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Challenge of Contemporary Terrorism: Tackling Roots via Education

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Recent massacres by terrorists in Brussels and Lahore reflect the changing dynamic of the threat. Fear of attacks forces governments to divert resources to combat possible threats in ungoverned zones and areas of sectarian conflict.

Commentary

THE RECENT spate of terrorist attacks and the diverse extremist Muslim groups involved have highlighted the changing nature of the terrorist threat. The reality is that these terrorist groups are unlikely to take over governments, whether in Asia, Africa or Europe. They pose a threat in ungoverned zones like ISIS-held territories in Syria or Taliban-controlled areas in Afghanistan where they provide a semblance of order under duress while providing support to far flung supporters.

But the fear of attacks forces governments around the world to divert resources to combat possible threats. It also fosters a climate of suspicion, as seen in the negative European reaction to the current flood of Muslim refugees from the Middle East and the anti-Muslim tone of the campaign by the frontrunners in the American Republican presidential campaign.

Terrorist Networks Overwhelm Security Agencies

The 22 March morning rush hour attacks in Brussels, involving two explosions at its main international airport and a third in a subway station, have shaken the complacency of the European public. The mood was already darkened by the after-effects of a series of coordinated attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, killing a total of at least 165, not to mention many more injured.

What is now emerging is that the Brussels and Paris attacks are related. A super cell with its command centre in Syria was involved in plotting and executing both attacks. The attacks have highlighted the lack of coordination and information exchanges among European security agencies and even within Belgium itself.

The terrorist network operated seamlessly across national borders, communicated through encrypted messages and received broad directives from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as ISIL, which has claimed responsibility for the attacks. The national security agencies and police forces were stymied by laws and rules promulgated in a more genteel era.

Belgium security agencies and police forces are divided along linguistic lines, with at least six different police jurisdictions within Brussels, a city of one million people. In Brussels, the police were prohibited from staging raids from 9pm to 5am, even on apartments and houses housing suspected terrorists.

The weaknesses of existing laws were already apparent after the Paris raid when one of the suspected attackers Salah Abdeslam may have initially escaped because of this loophole intended to protect family privacy. Information has often not been exchanged between security agencies. In the Brussels attack, one of the suicide bombers Ibrahim El Bakraoui had been deported by Turkey as he arrived in transit to Syria to fight for ISIS but was cleared by the Belgian authorities of terrorist affiliations and was repatriated to the Netherlands at his request.

With Europe's open borders, he soon made his way back to Brussels. The Muslim immigrant dominated, working class Molenbeek neighbourhood in Brussels is now seen as the cradle of the super cell. Marginalised, alienated and with roots in petty crime, children of immigrants from the Maghreb were radicalised in mosques, over the internet and in prisons and have become cannon fodder for ISIS' determination to bring the conflicts in Iraq and Syria to European shores. ISIS now has a second front in Europe.

After Europe, the Asia Front

Turning to Asia, on 27 March, as the minority Christian community in Lahore celebrated Easter Sunday, with many families visiting one of the largest parks in the city, a suicide bomber detonated explosives in his vest killing at least 72 and injuring more than 300 persons. Jamaat-e-Ahrar, a splinter group of the Pakistan Taliban, took responsibility for the attack. It claimed that it was targeting Christians, although most of those killed or wounded are Muslims.

The atrocity reminds us that although the international focus on acts of terrorism has shifted to Europe, lethal attacks continue in Asia and Africa, usually attracting less attention, as demonstrated by the failure to garner any sustained attention when Boko Haram attacks take place, for example, in Mali, northeast Nigeria and Chad.

While ISIS has attracted attention because it has conquered large tracts of Iraq and Syria, it is now coming under increasing pressure from a resurgent Bashar Assad regime backed by sustained Russian air operations. As much as 60 percent of ISIS-

held territories in Syria may have fallen to Assad's forces. But most commentators have missed the critical point – the idea of the Islamic State has captured the imaginations of its supporters who dream of returning to an imagined pristine way of life in the seventh century.

Even if ISIS is bombed out of existence, the threat will emerge elsewhere, for example, in ungoverned post-Gaddafi Libya or in a resurgent Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan. Acts of terrorism by Muslim extremists will be a critical concern of policy makers in the next decade.

Sunni/Shia Tensions

A second area of concern is the rising tensions between Sunni and Shia adherents. This has contributed to the image of a region in ferment. In part, this reflects the competition for regional dominance between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are seen as leaders of Sunni and Shia Islamists respectively.

The sharp division between Sunni and Shia reminds us that conflicts among religious believers of the same faith community are more deeply felt and are more difficult to resolve because of the sharp ideological and theological differences - an echo of the Catholic/Protestant Thirty Years War in Europe from 1618 to 1648, which was the longest lasting and most bitter conflict in Europe.

Although attention is usually focused on the revolutionary threats posed by Sunni militants through al-Qaeda and ISIS, and their global networks, Shia Islamists have established a crescent of influence in the Middle East linking Assad's military and intelligence services, Iraq's Shia militias, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Although Shias are a majority in Iraq, Bahrain and equal in numbers to Sunnis in Yemen, political power has traditionally been vested in Sunni political leaders. In the Middle East, the intra-Muslim conflict is today more significant than the threat posed to non-Muslims and has lessened the pressure for Israel to seek an accommodation with the Palestinians.

Complex Conflict in Yemen

The conflict in Yemen is complex and deserves some discussion because of recent revelations in Singapore. Houthi rebels from the Zaidi Shia community are allied with soldiers linked to the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, backed by Iran. The Houthis have effectively challenged Sunni tribes and military forces loyal to the incumbent President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which have been supported by a large-scale Saudi military intervention.

To add to the complexity, Hadi and the Houthis are opposed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with its strongholds in the south and southeast of the country. A Yemeni affiliate of ISIS also operates in the country and carried out a series of suicide bombings in the capital Sanaa in 2015.

On 16 March, Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs revealed that Mohammad Razif

bin Yahya (aged 27) and Amiruddin bin Sawir (aged 53) were detained for taking up arms in Yemen. They had begun religious studies in a Yemeni religious institution in January 2010 and July 2013 respectively and volunteered for armed sentry duties against any incursion by the Houthis. They were “prepared to kill and be killed as ‘martyrs’ in the sectarian conflict in Yemen”.

Mohamed Mohideen bin Mohamed Jais (aged 25) had also performed sentry duties while pursuing religious studies in Yemen from 2009 to early 2011. Although armed with an AK-47, he did not encounter any situation that required him to open fire. He has been placed on a Restriction Order since March 2016 which curtails his movements.

Implications for Singapore

The involvement of these three individuals draws attention to the challenge posed by Singaporeans proceeding for further education in religious affairs at Middle Eastern institutions without any reputation for quality and the risk that they may be drawn into the local sectarian conflicts.

While Singapore Muslims historically viewed conflicts in the Middle East as separate from their own concerns as Southeast Asian nationals, a trend towards greater commitment to their religious identity could result in some individuals placing their loyalties as Muslims above their commitment to Singapore as a nation-state.

In the same way, Wang Yuandongyi (aged 23) was placed under a Restriction Order because he intended to travel to Syria to join a Kurdish militia group fighting against ISIS. Participation in foreign military conflicts could undermine Singapore’s national interests and the Government needs to act immediately on such cases as well.

The increasingly volatile situation in Middle Eastern countries such as Yemen, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to which Singapore students have headed for higher education in Islamic studies may result in these students being influenced by their new environment and by the political conflicts in those countries.

The education is also very traditional focusing on literal interpretations and regurgitation of subject matter. Right now, there are individual courses in various departments at the local universities, but there is no degree programme in Islamic studies or theology. It is time to consider developing a programme of undergraduate and graduate education in Islamic studies and comparative religion in Singapore which would train a new generation of *asatizah* (Muslim religious teachers) that would meet the needs of a rapidly evolving and dynamic Muslim community in Singapore.

Barry Desker is Distinguished Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. This appeared earlier in The Straits Times.
