

The inexorable demise of jihadi terrorism

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The dramatic events of the last week in Montauban and Toulouse, France, again raise the question about the nature and the magnitude of the jihadi terrorist threat Europe is facing today.

Terrorism, by its very nature, seeks to create fear and anxiety that amplifies its attack. The sheer abhorrence it entails, should not lead us in a panic nor in overblowing the current threat. This is exactly what its perpetrators are aiming at. In order to mitigate the psychological impact of the tragic events in France, the history of terrorism contains a valuable lesson as to the bigger trend we're witnessing today. Neglecting these is too often the Achilles' heel in contemporary research in terrorism and radicalisation.

As far as the history of large terrorist campaigns can be a guide, its jihadi variety has a beginning and also an end. Notwithstanding the events in France, jihadi terrorism passed its peak. The current fragmentation of the jihadi terrorist campaign resembles the demise of international anarchist terrorism in the early 1900s or the radical left terrorism of the 70s and early 1980s. Each time, fragmentation and atomisation signaled the declining fortunes of terrorist campaigns.

Even if media reports linking the Toulouse gunman responsible for the murders of seven people in France, to a loosely connected European network of extremists, are correct, this does not entail that we are facing today a terrorist threat of serious magnitude. Already at the time of Bin Laden's death, his organisation and the state of jihadi terrorism were starkly different from their heydays between 1997 and 2004. Osama bin Laden himself had lost his Rob Hood image and jihadi terrorism its juggernaut sheen by the sheer revulsion its killings inspire, and as a result of international and national efforts and the growing resilience in Muslim communities and Muslim-majority countries. Osama bin Laden's death merely marked the symbolic end of an era. If it had any relevance in the real world of terrorism, this chiefly consisted in accelerating the waning of his message and the declining fortunes of his strand of terrorism.

Just as the earlier episodes of terrorist campaigns, jihadi terrorism too ultimately defeated itself – even if fringe groups undoubtedly try to maintain the momentum by periodic attacks and suicide missions. Neither did it weaken the 'far enemy', the West, nor the 'near enemy', the regimes in Muslim-majority countries. The first post-Bin Laden video, released by the jihadi media forum As-Sahab in June 2011, called for individual armed assaults (such as the Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan) and lone-wolf assassination attempts against adversaries. This message echoed earlier calls by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to militants living in the West to abandon joining foreign jihadi theaters, and instead to undertake individual acts in their home countries.

The renewed emphasis on individual terror acts can be considered as much as a recognition by al-Qaeda Central of the failure of jihadism to mobilise the masses in the Muslim world, as Bin Laden had always proclaimed. The loner-phenomenon signals the final stage in the demise of the jihadi terrorism campaign. It is a sign of weakness, not of strength.