

Conference Report

Confronting Global Terror

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

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This is a report of a closed session titled 'Confronting Global Terror', held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. Being an off the record session, it allowed speakers and participants to freely use the information received. However, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, was to be revealed. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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PREPARED BY

MUHAMMED LÜTFİ TÜRKCAN

PUBLISHER

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AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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Summary

This session primarily dealt with the question of how to develop a comprehensive strategy to counter global terrorism. The rise of global terrorism has created an atmosphere of fear across the globe affecting many countries in different continents. With advances in communication and transportation technology due to the processes of globalisation, once local groups now have the chance of spreading their ideologies and activities to a wider population. This session addressed the imminent need in reaching common ground for solving the issue since there is still lack of consensus on how to eliminate the threat of terrorism, if such a thing is possible.

The difficulties and challenges faced in countering DAESH attacks was one of the main discussion points in this session. Among the participants, one expert who served previously as a security advisor in a prominent institution claimed that the transformation of terrorism into more complicated structures stands as one of the most formidable challenges since it makes previous methods ineffective and unfit. Several predicaments such as diverging and sometimes conflicting interests of concerned countries, have also led to lack of coordination and cooperation in developing a comprehensive and an all-inclusive counter terror strategy. Moreover, another security expert maintained that complications associated with the nature of the DAESH threat - such as the impossible task of designing one particular course of action due to varying reasons for people's radicalisation, difficulty of detecting and measuring DAESH-inspired attacks and activities of its affiliates and an inability to cut off the external support to these terrorist groups - further complicate the situation by requiring a multi-layered response in the face of a multi-layered problem. In addition, the question of how to deal with the post-DAESH era appears as the critical component of the issue at hand.

There are several factors contributing to the intractability of the problem. First and foremost, terrorism is a function of international relations whereby states implicitly or explicitly support terrorists to advance their interests. In this sense, one discussant firmly asserted that no terrorist organisation survives unless they are supported by external powers. Therefore, it is imperative to have common understanding and agreed principles among the international actors, requiring all states to treat terrorist groups with an equal standard, without distinguishing them as good or bad terrorists. This will help eradicate the inconsistency in tackling terrorism.

Secondly, the ambiguity in the definition of terrorism is one of the factors curbing state collaboration. A realistic and workable definition of terrorism is needed in order to develop an efficient counter-terror strategy. Thirdly, failed states stand as one of the most important factors that result in the creation of a fertile environment for terrorists. Therefore, state-building mechanisms should be cautiously implemented in the post DAESH era. In this sense, the root causes of terrorism, including grievances, inequalities, lack of political representation, discrimination and so forth, should be properly addressed to be able to eliminate the conditions that provide a safe-haven for the emergence of terrorist groups. Finally, returning foreign terrorist fighters should be taken seriously if potential attacks in metropolitan cities are to be deterred.

Introduction

Terrorism has become a global phenomenon posing ominous threats to people living in all parts of the world. Various factors can be enumerated to account for the rise of global terrorism, yet one thing is evident: it knows no border or nationality. Besides, terrorism has also become increasingly multidimensional over the years, further complicating the process of countering it. Above all, the complex nature of contemporary terrorism has demonstrated the urgent need in finding common ground to develop a well-organised strategy. This situation requires a comprehensive understanding and evaluation of the different dimensions of the phenomenon. Against this backdrop, the session 'Confronting Global Terror' generated engaging discussions on the transformation of terrorism, development of counter-terrorism strategy and how to depoliticise it. Additionally, it was employed by politicians, academics, regional-experts, analysts and activists to discuss how the post-DAESH era should be handled in order not to give rise to a new terrorist group that would substitute the former one.

Transformation of Terrorism

The 9/11 attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda in the US in 2001 constituted one of the most shocking moments, not only for Americans, but also for many others around the world. Attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon showed beyond doubt that a country may be susceptible to terrorism regardless of the might of military capabilities.. This incident also demonstrated that terrorism is anything but a local phenomenon. The response of the US to Al-Qaeda attacks was to launch a war on terror, an international military campaign aimed at eliminating all terrorists in a preventive manner before they attack again. Many world countries showed their solidarity with the US in varying degrees to permanently root out terrorism. However, the world went into shock again after a group, which called itself DAESH (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took control of the city of Mosul in Iraq and self-declared caliphate in 2014. This was followed by brutal images showing the massacres committed by DAESH in the areas it captured. It then expanded its terrorist campaigns outside the so-called caliphate. In the last three years, DAESH carried out more than 70 attacks across the world and killed more than two thousand people. These attacks have targeted cities in many countries, from Paris to London, Barcelona, Istanbul and Kabul. In Turkey, DAESH attacks claimed the lives of more than 300 people just in three years. The problem became even more serious with the emergence of different terrorist groups declaring their affiliation to DAESH.

Within this context, the participants of the session agreed that terrorism has proliferated ideologically and organisationally and morphed into a new phase. One of the participants highlighted that when Osama bin Laden, the founder and the leader of Al- Qaeda, was captured and killed in 2011, there was hope for eradicating terrorism since his death was regarded as the final blow to global terrorism. During the same period, Turkey was also involved in a domestic peace process to solve its decades-long conflict with the PKK that caused more than forty thousand people to lose their lives. Yet, the ensuing developments proved that terrorism was far from over. According to a participant, one reason for the survival of terrorism is the arbitrary implementation of ineffective and irrelevant counter-terrorism strategies. What is needed to combat the evolving global terror threat is a well-coordinated and all-inclusive strategy. As articulated by one participant, the nature of terrorism in the 60s and 70s has transformed into a more complex structure where leaders of terrorist groups are now more skilful players who manage to regenerate their organisation in the event of structural collapse. This feature makes it impossible to eliminate terrorism completely. What can be done instead is to recognise terrorism as an ongoing problem that needs to be 'managed' and contained. Terrorism can only be managed through a comprehensive strategy which involves international cooperation. As claimed by one of the participants, countries spend too much time and attention discussing terrorism and too little

on countering it. Despite there is a consensus on the need to eliminate DAESH completely, there still is a lack of collaboration and coordination among relevant countries. As one of the speakers stated, the Global Coalition against DAESH is composed of 68 countries whose members still differ in their commitment in defeating DAESH.

The effectiveness of decapitation of terrorist leaders as a form of counter-terrorism strategy, was discussed in the session. It was noted that decapitation worked in a few cases, notably in religious organisations. Although decapitation might provide short-term gains, in the long run it could lead to further radicalisation. Therefore, it should be accompanied by long-term strategies. For instance, the death of Zarqawi did not bring an end to DAESH, proving that new terrorism could revive itself with a more radical ideology and leader.

Challenges of the New Terrorism

The discussions surrounding the session - 'existing and likely challenges with regard to
countering global terrorism' - revealed two sets of difficulties that lay ahead. The first set, pertained to the complicated nature of global terrorism while the second, was about the politics among countries. Beginning with the first one, the decentralised organisational structure of DAESH encouraged various groups in different parts of the world (who affiliate themselves with the group) to carry out attacks on behalf of DAESH. Dozens of pre-existing groups announced their allegiance to DAESH once Baghdadi declared the caliphate. Additionally, many DAESH recruits who were trained in Iraq and Syria and indoctrinated into the group's radical ideology were sent back to their country of origin or other countries to establish secret cells. These cells and affiliates constitute a large network where the money and resources are controlled and channelled to the organisations inside and outside the caliphate. Moreover, individuals inspired by DAESH ideology carry out terrorist acts in the form of lone wolf attacks which are harder to prevent beforehand. This poses a significant challenge because it is hard to measure and detect an individuals' allegiance to DAESH. Therefore, this scattered structure allows DAESH to exert its influence outside its self-claimed territory and carry out attacks in different countries.

People are radicalised for very different reasons making it hard to bring an all-encompassing solution. DAESH has recruits from over 120 countries and each individual recruit has different motivations for joining. Therefore, it is not possible to have one package that would mitigate every form of radicalisation. This requires a detailed plan of action. Moreover, government policies (both domestic and foreign) might also contribute to the radicalisation process. As articulated by one of the participants, European countries' refugee policies gain significance because ill treatment might exacerbate radicalisation among the refugee population. However, today, the upsurge of right wing and anti-immigrant discourse in Europe stands as an important factor in inviting radicalisation. The session also noted that there is a risk of pushing people to the periphery as a result of using disproportionate military pressure as a counter-terrorism strategy. The incidents of Afghanistan, Iraq and Algeria proved this. Therefore, it should be kept in mind an important challenge that needs to be overcome is the constant marginalising of people through the use of force – thereby stirring up radicalisation.

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Terror as an Instrument of International Politics

Countries implicitly or explicitly give support to certain terrorist groups whom they consider as good terrorists, in order to improve their national interests. As a participant pointed out, terrorism studies emerged under international relations rather than under psychology because international politics is the source of terrorism. This is a critical factor for the survival of terrorist groups since no terrorist organisation survives unless they are supported by external powers. For instance, over time, PKK camps and its so-called leaders moved from one location to another in order to survive between Beqaa Valley in Lebanon to Syria and Qandil Mountains in Iraq. At present, external support to terrorism still continues in different forms due to various motivations. This constitutes a critical challenge for building an international understanding that embraces the principle of denying support to any terrorist group, regardless of motivation.

In relation to the above-mentioned point, lack of agreement on the definition of terrorism can create challenges. More than 200 definitions of terrorism are cited in the dictionary handbook of terrorism. This reveals that the concept of terrorism is not conceptualised in a scientifically workable manner. In this context, one participant highlighted the need for a realistic and workable definition of terrorism in order to ensure consistency in the treatment of violent groups. This is essential because labelling someone as a terrorist is a context based and value-based endeavour generating inconsistency across countries, which in turn serve to the benefit of terrorist groups. In this context, Turkey's objection to the US support to the PKK's Syrian offshoot YPG becomes important because PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation not only by the US but also by the EU and many other countries. This inconsistency in treatment creates new challenges in the form of distrust not only among countries but also populations. For instance, many people in Turkey believe that DAESH is a product of the West. This perception has been fed by the inconsistent policies of the West with regard to terrorism problems outside their territories. Particularly, the case of FETÖ (Fethullah Terrorist Organisation) - which has been largely underestimated and downplayed by Western countries - has further aggravated the Turkish people's perception of the double-standard attitude of Western countries. It was noted that this challenge should be overcome by applying an unchanging and principled approach to other countries' terrorism problems as if they were theirs if an international understanding and common ground were to be achieved.

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Prospective Comments

As to the future projections of post-DAESH era, various ideas were provided with particular emphasis on the need for solving the root causes of terrorism. The rehabilitation of society who witnessed DAESH brutality is of utmost importance. The negative impacts of the difficult conditions, experiences and sufferings faced by people should be treated with due care in order to integrate them into society. For eliminating the risks that would lead to the flourishment of new terrorist groups, the root causes of terrorism should be addressed cautiously. Terrorism can be a result of many factors. Some people become terrorists due to a desire for adventure, while others believe that terrorism is the only way to achieve their ends. Grievances, exclusion, isolation, lack of political representation, discrimination, economic inequality can be counted as the driving forces behind people's choice to become a terrorist. Therefore, in the post-DAESH era, such problems should be tackled seriously. In this line, one of the participants argued that the economic crises in Middle Eastern countries caused high unemployment and income disparity leading the middle class to lose its economic well-being. The Arab uprisings offered a hope for these people to get through the economic turmoil. However, once it was crushed, the people lost their hope for the future and this pushed many to adopt extreme ideologies and turn to radicalisation. Therefore, establishing a functioning strong economy is an important element for preventing the re-emergence of global terrorism from the region.

Additionally, failed states are important sources of terrorism. The collapse of state capacity in
Iraq and Syria helped the emergence of DAESH in these countries by giving a safe haven for them to organise their activities without being subject to the state authority. In the post-DAESH era, state building mechanisms should be implemented cautiously in order to prevent the creation of another failed state in the future. Functioning state institutions should be formed with due care without giving any room for their collapse. However, the unsustainability of political order in the wider region still constitutes a challenge for Middle Eastern countries in terms of having a latent source for another conflict in the region. Moreover, it was noted that 500 people including their families joined DAESH each month. Their motivations were quite diverse considering the various backgrounds of each individual. Although it is possible to find out the many reasons that drive people to join DAESH, there is still no single pathway to radicalisation and therefore it is difficult to spot vulnerable people before they join. As one participant claimed, those who joined DAESH could easily travel across countries without being blocked or identified since there is no obvious profile of a person likely to become involved in extremism. Therefore, states should develop a mechanism to identify and prevent the travel of people whose purpose is to carry out terrorist activities. Cooperation of intelligence agencies among different countries will become an important component of counter-terrorism strategy in the post-DAESH era.

With regards to the evolution of DAESH after its collapse in Iraq and Syria, one participant argued that DAESH would not go underground, but rather become a virtual caliphate existing in cyberspace. The previous organisational models will be replaced by new ones as technology and cyberspace advance rapidly. According to this perspective, DAESH will continue its activities of recruitment, fundraising and ideological propaganda through the internet and maintaining its caliphate in the cloud.

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Conclusion

This session highlighted the importance of collaboration among countries in order to counter terrorism given the fact that its global character poses serious threat to the security interests of all countries more than ever. Post-DAESH era provides a good opportunity for the international community to take lessons from the previous mistakes and to develop a new mutual understanding that shares the concerns of others. In this sense, first, all cases of terrorism should be treated along equal standards. Secondly, this new understanding should be expanded to address and solve the root causes of terrorism that by and large pertain to the economic, political and sociological conditions of the world. The international community should take issues such as global inequality, political oppression, xenophobia, and Islamophobia and so forth seriously. Finally, in addition to the threat on the ground, terrorists are rapidly adapting themselves to the new dynamics of the 21st century by spreading their ideologies in cyberspace. This evolution requires a major shift in the way we deal with terrorism. Therefore, more counter measures need to be taken in order to solve the problem before it casts an even larger shadow over the globe.

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