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The Threat of Terrorism: Bangladesh's Context

The threat of terrorism today is very real. Terrorist acts in some form or other are occurring almost daily in the world. Terrorism poses a serious challenge to humanity as a whole. The terrorists evolve various modes of operation and devise increasingly complex ways to carry out their heinous acts with deadly consequences. As such, it is imperative to develop a thorough understanding of their presence in their various enclaves around the world. In recent times, Bangladesh has also been affected by incidences of terror committed, mostly by local extremist groups. As we know, terrorism is a global phenomenon. Logically, any debate on the issue in a local context such as in Bangladesh should, therefore, entail a concomitant focus on global terror.

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Terrorism: Definition, Causes and Consequences

The definition of terrorism remains a contested issue in the absence of a universally-accepted perspective. Different nations, groups and organisations define it to their own convenience, adding to the complexity. The best general purpose definition was attempted by the United Nations (UN) Security Council, describing “Terrorism” in its Resolution 1566 (2004) as “any

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action that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act". This will be sufficient for our purposes.

The causes of terrorism are numerous, varied and often related to each other in a complex fashion. Broadly speaking, the causes can be socio-political or religious. People resort to terrorist acts when they are trying to correct what they perceive to be a social, political or historical injustice. Many terrorists would say that they chose violence because they felt they had no other alternative. They believed that violence or its threat would be effective to achieve their objective. Besides this, perhaps the common cause of terrorism today is religious extremism. This phenomenon has been on the rise in the world. Terrorists of this genre often subscribe to wrong and contested interpretations of the religious text to which they ascribe their motivations. This type of terrorism is the most serious security challenge that the world currently confronts.

In today's global media landscape, terrorism is most immediately equated with Islam. This association is shaping a mind-set against the global Muslim population. Such an outlook can manifest in acts that promote or incite hatred and hate crimes in many parts of the world which, in turn, may engender more religious extremism.

Terrorism, Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Radicalisation and violent extremism are the precursors of terrorism. No wonder, these words are used together or interchangeably in the discourse on terrorism. Radicalisation is the process through which an individual or group adopts extreme views and ideals that reject or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions.² On the other hand, violent extremism is the set of beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals.³ Due to their intrinsically close relationship, the UN Security Council (UNSC), in its Resolution 2178 (2014), made explicit the link between violent extremism and terrorism, and

² As defined in the Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radicalization>.

³ As defined in the Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violent_extremism.

underscored that “violent extremism, can be conducive to terrorism and the commission of terrorist acts.”

Terrorism: Global Situation, Global Actions

The last couple of years have been marked by an increase in civil wars and the involvement of non-state actors in such warfare. A majority of these conflicts involves extremist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Al-Qaida and Boko Haram, among others, whose goals and ideologies do not conform to those of the modern society. Some of the worst attacks and atrocities have occurred in France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In terms of global response, terrorism has been on the international agenda since 1934 when the League of Nations took the first major step towards formally outlawing it by discussing a draft convention against it. Since 1963, the UN has adopted 14 universal legal instruments and four amendments against terrorism relating to specific areas of terrorist activities.

The UN has remained at the forefront of combating terrorism and religious extremism. The most comprehensive strategy on the matter was adopted by it in 2006 titled ‘United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy’. The strategy is a unique global instrument that enhances national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism. This is the first time that all member-states agreed upon a common strategic approach to fight terrorism, to take practical steps individually and collectively to prevent it and address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.

The UN Secretary General (UNSG) has recently adopted ‘the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism-2016 (PoA)’. In his PoA, the UNSG urged all to address the challenge of violent extremism by focusing on seven priority areas, namely, dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights and rule of law; engaging community; empowering youths; gender equality and empowering women; education, skill development and employment facilitation; and strategic communications, including through the internet and social media.

The UNSC formed the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) in 2006 which calls upon the member-states to improve their legal and institutional abilities in order to criminalise the financing of terrorism and cut the financial sources of the terrorists. The CTC is assisted by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, which carries out the policy decisions of the Committee and facilitates technical assistance to the member-states. The UNSG also established the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force to ensure that the UN system is attuned to the needs of member-states by providing them with the necessary support.

Outside the UN, too, there have been initiatives to fight violent extremism. Then-United States (US) President Barack Obama hosted the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism in 2012. Obama later hosted The Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL⁴ and Violent Extremism on the side-lines of the UNGA session in 2015. Switzerland and the UN co-hosted the Geneva Conference on 'Preventing Violent Extremism – The Way Forward' in 2016 in Geneva. The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) came into being in 2013 as the first global effort to support local, community-level initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against violent extremism.

Terrorism: The Bangladesh Context

Traces of terrorism in Bangladesh can be found as far back as in 1971 when the country attained its independence. After the liberation war was over, youths, inspired by the Maoist ideology, resorted to violence in the name of establishing a classless society and they started kidnapping people and carried out targetted killing of individuals. However, their activities were limited to certain parts of the country, mostly in its southwestern part. The leftist terrorist groups included Sarbohara, Janajudho and Purba Bangla Communist Party. Over the years, communism lost its appeal and these outfits eventually degenerated into local criminalised factions surviving on robbery, extortion and rent-seeking. The Afghan War from 1979 to 1989 was a trigger for the emergence of religious extremism that replaced the leftist extremism in Bangladesh. At the end of the Afghan War, many war veterans came back to Bangladesh with the 'Taleban Ideology'. Consequently, a new phenomenon of religious extremism emerged with a global dimension.

⁴ ISIL refers to The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The political positions of a few religious parties also offered a fertile landscape for extremism. These fundamentalist parties allegedly provided funds to the extremists to create instability and unrest in society. Moreover, following the formation of tribunal which was set up to try war criminals, a group of extremists which was sympathetic to the war criminals started the targeted killing of online activists, secular writers and bloggers in order to sabotage the judicial process. These local challenges have been amplified by the expansion of international terrorism in the region.

Bangladesh's home-grown terrorist groups are Jammat-ul-Mujahidin (JMB), Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh, Harkatul-Jihad-al-Islam, Hijbut Tahrir Bangladesh, Shahadat-E-Al-Hikmat and Allahr Dal. All these terrorist outfits have already been banned by the government. Many of the members, including their main leaders, have been arrested and tried. However, new terrorist organisations have emerged either from the roots of the old ones or as a result of inspiration from the extremist outfits abroad. These new groups included Ansar-Al-Islam and Ansarullah Bangla Team. Their ideologies or terror tactics remain more or less the same. They want to replace the democratic polity by an Islamic State based on Sharia law. In recent times, targeted and clandestine attacks by these home-grown terrorist groups have increased. More than 30 online activists, atheist writers and publishers and foreign nationals have been killed or attacked over a period of three years.

Like many countries, Bangladesh is also under the threat of radicalisation. The trend is particularly noticeable among young students, both in *madrassas* (religious schools) and in the general education stream. Youths from both English-medium schools, and public and private universities of higher or middle-class backgrounds are being allured to join the so-called *jihad* (holy war). Social media is being used to reach wider-than-ever-before audiences. Violent extremism is threatening Bangladeshi culture which is characterised by diversity, democratic values and tolerance. This natural social capital has come under pressure in the face of radical narratives propagated by the extremists at home and abroad.

Government Policy towards Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Countering terrorism remains at the top of the national agenda of Bangladesh. In recent years, the government has made sustained efforts to combat terrorism and the sources of its financing.

Bangladesh maintains a ‘zero tolerance’ policy towards all forms of terrorism including the financing of terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism – both nationally and internationally. As a matter of principle, Bangladesh does not allow its territory to be used by any terrorist individuals, groups or entities against any state or people. These pivotal policy statements against terrorism were reiterated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her General Debate speech at the UNGA several times since 2009, and they remain the bedrock-principle guiding the country’s approach to fighting this global scourge.

Countering Terrorism: Bangladesh’s Preparedness

Bangladesh has, over recent years, established a strong legal, regulatory and institutional regime to combat terrorism. The government has strengthened the national legal framework which includes The Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009, further amended in 2012 and 2013, which provides the legal basis for comprehensive counter-terrorism measures. The government has also promulgated Anti-Terrorism Rules, 2013, to specify the responsibilities of the respective agencies to implement the Act. The Act is further complemented by the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2012, and Mutual Legal Assistance Act, 2012. Alongside, the government has promulgated Money Laundering Prevention Rules, 2013, and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Rules, 2013. The government is contemplating framing a ‘Comprehensive National Counter Terrorism Strategy Paper’ to guide suitable actions.

The government has built robust institutional infrastructure to tackle terrorism. The infrastructure includes the formation of the Combined Threat Assessment Centre (CTAC), represented by the relevant government offices, departments or agencies, including National Security Intelligence, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, Rapid Action Battalion (Elite Force of Bangladesh Police), Detective Branch (Police), Criminal Investigation Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Military Intelligence, Bangladesh Bank, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission and other agencies to assess threats in relation to specific people, places and events. The CTAC provides a framework for international intelligence cooperation with regional and international partners.

Bangladesh has well-functioning committees to monitor and provide guidance on actions against terrorism. The National Committee for Intelligence Coordination, headed by the prime minister, monitors and provides guidance on policy responses to counter-terrorism-related data and intelligence. The National Committee for Militancy Resistance and Prevention, chaired by the minister for home affairs, analyses the emerging terrorist and extremist threats and suggests appropriate legal and administrative measures to mitigate such threats. The National Committee on Implementation of UNSC Resolutions on Terrorism and Financing of Terrorism, headed by the foreign secretary, ensures compliance with the provisions of the relevant UNSC resolutions through inter-agency coordination. On the other hand, the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit was established to prevent money laundering and combat the financing of terrorism.

The security forces have been successful in keeping the threat to manageable proportions since 2005. All the preparations went in vain, though, as the heinous act of terrorism in July 2016, the first of its kind in the history of Bangladesh, could not be stopped. It shows that no amount of preparedness can fully succeed in halting such attacks and providing full-proof protection, particularly when the culprits are ready to blow themselves up.

July Holey Artisan Incident

On 1 July 2016, armed terrorists attacked the famous Holey Artisan Restaurant in the upscale Gulshan neighbourhood in Dhaka, taking customers hostage at gunpoint and eventually killing 20, most of them foreigners. The law enforcement agencies, through a prompt and effective rescue operation, were able to save some lives. A total of 13 hostages, including three foreigners, were rescued. They were also able to kill six terrorists during the operation. Two police officers were killed by the terrorists.

The unprecedented terror incident shook the entire nation. It appears that the terrorists, their promoters and their financiers were trying to destabilise the country and tarnish the image and discredit the government, both at home and abroad. It was also intended to create a sense of fear and insecurity among the people in general, in order to weaken the morale of the secular government and project Bangladesh as a failed state. Nonetheless, the government took several short- and long-term steps to prevent the recurrence of such an attack in the country.

Government's Response: Short-term

Since the tragic Holey Artisan incident, security measures have been strengthened all over the country. The law enforcement agencies have conducted a thorough investigation and eventually identified, apprehended and killed the perpetrators involved in the attack. An elite strike force, SWAT, was formed in the police department to fight against terrorists. Special weapons were provided to them to keep pace with terrorist groups. Also, a task force, the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit was created in the police department. A number of raids have been conducted by the task force on the hideouts of the militants and the police succeeded in dismantling most of those hideouts. So far, significant advancement has been made in destroying the terrorist networks. Many of the terrorists were killed in the encounters with the police. Tamim Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi-origin Canadian who was reportedly the top leader of the terror groups in Bangladesh and the mastermind of the Gulshan attack, was also killed in a police raid.

The law-enforcing agencies also scaled up intelligence on the social media. They launched mobile apps to help citizens report terrorism-related information. Since July 2016, no terrorist incidents have taken place in Bangladesh, thanks to the efficient and effective actions by different agencies, ministries and departments. The overall law and order, and security situation in the country remains stable and peaceful. This has helped to restore the confidence of the people as well as foreigners alike.

The Government's Response: Long-term

In addition to the immediate law-enforcement measures, the government has also adopted long-term policies and programmes to defuse the ideological links to the extremists, and have also, through extensive awareness-building, taken steps to prevent people from becoming radicalised. The government is working closely with civil society, religious leaders and the private sector. The media is being used for the awareness-raising campaign against ideological or religious indoctrination. Documentaries, short-films, dramas, advertisements and video clips against militancy, and counter-terrorism messaging, are shown or published to build awareness against radical ideas.

The *madrassa* education system was long considered to be the breeding ground for terrorism. With this in view, the Bangladesh government revised and modernised the *madrassa* curriculum, in line with the mainstream focus on employment opportunities. The new curriculum requires that all students are taught languages, mathematics and sciences up to the eighth grade. Besides, the government has adopted a new education policy promoting secularism and anti-extremist sentiment through the textbooks.

The authorities have also engaged *imams* (clerics), religious scholars and religious organisations in the anti-terrorism discourse to spread the message of the values of Islam that promote peace, tolerance and harmony. *Imams* of mosques across the country have been asked to deliver *khutba* (sermons) during Friday prayers highlighting the directives of the Holy Quran and Hadith against terrorism. It is hoped that religious values, practices, motivation and ethics, interpreted in the right manner, would prevent the followers from being misled. The Bangladesh Jamiatul Ulama, an organisation formed by the Islamic scholars of Bangladesh, has published the ‘Fatwa of Peace for Humanity’ against terrorism and militancy, endorsed by more than 100,000 Islamic jurists, scholars and clerics. This *fatwa* (ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognised authority) has been well-received and appreciated nationally and internationally for its timeliness.

The government perceives that good education for the youths and the provision of socio-economic opportunities for them can be an effective antidote to terrorism. As such, it is striving to create employment and economic opportunities for the young people. Various programmes have been adopted for them to be included in the mainstream economic and social activities.

In order to eliminate terrorism, the foremost important thing is to cut off the sources of funding for terrorist activities. As such, the Bangladesh authorities have undertaken a series of legal, policy and administrative measures. The National Coordination Committee, headed by the minister for finance, works to strengthen the regime for combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit of the Bangladesh Bank works closely with the ministry of foreign affairs, ministry of home affairs and other relevant ministries and agencies for the same purpose.

The government is implementing projects targeting youths, women and other vulnerable groups through community engagement to build resilience against violent extremists. The

project under the GCERF funding has been currently implemented in three vulnerable districts. A multi-stakeholder Country Support Mechanism has been formed to ensure better coordination and cohesion in the implementation of the project.

Countering Terrorism: Bilateral, Regional and International Cooperation

Given the fact that the perpetrators of modern-day terror are not confined to a particular location, it is imperative to embark on global and regional cooperation. Bangladesh is working with its regional and international partners, including the countries with large diaspora communities, to this effect. The government has signed memoranda of understanding with India, the US, China and Russia for cooperation in combating terrorism. Bangladesh and India are already working together to fight the common enemy. Apart from security and intelligence cooperation, the US is helping build Bangladesh's counter-terrorism capacity through training and equipment support.

Bangladesh has also been active in building regional capacity to prevent and combat terrorism in the South Asian region. It is committed to countering terrorism through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Cooperation in this area has been institutionalised through a number of legal instruments, including the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism (1987). Bangladesh fully subscribes to the regional convention. It also endorses the counter-terrorism initiatives under the aegis of the Bay of Bengal Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

Bangladesh is one of the founding members of the GCERF Governing Board. It maintains a principled position in its association with GCERF in the light of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009, and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. It offered to be the pilot beneficiary country under the GCERF project, which is currently being implemented.

The government supports the UN-initiated actions against terrorism. It believes that the UN is the legitimate multilateral body capable of coordinating global action against terrorism. Bangladesh is a state-party to all UN anti-terrorism conventions. The National Committee on the implementation of the UNSC Resolutions on combating terrorism and financing of

terrorism has been formed to review and monitor compliance. Bangladesh has also implemented domestic laws and policies to conform to the UNSC Resolutions 1267, 1373, and 1455, which sanction organisations and individuals associated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. It may be mentioned that the country's preventative approaches to countering violent extremism is much aligned with the international and UN frameworks.

Bangladesh remains active internationally in counter-terrorism discourse and attended most of the global initiatives at the highest policy-making level. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina joined the Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism on 29 September 2015 in New York. She attended the Arabic-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh to fight terrorism and violent extremism on 21 May 2017. While the foreign minister attended the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism held in Washington in 2015, the state minister for foreign affairs attended the Geneva Conference on Preventing Violent Extremism in 2016.

Countering Terrorism: Challenges for Bangladesh

Notwithstanding the success in countering terrorism, eliminating all its drivers is not easy. There remain many challenges for the country to be able to overcome extremism and terrorism. The geographical location of Bangladesh, near the epicentre of international terrorism, makes it vulnerable to terrorist activities. The influence of radical ideologies, funding from overseas, involvement of diasporas-recruiters and the returnees from the Middle East conflict zones pose a formidable threat to the government in tackling religious extremism. As the investigation on the Holey Artisan incident reveals, the mastermind of the massacre was a Bangladeshi-origin Canadian, some of his recruits were students studying abroad.

An added challenge is posed by the growing and sophisticated use of the internet by the terrorists. As in other countries, the internet is increasingly being used by the extremists to spread their doctrine and establish clandestine networks. Social media is being effectively utilised by these groups and individuals for this purpose. This may be difficult to monitor by the security agencies in virtual time.

It was no good news to learn that Al-Qaeda intended to establish a new branch-AQIS (Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent) for this area. The AQIS propaganda is easily accessible online, which is often mentioned as a key factor behind the growing radicalisation in Bangladesh. Moreover, the group has also been active in spreading its propaganda materials in the local Bengali language. Further, the law-enforcement agencies have also reported a resurgence of JMB under a new leadership. What is more worrisome is the alleged link of certain political parties with violent extremist groups.

Conclusion

It is clear that no country can win the war on terror by focusing only on security-based counter-terrorism measures. Preventive approaches which address its drivers are also needed. Efforts to counter radicalisation and extremism are critical. Luckily, Bangladesh is a country of tolerant Islamic tradition. The people, in general, are secular and liberal. They do not support extremism. They consider terrorists to be maligning Islam through their heinous acts in the name of religion. Using this social capital and national attitude towards terrorism, engaging religious leaders for offering counter-narratives and finally, pursuing a ‘whole-of-society’ approach, the threat of terrorism and extremism can be tackled. Bangladesh, however, cannot overcome this global challenge alone. It is only through the coordinated and concerted efforts of all nations that terrorism and violent extremism can be effectively fought. As Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in the last UNGA session, “Terrorists have no religion, caste or creed. We must unite in our resolve to defeat and degrade them in all forms and manifestations...With our people’s resilience and support, we will make sure that terrorists have no place in our soil.”⁵

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⁵ “Work together to root out terrorism”, *The Daily Star*, 23 September 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/front-page/work-together-uproot-terrorism-1288366>.