

Are we crying wolf over terrorism?

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A friend said something thought provoking recently. He said Bangladesh is in company of Afghanistan and Pakistan as three exceptional countries whose governments are telling the rest of the world that they are infested with terrorists. While Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot claim otherwise as there are deaths and destructions aplenty from terrorism, all reported in the international media the moment they occur, it is a mystery that our own government is projecting us as such where there are neither deaths nor destructions to show nor do we figure anywhere in the context of reporting in the international media as a militant prone country.

It is true though that there are terrorists in Bangladesh. Where is a country that does not? Next door, India and Sri Lanka are reeling under very real manifestations of terrorism. However, these governments, while in battle with terrorism as a daily fact of life, constantly underplay the menace to minimize the potentials for damage such news can have on their international trade, investment and tourism.

The news about the arrest of the Bangladesh born British national Faisal in Barisal with a huge quantity of arms is a case in point. The discovery is worrying but the way it was handled by the government and the media is mysterious. One very senior minister was the first to jump into the fray, seeing a link with the Qaumi Maddrasas that have three

million students and quickly identifying them as terrorist outfits. Other ministers joined the fray and together they identified many hundred terrorist outfits in the country and several million terrorists to boot! This information made the butt of many talk show swipes where participants joked about the likelihood of one participant in every talk show being a "terrorist!"

Sometime ago, I wrote a piece in this paper where I said that worldwide, Islamic terrorism is on the decline. Although President Bush has been taken apart for his international politics, one has to give him credit for this declining trend in Islamic militancy. Since then, the situation in Iraq has turned around and Islamic militants are on the run. His war on terror has weakened the nexus of Islamic militancy worldwide. Islamic militants are now concentrated primarily in the no man's land between Afghanistan and Pakistan where their national politics is sustaining Islamic terrorism.

Historically, Bangladesh is fundamentally different from these countries. Islam here has been tampered by other cultures, and more particularly, Sufiism has made Bangladeshi Muslims tolerant to other religions. In our family and social lives, Islam plays a major part. We are good Muslims and respect our religious leaders. But we have never in a major way backed their political aspirations. The most important Islam based political party, Jamat-e-Islami, that has existed amongst us longer than both the Awami



League and the BNP never won more than a score of seats in any of our national level elections.

There is however no room for complacency. There are serious potentials for rising Islamic extremism in Bangladesh and in that context the Faisal case deserves most serious attention. Having said these, we must also bring into the equation the fact that in Bangladesh Islamic militancy has gained ground due to sponsorship of the major political parties. The BNP must share the major blame for allowing its Islam based alliance partners, when in power from 2001 to 2006, all the freedom to build a net-

work of armed cadre as pay-back for their electoral support in the 2001 elections. For political reasons, the BNP looked the other way and allowed the JMB terrorists to establish themselves, and turned a blind eye when the media and no less a person than the then US Ambassador, tried their best to draw the government's attention to the emerging frankstein. The Islam based parties used their political influence to penetrate the intelligence in a major way; a presence that was brought to dramatic focus when the Islamic terrorists managed to blast nearly 500 bombs all over Bangladesh in August 2005 while Prime

Minister Khaleda Zia was on an official visit to China in a manner that could have been possible only with direct connivance of the intelligence agencies. Interestingly, although the number and the synchronization that went with these blasts were amazing, only a couple of people were killed and there was no devastation either, suggesting two things. First, these terrorists could carry out the acts because of state sponsorship at some level. Second, their capability to cause devastation like Islamic terrorists abroad was very limited indeed.

When the US Government took a serious view of events

and pressured the government to tackle this growing menace, the JMB top leadership was caught in a manner that was almost farcical. These terrorists were later hanged under the Caretaker Government. There was not even a whimper from their cadre, which suggests that once state sponsorship was withdrawn they became innocuous. Since then, with decline in Islamic terrorism abroad, it is only logical to assume that such militancy should be on the decline in Bangladesh.

Why then are we crying out so loud that we are surrounded by Islamic terrorists on all sides for to have millions

of terrorists we must surely be rubbing shoulders with many of them every day! The media is also not doing a bad job either in overstating our case. One reason is that our ministers are now behaving like loose cannons when confronted by the media, saying pretty much what they perceive will please the Prime Minister with whom most of them have little or no contact except at the Cabinet meetings. The second reason seems to be coming from the emergence of the need to reestablish secularism in our politics, a move that has official government backing. There is, however, very little coordinated approach in these moves. Those seeking to reestablish secularism feel that Islam based parties are an obstacle. Hence they are trying to establish a fear in the public mind that these parties are creating and supporting Islamic terrorism.

There is urgent need for the sensible people in this government to set things in order for unless they do so, we would end up creating those very conditions that breed militancy; the way things are moving, very soon we could see secularism and Islam come in conflict with disastrous consequences. It was thus heartening to see the Prime Minister meet the leaders of Qaumi Maddrasas where there were mutual assurances against terrorism. We should also spare a moment and re-assess secularism which is a western concept that came from the need to keep the Church out of politics. In the Middle Ages of European history, also known

as the Dark Age, the Church by the power that Christianity gave it, had turned the lives of nations and nationalities into hell through corruption and degeneration. Islam has no such baggage from history where the secular and religious forces have lived side by side in tranquility. We must re-think about the necessity of taking a western concept that has little relevance in our lives and inject a new element of conflict in our society, more so because we are in no threat of having Islam based parties rule our lives.

We must weed out those who propagate violence in the name of religion. The present government is determined to end Islamic terrorism. It should not be difficult for them to do so because terrorism has thrived in Bangladesh mainly under state sponsorship. However, in overstressing the case against Islamic terrorism, the government is allowing the common and politically based criminals, who cause the people and the country more harm, to re-establish themselves as well as help create an image that could bring disastrous economic consequences for the country. This government has called for establishment of a Digital Bangladesh. In the digital world, news and perceptions travel in the speed of light. We should keep this in mind and reflect upon the dangers of the call this government gave on Mujibnagar day which was "unite to free the country from militancy". Why are we crying wolf?

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Obama's "new beginning" with Latin American countries

BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

ON 16th April, President Barack Obama said the US seeks a "new beginning" with Cuba and an "equal partnership" with all the nations of the Americas. Obama was addressing Latin American and Caribbean leaders at the fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago. Obama attended the Summit soon after an eight-day series of summits and meetings in Europe and Turkey. He faced a group of leaders far less forgiving than their European counterparts about the United States' central role in the global financial crisis.

The summit follows a historic thaw in relations between the US and Cuba. "The US seeks a new beginning with Cuba, an equal partnership with all the nations of the Americas," Obama told leaders gathered in Port of Spain, capital city of Trinidad & Tobago. President Obama met with thirty-three heads of state and government. Cuba was the only country in the hemisphere not invited since 1961. The fourth Summit took place in Argentina in 2005. At the summit in Argentina, President Bush was once seen all

crisis, curbing global warming and keeping people safe.

"We see this trip as part of the process of the United States re-engaging with this hemisphere," said Jeffrey Davidow, a former ambassador to Mexico and Venezuela who acted as an adviser of President Obama on the trip.

"Regional leaders will want to see a different tone and texture in the diplomacy of the new US administration," says Peter Hakim of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue. "But more than anything else, they will want to hear his thinking about concrete problems and opportunities," heads.

Chavez hosted a mini-summit of his leftist allies on 15th April including Cuban President Raul Castro, in which he declared Cuba was "more democratic" than the United States.

During a visit to China last week following a stop in Iran, Chavez, who expelled the US ambassador in Caracas last year, said "no one can be ignorant that the centre of gravity of the world has moved to Beijing." He went on to declare that "the power of the US empire has collapsed."

"There is no more Cold War, there is no more armed struggle," he has said, "and there's only one group which defends the armed struggle and that's the Farc [rebels in Colombia]."

Hoping to blunt criticism of the embargo, the Obama administration announced this week that it was lifting limitations on travel by Cuban Americans with family in Cuba and on the amount of money they may send back to their relatives. Obama's liberalization of travel amounts to a step toward normalized relations with Cuba. But in addition to Latin American leaders, members of Congress also want him to go further. Previously, Cubans had insisted their domestic politics were their own business, and administration officials were trying to determine what to make of the development.

Another country that presented the thornier diplomatic challenge during Obama's trip was Mexico. The Obama administration has been trying to make amends for a report to senators in February in which Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair said that drug cartels impede "Mexico City's ability to govern



by himself as the other leaders chatted in small cliques.

During the eight years, the Bush administration was occupied with two wars and neglected its relations with Latin American countries which elected democratically left-wing governments in Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Finding the vacuum, Russia and China turned their attention and consolidated their relations with them in the backyard of the US. It has been a diplomatic disaster for the US.

President Obama realised that the relations with the Latin American countries needed to be on the basis of trust and equality. Moreover, the US-led recession has hit hard the economy of the Latin American countries including the oil-rich Venezuela.

Mindful that foreign travel in the midst of a recession is risky politics, Obama gave a well-publicised speech on the struggling economy early in April, signalling that hemispheric affairs won't trump the downturn on his list of priorities. Heading criticism that the US tended to operate unilaterally under Bush, Obama is signalling that he wants to listen. The US wants to cooperate with other nations on easing the economic

Speaking from a meeting Chavez hosted in Venezuela, Raul Castro declared: "We have sent word to the US government in private and in public that we are willing to discuss everything -- human rights, freedom of the press, political prisoners, everything." An inevitable focus of the summit was Cuba. The US faced pressure from other nations to drop its economic boycott of Cuba, a legacy of Cold War tensions dating back nearly half a century. Latin American leaders are also pushing for Cuba's reinsertion into the Organisation of American States (OAS). Its membership was suspended in 1962.

By June 1, all the Latin American countries will have normalized their relations with Cuba. Venezuela, Bolivia and other nations are expected to call for Cuba's full integration into the life of the hemisphere. According to some reports, they would want to see any pre-conditions put on Cuba's return. It will be more about a symbolic shift in tone.

President Lula of Brazil has also made clear that, like virtually all the region's leaders, he wants to see a change in Washington's attitude towards Cuba.

parts of its territory." Still, political realities limit what the US will do to stop the southward flow of weapons that end up in the hands of drug traffickers. Obama seems in no hurry to resurrect a US ban on assault weapons. Obama has shown Latin American leaders a new tone of listening to the concerns of the region and to offer a more multilateral and respectful approach.

Some say the date of the Summit was not a good one for the US because it fell on the anniversary of one of the worst US foreign policy fiascoes in recent history, the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba on April 17-19, 1961.

The US has always dominated the politics of Latin American countries and the most obvious example was the coup by General Pinochet in 1973 killing the democratically elected left-wing President Salvador Allende of Chile.

President Obama's speech for "new beginning" with Latin American countries including Cuba on "equal partnership basis" is hopefully to usher in a new era in that hemisphere. It is a dramatic break from the hegemonic policy of the US.

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The Palestinian dialogue in Cairo

KHALED KHALEFEH

TEN days of dialogue between the Palestinian Movements ended without any real and substantial results. All the parties came with the will to succeed in the dialogue but there were too many obstacles that prevented such success. The main obstacles that prevented any progress in the talks were:

- Abu Mazen and his inability to influence any political process, along with his total dependence on the US and Israel.
- Israel has no real interest in a Palestinian reconciliation. Israel prefers to play on the two Palestinian tracks: the Gaza track and the West Bank track, which is headed by Abu Mazen. Israel is also keeping the key to the Gaza reconciliation close within its reach and maneuvering between the two tracks. Israel did not interfere during the talks because it was sure that Abu Mazen would neutralize any possibility of reconciliation. Dr. Salam Fayyad acted in such a way when he gave his resignation the impression was that he was with the reconciliation. However, he actually expected that the dialogue would fail and that he would be asked to be Prime Minister again, from April 2009 until January 2010. Israel and Abu Mazen are working concurrently by imposing the demand on Hamas that it recognize Israel and all the agreements that have been signed between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Abu Mazen also unequivocally asked Hamas to recognize Israel during the talks in Cairo. The parties did not discuss the matter directly and differed on the issue.

- The Egyptian side conducted the talks in Cairo by inviting all the Palestinian organizations, but at the same time did not give any real incentive to encourage any party to reach an agreement. Egypt also wanted to show that it was the regional hegemonic power. Egypt did not freely open the Rafah Crossing in an ongoing manner, but only from time to time. The Palestinian parties did not take the Egyptian side seriously as a force to stand up to Israel. General Omar Suleman, the Director of Egyptian Intelligence, left in the middle of the talks to visit Washington, without monitoring the conclusion of the dialogue. What he actually wanted to say was that the position of the US is very important. At the same time, I can argue that US policy has not changed during the Obama era and continues to insist on the need for Hamas to recognize Israel and its right to exist, a demand that was rejected before.

Although there is no change in the Israel and American positions, we notice some changes in the European position, although not as perceived by the Czech position, which is far away from changing its Middle East policies, or by Mr. Tony Blair, the Head of the Quartet.

Some analysts perceive his role as maintaining international continuity in order to receive a future position, such as a leading post in the international

system or with the World Bank.

Nevertheless, the Palestinians are aware of these strategic positions, mainly after the rise of Netanyahu and Lieberman, the War in Gaza and the new American Administration of Barack Obama. In that sense, the Cairo talks that Egypt sponsored were critical and acute in promoting the Palestinian Dialogue between the different factions. The general feeling, even among Palestinians, is that the new American Administration will come up with new ideas and proposals to face and confront the Palestinian problem. My argument, however, is that while everyone is looking at the American policies in the Middle East and the Engagement Doctrine, the economic crisis in the US will not go away for a while and the Engagement Doctrine will not affect Israel.

What might affect the Palestinian talks and maybe push and intensify the Palestinian Dialogue is the rising of the ultra national right wing government with its four ways:

- More settlements in the West Bank and in the Jerusalem area
 - No recognition of a Palestinian State
 - No recognition of the United Nations decisions
 - No right for the right of return
- There is support to push the Palestinians to leave and to implement a transfer policy. In that sense I can say that the right wing government, which will be led politically by Netanyahu and Lieberman and militarily by Ehud Barak, will sooner or later implement the targeted killing policy against figures of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and at the same time, will try to neutralize the Hamas regime in Gaza. However, the region will act in an escalated matter in all areas. In that sense, if we saw two wars during the three and a half years of the Olmert regime, we can face another 2-3 battles in the coming four years, if this government survives.

The Palestinians are conducting two strategies, that of Abu Mazen in which he believes in the continuation of the negotiations with Israel without any regional and international backing, and that of Hamas, which does not believe in the recognition of Israel and in the conditions of the Quartet but recognizes international resolutions. However, with the new reality of the imposing siege on Gaza, the Palestinians are trying to reach a compromise between the two political ways by creating a national reconciliation government. All the parties in Cairo agreed to create this National Reconciliation Government, which will try to reach several goals of creating presidential and parliamentary elections, electing a Prime Minister and rebuilding the security forces, while at the same time working to lift blockade and the siege on Gaza and restarting the reconstruction.

There are contradictory perceptions, however, between the two ways. Abu Mazen, Mahmoud Abbas, insists that Hamas must recognize the Oslo Agreement, the Quartet's conditions, the Arab Summit proposal and other international decisions. Abu Mazen is not interested in incorporating

Hamas into his government. He actually wants them to be out of the government and wants to move to create a government of "experts." Abu Mazen is also aware that the Hamas will not surrender to his demands to recognize Israel. In that sense, the dynamics of the conflict will continue between the sides.

Currently, although PM Salam Fayyad resigned, he was asked by Abu Mazen to come back and function as Prime Minister. As for President Abu Mazen himself, although he completed his term on the 9th of January, 2009, he continues with the role as President without paying any attention to the fact that his position is no longer valid.

Egypt is also not decisive in the role of overseeing the Palestinian Dialogue. It has also closed its crossing entrance to Gaza and behaves not as a sister Arab ally to Gaza but as the last of its enemies as it closed all the gates to Egypt, even for humanitarian purposes. Even so, Israel continues to criticize it for its role in the smuggling of arms from the Philadelpi Corridor.

Meanwhile, Abu Mazen has all the reasons to veto the dialogue. This dialogue is not under his authority and does not serve his own interests. Both Israel and the US are against any progress in the Palestinian Dialogue. The two sides still achieved much success in all the topics in Cairo: the elections, the authority of the government and modernization of the security forces.

As I explained before, Abu Mazen raised the subject of recognizing the Quartet's resolution without demanding from Israel to recognize the Palestinian rights for sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza. Omar Suliman, Chief of Egyptian Intelligence, visited Washington to push for a Palestinian Unity government. The Obama Administration, however, informed him that it has no policy toward the Middle East and Hillary Clinton's staff informed him that Hamas has to recognize the Quartet's resolution. This means that US policy still follows the Israeli policy towards the Palestinians.

Efraim Halevy, former Mossad Head and former Chairman of the National Security Council, argued on Kol Yisrael (4/4/09) that national security advisers has to submit to the new government alternative and policy to any formation of the Palestinian Dialogue in order to neutralize the dialogue on the political level. He also urged the government to form policies toward the Iranian-American Dialogue and the political integration of Syria in the international system.

I can also argue that Abu Mazen will try to continue with the negotiations with Israel in order to gain additional precious political time and in order to give Israel legitimacy to promote its low intensity conflict in Gaza until the upcoming escalation. Netanyahu will continue with the assassination policy in order to activate the Gaza Front and to give pretext to some extremists in his government to act.

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