

LONG SHADOW OF TERRORISM.

THAT fears of terrorist strikes might have led to the postponement of the Asean summit that is to have taken place in the Philippines today is a reminder again that terrorism casts a long shadow unlikely to fade any time soon. Five years ago this month, the Singapore and Malaysia governments simultaneously arrested a number of Muslim militants planning terror attacks in the region. In Malaysia, the 13 men arrested were members of a new wing of an Islamic militant group with links to Zacarias Moussaoui, a Frenchman involved in the Sept 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

In Singapore, the 13 detained were members of the Jemaah Islamiah (JI), a clandestine network with cells in Malaysia, Indonesia and, more recently, the Philippines. They were planning to strike US naval vessels in Singapore waters, as well as a shuttle bus service used by Americans to travel between the Yishun MRT station and Sembawang Wharf. Two of them had trained with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, a separatist movement fighting for independence for Mindanao Island in the southern Philippines. The latter, incidentally, is seen by security experts as the weak link in South-east Asia's fight against terrorism. In Singapore today, 34 people linked to JI are still in custody. There are 26 others not locked up but who must comply with certain restrictions or risk being detained.

So the terrorism threat is real and has a face - in fact, many faces: The terrorist is not always a Muslim, a 'jihadist' willing to kill others and himself. If there were comprehensive statistics, we would probably find that the majority of terrorists are in fact not Muslim. However, four aspects make the threat from the jihadist particularly challenging.

Asymmetrical means

THE first is the nature of jihadi terrorism itself. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong once observed that where 'the communists fought to live...the jihadi terrorists fight to die and live in the next world'. Their willingness to martyr themselves gives them a competitive advantage over security and law enforcement officials. Yes, terrorists of other persuasions are also willing to martyr themselves. But Islamic militants are disproportionately represented. Some of them (not all, it must be said) also elevate to the status of legitimate targets people with no fault other than that they are 'unbelievers' or 'infidels'. Not surprisingly, the root causes of Islamic terrorism are more complex than those of most other forms of terrorism. Political causes might explain the nationalist or separatist who resorts to

violence. Alienation and anomie might explain the anarchist. A sense of injustice and wanting to right capitalistic wrongs might explain the communist. But the Islamist, and the Islamic terrorist?

Security experts are increasingly coming to accept that Islamic terrorism cannot be neatly diagnosed as stemming from this or that. There are no clear root causes. There are factors that give terrorists a pretext for action, such as the US-led invasion of Iraq and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, but take these away and there will still be jihadi terrorists. One stark example: planning for the Sept 11 World Trade Centre blasts began in 1993, long before the US ouster of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Thin red line

PROFESSOR John Esposito, a well-known Islam expert at Georgetown University, and Ms Dalia Mogahed of Gallup Organisation recently conducted a survey of some 9,000 Muslims in nine major Muslim countries. The survey yielded the fascinating result that very little separates the 'moderate' from the 'radical'; the former defined as a Muslim critical of the Sept 11 attacks, and the latter as one in support of them. Levels of education, income and religiosity hardly varied between the two groups. What did vary was the way they viewed the West. Moderates were willing to build bridges with the West, while radicals saw the West as attempting to 'influence and control my way of life'. Ms Anna Simons, a professor of defence analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, takes the argument further. It is not wise to formulate policies based on any perceived distinction between 'moderates' and 'radicals' because the line between the two is not stable. Rebuking Western commentators who attribute Islamic terrorism to pat reasons of discrimination and alienation, she wrote in *The American Interest* (Summer, 2006): 'We gloss over the possibility that Islamists might want to do us grave harm out of deep spiritual conviction. It is easier and more politic to boil the problem down to inequities rather than iniquity.'

'Note here that deep spiritual conviction is not the same as deep spiritual learning; all too often the jihadi terrorist has been found to be a Muslim who does not know his religion as well as might be desired. In the European Union, fully 20 per cent of jihadi terrorists are recent converts to Islam.'

Global inspiration, local action

THIS brings us to the second point, the ability of Islamic terrorism to be local and global at the same time. Some call it the 'glocalisation' of terrorism. Islam is a religion whose reach is global. With the Internet as enabling medium, this helps terrorists recruit, advertise and communicate. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian terrorist implicated in Al-Qaeda's 1998 bombings in Tanzania and Kenya, recently called on the ummah, the global Muslim community, to 'wage a popular jihadist war'.

Home-grown terrorist groups have thus mushroomed in many countries - in Asia and increasingly in the more open societies in the West. The March 11, 2004, Madrid train bombings and the July 7, 2005, London subway bombings are spectacular examples. Less spectacular but no less worrisome are the foiled plots. In Canada, 17 Muslim men were arrested in June this year for a plot to cause 'massive' damage in the Toronto area. In the US, more than 50 Muslim Americans have been arrested for various plots since Sept 11. Most of them were born and bred in the US.

Counter-terrorism officials call these perpetrators 'clean skins': they have no prior criminal or security record. Their intellectual and ideological inspiration comes from militant teachings that can be found on the Internet. They operate locally and independently, without direct links to any established terrorist organisation. Some may even be mere teenagers. They are a big source of worry to law enforcement agencies because monitoring them effectively requires tremendous amounts of resources, both human and technological. This was perhaps why, last month, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, the head of Britain's domestic intelligence service, MI-5, told the British media about 'close to 30 plots' that her agency had uncovered and was monitoring. It was a departure from her usual taciturnity that helped to raise public awareness of the seriousness of the issue. The threat, she said, was one that would 'last a generation'.

Or more. The threat, after all, has taken 30 or more years to reach its present proportions, and the end game is nowhere in sight. Communism took 100 years to defeat, and even then it was not overwhelmed as such, but burnt itself out - after enough people were convinced by the evidence of their own eyes that it did not offer a superior way of life, far less a solution to the world's problems.

A widening divide

IN THE case of jihadi terrorism however, things will probably get worse before they get better because of what seems to be a widening divide between the Muslim and the non-Muslim worlds. On the Muslim side is a perception of victimisation fuelled by unsympathetic Western comments and media reports; on the non-Muslim side is a perception of Muslim unreasonableness fuelled by reports of what they see as Muslim over-reaction to events such as the publication by a Danish paper of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad and Pope Benedict's remarks about reason and religion.

Prince Alwaleed, nephew of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, noted in a recent interview in The McKinsey Quarterly: 'In the West, and specifically in the US, any act of terrorism by a Muslim is blamed on the entire Muslim community. In response to a recent attempted terrorist plot in the United Kingdom, for instance, the President of the United States talked of Islamic fascism. One or two people, or 20 people, or 100, or even 1,000 may fall into that category, but you can't make a general statement about 1.3 billion people. I acknowledge that we have problems inside our Islamic community, but putting all Muslims into one pot and implying Islam is a terrorist religion adds fuel to the fire. This polarisation between Islam and Christianity is very dangerous.'

Indeed it is. There is nothing more that the militant ideologues – upon whose teachings terrorists feed - would like than for that to happen. One ideologue found online, Abu Bakr Naji, writes almost gleefully of 'dragging the masses into battle such that polarisation is created between all the people'.

Exploiting democracy

WHEN Madrid was struck in 2004, three days before a general election, it signalled that jihadi terrorists had reached a new tactical high. They had learnt to manipulate the very political system that democratic countries build their foundations on. Angered by official attempts to pin the blame on Basque separatists instead of Al-Qaeda, as the evidence pointed, Spanish voters threw out the Popular Party headed by then Premier Jose Maria Aznar, and voted in the Socialist Party headed by Mr Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. Mr Aznar was a rare European supporter of the US involvement in Iraq, while Mr Zapatero had

promised to withdraw Spain's 1,300 troops from Iraq if he won. Which he did promptly.

The terrorists had successfully exploited political differences within Spain, and between Europe and America. In the Middle East, a number of what might be called terrorist-political organisations have exploited democracy in a different way, by taking part in elections and winning seats in government. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories are prime examples.

The long-term implications of this trend are far from clear. To be optimistic, the responsibilities of formal power might temper their violent tendencies and moderate them into 'normal' political parties which seek power through constitutional means. To be pessimistic, their new positions will allow them to spread their influence and subvert the system from within. One can expect the rise of unconventional warfare between these groups and the governments they seek to unseat. And they are not confined to national boundaries: Their links and influence cut across borders. Taken together, Hamas, Hizbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood mark the rise of non-state actors as players in the Middle East. This is a new challenge to the power balance in the region, dominated traditionally by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

In sync

SO, THE shadow of today's terrorism threat is indeed a very long one. It spans the globe, touching myriad local communities, including Singapore's.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Singapore government had a programme to inoculate Singaporeans against communist ideology. Many organisations were called into action - from schools to the People's Association to business groups. Today, we have a roughly similar, although probably not as concerted, programme via the Religious Rehabilitation Group, the Community Engagement Programme and Inter-racial Confidence Circles. But today's terrorist threat is more complex and delicate. In the Middle East, it is complicated by interplay with nationalist and political factors. In most other countries, including Singapore, it is complicated by communal and religious factors. Countering the jihadist threat, if done clumsily and with racial or religious prejudices, risks alienating entire Muslim communities and widening racial fault lines.

To counter the threat effectively, it is necessary for many things to be in sync - every national policy, every government action, every arm of government, every national media, every private organisation that might unwittingly host a potential terrorist. It is a tall order, but that is the only way - if the long shadow of terrorism is not to grow.

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