Asians are generally not with IS, their presence in Syria remains significant. HTS serves as IS' rival. It is based in Idlib and Hama and holds thousands of Central Asian fighters. The dedicated structures of Central Asians in HTS are Katibah Tawhid Wal Jihad, Katibah Imam Bukhari, and Turkistan Islamic Party-Levant. Malhama Tactical, a training unit led by Russian fighters trained Central and South Asian fighters. The Indonesian al Qaeda-centric group – Abu Ahmed Foundation – provides funds to Malhama Tactical.

3.2 South Asia Threat

The IS declared dedicated a series of wilayah in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India, the IS threat has grown with the declarations. The IS threat on both sides of the Af-Pak border and India will grow. To coincide with the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, Wilayat as Sylani was declared by the perpetrating group on April 21, 2019.

In its infographic, IS reported, “Executing a series of attacks on Christian churches and hotels in which reside nationals from international coalition countries, and against Sri Lankan police and security personnel, all of which resulted in killing and injuring over 1000 of them.”

“Thawgit and the kuffar in the world were really forced to admit how wrong they had announced the Islamic State was defeated a month ago, their error was reinforced by evidence of a Sri Lanka bomb attack and the emergence of Caliph Abu Bakar Al Baghady in the latest Al Furqan Production video, which even previously the kuffar media made fake news that the caliph had been killed.”

The threat in South Asia included attacks in India and Bangladesh demonstrating a significant rise in operations in the South.

Wilayah al-Hind (India) was announced in May 10, 2019. IS statement claimed an attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir. An IS statement issued on May 15 claimed an attack on a police officer in the Mastung area, Quetta in Pakistan on May 12 and against Taliban movement” also in Quetta. IS in Afghanistan attempted to infiltrate tribal Pakistan and then mainland Pakistan. Although Pakistani authorities are fighting back, IS is stepping up its operations by targeting law enforcement officers in Pakistan. The threat to Pakistan will increase from IS with drawdown of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

3.3 Afghanistan: Alternative Theatre

In 2018 and 2019, Afghanistan emerged as the alternative from Syria for foreign fighters. With the difficulties of transit through Pakistan, foreign fighters are travelling through Iran to

Afghanistan. With challenge of traveling to Iraq and Syria, foreign fighters are joining both IS Khorosan and Afghan Taliban to fight US, NATO and Afghan forces. The nationalities of one of earliest batches of foreign fighters that traveled to Afghanistan according to the Our Eyes database are:

- (1) Abdullah Tajikistani from Tajikistan
- (2) Abu Zahra Uzbekistani from Uzbekistan
- (3) Abu Mohammad Al Jazaeri from Algeria
- (4) Abu Hanif al Indonesi from Indonesia
- (5) Saad Kazakhstani from Kazakhstan
- (6) Abu Maryam al Faransi from France
- (7) Maaz Tajikistani from Tajikistan
- (8) Farooq Uzbekistani from Uzbekistan
- (9) Sabir al Indonesi from Indonesia
- (10) Abdu Abdullah Uzbekistani from Uzbekistan
- (11) Saifur Rahman Uzbekistani from Uzbekistan
- (12) Abu Dujana al Turki from Turkey
- (13) Zubair Uzbekistan from Uzbekistan
- (14) Abu Saleh Tajikistani from Tajikistan
- (15) Abu Saifullah Uzbekistani from Uzbekistan
- (16) Abdullah Tajikistani from Tajikistan
- (17) Furqan from Tajikistan
- (18) Shabab Jawzjani from Jawzjan province of Afghanistan
- (19) Abu Huzaifa Tajikistani from Tajikistan
- (20) Abu Muslim al Kyrgyz from Kyrgyzstan

The fighter national composition demonstrated the future threat to Central Asia and other regions including Southeast Asia. A key Indonesian IS leader Chaniago Saifullllah from west Sumatra coordinating operations in Southeast Asia was killed in Afghanistan by US forces in August 2019. Although D88 confirms at least 11 Indonesian fighters and family members in Afghanistan, the numbers are likely higher. The buildup was not only for training but to safely locate key leaders who direct operations.

3.4 The threat in Southeast Asia

The single biggest attack in Southeast Asia in 2019 was an Indonesian couple – both deportees from Turkey seeking entry to Iraq and Syria – bombing the Jolo Cathedral in January 2019. Amaq reported “Repulsing several attacks by the Filipino army, and executing an Istishhadi attack on the largest base for special forces on the Sulu islands”. Suicide attacks by foreigners and locals threaten the Filipino landscape mainly in the Sulu region.

The Southeast Asian threat landscape was largely shaped by the developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1990s and Iraq and Syria in the 2000s and 2010s. The leaders of a dozen terrorist and insurgent groups from Southeast Asia were educated in the Middle East and North Africa and a thousand fighters of their groups trained in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Like the al

Qaeda trained Southeast Asian terrorists who mounted the bulk of the attacks in the 2000s, those trained by IS will mount bulk of the attacks in the decade starting with 2020.

4. Conclusion

The IS suffered in Iraq and Syria throughout 2019 but expanded to other parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia. All indications are that Afghanistan is likely to emerge as an alternative IS headquarters.

The global command structures of al Qaeda and IS stretches from Africa to the Caucasus and the Middle East to Asia. Both al Qaeda and IS have coopted local groups and built capabilities to expand their influence by mounting attacks and disseminating propaganda to recruit. They also direct or motivate personalities, cells and networks in the West that carry out attacks. Although their local affiliates cooperate on occasions, the IS-Al Qaeda leadership dispute compel them more to compete with each other. After the death of the incumbent leaders, the two movements that are ideological akin are likely to merge if not work together at least in some theaters. If so the global threat to governments and communities will increase exponentially.