

AN ENDURING THREAT

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Intelligence is often referred to as the 'missing dimension' when there is a failure to anticipate critical developments of a political and strategic nature. History is replete with many such instances. In recent times, renowned historians like Christopher Andrew have also talked of a lack of 'theologians' compounding this situation. Combined, these are seen as reasons for failing to anticipate many of the serious developments that took place during the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

To this day, for instance, many still wonder how the West and its intelligence agencies failed to realise the dimensions of Iran's religious revolution, leading to the establishment of a theocratic state under Ayatollah Khomeini. In retrospect, the Iranian Revolution was much larger than most previous secular uprisings, including the French Revolution. The generally accepted view, hence, is that intelligence agencies and policy-makers are usually unable to recognise the potential of movements about which they know little or understand even less.

Grave lacuna

Intelligence analysts are better off when it comes to matters arising from more pedantic issues and events. For example, in the case of non-denominational terrorism, which has been around for a long time, intelligence is better placed to understand its dimensions than that of religious-oriented terrorism. Any number of instances can be cited, wherein agencies failed to understand the emerging dimensions of religious-oriented terrorism.

Hardly any intelligence agency in the mid-20th century was able to comprehend the danger posed by the teachings of Islamist scholar, Sayyid Qutb. Few saw in what he said the seeds of all-embracing religious terrorism that would plague the world for years to come. Today, no doubt, it is possible to see the connection between Qutb's views and the establishment of al-Qaeda, and how his teachings spawned an entire generation of Islamist terrorists.

It was only after al-Qaeda carried out its spectacular attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, that the world truly woke up to this reality. The failure or inability to piece together missing pieces of non-secular thought, leading to a lack of understanding of the expanding saga of revolutionary violence, mostly of the religious variety, constitutes one of the most spectacular failures of intelligence in modern times.

Ethnic-oriented violence and terrorism is no less sanguinary in many instances, as the history of 'peoples' uprisings' in different parts of the world confirms. Some of the better known struggles of recent times, such as that of the Kurds in West Asia, have attracted international attention. Many others, however, have had a more limited shelf life. Some are based on local grievances, and many are sponsored by outside forces anxious to create turbulence and disorder in another country. Hardly any of them, however, have the same broad sweep or appeal as religious-oriented terrorism, especially Islamist terrorism. This is not to say that they do not pose a threat, or that the danger they pose is any less.

What is apparent as one surveys the global scene today is that the number and variety of terror groups is larger and more widespread than at any time previously. Ideology remains the main source of violent extremism. When intertwined with religious extremism, it becomes an even more potent mixture. Behavioural patterns contribute to escalation, from grievance redress to

mobilisation, and on to violent extremism.

The Islamic State

Consequently, any premature celebrations of the so-called destruction of the Islamic State (IS) 'Caliphate' would be uncalled for. IS stormtroopers have moved from strongholds in Syria and Iraq to countries across Europe, Asia and Africa. Many regional franchises linking individual IS and al-Qaeda groups are already in the works.

As the IS lost ground in Syria and Iraq, parts of Africa became the new battleground. More than a dozen African countries across two broad belts of Africa — from Somalia and Kenya in the east through Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Senegal in the west — are facing a wave of Islamist terrorism. During the past two years, unverified reports indicate the deaths of more than 10,000, and the battle continues in unrelenting fashion.

Boko Haram, a one-time affiliate of the IS, has been even more sanguinary than the IS or al-Qaeda. Al-Shabab in Somalia, the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen in Mali, and several others continue to thrive in parts of Africa.

Afghanistan is the other main epicentre of radicalised Islamist terror. The years 2017 and 2018 have been particularly bad in terms of the number of terror attacks and casualties resulting from these attacks. In a single month in January this year, terrorists belonging to disparate terror organisations, including the IS, carried out four major terror attacks, killing over 160 people. In succeeding months, there have been several similar attacks, leading to the deaths of many more civilians and soldiers. Killings have been indiscriminate and a majority feature suicide bombers. Targets tend to be indiscriminate; in a recent suicide attack, the target was a convoy of Sikhs and Hindus on their way to meet the President of Afghanistan in Jalalabad city in which at least 19 persons were killed.

Given the climate of violence, and the determination of radical groups to wage war, India cannot afford to be oblivious to what is happening around us. It cannot afford the luxury of amnesia, given the kind of terror threats that we faced in the past.

The 'Khalistan' revival

Very recently, we have seen a manifest attempt by Sikh extremist groups residing in Canada and the U.S. to revive the demand for Khalistan and of self-determination for Sikhs. They have the backing of sections of the Sikh community in the U.K. as well. As a result, a fresh wave of Sikh radicalisation is beginning to be seen in quite a few Western nations.

The August 12 pro-Khalistan rally in London, sponsored by a body styling itself as 'Sikhs for Justice' based in the U.S. has the backing of the U.K.-based Khalistan Sikh Federation and the Dal Khalsa. It is the clearest sign yet of the resurgence of pro-Khalistan sentiments. The August event has come in the wake of pro-Khalistani activists ripping off the Indian flag in Parliament Square, London during the Indian Prime Minister's visit earlier this year. A revitalised movement for a separate Sikh state can cause problems within India, sooner rather than later.

India is currently preoccupied with terror attacks from Pakistan, and the role of organisations such as the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in sponsoring terror attacks from across the border. Notwithstanding this, India must not be oblivious to attacks from other radical Islamist sources. According to reports, both the IS and al-Qaeda are engaged in a fierce competition to enlarge their activities in India. There are also attempts being made to secure more recruits from India. The territorial demise of the IS in Syria and Iraq is likely to

exacerbate insurgencies elsewhere, as was witnessed after the 'Afghan Jihad' in the 1980s and 1990s. Militants fleeing the 'Caliphate' could enlarge the ranks of those already present. As it is, there are reports from many nations in the West of stray attacks by returning IS recruits from the Syrian and Iraqi battlefields — in cities as far apart as London, Toronto and Paris.

It is important to appreciate the fact that the strength of Islamist terror groups, and especially that of the IS, lies not only in their military capabilities but more in their ideology and propaganda. Jihad and martyrdom continue to influence young Muslims to join their fold. So-called polarisation and the plight of religious minorities present them opportunities as well as soft targets.

No time for complacency

The enduring message is that the ideological battle against religiously-oriented terror groups like the IS is far from over. No shortcuts are available as of now. Above all, India must realise that some of the world's top 10 most wanted terrorists are located in its vicinity (the Haqqani brothers, LeT Chief Hafiz Saeed, JeM leader Masood Azhar and Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi). India, hence, cannot afford to be complacent.

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