

# Let's consider micro-actors in anti-terrorism exercise

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IN the recently held 9th Parliamentary Election Bangladesh voters completely rejected negativity and cynicism in political campaign in which some parties repeatedly invoked Islam, and they voted decisively against such political use of Islam. The overall result demonstrates the peoples' ultimate verdict against all forms of religious militancy. Bangladesh's 153 million people showed very little appetite for political Islam. Thus the new government is in the heart of the people, hoping to save the country from the rise of Islamist extremism. Obviously it is not the time to debate whether to give combating terrorism the top priority for the new regime, rather it needs to be put on the 'emergency' list for inclusive development. No doubt terrorism has been a worrying factor for Bangladesh - a lethal offshoot of political use of religion, defective education system and the socio-economic backwardness of the country. It generates national security threats, creating tailback for inclusive development of the country.

It is important to take into consideration the terrorist groups and individuals who always take advantage of the weaknesses of a state or a government. The government is responsible to take the most appropriate steps to protect its citizens from the threat of terrorism. Again, the government is well placed to assess the threat for the country. The government is in a position to develop a comprehensive counter terrorism strategy with the help of other state and non-state actors.

To face it, it is essential for the government to map out the terrorism threat level in a country. Bangladesh has been implementing several plans and strategies to counter idiosyncratic nature of terrorist

threat. Mostly the government initiatives can be categorized into two types: (i) operational drives by the law and security forces, and (ii) legal initiatives. The law and security forces achieved some operational success in disrupting command and control structure of several extremist groups. A large number of extremist leaders and activists have been captured, put on trial and executed. A great deal of arms, explosives and grenades have been recovered. But the success in other operational spheres like disrupting financial and support bases, profiling terrorist individuals, groups, and organizations, and mapping out vulnerabilities and opportunities of threat, etc. is limited. In most of the cases, the Four-Party Alliance Government has taken coercive, quiet, amnesty and negotiating approaches to minimise the terrorist threat. The immediate past non-party Interim Government enacted the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance 2008 and the Anti-Money Laundering Prevention Ordinance 2008. Despite the shortcomings and confusion over these two Ordinances, Bangladesh has got a legal leverage to prevent terrorist activities in the country.

There are several deficiencies at different levels of anti-terrorism exercises in Bangladesh that the new government should take into notice. First, the profiling of threat groups and the early detection indicators are not sufficient to face new actors and techniques of terrorism. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the ideologies, organizations and operations of the threat groups. Second, the law enforcement agencies do not have close link with the other service sectors to identify suspicious activities to prevent terrorist activities. Third, the government is not strategically, operationally, and tactically fully capable of

handling the terrorist elements. The Bangladesh government is not sufficiently addressing strategic issues like dismantling motivation, ideologies and support base of the threat groups.

Operationally, law enforcement agencies are not adequately developed in dealing with the technology of terrorism. At a tactical level, there is very limited scope for the members of law enforcement, security and intelligence services to be trained or retrained to understand and respond to the threat of terrorism. A number of inadequacies have been identified in the armed forces, such as short supply of trained manpower in counter terrorism, lack of intelligence gadgets and equipment, inexperience in anti-money laundering, information insecurity, etc. Fourth, there is a lack of general consensus for all-out drive against terrorism and extremism in Bangladesh.

Fifth, there is a very limited initiative to educate formally and informally professional groups like academics, media community, service sector officials, and political leaders to be aware of and sensitised about the terrorist activities. Sixth, the overall strategic responses are still inadequate. The counter ideology or motivations and de-radicalisation measures are almost absent in the architecture of most of the institutions. In fact, there is hardly any institution in Bangladesh to address different kinds of motivation factors like ideological and experimental motivation, destructive and profit driven motivation, motivation to gain acknowledgement, etc. Furthermore, there are poor commitments in political society, lack of coordination among the anti-terrorist alliances, insufficient role of academics and media to address



the challenges of extremism and terrorism. Seventh, there is a tendency to overemphasise military and coercive approaches in dealing with terrorism issues.

There is no dedicated research institution in the government to provide forum for understanding and research on critical issues of terrorism in Bangladesh. Although the counter terrorism bureau of DGFI is responsible for policy related activities, it is barely possible to workout a viable strategy by a body of armed forces alone. Finally, it may be mentioned that, in Bangladesh, strategies and policies are preoccupied with processes highly centralized, overly bureaucratic, too ambiguous, unaccountable and unresponsive. Most of the initiatives are overly focusing on macro issues, not on micro issues and actors like ideology, motivation, and propaganda activities, empowerment of the individual, etc. to promote counter terrorism discourse.

The anti-terrorist security spending has been rising every year. Today, analysing the costs and benefits, it has been claimed that the benefits are still lower than the costs. If someone dismantles operational tactics, the other moves with even deadlier tactics - the ideological grouping. As evident in Bangladesh, a few terrorist groups have been attempting to regroup, and networking in different names and structure. Some of the new Islamist groups have emerged in Bangladesh preaching ideologies by training, distributing books and pamphlets among the common people and educational institutions in rural areas. Some groups often attempt to disseminate ideologies and operational techniques and the most frightening part is choosing female trainees to motivate the local people, especially the local women. Thus, the indicators suggest that terrorist threats to Bangladesh remain foremost among its national security challenges. As such, the

new government would need to maintain maximum monitoring, and operational and strategic efforts to counter the constant evolution and adaptive capability of terrorist groups in Bangladesh. To support these efforts, one has to understand the threat level, group's intention and capabilities, and risk factors.

In most cases the current anti-terrorism discourse demonstrate the use of 'hard power' without sufficiently addressing the root causes and new trends of terrorism. The 'soft power' mechanisms are not being sufficiently addressed in Bangladesh. Thus the new counter terrorism discourse should look for new techniques and understanding in order to reduce the impact of terrorism on society. Three important new trends should be taken care of in future anti-terrorism policy formulation in Bangladesh. First, the emergence of micro-actors in capability of terrorist groups, i.e. reduction in the operational capa-

bility of the terrorist groups, but increase in their ideological, motivational and propaganda ability. The second is the promotion of operational sophistication of terrorist activities with the option of using modern technology and information flow, finance and ideas in planning, communications, and targeting. And the last is the increasing trend of overlapping terrorist activities with crime, using the same supply, transport, and money moving networks.

During the last two years in the absence of political activities in the country it may happen that the threat groups have become more capable in launching any future deadly attack. Also, the new government must look into whether the corrupt money is spent for financing terrorist activities against the state and its citizens.

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## Silence of the Arab World on Israeli carnage shocking

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For the last eighteen days, the Israeli military attacks on the Palestinians on the Gaza strip can be described as a modern day savagery. It has shocked the conscience of all human beings who witnessed the killing of innocent children, women and men in Gaza on the pretext that Hamas is a terrorist organization which fire rockets into Israeli lands.

Nearly 1100 Palestinians, most of them civilians, were killed while a dozen Israeli were killed, many of them Israeli soldiers, since December when the conflict broke out.

The targeting of civilians in Gaza is potentially a war crime and the Israeli leaders could be tried by the International Criminal Court at The Hague for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

### Who created Hamas?

When Hamas was created in 1987, Israel was mostly concerned with Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement and figured that a religious Palestinian organization would help undermine Arafat. Israel cracked down on Arafat's Fatah and allowed Hamas to rise as a counterforce. Most Gazans scorn Fatah (Chairman Abbas's party) as corrupt and incompetent.

What we see today is the Boomerang Syndrome in the Middle East just as we had witnessed the rise of Taliban as a counterforce by the US intelligence to Soviet occupation in Afghanistan in the '80s.

### What does Hamas struggle for?

Hamas struggles for justice and fair play. Israel has been in illegal occupation since 1967. Israel does not care world opinion so long the US is with them.

Most of the Gazans, were refugees, driven by Israeli military to Gaza in 1948. The Gaza Strip, one of the world's most densely packed places and is a firmly sealed human pressure cooker today because of Israeli economic blockade.

The 1.5 million people, squeezed in a territory of 140 square miles - more than half of whom are under the age of 18 - are struggling under severe movement restrictions further tightened by Israel. Israel controls access to the area, exports and imports, movement of people in and out. Israel has control over Gaza's airspace and coastlines and its forces enter the area at will.

Gaza has been choked off, leading to life-threatening problems of sanitation, health, water supply, and transportation. The economic blockade put by Israel on Gaza is inhuman.

### Why this attack?

Lifting the blockade and the cessation of rocket-fire was one of the key terms of the June cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. The cease-fire broke down when Israeli forces launched major air and ground attacks in early November.

The present conflict is also politically motivated because the Labour party of Israeli defense Minister, Ehud Barak, (the chairman of the party) is trailing behind both Likud and Kadima parties in popularity poll in Israel. The next Israeli election is to be held next month and therefore the Defense Minister started this war against the Gazans to boost his party in the poll to prove his tough stance against Hamas, unnecessarily killing the innocent Gazans.

### Reactions

Across the world, people protested the Israeli attacks on civilians. The brutal killings of the innocent Palestinians led Venezuela and Bolivia to sever diplomatic ties with Israel but neither Egypt nor Jordan did take any step to cut-off its diplomatic relations. Turkey came out with strong statement that killing 4000 children in

Gaza did not constitute "success for Israel".

Furthermore, the twenty-one Arab States except Syria have been watching silently for almost three weeks as Palestinian civilians were being killed by Israeli attacks.

Why are they silent for so long? They held the Arab League meeting only on 16th January, after good three-weeks of conflict had passed, and over a thousand Gazans were killed. There are many reasons for the silent behaviour of the Arab World and some of them may be described as follows:

First, the attack on Hamas is seen by the Arab World as weakening Iran's hold over the Hamas who control the Gaza. If Hamas is destroyed, Iran's influence on the Palestinian peace process will be drastically reduced.

Second, the Sunni Arab States feel threatened by Shi'ite Iran and Hamas, though Sunnis are being strongly supported by Iran; the Arab World wants to de-link Hamas from Iran.

Third, the US provide billions of dollars as aid to Egypt and Jordan and many of the Arab rulers depend on the US for the continuation of their rule and therefore they do not wish to annoy the US by taking any action against its strongest ally in the region, Israel.

Fourth, the Arab League is divided and the essential glue of uniting all Arab states is absent, partly because competition for leadership in the Arab World is still going on among certain states.

Fifth, Arab oil-producing countries export substantial portion of oil to the US and they do not wish to disturb the export at a time when many Arab countries are in financial trouble because of the global economic crisis. The demand for oil is getting low day by day and the price is now less than \$40.00 per barrel and most of their budgets were based on the oil price of \$70.00 per barrel.

### Realities on the ground

Palestine was never a land without people. Israel is persistently and grossly breaching international law and infringing fundamental human rights with impunity afforded to it through the diplomatic, economic and military support of the US. The June cease-fire agreement has not been kept by Israel. The economic blockade was not lifted. The life of the Gazans was precarious and humiliating.

The Israeli war on the people of Gaza is not about firing rockets. Its purpose in reality is to show to Iran how strong Israel is. It is also to demonstrate to Hamas that they understand the power of Israel and that they are defeated people.

It is interesting to note Dr. Aaron David Miller, who has played a central role in US efforts to broker Arab-Israeli peace under both Republican and Democratic administrations, in his book "The Much Too Promised Land", (March 2008: Random House). He writes that the Bush team in eight years has managed to put America in the unique position in the Middle East where "it is not liked, not feared, and not respected...we stumbled for eight years under George Bush over how to make war there" and the result is "an America that is trapped in a region which it cannot fix and it cannot abandon."

What the Obama administration should do is take initiative that is impartial, and inclusive to resolve the growing cycle of violence and tension. It is suggested that the new administration of the US should engage and entice the parties, in particular Israel, and hold them accountable in practical terms, not just rhetorically.

The new Secretary of State Hillary Clinton may ensure that the Obama administration should not get sucked into an Israeli approach and should be a non-partisan and credible mediator of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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## Transit or no transit?

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AS this article goes to press, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, Indian External Affairs Minister, would have gone back home after his 2-day whirlwind tour. The signing of various treaties had raised, as usual, accusations from the opposition that the government was 'selling-off' the country and compromising the national sovereignty by signing unequal treaties with India. The Government, after opening the Pandora's Box, seemed to have quickly gone on the back-foot. The Commerce Minister, who had been an outspoken champion of transit, changed his own position somewhat and said that there will be no transit or transhipment treaty, only a renewal of the existing Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement.

Transit, more specifically land transit between India and Bangladesh, has long been a matter of political opportunism. It involves giving access to India of a number of road and rail routes across Bangladesh to carry goods to and from its northeastern states. A look at the map clearly shows how Bangladesh almost dissects India's northeastern states, the slim physical contact maintained through a 20-mile wide corridor, popularly known as "Shiliguri Corridor." Whereas Bangladesh feels encircled by India on three sides, people in the India's north-eastern states feel that Bangladesh is sitting across them and the Indian mainland. Just as a Bangladeshi feels geographically bottled up and overwhelmed, an Assamese or a Mizo feels cut-off and distanced from the mainstream India. Perennial insurgency that had plagued north-eastern states owes much to this sense of isolation and seclusion. The partition of India in 1947 created innumerable legacies -- cut-up and dislocated communications, physical isolation and political separatism are some of them.

It is interesting to note that despite partition in 1947 and war over Kashmir in 1948, India continued to have direct rail and river transit across East Pakistan (Bangladesh) until 1965. When war broke out in September 1965 in Kashmir and West Pakistan, Pakistan government stopped transit traffic across the then East Pakistan thus depriving the provincial government of the revenues they used to receive from the transit traffic. While river transit from Kolkata to Assam via Jamuna and Meghna restarted in 1972 and continues to this day, albeit in a much reduced volume, the rail and road transit never restarted and sank into the political and bureaucratic quagmire.

Meanwhile, India had developed multiple rail and road communication through the Shiliguri Corridor. The aim was to develop safeguard against possible cut-offs due to war

Transit trade is very common in International commerce. Trade means profit and that could go on even among sworn enemies if it brings profit to both sides. For example, in the height of the Cold War, the Japanese export used to be transported by trans-Siberian Railway across the then Soviet Union to West Europe. USSR used to sell gas to Germany, a key NATO member. Today, Singapore's economy centres on transit trade. Its air and sea ports, some of the busiest in the world, handle mostly transit traffic. Last year, Iran signed a \$3.2 bn deal with Pakistan and India to supply gas to the two countries; their mutual hostility was no bar to good business sense.

or insurgency. Although the communication system is multi-modal and secure, its carrying capacity remains limited in view of the increasing demand of a growing Indian economy. The circuitous route adds to the cost of goods and services to the people in the north-east. Since 1947, the area saw little industrialization or economic progress. Whereas in 1947, Assam and the northeast had the highest per capita income in India, today it has the lowest. No wonder, India and especially people of northeast, had been looking forward to a direct route across Bangladesh. Tied with it has been a demand for access to the port of Chittagong for the region's external trade and commerce. Over the last three decades, the liberals and centrists within BNP had stated in public the positive impact that transit trade could have on the economic wellbeing of the country. The business bodies such as FBCCI had taken a stand in favour of the transit treaty. Ironically, BNP-JI alliance has found an unlikely ally among the extreme left in opposing the transit treaty with India. They argue that providing transit to India will mean surrendering national sovereignty and creating an inroad of Indian hegemony.

Throughout Europe, Americas and much of the Middle-east goods and passengers are freely crossing multiple borders often without stopping at checkpoints. Why it should be different in South Asia is difficult to understand.

If Bangladesh and India sign the transit treaty, goods train or trucks could enter and depart through designated land ports. The two countries could mutually work out the service charges. Bangladesh could use the additional revenues thus generated to improve the road and rail communication within the country. Besides direct revenue earning for the Government, transit traffic will mean more service and gas stations, more rest area, more hotels and restaurants, each generating additional employment and income for local people. Bangladesh could then be suitably poised to enter the Asian Highway or the Asian Railway Network.

Use of Chittagong port by the north-eastern states of India had been on the table for long. Here too,

a section of rightwing politicians' stand had been that it would compromise national security. Of course, they never explain how handling Indian containers would hinder national security. Indian ships are calling on Chittagong port all the time just as Bangladesh ships do at the Indian ports. If that does not hinder national security, how loading/unloading containers destined for Assam, for example, will jeopardise national security? While compromising national security is difficult to comprehend, economic benefits of handling increased traffic are clear for all to see. More traffic, more profit it is as easy as that. More traffic for Chittagong will mean more work in the port, more employment, more hotels, restaurants, banks, insurance etc. Increased traffic will further justify establishing a deep-sea port off Chittagong. Growing international traffic will increase prospect of foreign investment in the development of port infrastructures. A busier seaport will mean a busier airport too.

Bangladesh's geo-strategic position gives us a great advantage. We are suitably positioned to serve as a transit hub not only to India, but also to Nepal, Bhutan and even Tibetan China. In future, this could make Bangladesh a regional hub of trade and commerce.

The arguments put forward by those opposing the transit treaty are reminders of a bygone era where ironclad barriers insulated societies, where outsiders were always considered enemies. BNP leadership claims that it would favour a multi-lateral transit treaty under the banner of SAARC, but not a bilateral one between Bangladesh and India. This, in fact, takes away our sovereign right to enter treaty with any country of our own choosing, within the ambit of SAARC or outside it. They continue to argue that providing transit means providing India with a 'corridor.' It smacks of creating a smokescreen to hoodwink the people. They argue that Bangladesh is going to lose its sovereign rights on the roads and railways that the Indian trucks and railway wagons would use. This is far from the truth. Does Bangladesh lose its sovereignty when Indian steamers or barges travel down our rivers?

The argument that the anti-government insurgents will attack Bangladesh's transport network if we allow transit to India casts doubt on our ability to defend our own assets inside the country. It presupposes our security forces' inability to defend our territory a dangerous supposition in the least. Do we close down the Afghanistan embassy in Dhaka because Taliban or Islamic militants threaten it? Did we stop trading with Nepal when the Maoist guerrillas were fighting the Nepalese government? If the answers were 'No', then the same argument will apply here. Our trade and commerce, our internal and external relations are guided by what we perceive to be our best interest notwithstanding any threat from any quarter. Continued dilly-dallying with transit issue has already cost Bangladesh dearly. We have lost enormous revenue surcharges that we would have got over all these years. Only because we might have to give transit to India had prevented us from signing on to the Asian Highway and the Trans-Asian railway network. Now there is a looming possibility that both the projects might bypass Bangladesh and we might remain like an island cut-off from the mainland. In fact, no one waits for ever.

Few years back, the Chief Minister of Mizoram was in Dhaka seeking a possible use of the Karnaphuli river system and Chittagong port for external trade of his state. While we kept them waiting, last year India signed a road-building project with Myanmar connecting Mizoram with the port of Sittwe. Few years back India wanted to buy gas from Myanmar through a pipeline across Bangladesh. It was a golden opportunity. Not only could we have earned revenues, more importantly, we could have tapped gas for Chittagong and Khulna region at virtually no overhead cost. But our guardians of national sovereignty would not allow the pipeline to pass through Bangladesh and the project fell through. Now we want gas from Myanmar, but Myanmar is not interested. Remember, in the world of intense competition, no one waits for others, the caravan moves on.

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