

ANALYSIS

Terror shadows loom large

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Six years after a handful of armed terrorists drove a car full of explosives into the heart of India's republic in one of the brazen terror attacks in the world, the jihadi threat to the country has only multiplied manifold, with the Indian state paralysed by its preoccupation with jockeying for a seat on the so-called high-table of global diplomacy.

If any lessons were ever learnt and implemented in the heat of the moment, those have become irrelevant and counter-productive in the past few years for one simple reason: jihadis have changed dramatically in the past five years, the Government thinking and policy have not. Take, for instance, the preventive measures taken at the Parliament House. Security checks are now multi-layered; the barricades, both concrete and iron, are firmly in place; the ID checks are more fool-proof; there are more armed guards inside and outside and plus new technical gizmos like scanners are in place. Step back and look hard at these measures. They are only a shade better than the past practice of rolling stones and boulders on the roads leading to the protected site.

The nature of threat has changed so much that the 'barrier-approach' of prevention could lull the security agencies into a false sense of security, leaving gaping holes for jihadis to penetrate. It would be a moot, but no less relevant, exercise to figure out the reactions of the security agencies if jihadis were to drive two buses, say, like the ones carrying the members of Parliament, laden with explosives from two opposing gates. They don't really have to enter the gate. They can crash into them, setting off explosions that could cause extensive destruction. The recent Algiers explosion is a case worth studying. This is just one of the scenarios that need to be kept in mind.

Let us understand how the jihadi threat to our country has mutated in the past six years and then it will become clear how the Government has chosen to remain oblivious to the dangers. First is the way jihadis have worked out a coalition of terror, cutting across ideological differences.

This has allowed them to work in smaller, more anonymous groups across India, unlike in the past when they were confined to certain areas. Today, the loose network can be traced from West Bengal to Rajasthan, a random sprinkling of cells waiting to be triggered for action as and when required. There is virtually no connection between these cells except for a group of masterminds, working both within and outside India, which works out the details, recruits new members, procures explosives and lays out the execution and exit plans. In the past three years, such cells have only increased and expanded as terror attacks starting from the October 2005 Delhi blasts to the recent serial bombings in Uttar Pradesh reveal.

Another critical dimension to this mutation is the dominance of radical Islamic groups (like Lashkar-e-Tayyeba) working in tandem with members of Students Islamic Movement of India -- a group, banned since 2001, which was largely funded by a global Wahaabi organisation, the

World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) based, before September 11, 2001, in Falls Church, Washington. This Wahabi brotherhood links them directly to Al Qaeda and its ideological objective of carving out an Islamic enclave from Malta to Malacca, seemingly a preposterous mission but with thousands of zealots willing to die for it.

It is, therefore, important to realise that the groups or cells which are operating in or against India are part of the Al Qaeda network with access to training camps in Al Qaeda's new sanctuary, Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where Uzbek and Arab trainers are proficient in making explosives and preparing recruits for suicide missions.

These groups also access the large volume of internet traffic generated by jihadis worldwide, giving them ready-to-use information about explosive cocktails and methodology, use of various weapons including radioactive materials, methods to deal with interrogators and enormous amount of attack videos and texts to brainwash and instigate. Specifically put, terrorist cells do not really have to walk around the select targets to map the area for days; a mobile phone with a camera and Google map can give a reasonable layout of, say, Parliament House, with entry and exit gates, surrounding roads and areas to figure out how to hoodwink the security, and even escape. If you look at it, most of the preventive measures are, in fact, aimed at cutting off the escape route of attackers.

That is where the trouble in assessment is. The new set of jihadis would not be interested in escaping alive: They would be suicide bombers. There is already a mass of data to indicate such an eventuality in Jammu & Kashmir and elsewhere. For almost two years now, new recruits from LeT and Jaish-e-Mohammad have been going to training camps set up in Waziristan and North-West Frontier Province. They are trained by veteran terror specialists who have had years of experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Iraq. They are specialists in rigging up IEDs, landmines and more powerful bombs. More alarming is the stress on suicide missions.

Are we factoring in these developments in our counter-terrorism strategies? If we are, then we must not slack our vigilance on the Line of Control, border areas with Bangladesh and Nepal for infiltration. The real fear is that if and when some jihadis managed to enter India, and are able to train a few cell members in suicide missions and setting off huge explosions, it would be a security nightmare, particularly when Jammu & Kashmir goes to election next year and the country a year later.

We need intelligence not in isolated bits and pieces, but a way to collate, analyse and assess different streams into a real-time input for neutralising as many terror plans as possible. We can take a cue from how the Americans have managed to keep their homeland safe since 2001. Ironically, the US seems to be more worried about jihadi terrorism in our region than most of us -- it has recently moved its Open Source Centre to Delhi and created a new position to keep a tab on terrorism at their New Delhi Embassy. We must get out of our stupor brought in by brightly lit malls and gleaming metros.