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Is al-Awlaki the No. 1 Enemy? Setting the Priorities Right

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Synopsis

In the counterterrorism scene today where nations are quick to tag along the bandwagon initiated by the United States, policymakers must remember to stay focused and not risk obscuring the actual target – the terrorist ideology regardless of its propagator.

Commentary

THE DIRECTOR of the US National Counterterrorism Centre, Michael Leiter, announced on 9 February 2010, at a hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security, that "the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) with Awlaki as the leader within that organisation (is) probably the most significant risk to the US Homeland". The media was quick to frame the story and declare Anwar al-Awlaki as the 'U.S No. 1 Public enemy'. There are several implications to this.

Firstly, Leiter's senior position within the administration implies the seriousness of al-Awlaki's threat to US security in the eyes of the US authorities. Secondly, this perception through strong media headlines such as, "Hunting down Anwar al-Awlaki, Public Enemy No.1" is most likely to gain the attention of a large audience nationally and internationally, simultaneously spreading the US-centric perception worldwide.

This may have an impact on the overall direction of the global fight against new terrorism today, which is influenced by the US as the 'Global War on Terror (GWOT)'. This is especially so with the strong links that the US has established with counterterrorism initiatives throughout the world, from Europe and United Kingdom to Asia. Furthermore, the US is still a continuing superpower and has shown its tremendous influence through the global spread of this campaign since it was first launched in 2001.

The al-Awlaki Threat to the US

It is understandable why the US would regard al-Awlaki as a threat to its homeland security. Although the US has been spared organised large-scale attacks like that of 911 due to its successful demolition of Al Qaeda's physical sanctuary in Afghanistan, it has not escaped the perpetual fear of terrorism, especially from small-scale attacks and attempted attacks from homegrown terrorist individuals. Al-Awlaki played a prominent role in this relatively new terrorism threat in the US. He was the key motivator and instigator in the radicalisation process of these individual perpetrators. These individuals include Major Nidal Hassan who was responsible for the Fort Hood shooting in November 2009, Omar Farouq Abdul Mutallab also known as the 'underwear bomber'

who attempted to bomb an airplane bound for Detroit on Christmas day 2009, and Faisal Shahzad who failed in his attempt to bomb Times Square in May 2010.

Today, the very terrorist ideology that has influenced amongst others, the three individuals mentioned above, is still widely available online. Apart from videos of lectures and hate speeches of al-Awlaki found in YouTube, this American-born preacher of Yemeni descent too has initiated a monthly magazine Inspire which is accessible not just on Islamist extremist online sites, but also on mainstream online sites reporting on the magazine. These contents that preach hatred towards the West and urge individual acts of violence as acts of "jihad" against the West are not revolutionary. They however present more effective communication tactics used to package an already known product targeted at the English-speaking community.

al-Awlaki in the Wider Terrorist Context

Putting the above threat analysis into perspective and into the larger terrorism context, al-Awlaki is but a small part of the bigger scheme of things. Hence, it is doubtful that his elimination will have a serious impact on the terrorism threat as a whole. Firstly, he is merely an emerging leader who has yet to make his mark. It is observed that the degree of al-Awlaki's influence is mixed among militants. He is particularly potent to the militants' target audience in the West who are not well versed in Arabic; he has the ability to communicate fluently in English. However, he has less influence on Middle Eastern Arabs and has no significant role in radicalising youths in the Afghan-Pakistan theatre and Indonesia – two key areas where the radicalisation trend is being observed.

In cyberspace, news updates of and articles by him posted in Arabic and Bahasa Indonesia on violent extremist online sites spur only the normal rhetoric on how Muslims are repressed, and do not generate much conversation thread. In offline reality on the other hand, he is not as prominent as local clerics on the ground such as Abu Bakar Baasyir and the Taliban leaders for instance. Secondly, the influence of al-Awlaki is not seen to resonate in other significant cases of radicalisation and terrorism in other parts of the world, as with the case of Jihad Jane, the Bali Three – Imam Samudra, Amrozi and Ali Ghufran -- and a myriad more. Thus, a global focus on al-Awlaki replacing bin Laden as the US No. 1 enemy risks obscuring the actual target – the terrorist ideology regardless of who is propagating it.

Indeed what al-Awlaki does, and his influence, need to be stopped and tackled, but more importantly is to neutralise the terrorist ideas, not just the individuals. This is where counter ideology and communicating it to the larger community comes in. Finally, a study of radical ideology shows that it is not anchored on any single person. A look into Minbar Al-Tawhid Wa Al-Jihad, the largest website that host radical ideology materials, would testify the existence of numerous thinkers and strategists who influence and sustain militant propaganda.

The Ultimate Fight

Placing al-Awlaki as the No. 1 enemy and seeking to eliminate him may serve the US national security interest but not for the overall fight against extremism and its by-product, terrorism. The problem has no one centre of gravity in the global context and each nation should have its own counterterrorism strategy. For success in the long haul, however, one tactic remains relevant across all nations – local counter-extremism through counter-ideology and community engagement.

It is important that in the midst of the fight to neutralise and target the physical and tangible perpetrators and instigator of terror, we do not forget our most valuable asset – the community and public at large – which will eventually be the ultimate weapon against terrorism.

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