Holey Artisan Attack and Renewed Challenges for Future Counter Terrorism Strategy in Bangladesh

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I. Introduction:

Countering Terrorism Has Been One Of The Key Policy Agendas For Governments Throughout The World Since The Rise Of Terrorism As A Common Threat. However, After The 9/11 Attack And The Subsequent Declaration Of War On Terror Has Added New Dimensions And Drive Towards Counterterrorism Strategies Of Different Nations. With The Advent Of New Facets Of Terrorist Activities There Is Continuous Necessity Of Shifting The Practicing Counterterrorism Activities. Bangladesh Is Not An Exception To This Context And Rather It Is One Of The Mostly Threatened Nations Due To The Rise Of Terrorism And Radicalization. The Assault On The Holey Artisan Bakery, An Upscale Restaurant In Bangladesh’s Diplomatic Enclave, Last July Was A Wake-Up Call For Bangladeshi Society. No More There Was Chances To Deny The Fact That IS Was Not Operative In Bangladesh. It Is High Time The South Asian Nation Should Pursue For Complete Reassessment Of Counter-Terrorism. Bangladesh Has Seen Extremist Violence Earlier, But This Incident Was Game-Changing And Was Repeatedly Referred To By People As ‘Bangladesh’s 9/11’ Because Of The Effort It Left On The Society Was Shaking. Only Six Armed Militants, Claimed By Islamic State, Conducted The Shootout, Killed Two Police Officers, Hold A 12-Hour Standoff And Unfortunately Killed 20 Hostages. Eventually The Commandos Of Bangladesh Armed Forces Had Been Engaged To Deal The Situation. The Government In Bangladesh Has Certainly Taken Some Positive Steps, But For More Is Necessary To Halt A Fall Into The Chasm Of Terrorism And Extremism. While The Cafe Has Now Reopened, The Scars Run Deep. A National Soul-Searching Has Hastened To Tackle The Roots Of This Violence.

1. Terrorism in Bangladesh: A Brief Guide Since The Beginning:

Between Ruling Elites And A Rapidly Developing Populace, Complicate A Coherent Response To Extremism. There Are Also International Aspects Of The Phenomenon That Need To Be Better Understood, In Particular The Influence Of Ideologies, Networks, And Funding From Overseas. The Rise Of Terrorism In Bangladesh Has Seen Different Phases. Based On Their Transformations, Tactics And Objectives, These Phases Can Be Separated.


2. Holey Artisan: A ‘New Chapter’ For Terror In Bangladesh?


3. Counterterrorism strategy Of Bangladesh: A Timely Needed One?

3.1. Bangladesh Government’s Preparedness:


In The Recent Years, Bangladesh Has Been Making Consistent Efforts To Create An Effective Legal, Regulatory And Institutional Regime To Fight Terrorism And Violent Religious Extremism. Few Of These Are:

- In 2009, The AL Government Established A 17-Member ‘National Committee On Militancy Resistance And Prevention’ Headed By The State Minister For Home Affairs To Contain Religious Extremism And Terrorism And Mobilize Public Opinion Against Such Activities.
- In 2012 ATA Was Authorized Death Penalty For Terrorists Targeting Another Country From Bangladesh.
- The Bangladesh Government Monitors And Regulates The Activities Of The Foreign NGO’s - Some Of Which Were Found To Be Involved In Terror Financing. In Coordination With The NGO Affairs Bureau, The Bangladesh Bank In Audits Accounts Of The NGO’s.
- In December 2015, A New Police Division Named ‘Counter-Terrorism And Transnational Crime’ Unit Under The Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Consisting Of 600 Men Was Formed To Boost Police Capability In Combating Militancy And Terrorism.
- In Its Efforts To Contain Terrorism At The Domestic Level, The AL Government Has Streamlined Inter-Agency Coordination As Well. Bangladesh Border Guards, Coast Guards And Government’s Passport And Immigration Department, And Custom And Port Authorities Work In Harmony With The Law Enforcement And Intelligence Agencies In A Systemic And Organized Manner To Detect And Deter Illegal Entry And Exit Of Potential Terrorist, Illicit Transfer Of Cash Or Arms/Explosives.

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- The Information Ministry Has Adopted The Means Of Dissemination Of Awareness And Proper Education Via Making Short-Films, Documentaries, Dramas And Advertisements And Video Clips


3.2. Recent Breakthroughs In Fight Against Terrorism:


In A Significant Development In Terms Of Terror Financing, On August 31, 2016, A Singapore Court Jailed Two Bangladesh Workers For Terror Financing. Prior To That, In The Previous Month, A Singapore Court Convicted Four Bangladesh Workers For Funding Terror Attacks Back Home Under The Banner Of Islamic State In Bangladesh. Thus Preventing Spread Of Radicalization Among More Than 2 Million Expatriates Working In Gulf And Arab Nations Is A Major Challenge For The Government. These People Are Highly Vulnerable To The Doctrines Of Terrorism And Extremism.

3.3. Counter-Terrorism And Security Cooperation At Regional And International Level

Since The Recent Phases Of Terrorism And Radicalization In Bangladesh Is Transnational In Character, This Menace Cannot Be Fought Only At The Domestic Level. Following The Holey Artisan Attack, The Government Had Sought Cooperation From United State And India In Sharing Intelligence To Prevent Terror Attacks In Future.

US Secretary Of State John Kerry Visited Dhaka On August 29 To Increase The Cooperation And Build A Strong Collaboration Among The Nations Of South Asia In Order To Tackle The Terrorist Activities And Hold A Stronghold Against Terrorism Which Would Be Detering To Any Sort Of Terrorist Organization. He Expressed Concerns Regarding The Series Of Attacks Targeting Secularists, Rights Activists, Liberal Intellectuals, Foreigners And Members Of Muslim Minority Sects And Religious Minority Groups During Last Few Years. Kerry Urged The Bangladeshi Leaders To Step Up Efforts To Fight Extremist Violence And He Made It Clear That The IS Elements Are “Connected To Some Degree” With The Local Jihadists. This Is Significant Because The AL Government Has Persistently Denied The Organizational Presence Of Transnational Groups In The Country And Blamed The Home-Grown Militants For The Recent Killings. This Is Certainly Not Expected In A Context When Transnational Terrorism Has Become A Visible Source Of Destabilization In Recent Years. Sharing Of Intelligence And Communication Between Two Countries’ Law
Enforcement Agencies Has Gained Top Priority During The Talks. In Streamlining The South Asian Counter-Terrorism Structure, The US Has Been Engaged With Bangladesh For Long.

Among The Neighboring Countries, India Is A Major Ally Of Bangladesh In Counter-Terrorism Cooperation. In The Face Of The Recent Terror Attacks, New Delhi Reportedly Renewed Its Offer To Dhaka For A Comprehensive Framework Agreement To Broaden Bilateral Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, Including Sharing Of Intelligence Inputs And Training Of Neighbouring Country’s Security Personnel In India. There Was Tension Going On That India Can Be Also Affected By The Terrorists Harbored In Bangladesh. As Cross Border Terrorism Possess Same Level Of Threat To Both Countries, So Political Leaders Are Jointly Working On To Build A Stronger Security Cooperation Against Terrorism. New Delhi And Dhaka Need To Act Together As The Militants Often Forge Alliance To Subvert The Friendly Relations Between The Two Neighboring Countries. Bangladesh Is Expected To Enhance Security Cooperation At Bilateral, Regional And Multilateral Levels To Counter The Jihadist Threats In The Coming Days.

4. Challenges To The Current Approach And Suggested Solutions:

Politicians And Law-Enforcers In Bangladesh Sometimes Hype Up Panic By Publicizing “Terrorists Everywhere” And Sometimes Expresses Smugness By Publicizing “No Terrorists Anywhere”. This Lack Of A Coherent Perspective Is Counterproductive To Counterterrorism Operation. The Base Requirement For Fighting Terrorism And Taking Effective Measures For Counter Terrorism Is To Understand That Terrorism Is Ideology-Driven Violence, Different From Mere Form Of Violence And Warfare. Terrorists Are Not Mindless Robots Programmed To Kill Innocent People Just For The Sake Of Killing. Most Terrorists, Globally, Have Been Well-To-Do Engineers And Technocrats, Not Poverty-Stricken Madrassa-Educated People.

Rather Than More Troops Or Policemen Or Laws, A Successful Counterterrorism Strategy Requires The Admission By Politicians And Police That Terrorists Do Exist In Bangladesh At The First Place. Blame Game Against Each Other Is Also Counterproductive To Counterterrorism Efforts. Apart For These, Good Governance And Fair Distribution Of Prosperity And Opportunities To All Can Ensure A Healthy Social Balance Which Can Prevent Dissatisfaction Among Individuals To Stand Against The Society.

In The Wake Of The Latest Terror Attacks At Gulshan And Sholakia, The Stance That There Is No ISIS In Bangladesh And That Terrorists Here Are All Homegrown Locals Seems To Have Become Irrelevant. In Fact, They Should Rather Worry More About The Homegrown Elements Than The Foreign Ones, Who Are Relatively Easier To Track Down Than The Locals.


A Key Vulnerable Aspect Of The Bangladesh Counter Terrorism Policy Is That There Is A Huge Lack Of Terrorist Rehabilitation Program For Detainees And Inmates. Terrorist Rehabilitation Program Has Gained Acceptance Globally And It Is High Time It Should Be Taken Into Serious Consideration By Bangladeshi Government And Policy Makers. Within South Asia, Pakistan Has Been Using Such Programs For A Number Of Years, While India Has Also Begun To Embark On Both Counter-Radicalization And De-Radicalization Initiatives. Saudi Arabia Has Been Practicing This Strategy For Many Years, Although It Is Difficult To Presume How Successful Such Programs Are, And To Measure Their Success, Evidence Suggests That Such Programs Are Essential, In Order To Combat Radicalization And Violent Extremism.


Bangladesh Can Follow The Counterterrorism Strategy Developed By Asia-Pacific Center For Security Studies (APCSS). This Particular Doctrine Underscores The Importance Of Intrastate And Interstate Cooperation To Contain And Defeat Terrorist-Insurgencies In Various Countries In The Asia-Pacific Region, Including Bangladesh.


Maulana Fariduddin Masoud, Chairman Of Bangladesh Jamaatul Ulama (BJU), A National Body Of Islamic Scholars, Presented A Fatwa Or Religious Decree Which Was Signed By More Than 100,000 Islamic Scholars, Legal Experts And Clerics. Since Most People Have An Incorrect Idea Of Jihad, The Scholars Who Signed The Fatwa Sought To Explain What Jihad Means In The Quranic Context And How Islamist Extremists Are Misleading Both Muslims And Non-Muslims On The Issue.

Government’s Operational Strategy Requires Significant Changes In Practice. In June 2016, An Anti-Militancy Drive By Law Enforcement Led To Over 11,000 Arrests Among Which Less Than 200 Of Those Arrested Have Been Identified As Militants And Others Were Drug Peddlers And Petty Criminals. This Will Not Ensure Justice Since As The Courts And Prison System Are Not Equipped To Handle Thousands Of Cases. So The Government Need To Focus On Islamist Militants.

The Bangladesh Army 1st Para-Commando Battalion Must Be Deployed Immediately To Tackle Situations Like Holey Artisan Attack. This Battalion, Which Has Received Counterterrorism Training From The U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific, Has Been Credited With Successful Operation During Dhaka Attack. If The Rapid Action Battalion And Border Guard Bangladesh, Two Paramilitary Groups Who Were Among The Emergency Responders, Cannot Take Similar Action, The Nation Cannot Wait Once Again For The Prime Minister To Give Approval To Deploy The Army Commandos.

The Political Suppression Of The Opposition Party By The Ruling Government Has Proved To Be A Source Of Increased Extremist And Radical Activities. The Ongoing Suppression Will Also Have Its Consequences Because A Sense Of Deprivation, Disrespect And Humiliation Is Growing Higher Among A Large Portion Of The Society. Bangladesh Needs All Political Stakeholders To Come Together To Solve This Threat Of Militancy. Without Adapting An Inclusive Approach, The Government Cannot Expect To Minimize The Threat Of Terror To The Expected Level.

II. Conclusion:


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