



IS CONSTRAINED: SHIFTING AGENDAS AND TARGETS

Radhika Halder
Research Associate, CAPS

The New Year has only just begun and already given us the first terror incident. It was in one of Ankara's nightclubs where a gunman went on a rampage, killing 39 people. The Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for the attack, which may not be a surprising phenomenon. However, this is the first time the terror group has stated that the assault was in retaliation against Ankara's incursion into Syria, joining the international coalition fight against the IS. Despite being suspected for major attacks in Istanbul this year, the IS has never issued an undisputed claim as this in Turkey, clearly stating that Turkey's military intervention against jihadists in Syria was the sole reason behind the attack.

As celebrations to usher the new year around the world were guarded with extra precautionary security measures, Turkey, one of the most terror-struck countries of 2016, failed to keep up. While immediate fingers are being pointed at the rapidly deteriorating security

situation in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Syria policy has also been dubbed as a monumental failure. The repeated attacks in Turkey have only succeeded in exposing the same along with creating widespread psychological fear in the region; the strategy that IS has always thrived on.

Terrorism is known to be a psychological warfare and IS professes it in its most brutal form. From the inception of the Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, it has succeeded in establishing psychological fear and control of all those living under its rule. Further, their suicide missions and form of jihad has always been self-sacrificial and glorified as martyrdom, exaggerating the psychological impact of terror. Here, psychological impact comes as a consequence of the tactics that IS indulges in. However, before that stage, there is a psychological indoctrination that exists within the terror outfit, enabling it to recruit fighters globally and create a vast network of supporters the world over.

IS not only thrives on the minds of those who fear it, it also thrives on the minds of those who are susceptible to empathising with the group. The IS is an idea that has spread across countries and connected with people around the world. The most prominent consequence of this can be seen in the form of lone-wolf attacks, wherein, an individual carries out an attack without any direct command or assistance by a terrorist organisation. Essentially, the individual is motivated to conduct such an act drawing inspiration or encouragement from an organisation's propaganda or belief, which may appeal to him/her. The idea that IS propagates has led to a wide number of such attacks in the past year and the numbers only seem to increase.

Along with creating a widespread psychological fear in the international community, IS has been successful in displaying its vast and global network with terror incidents taking place globally. Traditional terror groups are known to conceal their identity or involvement in a particular attack, although it would appear that times have definitely changed. IS does not leave the slightest opportunity to claim responsibility for an act of terror/violence against civilians the world over. Thus, the group has indeed blurred the line between: 1) operations that have been orchestrated by the group and carried out by the pledged soldiers of IS; and 2) attacks carried out by sympathisers who are inspired through propaganda widely available at their homes with no formal

allegiance to the group. According to Kamran Bokhari, a fellow at the George Washington University's extremism program, IS has been claiming attacks as a strategic move to showcase its geographic reach.

The Brussels and Paris attacks in 2016 are chilling reminders of the vast network of fighters that the group maintains, consisting of members of different nationalities operating across Europe. The perpetrators of these attacks were European nationals of Moroccan or Algerian origin who were radicalised and pledged into the IS mostly through social media and communication systems where they found a community of support. These incidents have not only revealed the reach of the IS and its lethal modes of propaganda but further gave a shocking insight to Europe's failure in addressing a vast number of such vulnerable people.

As IS is on the back foot in Mosul, reportedly having lost over 8 per cent of its territory in Syria and Iraq according to *Al Jazeera*, it is clear that the idea of the "Islamic Caliphate" has in no way been affected. The psychological repercussions of the group's propaganda are here to stay and global efforts need to be made in such a direction so as to eradicate it ideologically. In the past year, there has been a surge in lorry attacks carried out by IS-inspired or IS-instructed perpetrators, which is no coincidence. An English IS propaganda magazine, *Rumiyah*, in its November issue, has

glorified the Nice truck attacks and included an article outlining the vehicles and “useful” tactics for such terror attacks. Likewise, Al Qaeda has also called upon global attacks against Westerners with the “ultimate towing machine”, a vehicle, preferably a truck, featured in its English magazine *Inspire*.

Further, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the IS spokesman killed in an airstrike in 2016, in one of his propaganda messages called upon all fellow “soldiers of the Caliphate”, asking them to single out the disbelieving Westerners and smash their heads with a rock, slaughter them with a knife, choke or poison them or run them over with a car, in the absence of an IED, bullet or any other expensive equipment. The Nice lorry attacks, followed by Berlin, and, in the first week of 2017, Jerusalem, are testimonies to the fact that the message is not only spreading but gaining heedfulness.

IS has increasingly shifted its rhetoric from a ‘call upon all soldiers to travel to the Holy Caliphate’ to ‘a call upon soldiers to fight where they are, with whatever means available to them’. In this manner, it has managed to maintain its mass ideological appeal and has garnered sympathisers, thereby continuing to wreak its havoc.

(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])