Grinding Terrorist Networks Down in 2012

Written by Raffaello Pantucci

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In an age of persistent conflict, terrorism will continue to be a threat confronting governments. However, the nature of this threat is shifting and the question that has not been properly answered is whether we are seeing a threat that is finally in decline or continues to ascend.

The general tendency is to answer this question with a shrug of the shoulders and say the threat seems to have "plateaued" – in other words, the threat is persistent but seems not to be increasing in volume. But this response is less than satisfying for numerous reasons – not least because it attempts to put a standard answer on a threat that has diversified considerably in the past few years.

In some parts of Africa and Asia, while major strides have been made against the variety of terrorist organizations that come under the al Qaeda brand, or ascribe to a violent Islamist ideology, the groups have proven impressively resistant and refuse to be eradicated. There continues to be a steady patter of violence emanating from them as local forces, often with the support of western intelligence and military, mount operations targeting leaders and disrupting networks. While some pose a threat to the west, the majority poses a more direct threat to local international interests or local targets. For example, beyond the depressing list of attacks targeting local forces or civilians across Asia, the Middle East or Africa, the al Shabaab instigated plot in August 2009 to target American Secretary of State Hilary Clinton while she was visiting Kenya; al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's persistent targeting of western tourists or aid workers in North Africa; or the targeting of western hotels and tourist destinations in Southeast Asia by local Islamist networks. [1]

When looking instead at the direct threat in the west, outside directed networks continue to pose a threat with individuals and groups periodically disrupted with connections to Pakistan. But intelligence capacity (and electronic intercepts) has reached such a point that these networks are disrupted before they are able to move towards any operational capacity. Instead, we have seen the larger danger emanate from unaffiliated networks and individuals that self-radicalize and self-activate, loosely following what they believe to be the al Qaeda playbook. Often this is something that they have found in reading from the Internet or in the form of American-Yemeni preacher Anwar al Awlaki's preaching or writing.

The result has been while we continue to see a steady stream of threats emanating from abroad, these have declined in number and quality. A certain volume of young men and women choose to go and join radical networks abroad, but few end up returning home (and often they are on security services radars). Heightened vigilance has also made it hard for external networks to penetrate the west, but nevertheless some are able to get through though so far they have been caught prior to being able to do anything. Instead, when terrorist plots or attacks are perpetrated, they tend to be from groups or individuals who are almost completely homegrown and auto-didactic in nature. For example, the loner Islamist plotters Arid Uka of Germany who shot two American servicemen as they waited to be taken to a flight in Frankfurt or Roshonara Choudhry who tried to stab a Member of Parliament Stephen Timms for his support of the Iraq war. Both were clearly inspired by ideas that could be described as spawned from al Qaeda, but neither was being directed by anyone in or near the organization. Similarly, the nine men convicted for a series of offenses in the United Kingdom early this year including attempting to leave an explosive device in the London Stock Exchange were not connected to al Qaeda, though they were involved in radical groups in the UK and had made moves towards establishing a terrorist training camp in Pakistan.

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The quality and degree of threat posed by such groups and individuals is clearly of a different level than the group that perpetrated the July 7, 2005 bombing in London, the September 11, 2001 group or the plotters who planned in summer 2006 to bring down as many as eight airlines on transatlantic routes using ingeniously designed liquid bombs. There we saw groups trained abroad and then directed to conduct operations in the west using counter-surveillance techniques, coded emails and cleverly designed explosive devices. Close contact was maintained between the cell on the ground and operators abroad, highlighting the degree to which the plots can be described as al Qaeda directed. The newer wave display much less contact and much less operational guile and savvy. [2]

But what is to be read from this? Is the point that intelligence services have gotten so much better at detecting and disrupting externally directed networks, or that they have stopped trying to get in as much? And is the fact that we are now seeing self-started local plots as the main driver of threat an expression of the fact that we are looking at a threat that is in terminal decline since it cannot get in or merely that this is the only aspect of the menace that security services have not quite managed to get their heads around disrupting?

Difficult questions all, but to give a general answer, it is clear that some of the heat has gone out of the violent Islamist terrorist threat. The persistent hammering of leaders with drone strikes and Special Forces operations has reduced capacity, while enhanced intelligence focus has given a much better over watch position from which to ensure that networks are not able to dispatch cells to conduct attacks. The fact that the most active plots now come from groups that are self-started and self-directed is a reflection of two things: that these individuals are unable to make contact with known networks (because it is now harder to do so due to a lack of options and security) and that the ideas are incredibly diffuse in society's general consciousness. But the ideas are clearly only inspiring small groups of individuals, so the threat is reduced and less capable than before.

But having said all of this, there still remains a rump of individuals in the west who are drawn to violent radical ideas, something indicative of the fact that, counter-radicalisation programmes notwithstanding, progress has been relatively limited in devising effective ways to deter people from choosing this path. What has been reduced however is the capability of networks abroad to connect with these individuals undetected. And when this is coupled with the fact that these networks are being vigorously shrunk through aggressive counter-terrorism operations abroad, it is possible to determine that the terrorist threat to the west from radical Islamist groups is in decline. Not necessarily in absolute and terminal decline, but certainly a far less capable and direct threat than it was in the mid-2000s and before when large-scale networks that had been developing for decades were able to repeatedly attempt to carry out plots in the west.

Terrorism has always come in cycles . The current menace from violent Islamists targeting the west is no different. Entropic forces tend to wind down violent political networks that are unable to achieve their immediate goals in a short-to-medium term timeline, and over time networks are degraded and their ideas lose some force or evolve in new directions. Al Qaedaism as we currently know it is clearly facing a downward trajectory, but the sparks as it winds down will trouble the world for years to come.

This article was commissioned in response to Dr Gunaratna's piece.

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[1] Raffaello Pantucci, "The Islamist Terrorist Threat to Europe after Osama bin Laden's death,"*Chatham House Workshop Paper*, July 1, 2011, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/International%20Security/010811wr_terrorism.pdf

[2] Bruce Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion: Al Qaeda and the 7 July 2005 Bombings and the 2006 Airline

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