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After Nice: The Threat Within Europe

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

The mass truck attack on pedestrians along a promenade in Nice on Bastille Day marks a significant new stage in Islamic State's transformation to a global terrorist movement. It epitomises the IS strategy to seed a culture of extremism and violence among the Muslim population of Europe following the loss of territory in its heartland of Iraq and Syria and pursue its political goals.

Commentary

ON BASTILLE Day, 14 July 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drove a 19-tonne refrigerated lorry into the crowds at 1045 p.m. killing, maiming and injuring nearly 300 men, women and children. The 31-year-old French Tunisian delivery man, Lahouaiej-Bouhlel ploughed through two kilometres of the Promenade des Anglais before exchanging fire with the police. He killed 84 and injured 202. The death toll is likely to rise as 52 critical of which 25 on life support.

The wider impact of the IS attack is too early to assess accurately. "Shocking France and their soul", the attack was traumatic on the French, if not, the wider European population. The truck attack seemed to echo the injunction to IS followers by the IS spokesman Abu Mohamed al Adnani through al Furqan on 21 September 2014: "If you cannot [detonate] a bomb or [fire] a bullet...bash his [westerner] skull in...slaughter him with a knife, run him over with your car, throw him off a cliff, strangle him, or inject him with poison."

IS Culture of Violence

The carnage in the aftermath of Nice did not produce sorrow but celebration among the IS fraternity. The IS strategy is to seed a culture of extremism and violence among the Muslim population of Europe. To accomplish this feat, IS seeks to replace traditional Islam with the IS version of Islam of hatred and incitement. To galvanise the French Muslim population to sustain attacks, the French speaking fighters in the IS heartland and elsewhere disseminated propaganda messages.

IS supporters and sympathisers on social media, attempted to justify the message among the wider Muslim community stating that the French brought this attack on themselves. “Khilafah News” and “Online Da’wah Operations”—circulated a uniform message calling on users to use specified hashtags to “show the world the truth about the war on the Islamic State and how they brought this to themselves.”

IS also attempted to portray the Nice attack as revenge and retaliation against the coalition kill of the best known IS military commander Umar al-Shishani announced by IS on 13 July, 2016. Another image invoked the November 2015 Paris attacks referencing Nice next to a picture of Paris attacker Abu 'Umar al-Baljiki stating, “As you kill you will be killed.”

In an attempt to incite IS supporters and sympathisers to repeat the Nice attack, IS threatened Berlin. With a fighter in front of the Reichstag Building in Germany, an earlier image released by Furat Media read “Bald [Next] in Berlin.” A low cost, high impact act of terror, Nice as a model is very likely to be repeated elsewhere.

IS Radicalisation of French Muslims

France faced a large-scale and an escalating threat from IS-directed and inspired-attacks. IS central and IS supporters released propaganda repeating its calls and chants galvanising French Muslims. While the bulk of the French Muslims were mainstream, the IS propaganda aimed to radicalise them into extremism and militarise a tiny segment into violence.

IS understood that propaganda shapes public opinion. In the lead-up to the attacks, IS propaganda products compiled by SITE Intelligence Group demonstrated the continuing threat to France, Belgium and Europe from IS-directed and -inspired attacks.

IS released a French-language video chant by a child swearing revenge for massacres and destruction caused by coalition airstrikes. Two versions of the video, entitled, “Blood for Blood,” and produced by the group's al-Hayat Media Centre, were released, one with Arabic subtitles, and the other with English.

IS released the ninth issue of its French magazine, “Dar al-Islam,” and among its articles, called on lone wolves to kill a French imam in Bordeaux, traced the travels of Jihadi John alias Abu Muharib al-Muhajir and provided internet security and anonymity tips.

On 5 July IS disseminated a French video chant, entitled, “My Revenge,” which promoted its attacks in France and Belgium and featured clips of the Paris attackers

and the two fighters involved in the March 2016 operation in Brussels. American, French, Indonesian, Russian, and Uzbek fighters in IS Furat Province in Iraq lauded Orlando nightclub gunman Omar Mateen and called upon Muslims to follow his example and kill "disbelievers".

IS official news agency Amaq released the self-recorded video of Larossi Aballa, who stabbed to death a French police captain and his wife, a police secretary, in front of their two-year child in a Paris suburb. Abdalla, speaking French, pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and called upon Muslims to follow the directive of IS spokesman al-'Adnani to carry out attacks.

Abdalla urged potential lone wolves to disregard the religion of the victim, even if they are Muslim. IS promoted the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, and the stabbing death of the French police captain and his wife in France in its al-Naba newspaper and circulated on Telegram and Twitter.

IS Aleppo Province in Syria released a video focusing on the 12-year-old son of a slain French fighter, who expressed a desire to return to France to carry out a suicide operation. The Arabic- and French-language video, entitled, "The Path of the Fathers," was distributed on Telegram and Twitter on 14 May 2016.

Response

The attack in France was premeditated. It was a deliberate act of political violence calculated to terrorise the civilians and inflict fear. The attack in Nice should not be considered an attack on France alone. To secure France from the IS threat, it is necessary to craft a Europe-wide response.

With IS propaganda seducing European Muslims, Europe has suffered from multiple IS directed and inspired attacks by IS. IS call for attacks will inspire multiple offensives in the coming months.

Every terrorist attack is an opportunity for government to reflect on how best to fight the threat. Working closely with its allies, friends, and others, Paris should mobilise the international community to contain, isolate and eliminate IS. To be effective, the European response should not only be focused on military measures. The European response should be to the decade-old challenge of Europe's weak immigration and integration policies.

As extremist and terrorist ideology resonates among Muslims who live isolated in diaspora and migrant enclaves, IS strategy is to reach out to vulnerable segments of Muslims in Europe. To fight back, Europe should work with the mainstream Muslim communities to reach out to the vulnerable segments of the diaspora and migrant communities and develop effective counter radicalisation and deradicalisation programmes.

In parallel to working with their coalition partners to dismantle IS in the heartland, Europe should collectively respond to the current and emerging IS threat by developing programmes to integrate the Muslims living in diaspora and migrant enclaves.

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