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# WESTMINSTER ATTACK AND THE MENACE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

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As if to mark the anniversary of the Brussels terror attacks last year at Zaventem airport and Maalbeek metro station, the iconic city of London witnessed a gory terror attack. On 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2017, 52 year old Khalid Masood, was driving a car on Westminster Bridge, at the end of which lie the Houses of Parliament and the magnificent Big Ben. Masood mounted his car onto the pavement of the Bridge as he drove along it mowing down people on his way. At the end of the bridge, the car was rammed into the Parliament boundary injuring a few more pedestrians after which Masood sprinted out of the car. He entered the grounds of the Parliament and repeatedly stabbed the first police guard that stopped him. Eventually, he was shot three times and succumbed to his wounds. He seems to have acted alone drawing inspiration from “international terrorism”, according to Scotland Yard.

The style of attack has not only left the people of London in shock but has further drawn global attention and condemnation for the same.

While other parts of Europe and the world have had unfortunate encounters with acts of terror, London had remained, until this day, shielded from such incidents. The attack seems to hold more symbolic value due to its location at the Westminster Bridge and further, inside the Parliament grounds during a session. It is clear that the attacker had no intentions of escaping and only wanted to wreak havoc and fear in one of the most securely guarded areas of the capital city. The Westminster attack has had 5 casualties including the attacker and a police official, and has left 40-50 people from across the world seriously injured.

While reports so far suggest that Masood had not received any formal instruction in carrying out the attack, the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for it within the next day. He was called a “soldier” of the caliphate by the group, who has said to have “carried out the operation in response to calls to target the people of coalition nations”.<sup>1</sup> This claim comes in the wake of IS facing major losses at its core

territories of operation in Iraq and Syria, due to the US-led coalition that has conducted over 19,000 air strikes on IS targets. These have not only killed thousands of IS fighters but have further disabled their oil fields, ammunition, factories, weapons facilities, command posts and cash stores, shaking the very structure and functioning of the group as well. So far, IS has been pushed into one area of Mosul which was earlier occupied and controlled by the group, and its de facto capital, Raqqa is soon going to face similar airstrike operations. Thus, the organisation has lost 62 percent of its territory in Iraq and 30 percent in Syria, according to US officials.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Caliph of IS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a statement in what was called as his “farewell speech” accepting the defeat of the group in Iraq. He urged soldiers to either return back to their respective countries or blow themselves up, proceeding to heaven. Most fighters are believed to have fled to its remaining operating grounds in Syria.

In the aftermath of the Westminster attack, IS’ claims for responsibility is a clear attempt made by the outfit to revive its relevance. However, this is not to say that IS claims responsibility for merely any attack that it may or may not have directly instructed. Not only was the London attack similar to IS-style lone wolf attacks, but it is also in line with the narrative that the group stands for and could not have been more symbolic, targeting the Houses of

Parliament, with the backdrop of the iconic Big Ben.

IS depends largely on its propaganda for recruitment of fighters across the world. Also, according to Charlie Winter, senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (London), the narrative focus of IS had shifted from attempting to portray its so-called caliphate as a utopia, to material characterized by warfare and violence.<sup>3</sup> This changing rhetoric can clearly be seen in the propaganda manuals and magazines that carry the ideology and guidelines for IS sympathisers and potential recruits. Not only are fighters asked to wage jihad by eliminating the infidels from “wherever they are” but further they are encouraged to use “whatever tools they have got” like guns, knives, cars, or even lorries in order to do their bit.

The Nice attack where a lorry was used to run over a celebratory crowd last year (2016), was not only glorified by the IS but further the November issue of their English propaganda magazine *Rumiyah* carried a story encouraging more attacks of the same nature. Khalid Masood did not pledge allegiance to IS but his style of attack imitates an adherence to the very same. This is the very reason that IS has claimed responsibility for the attack, in an attempt at bringing light to its narrative once again and achieving legitimacy one more time, thereby adding to its propaganda.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that despite IS losing physical presence, its psychological presence has been manifested in such a way that it continues to exist extensively across the globe. With lone wolf attacks slowly becoming a common affair, one could even say that it seems most likely to be the future of terrorist acts. As IS loses more of its territory at the home turf, it only makes sense for “soldiers” to fight from where they are and with whatever means available to them. Further, the fact that the London attacker chose the same date as the Brussels attacks which were orchestrated by the IS, may not necessarily be mere coincidence. Symbolic dates and locations are often used by such attackers in order to make the maximum impact with the least resources available to them.

While it is yet to be determined whether Masood was actually acting alone or has any connection with radical extremist groups in England, one thing has become very clear. Sympathisers of groups such as IS need not necessarily be radical and religiously motivated or actively engaged in terrorist activities and communication. Khalid Masood is known to have been under the radar of police and intelligence agencies in the UK since 1984 for his violent behaviour and inclination towards extremism, however, he was not singled out as a terrorist threat and thus was left unchecked. Even the perpetrators of the Brussels attacks were known to be petty criminals and not inclined to religion

or extremism as such, which is why they were not under the radar for potential terrorist threat at the time. This makes the thin line between criminals and terrorists very hard for security agencies to decipher and perhaps requires a change in the norms of monitoring mechanisms put in place. The moment a criminal becomes a terrorist is extremely hard to detect, posing a complex situation for the security setup. Further, the lone wolf again has the unique advantage of not communicating with anyone at all and thereby acting completely alone, in which case individuals need to be checked at a personal level, in order to be detected as a threat. The UK is known to have one of the best counter-terror agencies in Europe and have thwarted several terrorist plots, remaining free of an attack since the 2005 London bombings. However, the way the lone wolves operate in isolation seems to stay off the intelligence radar, posing as one of the greatest challenges to all police and intelligence agencies. In such a scenario, effective human intelligence and community relations need to be maintained in order to scrutinize individuals at a more personal level, thereby magnifying the existing counter-terror radar.

Further, in the aftermath of the Westminster attack, the manner in which some sections of the society have responded has been appalling and is also part of the problem. United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader and pro-Brexit campaigner, Nigel Farage, issued a statement suggesting that mass immigration and

“multiculturalism” are the reasons behind this kind of attack. He went on to say that the Westminster attack can prove to the Americans that President Trump’s policies regarding immigration may actually be a step in the right direction.<sup>4</sup> Soon after however, he was forced to admit that the Westminster attack had nothing to do with immigration. Further, after the attack, a picture of the Westminster Bridge, with victims being attended to, went viral across the internet due to a woman in that picture wearing a *hijab* and looking into her phone. Several people lashed out with anti-Islam sentiments aiming to suggest that the girl looked “least bothered” with the carnage at the scene owing to her faith. Such statements and actions by members of the public and influential leaders are not only insensitive and provocative but further, provide more fodder for the narrative that groups such as IS stand for.

Essentially, even though it may look like IS is losing its base, the menace it has left behind has in no way been diminished. Despite Baghdadi accepting defeat and no longer calling upon soldiers to actively fight, the narrative and “legacy” he has left behind through the group, is like a seed that has germinated and spread across the minds of many people worldwide. Such a phenomenon is not new to the world as a similar pattern was seen with the way in which Al Qaeda had originated and evolved over the years, with sleeper cells still present across the globe. It would seem today that IS is resorting to

the very same, except unintentionally, as is clear with the increasing number of lone wolf attacks. As long as such narratives gain sympathy and draw inspiration, the future seems exceptionally grim and calls for effective counter-narratives to thwart it.

***(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

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Smith, “ISIS Claims Responsibility for London Attack but Analysts Remain Skeptical”, *NBC News*, March 24, 2017. Available at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/london-parliament-attack/isis-claims-responsibility-london-attack-analysts-remain-skeptical-n738071> Accessed on: March 28, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Lizzie Dearden, “Isis claiming responsibility for London attack to mask huge losses in Iraq and Syria, say terror experts”, *Independent*, March 23, 2017. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-london-westminster-parliament-attack-claim-syria-iraq-islamic-state-militants-plan-what-does-it-a7646871.html> Accessed on: March 28, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> No. 1

<sup>4</sup> “Nigel Farage says failed multicultural experiment is to blame for Westminster attack”, *Express*, March 23, 2017. Available at: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/782966/london-terror-attack-nigel-farage-multicultural-britain-fail> Accessed on: March 28, 2017.