



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

The New America? The New al Qaeda? And a Few More Questions

Mr Aersh Danish
Research Associate, CAPS

Friday the 13th (of November, 2015) would go down in history as one of the most unfortunate of days for the civilised world. The national capital of France, Paris was hit by one of the deadliest attacks that the western world has seen since 11 September, 2011. The attack which was organised and orchestrated by the Islamic State (IS) left the world in shock and saw a wave of sentiments condemning the attacks. This article does not delve much into the nuances of the attacks as much as it raises a few questions pertinent with the rise of the IS, especially post the Paris attacks.

The attacks shaped a more or less cohesive government and public opinion that once again reaffirmed the need to combat terrorism. This unison of thought, although much needed, also reflected on the hypocrisy of our civilised world which had otherwise failed to take prominent notice of the attacks in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. **A failure to perceive terrorism as a global**

threat is perhaps the first point that we should consider. The world has seen a series of attacks from 9/11 to 26/11 and now 13/11, all of which marked major attacks on nation states that are considered as important players in the arena of international politics. However, the groups which have coordinated or executed these attacks have been active prolifically in other nations, and more so in conflict prone nations of West Asia and Northern Africa. The predominantly Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram killed more people last year than the IS, and yet the world is yet to look into the concerns and plight of the people suffering in the terror prone belts of Africa.¹ Facing the enemy and fighting it has become so lopsided an approach, that even global concerns are seen through the prism of national interest and self gains. However, in the world of pragmatic realism, one cannot blame the state for doing so. What can be blamed, is the apathy that the general populace has towards such issues, and with public opinion

often shaping policy, the governments have a similar perspective as well - unless of course, their interests are threatened.

However, evading the debate of discrimination that exists in the international order, if one were to discuss the issues pertinent to the recent attack, the choice of Paris as the site does flag off some important points. One may argue that it could be a symbol of the clash of civilisations. **Has France become the new America?** The nation has seen a spate of two high profile terrorist attacks, with the Charlie Hebdo killings in January 2015 and now with the Paris attacks. The country has been the birthplace of democratic values and has always been seen as the beacon of equality, fraternity and tolerance in the world. It has the largest number of Muslims in Europe, with a significant African population, most of whom migrated from its colonies, and are currently residing in France and belong to the social fabric of the nation. Any attack of this stature challenges this balance, and especially so in the face of the refugee crisis that Europe is currently facing.

However, at a deeper analysis, the choice of Paris also reflects on the weaknesses of IS. First, it is a clear reflection of the fact that their reaches are limited only to the European mainland. Attacking Paris was an easy choice, with the only other alternative being Berlin. However, with the role of the French Air Force in the Syrian crisis, and considering the large Islamic population base in France, Paris did make a more

ideologically relevant option. European borders are porous at places which allows for easy movement of people - and along with them - ideology and ammunition. The weapons used were AK47 and Kalashnikov, which are easily available from the Balkan regions. France has one of the most stringent gun policy in place in all of European Union (EU), however open borders mean that weapons can be procured through other EU nations and transported easily into France. Certain pockets such as the suburban area of Molenbeek in Brussels has already become a hub for Islamist extremists in Europe.² The city has been linked with al Qaeda since the 1990s. The point to note here is that Brussels is the Capital of Europe and with the growing right wing sentiments within the European Parliament, such attacks further push the EU towards an existentiality crisis.

Also, attacking Paris can allude to the fact that the IS cannot yet attack the west beyond the Schengen region. This can be argued from the point that cities such as London, which are beyond the Schengen have been untouched despite there being reported plans of possible attacks on the United Kingdom.³ The insular isolation that the islands of UK enjoy are the same that North America enjoys, and thus the United States has been able to keep itself safe from terrorist attacks. The strict surveillance laws and the mechanism of Homeland Security has been successful in protecting America from any major terrorist attacks to be executed in the

American mainland. The only exception being the Boston Bombing incidence, which was a lone wolf attack. The fact that no such incident has been repeated could be a reflection of the failure of the IS to radicalise the American society enough to carry out an attack.

The point to note is that if the IS could attack America, it would have attacked America, and because it did not, it signals that it still cannot. Thus, al Qaeda still remains the only Islamist terrorist group to attack the US on its own soil, pushing aside the question that in certain regards, **the IS is still not al Qaeda.** Meanwhile, al Qaeda has become almost invisible in the debates among the security and scholarly community, with the al Nusra front being its only discussed affiliate for its role in the Syrian crisis. There are certain scarring rumours that are afloat in the fields of Syria which speak of a possible temporary alignment between al Nusra front and the IS in the face of increasing attacks by the Russians.⁴ Such an agreement can be of disastrous consequence and with a failing central leadership in al Qaeda, it just might become a possibility.

Finally, France has taken a strong stance post the attacks increasing its air strikes over Syria. It will be deploying its only aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle in the Mediterranean to supplement its operations in the region. This will bring the French Navy in close proximity to the Russian Naval ships deployed in Tartus. The attacks serve as another reason to legitimise the

air strikes that will further displace people only adding to the existing refugee crisis. The situation remains delicate and will only aggravate until the political situation in Syria is resolved. Meanwhile, the world shall be witnessing a horrific violation of human rights from every side, with each side fighting for a cause they feel is justified.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Charlotte Alfred, "Boko Haram Actually Kills More People In Terror Attacks Than ISIS", Huffington Post, November 18, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/boko-haram-isis_564cd890e4b00b7997f8c15d?section=india&adsSiteOverride=in

² Jay Newton-Small, "The Belgian Suburb at the Heart of the Paris Attacks Probe", Time, November 16, 2015. http://time.com/4114305/paris-attacks-molenbeek/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report

³ Michael Wilkinson, "Revealed: Britain has foiled seven terror attacks in one year", The Telegraph November 16, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11997853/Revealed-Britain-foils-seven-terror-attacks-in-just-six-months.html>

⁴ "Jordan tasked with establishing terrorist blacklist for Syria", Al Monitor, November 15, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/jordan-syria-is-france-hamas-islamic-jihad-intifada.html>