

CLEAR SIGNALS THE 'FRINGE' OUGHT TO READ

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'The transnationalisation of issues pertaining to Indian Islam will always be challenging for the Government, while also making Indian Muslims extremely vulnerable to the political use of Islam, known as Islamism' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

In a period of just one week, we have had three important public statements being made by three of the most important government functionaries in India that have emphasised India's stronger credentials as a secular democratic polity. The context is the reactions to [the controversial remarks on the Prophet made by a \(now former\) spokesperson of the ruling party](#). In the first instance, the External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, stated that the negative reactions of many Muslim countries over the controversial remarks on the Prophet "... was an issue where the sensibilities and the sensitivities of people were impacted". Next was the National Security Adviser (NSA), Ajit Doval, who candidly accepted that the controversy has damaged India's global reputation, but also arguing that "India has been projected or some disinformation has been spread against India — which is far from the reality. Probably there is a need for us to engage them [Muslim world] and talk to them and convince them".

Most importantly, we had the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, mentioning in his blog his childhood friend, one Mr. Abbas Ramsada, to highlight his (the Prime Minister's) mother's selfless nature. Reminiscing their childhood, the Prime Minister mentioned Mr. Abbas having stayed with Mr. Modi's family "after the untimely death of my father's close friend who stayed in a nearby village" (i.e., Mr. Abbas's father). Though the Prime Minister did not directly address the controversy over the derogatory remarks made about the Prophet, the very reference to Mr. Abbas is an indirect acknowledgement that more damage should not be done to India's image as a country that celebrates its diversity and plurality. That Mr. Abbas was a part of his (the Prime Minister's) household, that Mr. Modi's mother took care of Mr. Abbas just like her own children, and that she also prepared favourite dishes during the festival of Eid must be seen as emphasising Mr. Modi's inclusive upbringing and the level of societal integration between Hindus and Muslims in India. And, finally, it was the Supreme Court of India that [held the discredited former spokesperson "single-handedly responsible" for igniting emotions](#) while asking her to "apologise to the country".

Then there was the timing of the diplomatic firestorm over the remarks: India's Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu was to reach Qatar on the last leg of a three-nation tour, and Iran's Foreign Minister was to arrive on his first official visit to India. The Modi government has also taken remarkable initiatives to improve ties with many West Asian/Gulf countries, in part to ensure energy security and to attract investment from there in the infrastructure sector. But there is another dimension that should not be forgotten.

Whether Mr. Jaishankar was hinting at global jihadist organisations or Pakistan's security establishment is not known, but he did acknowledge that there are elements desperate to "fish in troubled waters". It needs to be mentioned that immediately after the controversy erupted, the Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) issued a letter that has warned of suicide bombings in many Indian cities to protect the honour of the Prophet. The language it has used to denigrate the Indian government illustrates its efforts that are aimed at a transnationalisation of local political tensions and conflicts.

Even before and after Independence, communal riots have occurred across India with disturbing regularity. But here, the Indian government did not have to apologise to the Muslim world as the

issues triggering the riots were seen to be local. While it has been relatively easier for sympathisers from the Hindu religious right wing to brand Indian Muslims as anti-nationals and to exhort them to become more nationalist in their world view, it is now quite difficult to move away after indecorous remarks were made against the most respected figure in Islam. The Prophet unites all Muslims, irrespective of their political, ideological, sectarian, ethnic and linguistic differences. The mobilising potential of this issue is truly 'transnational'.

We never forget to mention that Muslims are closely integrated in Indian society, and have never empathised with jihadist organisations and their transnational aims. Even in these organisations, foreign fighters from India are disproportionately outnumbered by their American, French or British counterparts or by people from countries where there is a sizeable Muslim population. While Indian Muslims may have taken to streets protesting the persecution of their co-religionists in many conflict zones across the world, they have also done so against terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam.

While the social, political and economic concerns of India's Muslims have been too local to have any reverberations outside India, their religious anxieties have also been too Indian to have any resonance in any transnational organisation, be it Islamist or Jihadist. And it must remain so because the transnationalisation of issues pertaining to Indian Islam will always be challenging for the Government, while also making Indian Muslims extremely vulnerable to the political use of Islam, known as Islamism.

Various scholars have convincingly held that Islamism is not about Islam or Islamic faith, but it is about a remaking of the political order. Islamism thrives on a transnationalisation of issues pertaining to the Islamic faith and practices, which are not a monolith. 'Religionisation of politics' and 'politicisation of religion' is the root of Islamism, the same perilous politics that led to the creation of Pakistan. And, most disturbingly, what unites Islamists and Jihadists is their vision of a Sharia-based Islamic state as a desired political order. Muslims have always found the charm and the influence of India's constitutional order premised on secular nationalism more powerful than the fatal attraction of radical Islamism. Many experts will still underplay the threat posed by the global jihadist movement, arguing that neither AQIS nor the Islamic State (ISIS) has gained any traction in India. Fortunately, that is true since there has been no noticeable increase in the number of radicalised recruits despite the growing sense of political alienation among Indian Muslims. Can this make us complacent? The ISIS is also severely damaged, its various Indian franchises and offshoots do not pose any significant threat, and its capacity to draw recruits in India has also become questionable. But the AQIS would like to capitalise on the ideological vacuum in the regional jihadist landscape, particularly after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.

The Taliban's relationship with al Qaeda has often been marked by mutual suspicion. But despite many complexities, they have often adopted successful ways to cooperate for mutual strategic and tactical benefits. Even when the Taliban entered the Doha talks with the United States for America's eventual exit from Afghanistan, the two groups continued to coordinate till the end. After the Taliban's takeover, al Qaeda's jubilation has been understandable. Notwithstanding the fact that their relationship will remain fraught, they will still do their best to cooperate and coordinate.

Though it is unclear how the Taliban will stop al Qaeda from using Afghan territory for transnational jihadist operations, Kabul's new 'Islamist' rulers are nonetheless unlikely to restrain al Qaeda's regional ambitions, due to their inability or unwillingness. This makes the Taliban a highly suspect or unreliable partner in regional or global efforts to counter al Qaeda — we all know that the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has been the birthplace of many jihadist organisations including al Qaeda. The Pakistan factor too comes into play as Pakistan's security

establishment has been a long-time patron of the Afghan Taliban. There is also the kind of role Islamabad is expected to play by Washington in post-exit Afghanistan. While the Pakistan state itself seems to be bearing the brunt of the Afghan Taliban's success in Afghanistan with the reorganisation and reinvigoration of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the temptation will never dissipate in Rawalpindi to manipulate the complex jihadist landscape of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to meet its own geopolitical needs.

The Taliban, al Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) are three of the most important Islamist groups operating in Afghanistan's conflict ecosystem. Though the Taliban have consolidated their hold over the Afghan state since coming to power, their continued relationship with al Qaeda makes strategic sense for them because of the all-important dimension of collective effort. Both can effectively band together to combat their common foe, ISIS or the IS-K. Thus, despite growing international pressure, the Taliban regime does not have any incentive to undermine its own limited capabilities to counter the IS-K threat by either expelling or immobilising al Qaeda who have been its partners.

Al Qaeda's ability to navigate Afghanistan's jihadist landscape may or may not be of major interest to the Afghan Taliban or other western countries, but it is very important for India. Opinion remains divided as to whether India can be a direct target of al Qaeda or an indirect one, with most opinion tending toward the second view, i.e., India is secondary to their real struggle. Nevertheless, it is the possibility of the Taliban and al Qaeda jointly waging a fight against the IS-K in the same operational battlespace that should alarm Indian authorities. This also explains India's recent diplomatic efforts to engage the Afghan Taliban and maintain its presence in Afghanistan.

The transnationalisation of local tensions and the Islamisation of local politics have always exacerbated deadly conflicts. At a time when three of the most visible faces of the Indian government and the highest judicial institution of the country have directly and indirectly highlighted India's civilisational heritage of inclusivity and tolerance, as well as the non-discriminatory nature of the current political regime, it must be hoped that the 'fringe' elements in the ruling party will be forced to abandon their Islamophobic vocabulary and religious prejudices.

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