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Bangladesh: Checking Violent Extremism

By Iftekharul Bashar

Synopsis

Bangladesh must have a long term approach to check the growth of Islamic State. Rather than denying the growing transnational linkages of the local terrorist groups, Bangladesh must plug the loopholes in its counterterrorism strategy.

Commentary

THE RECENT killing of a Hindu priest in the northern region of Bangladesh is reflective of the continued threat of terrorism in the country. There has been more than ten attacks since September 2015 for which the self-styled Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility. The recent deportation of 26 Bangladeshi terrorist suspects from Singapore is evidence that a segment of the Bangladeshi diaspora community overseas is also affected by violent extremist ideologies. With this backdrop, the effectiveness of the current counterterrorism response of the Bangladesh government appears to be inadequate.

The major problem is that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government is still in a 'denial mode'. The government is not acknowledging that the country has groups and individuals who support transnational terrorist movements like IS and Al Qaeda. The Bangladesh government needs to give a clear message that it remains committed to its much publicised policy of zero-tolerance against terrorism.

Violent extremism on the rise

Thanks to this zero-tolerance policy against terrorism in all forms, the country made a dramatic comeback from the 1999-2005 era of poor security sector governance and deadly terrorist attacks. However, after a relative calm, Bangladesh started

witnessing the rise of violent extremism since the 2013 killing of a secularist blogger by Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT)/Ansar al-Islam, a local proxy of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

The trend continues and has intensified due to the rise of IS, the launch of the Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and the aspiration of the local groups and individuals in the country to be a part of what they saw as a “global struggle for Islam”. A segment of the Bangladeshi diaspora was also attracted to the global brands of terrorism. Online extremist materials in the local language created an open and conducive space for the rapid indoctrination of the diaspora and formation of overseas cells of local groups. Overseas cells are often a key source of funding for local extremist and militant groups in Bangladesh. At present a key threat emanates from a faction of the Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) which has a support base in northern Bangladesh.

Since 2013, Bangladesh has been witnessing low intensity terrorist attacks mostly in the form of targeted assassinations. However, there is evidence that local groups are rapidly increasing their operational capabilities to mount deadly and large-scale attacks particularly in the major cities like Dhaka and Chittagong. Investigations reveal that the country is likely to witness attacks in the airports, sea ports, military bases, oil depots, naval ships, luxury hotels, shopping malls and embassies.

The recent developments indicate that there is a competition within the Islamist militant groups and their splinter cells to get recognition from global terrorist brands particularly IS. Such quest for recognition is partially motivated by ideology. But a major motive is to receive funding and logistical support to occupy territory and to establish what they perceive as an Islamic state based on their interpretation of Sharia law.

Regional implications

The rise of violent extremism in Bangladesh will have serious consequences for two of its immediate neighbours - India and Myanmar. Several publications of IS and AQIS have expressed interest to use Bangladeshi territory as a springboard to expand their operations in these two countries. In this regard, the regional network of Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and its links to the Rohingya militants need to be watched closely.

It is noteworthy that there are half a million stateless Rohingya living in Bangladesh. While about 30,000 of them are living in two camps maintained by the United Nations, the rest are living outside the camps along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

The India-Bangladesh-Myanmar border is already a major conduit of transnational crimes and illicit activities such as drug trafficking and human smuggling; the area has previously been used by the Rohingya militant groups like Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Harkat ul Jihad al Islami-Arakan (HuJI-A) Tehrik-e-Azadi Arakan (TAA). The RSO reportedly is regrouping and trying to get fresh recruits. Considering the group’s past history, it is highly likely that it will work closely with the local militant groups in Bangladesh.

What Bangladesh must do

Bangladesh has yet to acknowledge the transnational linkages of its local terrorist groups and individuals and make it a priority to neutralise them. It is of utmost importance to keep counterterrorism out of politics; however it is also important to dismantle extremist elements embedded within the Islamist political domain. Extremist links of the Islami Chatra Shibir (ICS), the student wing of the country's largest Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami is a case in point. Similarly an Islamist vigilante group known as Hefazat-e-Islam is also known to have extremist elements.

Bangladesh needs to be more transparent to address the weaknesses in investigation and prosecution. It is important to scale up the security of the critical infrastructures such as airports. Bangladesh's existing security arrangements are neither adequate nor professional by any international standard. If Bangladesh is to sustain its impressive economic growth, which is currently more than 6 per cent per annum, it must not underestimate the threat of violent extremism.

Against this backdrop setting up of a new police unit for counterterrorism and transnational crime is a welcome move. However, it remains to be seen how the new unit sets its priorities. It is also high time for Bangladesh to consider creating a focal point to build its strategic counterterrorism capabilities such as a terrorist rehabilitation programme in the prisons.

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