



GLOBAL THREAT ASSESSMENT 2009

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Abstract:

The year 2009 will bring an increase of national security threats: terrorism, emulation of Al-Qaeda, instability in Iraq as Coalition troops withdraw, persistent threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan and a spread of terrorism both in the global South and in the Western countries due to the radicalization of its Muslim diasporas do not bode well for the next year. If from a tactical point of view the intervention in Afghanistan may have weakened terrorism, it is definitely boosting it in the strategic level, in particular after the invasion of Iraq, as the appeal for Yihad increases. The effect of Islamist “guerrillas” coming back home from the Iraqi and Afghan fronts can be devastating. Although the US are more protected than before the 11-S, its vulnerable allies (specially in the global South as the Levant, the East/Horn of Africa and South Asia) will further suffer the threat of terrorist groups adopting Al-Qaeda’s tactics as the latter turns into a training and coordinating hub protected in its stronghold in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) in Pakistan. But the solution goes beyond fighting terrorism, it entails fighting extremism and the Muslim perceptions of the West as a promoter of anti-Muslim policies. Solving the quagmire of Iraq, but also the plight of the Palestinian people and other local conflicts such as Kashmir or Mindanao becomes essential and will be the big challenge for the incoming Obama administration.

Keywords: Terrorism, Extremism, Al-Qaeda, Muslim.

Resumen:

2009 será un año que se distinga por el aumento de la principal amenaza a la seguridad nacional, el terrorismo: Fenómenos de emulación de Al-Qaeda, inestabilidad en Irak a medida que las tropas de la Coalición se van retirando, la persistente amenaza en Afganistán y Pakistán y la extensión del terrorismo tanto en el Sur Global como en los países occidentales a causa de la radicalización de las diásporas musulmanas, son presagios nada halagüeños para el año que se avecina. Si desde un punto de vista táctico la intervención en Afganistán puede haber debilitado al terrorismo, desde un punto de vista estratégico la refuerza, especialmente tras la invasión de Irak, con el aumento del atractivo por la Yihad; el efecto del retorno de las “guerrillas” islamistas a sus países de origen desde los frentes iraquí y afgano puede ser devastador. Aunque los EEUU se encuentren más protegidos que antes del 11-S, sus aliados más vulnerables (en particular en el Sur Global en las regiones del Levante, Este/Cuernos de África y el Sur de Asia) sufrirán una mayor amenaza por todos los grupos que adopten las tácticas de una Al-Qaeda transformada ahora en eje de entrenamiento y coordinación desde su cobijo en las FATA en Pakistán. Pero la solución, más allá de atacar el terrorismo, consiste en luchar contra el extremismo y la percepción de Occidente como anti-musulmán: Solucionar el caos de Irak, el conflicto de Palestina y otros conflictos locales como Cachemira o Mindanao se torna esencial y habrá de ser el gran desafío de la administración entrante de Obama.

Palabras Clave: Terrorismo, Extremismo, Al-Qaeda, Musulmán.

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1. Introduction

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In 2009, the most profound changes in the global threat landscape will be:

First, terrorism will emerge as the pre-eminent national security threat to most countries. The terrorist threat will spread from conflict zones to neighbouring regions and countries. More threat groups will adopt Al Qaeda's methodology of suicide and ideology of global jihad. Using vehicle- and human-borne suicide attackers, terrorist groups in Asia, Africa and the Middle East will mount spectacular attacks against high profile, symbolic and iconic targets in urban cities.

Second, the phased withdrawal of U.S. led coalition forces from Iraq will create greater instability in Iraq and beyond. The Iraqi forces will fail to contain the violence. Tehran will expand its' covert and overt influence in Iraq. The threat from Iraq will spread to the Levant, Europe and beyond. Unless the U.S. is pragmatic in its withdrawal plans, a weakened Al Qaeda and its affiliates is likely to revive. To prevent Iraq from being used as a forward operational base to mount operations in the Middle East, North and Eastern Africa and the West, it is paramount for Western governments to maintain a strong intelligence presence.

Third, despite a dramatic increase in coalition forces in Afghanistan, the terrorist threat will persist in Afghanistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border will remain the epicenter of global terrorism, where Al Qaeda led and driven multiple threat groups will plan, prepare and mount attacks globally. At this point of time, mounting attacks in the West is within Al Qaeda remit in tribal Pakistan. Unless and until the international community recognize and assist Islamabad to dismantle Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban infrastructure in tribal Pakistan, the threat to the world will continue.

Fourth, the conflict zones in the Middle East (particularly the Levant), East/Horn of Africa and South Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan) will witness the highest level of threat. Threat groups operating in conflict zones will conduct long range terrorist operations in neighbouring regions and countries in the global south. The terrorist threat will be lowest in Northeast Asia (except Xinjiang) followed by Southeast Asia (except Indonesia and the Philippines). The threat to North America, Europe and Australia will largely stem from politicized and radicalized segments of migrant and diaspora communities. However, by increasing their intelligence penetration of radicalized segments of the Muslim communities, the Western security agencies will manage the threat to their host countries.

2. The Context

The global terrorist threat has steadfastly escalated since Al Qaeda attacked America's most iconic landmarks on September 11, 2001. While the threat to the U.S. homeland has decreased, due to sustained U.S. investment in preventive and protective measures, the threat outside the U.S targeting its Allies and friends has increased. The numerical strength of Al Qaeda has been reduced to a few hundred fighters mostly located on the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), Osama bin Laden has been able to influence three dozen groups worldwide to attack Western targets. Many of the groups in Asia, Africa and the Middle East that have traditionally fought their local regimes and rulers perceive the U.S., their Allies and friends as their primary enemy.

The U.S. led coalition intervention in Iraq in March 2003 was a huge waste of resources – both human and material. Political incompetence distracted and diverted limited



specialist resources from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Middle East. Seven years after 9-11, the core leadership of Al Qaeda that masterminded 9-11 is still free. After Iraq, Al Qaeda propaganda that the U.S. is deliberately killing Muslims and attacking Islam found resonance among Muslims globally increasing the global threat. Today, there are more threat groups and greater Muslim participation and support for violence than at 9-11.

Under the Bush Administration, the U.S. led coalition to fight terrorism has been largely kinetic and lethal. Such a response has helped to reduce the tactical capabilities of threat groups but increased the strategic threat of terrorism. Although it is not, Muslims increasingly perceive the Global War on Terrorism as a fight against Islam and Muslims. Under the Obama Administration, this is likely to change. The U.S. is likely to sharpen and perfect its direction action capabilities but invest more in its highly underutilized engagement capabilities.

3. Understanding the Threat

Understanding the threat is paramount to tactically and strategically reducing it. The global terrorist threat is largely stemming from conflict zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Algeria, India (Kashmir), Russia (Chechnya) and China (Xingjiang) where Muslims are suffering. Both virulent ideologies and operational capabilities in those conflict zones spill over to neighbouring regions and countries. While the bulk of the terrorist attacks will be detected and disrupted in the planning and preparation, a few attacks will be successful.

The single biggest threat will stem from Al Qaeda. Operating out of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), Al Qaeda has transformed from an operational organization to a directing, training and an ideological organization. In FATA, the number of foreign fighters operating is estimated at 900. The Arabs (mostly Al Qaeda) have diminished to below 100 and the Uzbeks to 350. Although Al Qaeda has been weakened in numerical strength, its influence has grown. Using Al Sahab, Al Qaeda's multimedia arm, Dr. Ayman Al Zawahiri and his son in law Abd-al Rahman Al Maghrebi, the Head of the Information Committee, is radicalizing both territorial Muslims in the Global South and migrant/diaspora Muslims in the West. Furthermore, Al Qaeda will forge more partnerships. The fashion of local groups adopting the name Al Qaeda will become a trend. In 2009, it is very likely that Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (Turkistan Islamic Party) or Al Shabaab in Somalia and at least another group will adopt the name Al Qaeda.

More terrorist and extremist groups will emulate Al Qaeda's ideology and methodology. While Al Qaeda's favoured methodology is to mount suicide attacks against high profile, symbolic and strategic targets to inflict mass fatalities and casualties, its ideology calls for attacks against both domestic governments and Western/Israeli targets. As the near simultaneous "no surrender" attacks in Mumbai demonstrated in November 2008, even groups that are not a part of the Al Qaeda family, such as Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) have adopted Al Qaeda's style attacks. Although the LeT operatives were not suicide attackers, they staged a no-surrender (fedayeen) attack and were more militarily skilled than most Al Qaeda attackers.

Afghanistan and Iraq will persist as the world's defining conflict zones. The Muslim suffering, agony and resentment will galvanize Muslims worldwide. Although only a tiny minority of the Muslims support terrorism, the majority of the Muslims will be reluctant to



support Western presence in Muslim lands. The terrorist groups based in FATA will not only attack Afghanistan but mainland Pakistan. Increasingly the same tactics used in Afghanistan will be replicated in Pakistan and beyond. While the high intensity insurgency in tribal Pakistan will persist, there will be regular terrorist attacks against mainland Pakistan. It is very likely that Pakistan will continue to suffer from attacks of the scale of the Islamabad Marriott bombing in September 2008.

The withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq will reduce the intelligence visibility of the threat groups operating in Iraq. Today, groups in the Levant such as Usbat al-Ansar are sending fighters to Iraq. Groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) openly try to convince Maghrebis, who want to go to Iraq, to remain and fight in North Africa. As AQI use most foreigners for suicide attacks, many chose to stay and fight with AQIM (others are lured into staying through the offer of military training by AQIM). However, nationals from almost all the countries in North Africa have established a presence in North Africa. At least a few of the Middle Eastern and European support networks feeding Iraq are likely to mutate into operational (attack) networks in 2009. The returnees from Iraq will continue to mount attacks in the Middle East, Africa (both North and East) and in Europe. As they are in the immediate neighbourhood of Iraq, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon will face a greater threat. With the difficulty of threat groups linking up with Al Qaeda in tribal Pakistan, even Asian terrorist groups are developing relationships with groups in Iraq. Even Islamist nationalist groups such as LeT have been dispatching fighters in small number to Iraq and Jemaah Islamiyah from the Far East fully intended to send two of its most prominent leaders to Iraq to establish links with AQI in 2008. If Iraq slides back, both the linkages to Iraq will galvanize existing groups and the tempo of fighting in Iraq will inspire new groups in the Middle East and beyond.

4. Challenges in 2009

The greatest national security challenge for the world in 2009 is to counter extremism, the precursor of terrorism. Although the operational and intelligence capabilities have been adequately built, the West now needs to build global capabilities to counter the extremist message that the West is attacking Islam and killing Muslims. The most important ingredient necessary to win the fight is restoring Muslim public support and confidence in the Western governments and publics. Especially the U.S. should remove Muslim mistrust and suspicion of America's genuine intentions to make the world a better place. The terrorist won sufficient public sympathy and support largely due to misinformed and misguided Western actions, primarily the U.S. invasion of Iraq. For the U.S. to convince the Muslim World that the U.S. under the Obama presidency will be significantly different will be a monumental challenge. In the face of sustained terrorist and extremist propaganda, neutralizing nearly a decade of cumulative resentment and anger in the Muslim and Islamic World will take time and resources.

Even if the new U.S. Administration successfully engages the Muslim World, it will require an unprecedented international effort to change the ideals and reality of the world. The Western countries have the resources, the discipline and the staying power to intervene in man made and natural disasters. A priority should be to stabilize conflict zones that produce suffering, virulent ideologies, violence, displacement, refugees and terrorists. From resolving protracted disputes such as Palestine, Kashmir, Mindanao, and other conflict zones where



Muslims are suffering, the international community will have to play a sustained role to buy Muslim goodwill.

As most Muslim countries are corrupt and poor, without Western investment and assistance the threat of extremism and terrorism will persist. Instead of promoting democracy, investing in economic development will result in Muslims themselves wanting greater political participation and representation. For the West to play such a role, the U.S., Europe and Australia will need to invest in initiatives and partnerships to prevent the political and economic marginalization of Muslims both at home and abroad.

There is a mistaken belief among policy and decision-makers in Washington D.C. London, that they must not be seen by the mainstream Muslim leaders with the potential to counter terrorism. Key to winning the fight against terrorism is to build lasting partnerships between enlightened Western and mainstream Muslim leaders and their institutions to counter extremism. As terrorism is a by-product of extremism, it is paramount to counter the misinterpretation of the Koran and Hadith that legitimize messages and acts of violence. Every Islamic and Muslim school can be used as a vanguard to build future peace.

While encouraging and supporting the Muslim governmental and non-governmental organizations to proactively and reactively counter extremism, the west will need to be more sensitive to Muslim sensibility. The Danish publication of prophet's cartoons, the Dutch release of fitna movie and the American use of terminology such as "crusade" and "Islamic terrorism" favoured the terrorists and extremist. Formal and informal education of the world especially of its leaders will be essential to win the defining conflict of the early 21st century. Operational counter terrorism can help but without formulating and implementing a strategic response, terrorism will persist and the threat will even grow in 2009.