

## The lessons of this tragedy

### Wake up to the reality

THE Prime Minister has announced two days of national mourning in honour of the 22 victims mercilessly murdered by a terrorist attack on a restaurant in Gulshan. The brutality of the killings and the long wait to see the end of the hostage crisis has left the nation shattered and with a sense of extreme unease.

But as we try to cope with the horror of this attack and show our commiseration for all those families who have lost their loved ones we must also wake up to the ramifications of this tragedy. This attack presents a whole new aspect of terrorism for us. So far we have been confronted with mainly lone targets, with the attackers singling out an individual who, in their minds, fit a certain profile and then carrying out the assassination. This attack focused on a larger target with the goal of causing maximum casualties. The methods employed and the savagery with which the killings were carried out are hallmarks of international terrorist outfits like ISIS and Al Qaeda. This is clear. What is not clear is whether, after such overwhelming evidence of their presence, the official line will be one of denial?

It is high time we moved away from debates over whether the terrorists were homegrown or affiliates of ISIS or Al Qaeda. We must acknowledge the ground realities that there are groups ideologically linked with such international outfits, the mandate of which is to kill innocents in the name of religion. We must combat this evil not just with more efficient, sophisticated security measures. We must fight this terror ideologically by finding ways to stop our young people from being radicalised and lured into the distorted path of murder and suicide, both acts categorically condemned by the religion they profess to be defending.

## A highway to growth

### Proper maintenance crucial

THE expanded four-lane highways connecting Dhaka with Chittagong and Mymensingh would make travel faster and easier, and advance trade, export and import, contributing to the GDP. We congratulate the government for implementing the mega projects that will significantly benefit the business communities as well as ordinary people.

About 95 percent of the exported and imported garment products are transported through the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. Dubbed as the economic corridor of the country, the two lane highway, now expanded to four lanes, with a daily traffic of around 30,000, was notorious for traffic snarl ups, causing travel time between the capital and the commercial city to go as high as 15 hours during holidays, a trip that should not take more than 5 hours. Hopefully that's going to change now.

Physical infrastructure such as these is a precondition for industrialisation and economic development. However, a number of measures will have to be taken to reap the benefits of the new freeways such as barring slow moving vehicles, checking reckless driving, installing proper signage along the road and constructing adequate number of overpasses, flyovers and bridges which will take time. Meanwhile, small, easy-to-enforce steps like banning illegal parking and bazaars on the roadside would make the new-built highways safer and more user-friendly.

## COMMENTS

### "Terror Strikes Dhaka"

(July 2, 2016)

Fahima Akhtar

The law enforcement agencies were warned well in advance, yet our government didn't take the threats seriously. Militants always cite a religion for their actions, but it does not represent our beliefs. My worst fear is that we may end up becoming a failed state like Pakistan.

Mostafa Ali

A true Muslim never kills innocent people in the name of Allah.

Shoyeb Salvador

The terrorists have carried out this horrific and cowardly attack to tarnish the image of Bangladesh. They don't belong to any religion.

Yasin Mobassir

May Allah save us from these terrorists. They didn't even say their Isha and Tarawih prayers. I wonder if they understand the true teachings of Islam at all.

Enamul Khan

Terrorism has no religion.

## ISIS ATTACKS BANGLADESH

# Should there still be ambiguity?

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

ALTHOUGH some Bangladeshi politicians till the recent past – the home minister repeated his position on July 3 2016 that the Holey Artisan Bakery massacre has no ISIS link -

had been in a denial mode about the presence of any ISIS elements in the country, the latest terror attack in Bangladesh has spelled out with no ambiguity that it was ISIS, which was behind the killing of 22 people at the Holey Artisan café in Gulshan. For some strange reasons, despite ISIS claims, the US State Department attributed the attack not to ISIS but to al Qaeda. However, as the standoff continued – within two hours of the attack – ISIS posted gruesome pictures of victims inside the café to 'Amaq' (its media agency), and claimed it had killed 20 hostages. Interestingly, the number corroborates what we get from various Government agencies.

Now, it's not the time to debate whether ISIS, al Qaeda, or some purely home-grown terrorists were behind the latest attack. In view of the ongoing unresolved killings of bloggers, writers, intellectuals, non-Muslim priests, traders, and ordinary people since early 2013, one believes more than one group of terrorists and criminals – some may even have links with law enforcers - have been involved in these killings. Surprisingly, by now the police have arrested more than 10,000 "suspects" from across the country, in the name of countering terrorism. One knows the real motive of these arrests. Even British weekly Economist has recently exposed the ill motive of the police. But the police do it with total impunity. And the impunity of the protectors of law has its own impact on terrorism and anarchy. One can't deny the existence of various Islamist terrorist killer groups in Bangladesh, such as the pro-ISIS Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), and the pro-al Qaeda Ansarullah Bangla

Team (ABT). Again, terrorism isn't a primeval cause or the "original sin"; it's a reactive force, an ideology-driven violent political alternative. Terrorism could be totally anarchic, and nihilistic by nature, unexplainable by any rational argument or discourse. As leading experts on terrorism have explained, suicide terrorism is a "rational behaviour", which is often beyond the comprehension of normal people. We can't win against terrorism unless we understand the phenomenon.

Thousands of Bangladeshi Muslims have had exposures to the Afghan Jihad, Taliban, al Qaeda, and of late, to the ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Hundreds of Bangladeshi men (and some women) may have already joined the ISIS in Syria. Marginalised and angry people from higher echelons of society have been traditionally swelling the ranks of Islamist terrorists for the last thirty-odd years. None of the 9/11 terrorists were poor, madrasa-educated people. Almost all the terrorists leaders (with a few exceptions) have been secular-educated engineers, doctors, and technocrats. No wonder all the terrorists killed in the Gulshan Attack were from secular-educated upper middle class/rich families. Thus terrorism isn't a derivative of madrasa education!

Since politicians anywhere don't know everything, they shouldn't pretend to be super intellectuals; they should speak less, and learn more from their own or foreign experts. Terrorism is one such area, which isn't as simple as a short story by Chekov or Tagore. It has apparently all the similarities with crime, but simultaneously very different from crime as well. While criminals deny and hide their crime, terrorists brag about their violent acts – mass killings and destructions – and often make false claims. So, terrorism isn't a problem to be resolved or tackled by police, or even a smart SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) Team of America, let alone by the military. In sum, terrorism isn't a problem of law and order, to be resolved by law enforcers. Terrorism is more than 90 percent political, social, economic and psychological; only a small portion may be motivated by deviant religious ideology or practices.

Unfortunately, leaders belonging to the ruling parties either deny the existence of any Islamist terror groups in the country – both the BNP and Awami League suffer from this syndrome – or, they invent some scapegoats from the opposition parties (sometimes total strangers) to implicate them in terror attacks. The staging of the "Joi Miah drama" by the BNP-Jamaat Government in 2004 is still fresh in our memory. The police falsely implicated one Joi Miah in the infamous Grenade Attack on Sheikh Hasina's rally in Dhaka on 21 August 2004 (that killed 24 people and injured around 300). Innocent Joi Miah spent four years in prison. Mutual name calling by Bangladeshi politicians as proxies of al Qaeda and ISIS is also counterproductive. This sort of irresponsible behaviour is divisive, and makes counterterrorism ineffective, difficult, and farcical.

Although the PM in her latest address to the Nation in the wake of the Gulshan Attack didn't mention BNP-Jamaat as promoters of terrorism, yet one takes her following assertion with a grain of salt: "They've taken a path of terrorism after having failed to win the hearts of people through the democratic process". One's not sure about who are these people! Did these terrorists ever try "democratic process" in the past? The not-so-hidden innuendo is unnecessary, and uncomfortable. Even leaders' subtle name calling at each other at this grave hour of national crisis and emergency is likely to backfire, to the detriment of effective counterterrorism (CT).

At the end of the day, Bangladesh must admit, international Islamist terrorist outfits or their followers, are actively engaged in killing people in the country. Most importantly, the Government and people concerned must realise poor Bangladesh can't afford CT operations. CT has cost America billions of dollars, and the cost is going up and up. Bangladesh can't afford it, which would cost the country many times more than the cost of making dozens of Padma Bridges. So, the country must find out ways to eliminate terrorism at the roots, or before it even sprouts up. It needs sustained anti-terrorism measures through good education system, equita-

ble distribution of wealth and opportunities, and transparent government (if not real democracy).

Bangladesh needs a foreign policy in conformity to the country's geopolitical and domestic interests. Agreeing to send soldiers in support of Saudi Arabia was unnecessary. This policy could have angered various Islamist terror groups in Middle East and beyond. Many experts at home and abroad believe Bangladesh has a foreign policy vis-à-vis India which has not served Bangladesh well. I'm not going to catalogue here in how many different ways Bangladesh's mighty neighbour has not met the expectations of our people or have reciprocated sufficiently for policies initiated by us.

While democracy, accountability and equality before the law have greatly dwindled in the country, the polity has already been thoroughly "Islamized" or "Arabized". Last but not least, terrorism isn't all about poverty. It's not a backlash of the poor, but a weapon of the weak. One doesn't doubt that they are misguided. Any society, which promotes pre-modern values, glorifies death, not life, and provides no peaceful alternative for change and improvement become a safe haven for terrorism, anarchy, and nihilism. Bangladesh is far from being such a society. It has the potential to turn either way, toward democratic civility, or totalitarian proto-fascism. The latter promotes state-terrorism, and nurtures non-state terrorist actors under the aegis of terrorist outfits like al Qaeda, and Islamic State.

In sum, Bangladeshi politicians, analysts, intellectuals, and media should do the following three things for the sake of durable peace and order in the country: a) stop denying the existence of terrorism, as there is hardly any country without terrorists or terrorist sympathisers, in the post-9/11 world; b) fight terrorism not only with force but also through education and mass motivation; and c) do not think of gaining political leverage by falsely implicating political rivals or personal adversaries as terrorist agents. Terrorists gain most in divided and fractured countries. Examples abound.

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## A Night of Terror

THE MIDDLE PATH



ADNAN R AMIN

SO, a night of absolute terror preceded the glorified Night of Power this Ramadan. And it has left Dhaka in a stupor; in a dazed state of disbelief and heartbreak. There is talk of vengeance in the air; and there is the call to patience. There are defenses of creed and vilification of entire traditions. There is evaluation of the response time and criticism of the PR spin on casualties. There

are subtle attempts to claim some connection to the tragedy, by professing either geographic or personal proximity to the place, or the people involved. But what is missing is clarity. 'Why did this happen? Why us?'

This is the intended effect of Terrorism. This piece was written Saturday night, so by now new developments will have been reported. Defense analysts will have speculated without end and media will have ceaselessly eulogised victims for the extra click. Claims will have been made about the alien beliefs and social standing of the attackers. Perhaps, our national response, by next week, will have been 'business as usual'. Either way, it does not matter – because a new reality has been revealed to us, which exists and will continue to exist regardless of how we react to it. As Bangladesh mourns the victims of this attack, it must also mentally and strategically prepare for the next one.

A condemnation of the perpetrators, though socially warranted, is meaningless. It is self-serving. It is a symbolic shield against a real, unsheathed cutlass. Then again, the audience too is a victim in this and its need for venting, pontificating and consolation must not be ignored. However, this should not preclude a social response strategy, be it through community-based counterterrorism or through reclamation of traditional values.

But the other party central to staging a bloody spectacle must not be beyond reproach. Mainstream media's performance during the night of terror has been outrageous and outstanding at the same time. Outrageous because reporters demonstrated zero professional training, no respect for tactical response preparations and little empathy for those thrust in harm's way. What self-respecting reporter tries to interview injured policemen? What kind of a human being prioritizes 'breaking' hostage identities over protecting their lives? What kind of intellectual institutions don't understand why televising security positions and tactical equipment may jeopardize security forces?

Media performance was also outstanding because reporters sensed the irrepressible public demand for inside scoops and gory details. Perhaps, this unholy interest in violence and death is universal: there is no denying that a violent spectacle on this scale is as inherently addictive as it is repulsive; that it triggers a macabre voyeurism, a certain brand of schadenfreude. Remember: when a thousand security experts mushroom all over the screens, Facebookers peddle new details and conspiracy theories and op-eds like this one start to frame and reframe the event – it is spurred on by the popular demand for meaning-making.

This is the target market for Terrorism. The fourth wheel, so to speak, is the formal response system: comprising of researchers, strategists, intelligence agencies, anti-terrorism units and tactical equipment. Bangladeshi security forces acted with valiance. While their failure to prevent a heavily-armed squad's entry into the heart of Dhaka may be baffling, and their initial lack of readiness criticised – there is no question that members of security forces put themselves in harm's way



People help an injured person after gunmen attacked the Holey Artisan Cafe.

PHOTO: AP

when it mattered. The tragedy that transpired wasn't from a lack of effort or dedication, but it may have been helped along by a lack of preparedness.

What may have been underwhelming was the management of information flow during this national crisis. It is strange that the media was allowed to broadcast from the scene for as long as it was. Despite the black-out, videos of trucks hauling military landing crafts were being telecast till after daybreak. On international media, there seemed to be little monitoring of or control over who was speaking for Bangladesh and in what capacity. As a result, US media, for example, managed to paint Bangladesh as 'a failed state', 'right next to Pakistan'.

It is now easier to place Bangladesh in the radicalisation map and the global Islamist Terrorism narrative. Doubtless, this broad shift has its roots in geopolitics. But when was there a scenario where an attack wouldn't be politicised? Theories will fly. Political analysts will connect it to geopolitical ambitions of larger nations. Loyalists will find anti-liberation elements in the mix. The global audience will see a natural, geographic progression in terrorist tactics. The opposition will view it as a government failure and the voyeur horde will treat it as a juicy spectacle. There are those who will take it as a loss of this city's innocence and breakdown of family structures, and yet others who will find in it the wrath of God. Each of these views is politically inspired and contributes something to the bearers' individual/group interests.

For some years, we have seen the 'War on Terror' (WOT) manual being emulated in Bangladesh, where an 'other' is blamed for attacks on 'us' and the narrators retain exclusive right to the moral highground and legitimacy by controlling the interpretations. The tactic is to fight violence with greater violence, a questionable approach even when the enemy is an outsider. But could a Muslim majority country thus deal with violent radicalism? An important clue may have been revealed when RAB announced its intention to negotiate with the gunmen at Holey Artisan Bakery, a departure from WOT response protocol.

Perhaps, academics and security strategists should revisit if the Bush-administration's tactics are adequate or even suitable for Bangladesh. To illustrate, there are cases where a single individual was connected (or separated by a degree) on social media to both victims and alleged terrorists. It would appear that the gunmen lived and breathed much closer than we expect(ed). Their socioeconomic status, social environment and operational tactics were also markedly different from that of 'sleepers' involved in recent targeted killings. These young men didn't travel to Dhaka from far-flung districts, only to flee once they had struck. They grew up among us. They played with us on our fields. And then, something led them to that fateful night of terror. By then, they had crossed an invisible threshold and had no demands or statements left to make. Bloodshed was the only statement. This is not a language that we understand, but the gravity of the contents is lost on no one. Also not lost is that fact that such ideologies cannot germinate without nurturing.

Bangladesh is not a fertile breeding ground for radicalism. The key word here is 'fertile'. There is no historical resentment or unjust wars, as there are in Iraq or Afghanistan. There are no 'infidel rulers' or sectarian conflicts. However, there are indeed young minds ready to be molded and influenced. And there is a glaring lack of exemplary role models. There seem to be social cracks, where tender emotions are being smelted into violent hatred. This is where social response must start.

Let me end with a little story. Family sources say that when one of the boys held hostage was spared his life, he refused to leave without his two friends. He demanded that the friends too be allowed to leave, and when refused, stayed back in that inferno. In the end, he paid the price with his life; but not before setting an example of and for us all. Let this boy remind us that at the end of the day, there's no morality without courage, and no righteousness without mercy.

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