

Global Security Briefing – FEBRUARY 2015

IS ISLAMIC STATE IN RETREAT?

Paul Rogers

Summary

This briefing looks at two unrelated incidents in the first weeks of 2015, in France and Syria, as indicative of major developments in the evolution of extreme Jihadist movements and that are likely to have long term effects. The *Charlie Hebdo* murders will lead to much more intensive counter-terror procedures in France and in greater security services cooperation across Europe but these also risk stimulating a further rise in the anti-Islamic mood. The execution of the young Jordanian pilot, Flight Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasasbeh by Islamic State (IS) in Syria looked initially to increase the resolve of regional states to confront IS. However, it is far from clear that recent suggestions that IS is more generally on the defensive are accurate.

Charlie Hebdo

On 7 January, two French brothers of Algerian descent, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, entered the central Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and opened fire on an editorial meeting, killing 12 people. In an apparently coordinated attack, hostages were later held at a Parisian kosher supermarket. Four customers and another police officer were killed by Amedy Coulibaly, an apparent associate of the Kouachi brothers. By the time the three attackers were killed in sieges on 9 January, France had deployed an estimated 80,000 police, army and other security personnel in response.

Although *Charlie Hebdo* was a low circulation magazine, it was a part of French political culture and represented that strand, more prominent in France than in most European countries, of vigorous political lampooning, sometimes close to the obscene. The attack was viewed immediately as an assault on freedom of expression and the response included the biggest public demonstrations of support on any issue in France for decades and stoked intense debates across Europe on what is and is not permissible.

One element of the attack is to point to how actions by determined individuals can have a huge influence depending on the targets and the timing. Those directly involved were just three people. They appear to have been well equipped and to have had paramilitary combat training, with at least one of them spending time with an offshoot of the al-Qaida movement in Yemen, and there was in all probability a small support group, some of whom may have been aware of the detail of what was planned. Even so, two people with one specific target and another with a more generic intention, were able to dominate the security agenda of a major western country for three days with the mobilisation of over 80,000 security personnel, and to have a major effect on the world-wide media. What was largely ignored was the deep and structured alienation and deprivation that formed the backstory for the attackers' turn to the politics of

violent and conspiratorial jihadism, in Coulibaly's case via petty criminality. They share this backstory with many others perpetrating similar attacks on civilians in western countries in recent years.

What was also relevant was that the *Charlie Hebdo* attack was not specifically linked to IS, widely seen as the major issue for European states. Confusingly, Coulibaly had claimed allegiance to the IS in a previously recorded video message and his alleged accomplice, Hayat Boumedienne, is believed to have fled France for IS-controlled Syria. The Kouachi connection was more strongly with the Yemen-based al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a reminder that Islamist and jihadist groups exist in a variety of configurations beyond IS and that links between such competing factions and their supporters are often nebulous and far more defined by the individual's imagination than by inter-institutional alliances.

Flt Lt al-Kasasbeh

The manner of the execution of the young Jordanian pilot, Flt Lt al-Kasasbeh, led to vigorous condemnation across the Middle East and beyond, with immediate suggestions that IS had greatly damaged its standing. It was an analysis reinforced by the clear indication that this was not a sudden decision but part of a closely scripted action, most likely done some weeks before the release of a lengthy and professionally produced video of the murder.

The initial response from Jordan was very heavy condemnation from King Abdullah and senior government officials that reflected opinion across much of the Kingdom, even though there were still indications of unease among a substantial section of the population that had been unhappy about Jordan's participation in the war. One other coalition partner, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had contributed strike aircraft until December but then withdrew after the capture of Flt Lt al-Kasasbeh, citing fears for its own aircrew.

In the wake of the execution the UAE was under heavy pressure to renew its commitment to the coalition and in early January it did so, reportedly deploying an F-16 squadron to Jordan. Meanwhile, Jordan substantially increased its role in the bombing attacks on IS, primarily in Syria and aimed especially at the IS. IS sources subsequently claimed without clear evidence that one attack had killed their one remaining American hostage, the young aid worker Kayla Mueller, who had been detained in Syria eighteen months earlier.

IS's action had multiple purposes. One was to act as a threat to all Jordanian aircrew - if they are captured, a similar fate will await them. To drive home this threat, IS released the names and addresses of other Jordanian pilots involved in air attacks in the video showing his execution. A second was to spread dissension and division within Jordan. A third was to extend the sense of threat to all aircrew in the coalition, including pilots and other aircrew from the United States, UK, Canada, Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, France and Denmark. This threat also extended by inference to any ground troops that might be taken hostage, including forward-based Special Forces and the increasing numbers of troops involved in training Iraqi Army personnel in Iraq and Kurdish and rebel militias in Turkey.

The reactions from Jordan and the UAE suggested that the killing of Flt Lt al-Kasasbeh had had the opposite effect to that intended, but there have been other indications of considerable political concern among western governments at the prospect of their military personnel

suffering a similar death. Late last year the UK announced it was expanding its training commitment to the Iraqi Army by establishing a battalion-sized force with 200 trainers and several hundred supporting personnel, including a substantial protection force. In spite of the size of the protection force, the National Security Council postponed implementing the decision following the capture of Flt Lt al-Kasasbeh, reportedly on the grounds that the government feared the public impact of the capture or killing of UK military personnel in the run-up to the May general election.

Escalating Conflict

In both Syria and Iraq, the war with IS expanded further in December and January and one of the most significant developments was the increase in direct combat between IS paramilitaries and western troops. Contrary to the repeated statements from heads of government that such troops would not be involved directly in ground combat, there were clear indications that this was happening, including reliable reports that Canadian Special Forces had engaged in three fire-fights with Islamist paramilitaries during January.

After the killing of the Jordanian pilot, there were indications of some setbacks for IS in Syria, some taking of territory from them in Iraq and even some indications of declining morale. The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, argued on 8 February that the coalition was now “on the road” to defeating the movement, a notably upbeat assessment compared with assessments at the end of 2014.

There is reason, though, to treat this and other optimistic statements with caution. As earlier ORG briefings have emphasised, IS may have major internal contradictions but it also actively seeks confrontation, not least as a means of gaining more recruits from abroad. This was summarised three months ago in a November briefing which concluded:

At the core of the current situation lies a dilemma for the coalition. The conflict between opposing parties is now close to a stalemate, with IS having limited potential for gaining more territory but the use of coalition air power being wholly inadequate to defeat it. Given time, it may be possible for the coalition to train Iraqi and other ground forces, but there is no guarantee of this. Meanwhile there are early signs that IS is using more persistent force to control the territory it now holds.

That may eventually undermine support for its aims among local Sunni populations, and an implication of this is that it needs more recruits from outside. Gaining such recruits, though, is partly dependent on Western air strikes and their effect, given the clever use of new social media by Islamic State and its ability to present itself as a vanguard in the defence of Islam. Thus, current Western policy may be just what IS strategists want. Indeed there may be serious attempts to provoke a more intensive air campaign, not least through brutal actions against Western citizens and even attacks in Western states. Much will depend on whether such provocation succeeds.

In that sense, the further development of IS, in the face of some difficulties in Syria and Iraq, will depend on its level of support in the wider region, not just across the Middle East and North Africa but in a number of western countries. Judging by the reaction to the *Charlie Hebdo*

attacks, counter-terrorism forces in Europe are fully aware of this, but the problem is that any substantial increase of action which can be seen as heightening suspicion of Muslim communities risks exacerbating social alienation, especially for young disaffected men and women. For all the current talk of threats from 'foreign fighters' returning from territory uncontrolled by any recognised government, politicians continue to miss the point that radicalisation increasingly happens at home and in response to their own internal and foreign policies. Leaving to fight abroad with IS or al-Qaida is far less a cause of radicalisation than its consequence.

Conclusion

While IS has suffered some reversals, its core challenge remains the same and it has recently had further extreme Islamist factions pledge allegiance, including in Libya, Egypt, Philippines and Afghanistan. It is believed to be still attracting many hundreds of recruits every month from across the region and beyond. Perhaps of greatest concern is that if there are increasing tensions in communities in Western Europe, not least France, then the political and security response will exacerbate marginalisation among vulnerable groups. In that respect, the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, though having little or no connection with IS, may have a significance that is currently being missed.

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG) and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His 'Monthly Global Security Briefings' are available from our website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via our newsletter each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.



Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.