

Clarity amid the doubt



Behind the headlines by Bunn Nagara

Despite the doubts and uncertainties that come with battling terrorist groups, it is still clear enough that some issues need to be pursued as planned

EVEN before Said and Cherif Kouachi had claimed allegiance to “al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” (AQAP) earlier this month in Paris, the network of transnational terrorism had been hazy enough.

Since then, connecting the dots in mapping the “face” of global terror became even more arduous.

Said had visited Yemen in 2011, but little by way of his role or affiliation was known or seemed to be knowable.

Within hours of the brothers’ claim, co-conspirator Amedy Coulibady declared his allegiance to al-Qaeda rival Islamic State (IS).

Security analysts were stumped: if IS and al-Qaeda could not even think of cooperating, how could the Kouachi brothers and Coulibady be collaborating?

But such questions were only the beginning of several imponderables. The more that was subsequently discovered about the perpetrators in Paris, the less appeared to be comprehensible.

Meanwhile, events on the ground in Yemen became increasingly harrowing.

The situation becomes more baffling when Yemen’s domestic politics need not impact on the international scene directly, accordingly or proportionately.

Security experts working against terrorism have always sought a clearer understanding for a better grasp of the problem.

However, they have often been let down by some prominent commentators and political leaders.

How can the West ever begin to understand the roots of terror a continent or two away when there is still so much misunderstanding even between the closest of allies?

Following the Paris events, Fox News commentator Steve Emerson warned Europeans of impending calamities when, he said, a British city like Birmingham had completely been taken over by Muslims and had “no-go zones” where non-Muslims could not enter.

The remark shocked Britons, and not just in Birmingham. As the news item aired, British Prime Minister David Cameron choked on his breakfast porridge and called Emerson “a complete idiot”.

Fox News apologised for the reporting error four times in 12 hours, along with Emerson himself.

But soon after that, Republican governor Piyush “Bobby” Jindal of Louisiana said even more extreme things on CNN about London itself.

CNN then interviewed a range of Londoners who were again shocked at such unthinking remarks.

Jindal, a first-generation Indian American, is the first such state governor and the second such Congressman.

In recent years his political profile has taken off so much that he is tipped as a prospective presidential candidate.

He could not have been unmindful of such glowing career prospects in playing the alarmist card on the Muslim community.

However much of a new dimension in home-grown terrorism the French-born Kouachis and Coulibady represented, stoking right-wing paranoia is not the answer even if it is an "investment" in prospective presidential aspirations.

Given such abysmal ignorance among US commentators and politicians, what hope is there for a proper understanding of terrorism sufficient to defeat it?

Among all the countries where the US has intervened militarily only to see the situation worsen, Yemen along with Syria leads. Yet it is only too easy to jump to hasty and misleading conclusions.

When the Kouachis declared their allegiance to AQAP, there was no immediate response from its leadership. It took some days before the latter acknowledged the brothers, somewhat belatedly.

Still, acknowledgment need not mean that AQAP had planned and directed the Kouachis' attack.

Similarly, Coulibady's rampage might not have been masterminded by IS.

The consensus among the French authorities is that the trio had hatched their plots among themselves quite independent of AQAP and IS, even if they had been inspired by "their" respective terror organisations.

Indeed, groups like AQAP and IS, like the al-Qaeda of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, operate simultaneously both on their own in quite limited ways as well as through the unilateral actions of distant individuals and groups.

The popular notion of a transnational format, by way of a large, unitary international organisation coordinated from a centralised headquarters, is a myth.

No clandestine organisation can operate successfully in that way when half the world's intelligence agencies and armed forces are on the prowl.

In a franchise system where no prior licensing is required, the independent actions of multiple groups and individuals help to boost the organisation's global reach and presence.

And by acknowledging such affiliates rather than denying them, the organisation's stature is also enhanced accordingly.

Another instance showing the independence of group operations was the 2009 merger of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda.

This was spearheaded by current IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi but opposed by Ayman at al-Qaeda "central".

Despite the strong rejection by Osama's successor, the merger went ahead.

The leadership and headquarters of al-Qaeda could do nothing to stop it or to delegitimise its actions later.

Operationally, there are also differences between al-Qaeda and the smaller organisations.

The latter are more focused on their targets and the scale of their attacks is more limited.

A critical difference between IS and the others, including al-Qaeda, is its comprehensive public administration alongside immediate enforcement of syariah law and mass indoctrination programmes.

These measures contribute significantly to the unprecedented stream of militant extremists as groups and individuals from around the world.

They also promote a sense of community and belonging that may be termed mesmerising or cult-like.

Nonetheless, IS also contains the seeds of its own destruction.

Its exclusivist, sectarian and deeply discriminatory style based on its sense of exceptionalism has alienated other militant groups, states and influential individuals.

Earlier this month its strength in Kobani, Syria was reportedly declining, following Kurdish resistance and US air strikes.

As part of its mythology its leader is said to have been killed at least twice, on at least one occasion said to be fictional, and occasionally confused with other leading militants in the vicinity.

Now Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is said to be injured from a US air attack in Iraq near the Syrian border. But a subsequent report soon followed to the effect that he had been killed in the attack, again.

Yemen itself has been thrown into deeper turmoil as President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi was finally routed after months of governmental decline since September.

One national leadership is displaced by another, and then by another, as rebel forces and foreign powers assist one side or the other.

The US-backed Abed had been ousted with help from Syiah Houthi rebels not unsympathetic to Iran.

Once more, sectarian shifts and geopolitical tilts have not ultimately served perceived Western interests.

Yet another quandary is challenging Western perceptions: Houthis are also at war with Sunni IS and al-Qaeda. Abed's misrule had earlier contributed to Yemen's al-Qaeda despite his pious protestations to the contrary.

Meanwhile, Afghan leaders are asking for more US military aid while acknowledging the success of such aid so far against terrorist groups. But at the same time, FBI director James Comey testified in Congress that such aid had only helped IS' recruitment drive.

In South-East Asia, the Philippines-based Abu Sayyaf and Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters had already pledged allegiance to IS last year.

They also opposed the MILF peace agreement with the Philippine government.

These developments may baffle and cause great uncertainties on which policies to adopt or avoid. But whatever the consternation, it is clear that matters like the Bangsamoro peace agreement need to be expedited forthwith.

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