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THE MANY FACES OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of External State & Non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security incl. Terrorism & illegal Migration

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September 02, 2023 12:08 am | Updated 01:20 am IST

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A protest in New Delhi against violent attacks across the country targetting Muslims minority.
File | Photo Credit: AP

A video clip of an incident that happened in Khubbapur village in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, where [a Muslim boy was slapped by his classmates on the instruction of their teacher](#) is Islamophobic. In this case, the victim and the perpetrator belong to the Tyagi clan. Despite hailing from different religions they share a cultural bond. Their neighbourhood was not directly affected during the Muzaffarnagar riots in U.P. in 2013 and has an established history of social harmony between the Hindu Tyagis and Muslim Tyagis. This is why reconciliation could happen so swiftly. It also highlights the roots of the indigenous Indian Islam. Yet, Islamophobia has reared its ugly head and left the sacred trust between teacher and student broken. This is how much India has changed.

Islamophobia is a global phenomenon. But the sources and issues from which it emanates vary from region to region. What is being witnessed in India is quite different from what is seen in the West. In India, Islamophobia, communalism and intolerance are some of the key concepts used to explain the troubled Hindu-Muslim relations. Of the three, the use of the notion of communalism has disproportionately dominated scholarly works particularly during the 20th century. In a Rawlsian sense, each is a freestanding concept, but possesses overlapping attributes. It is only by unravelling these attributes that the threat that Islamophobia poses to India's secular social order can be understood. With its pejorative connotation, the concept of communalism is applied exclusively in a South Asian context; the concepts of Islamophobia and intolerance are universal in usage.

How does the Indian brand of Islamophobia vary from the western one? For instance, lynching in India is a violent expression of Islamophobia that occurs mainly due to the cow slaughter issue. Given the rising number of Muslim victims from cow vigilantism, it needs to be seen as Islamophobia by other means. But in Europe and the United States, cow slaughter is neither the source nor the issue of Islamophobia.

On the Masjid-related issue, there are interesting comparative insights that can be drawn. In 2009, a Swiss federal referendum to ban minarets on masjids was passed, and its Egerkingen Committee campaign posters displayed minarets as being reminiscent of missiles. In New York, controversy regarding "ground zero mosques" was driven by Islamophobic arguments. It was argued among other things that it would mean disrespecting the victims of 9/11, as if entire Islam

is responsible for the violence committed by a handful of disoriented Muslims.

In India, there are major disputes such as the Babri Masjid issue or the ongoing Gyanvapi Masjid issue in Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. But these are more related to a power struggle that pertains to Muslim rulers and the consequences of their actions. Indian Muslims do face the impact of these disputes, but Islamophobia is not purely derived from architecture or structures, as is the case in Europe. It may change in the days ahead.

There is Islamophobia reflected in the use of loudspeakers during Azaan. In India, a country where there is constant automobile honking and other forms of major noise pollution in many of its towns and cities, it is absurd to argue that the use of loudspeakers for Azaan for a few minutes causes intolerable noise pollution — and that it calls for a law.

There were controversies over this issue in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. More than 11,000 loudspeakers were removed from all religious places, both Hindu and Muslim, in 2022 in Uttar Pradesh. Likewise, the veil has been an Islamophobic issue in Europe. It is the hijab controversy in Karnataka. There seems to be a growing list of common issues that drive Islamophobia in India and Europe.

But everything concerning Muslims cannot be viewed as Islamophobia either. Some issues concern Muslims but not Islam. For instance, the Hindu Right's argument against Urdu as a language of Muslims, which it is not. Muslims across the world speak a variety of languages based on a number of factors. In that sense, Urdu has a very limited relationship with the Muslim identity. It was the gross arrogance of the erstwhile West Pakistani Muslim elite bullying the Bengali Muslims of then East Pakistan to embrace Urdu that fuelled Bengali nationalism. Therefore, the Hindu Right's attempt to resist Urdu or see it as a language of Muslims could be explained more accurately as Muslimphobia than Islamophobia.

In the wake of the growth of Islamophobia in India, Hindutva politics and V.D. Savarkar's Essentials of Hindutva, published almost at the end of Khilafat movement, have played a major role. According to Savarkar, Indian Muslims cannot be completely loyal to India because Mecca and Madina are located outside India; it is Savarkar's most troubling Islamophobic reasoning. But foot soldiers such as Monu Manesar or Babu Bajrangi might not have any idea what Savarkar's Hindutva says. Islamophobia in India existed long before Savarkar wrote his tract. Indeed, there were riots resulting from cow slaughter in the latter part of the 19th century just as Hindi received equal status with Urdu in 1900 because of the debate between Hindu and Muslim elites. During the great Kanpur Riot in 1931, 18 mosques were razed.

What is the difference then between present-day Islamophobia inspired by Hindutva and during colonial India? Or even before? The difference is that Savarkar's Hindutva has inspired a new political class in India that wishes to weaponise Islamophobia and make it a part of a state policy. The state responses on Azaan or a ban on cow slaughter are a result of this. This is what poses a mortal threat to the secular fabric of the Indian state and its society at large.

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EXPLAINED

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Basics of Cyber Security and related matters

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September 11, 2023 08:30 am | Updated 08:30 am IST

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The story so far: In July, Microsoft said that a China-based hacking group breached U.S. government-linked email accounts. The company said the group identified as Storm-0558, gained access to email accounts of 25 organisations, including Western European government agencies, email accounts from top American officials such as Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, U.S. Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink. The attacks stemmed from the compromise of a Microsoft engineer's corporate account. The company further explained that hackers were able to extract a cryptographic key from the engineer's account to access into email accounts. The flaw has been fixed now.

The attack on email accounts of American government officials was first noticed when customers reported abnormal activity on June 16. Microsoft then began an investigation which revealed that from May 15, Storm-0558 gained access to email accounts affecting approximately 25 organisations in the public cloud including government agencies as well as related customer accounts of individuals associated with them.

Microsoft Threat Intelligence "with moderate confidence" assessed that Storm-0558 is a China-based threat actor with activities and methods consistent with espionage objectives. The group is thought to operate as its own distinct group and its core working hours are consistent with working hours in China, Microsoft said in a blog post.

In the past, the group has been seen to have primarily targeted U.S. and European diplomatic, economic, and legislative governing bodies, and individuals connected to Taiwan and Uyghur geopolitical interests. The group has been targeting Microsoft accounts since August 2021 and had reportedly obtained credentials for initial access through phishing campaigns and exploited vulnerabilities in public-facing applications to gain access to victims' networks.

The China-based threat actor was able to compromise Microsoft's cloud security systems by using an acquired MSA key to forge tokens to access Outlook Web Access (OWA), Microsoft's web-based mail client that is part of the company's Exchange Server, Outlook.com. MSA keys are token signing keys used by a service to validate authentication tokens for the service.

Hackers then used the acquired key to forge a token that was used for validation issues to impersonate Azure AD users and gain access to enterprise email.

A cryptographic key is a string of characters used within an encryption algorithm to alter data making it illegible to someone without the correct key. Like a physical key, a cryptographic key encrypts data and is used to decrypt the encased data by the holder of the key.

In the case of SSL encryption (HTTPS), two types of encryptions are used. They can be symmetric and asymmetric encryptions. In symmetric encryption, both sides of a conversation use the same key for turning plain text into cyphers (encrypted) text.

However, in asymmetric or public key encryption, the two sides of the conversation use a different key. A public key and a private key, the private key is never shared by the party with anyone. When plaintext is encrypted with the public key, only the private key can decrypt it, not the public key.

Microsoft, after its technical investigation into the attack, revealed that the key was stolen from its corporate environment due to a series of errors. Threat actors compromised a Microsoft engineer's account gaining access to the company's network and debugging environment. A debugging environment is used by companies to test their products during production and fix errors and bugs in the source code before they are released to the public.

In this case, the consumer signing key was present in the debugging environment due to a consumer signing crash in April 2021, that resulted in a snapshot of the crashed process. A crash dump is a file of digital records related to the crash. The crash dump should not have included the signing key of the consumers, Microsoft said in a blog post. And, since Microsoft says it was not aware of the presence of the key in the crash dump, the dump was moved outside the isolated production network into the company's debugging network, connected to its internet-connected corporate network.

Microsoft's investigation into the report further adds that the company does not have logs related to the "specific evidence of this exfiltration by this actor", the engineer's account, due to their log retention policies. The company, however, says that this was the most probable mechanism by which the actor acquired the key.

Microsoft did not reveal the identity of the engineer whose account was compromised by threat actors to access the keys.

Microsoft introduced a common key metadata publishing endpoint in September 2018. Microsoft says it provided an API to help "validate the signatures cryptographically but did not update their libraries to perform this scope validation automatically".

The company further added that developers in the mail system incorrectly assumed libraries performed complete validation and did not add the required issuer/scope validation. This allowed the mail system to accept or request enterprise email using a security token signed with the consumer key. Microsoft says the issue has been corrected.

China called the Microsoft report about the China-based hacking group breaching government-linked email accounts "disinformation", a report from AP said. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, Wang Wenbin, further added the accusation was "disinformation" aimed at diverting attention from U.S. cyberattacks on China. "No matter which agency issued this information, it will never change the fact that the United States is the world's largest hacker empire conducting the most cyber theft," Mr. Wang added in a routine briefing.

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PAKISTAN'S INTERNAL CHALLENGES, SHIFTING DYNAMICS

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Security challenges and their management in Border Areas

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Taliban security personnel at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in Torkham | Photo Credit: AFP

Former Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani's persistent efforts to engage Pakistan to rectify its strategic errors in Afghan policy, faced unmet expectations. In a critical meeting in May 2021 between Mr. Ghani, the Pakistan Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, Lt. General Faiz Hamid, and the Chief of Defence Staff of the United Kingdom, Gen. Sir Nicholas Patrick Carter, it became evident that promises made by the Pakistani military were often diluted through their chain of command. Mr. Ghani noted a consistent drop in implementation percentages, as orders traversed from Gen. Bajwa to Gen. Faiz Hamid to subordinate field commanders. This decline, attributed to a sympathetic disposition of mid-level commanders towards the Taliban, underscored the complexities within Pakistan's military.

However, following the Taliban's unexpected triumph in Afghanistan, the mood shifted dramatically within Pakistan. A sense of victory, liberating Afghanistan from a perceived oppression, led to celebrations and jubilation among military and political leaders. Yet, as the international community's views transitioned from jubilant acceptance to the condemnation of the Taliban's actions, Pakistan's claims of being a victim of terrorism found little traction. A similar scepticism resonated from within Pakistan, where doubts persisted about the military's narratives.

Mr. Ghani's insistence that Pakistan's chosen military approach in Afghanistan represented a lose-lose-lose scenario remained steadfast.

In the wake of the Taliban's seizure of Kabul, Pakistan witnessed a shift that caused concern. The Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) saw almost 40 allied groups joining its ranks, triggering a surge in insecurity that was marked by a rise in suicide attacks. Pakistan now found itself as the new battleground. The TTP's emboldenment fuelled this transformation through the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan, while Pakistan grappled with an intensifying phase of radicalisation.

Strategically, Pakistan's military, facing criticism and security lapses, sought to shift focus from its Afghan policy. The Afghan Taliban became the target of blame, with accusations of inaction against the TTP, which allegedly exploited Afghan soil for attacks inside Pakistan. Contrarily, the Afghan Taliban dismissed TTP as a domestic concern, revealing internal divisions and mutual

distrust.

The TTP emerged as a more potent force, displaying heightened sophistication across domains — structural, communication, and public relations. Bolstered by existing grievances and the marginalisation of the Pashtun and Baloch communities, the TTP capitalised on radicalised groups across Pakistan, particularly in Punjab. Can Pakistan effectively combat the TTP? The outlook is grim. Ingrained structural grievances, widespread radicalisation, and a degree of local sympathy all play into the TTP's favour. Noor Wali Mehsud, the Amir of TTP, outlined the group's resurgence in his book, *Inqilab Mehsud*. The text emphasises local alliances and organisational discipline, while mirroring the Afghan Taliban's provincial structure with a focus on urban insurgency. Employing slick media tactics, the TTP strategically comments on financial, governance, and corruption issues, in order to rally public support.

The TTP leverages a potent narrative that resonates with Pakistanis, exploiting existing divisions and grievances while presenting Afghanistan's Taliban success as a model for governance. In contrast, Pakistan's present government narrative is feeble due to economic struggles, governance lapses, a fragmented political elite, and societal divisions. Events such as those on May 9 in Pakistan, underscore public frustration with the military's role. Additionally, the absence of support from the United States in terms of intelligence, drone operations, and financial aid further compounds Pakistan's challenges.

A significant shift in strategy has become evident. Pakistan's historical pursuit of strategic depth in Afghanistan, which encompassed the backing of non-state actors against amicable governments, has undergone a notable alteration. The dynamic has reversed with the Afghan Taliban securing a strategic foothold within Pakistan. This was achieved through the backing of entities such as the TTP and other radical groups operating within Pakistan. Should the Taliban decide to take action against the TTP, it risks forfeiting its leverage against Pakistan in its future dealings. The TTP, formerly aligned with the Afghan Taliban, is now engaged in 'jihad' inside Pakistan, signifying a multifaceted partnership that has spanned over two decades.

There are several reasons why the Afghan Taliban cannot and will not take solid military action against the TTP. First, the Afghan Taliban avoids strong action against the TTP to avert internal division, preventing the potential loss of its ranks to the TTP or other extremist factions such as the Islamic State—Khorasan Province and al-Qaeda. Second, the Taliban comprehend that antagonising the TTP could result in them losing secure havens across Durand Line which they once utilised when facing off against international forces and Afghan security (all under the shelter of the TTP's umbrella). The TTP has the capability and a strategic geographical edge that could challenge the Taliban's authority in Afghanistan. Should the Afghan Taliban's dominance be contested, the TTP has the potential to forge alliances with other groups to mount a formidable challenge. Third, Pakistan's historical use of religious madrasas to exert influence and issue fatwas against Afghan governments is now in the hands of the Afghan Taliban. Their extensive network established in the last 25 years within Pakistan, involving students, teachers, and friends across thousands of madrasas, provides substantial support. Fourth, while Pakistan once tolerated public charity drives to fund the Afghan Taliban, according to many local sources, similar support is now flowing from Afghans to TTP groups, complicating the situation and indicating a paradigm shift.

Navigating a way forward demands a thorough re-evaluation of Pakistan's policy on cultivating radical Islamist groups, domestically and internationally, for the sake of foreign policy gains. Notably, while many nations that once supported Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion, including the Gulf states in the 1980s, have abandoned the practice of backing global Jihadist and Islamist militant groups, Pakistan remains steadfast in continuing this policy, a choice that now casts a shadow over the nation's trajectory. Rather than seizing the opportunities presented

by the era of globalisation, and economic growth, Pakistan has persisted in channelling its resources toward cultivating terrorist organisations. Hence, it is imperative that the nation's military redefine its role to prioritise the interests and welfare of the populace, respecting the mandate of civilian governance.

The Pakistan military must lend its support and create a partnership with the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). This movement advocates regional peace and takes a stand against Pakistan's dual-centric policy, which involves nurturing militancy to safeguard the military's interests along the Pakhtoon belt of Pakistan across the Durand Line.

Moreover, the urgency of veering away from exporting radicalism is underscored by rampant radicalisation within the country, pervasive poverty, the beleaguered state of the economy, and India's continued advancements. Pakistan stands at the crossroads, where adopting a new path is imperative to secure a more stable and prosperous future and establish working relationships with its neighbours, specifically India and Afghanistan.

Tragically, the price of the recent abysmal policies executed by the military leadership is borne by the innocent citizenry. It is disheartening to witness individuals with abundant talent and resources grappling with the harsh reality of mere survival; and for some, even survival is a distant aspiration.

Aziz Amin is a fellow at the Brenthurst Foundation. He has served as the Principal Secretary and Special Assistant to former President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan. Prior to this role, he worked for Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission as Deputy CEO, Director-General of Public Communication and Donor Relations at the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, and Director of Policy Research Analysis and Development for the Office of the President. Twitter: @iamazizamin

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