Perspectives On International Terrorism – II

Riyaz Punjabi*

*Prof. Riyaz Punjabi is President International Centre for Peace Studies, New Delhi and Editor of Journal of Peace Studies

The perspectives on global terrorism have undergone a sea change during the last six months. The phenomenon of dissipation of Al-Qaeda and disintegration of Taliban in Afghanistan has prodded the community of scholars, experts and analysts to deeply fathom into the emerging reality and isolate the factors that lead to terrorism. It needs to be recognised that changing global situation and amorphous nature of International relations have changed the context and approaches in studying the phenomenon of terrorism. The context in which this subject was analysed during the past fifty years does not remain valid any more. The experiences of those years might provide valuable clues, but exclusive reliance on these experiences in understanding the present day phenomenon of terrorism could lead to faulty conclusions.

It has already been discussed in the first part of this article (September-October 2001) that terrorism was used at times as a strategic weapon in dealing with the adversaries during the cold war years. The use of Afghan-Arab guerillas against the ideology of Communism, which finally led to dismemberment of the then Soviet Union, provides an illustration to the point. However, the rise of Taliban and its capacity to provide structural, social, political and logistic support to Al-Qaeda would not have been easy in case the atmosphere generated with the engagement of Afghan-Arab guerillas, projected as *Mujahideen*, would not have persisted in Afghanistan. This leads to the conclusion that International Community has to be vigilant that specific ethnic and religious groups are not trained, armed and used to achieve strategic targets through terrorist methods. The lesson from the Afghan experience is that ignoring the issue of the utility of these groups after the specific strategic objective has been achieved would be like leaving a powerful dynamite unattended in a crowded street.

It is equally important to note that schemes to tackle International terrorism should not be stretched to settle scores and enhance the prospects of achieving strategic gains. Such approaches are bound to weaken the initiatives aiming at eliminating the menace, and such approaches could even polarise the world. Moreover such approaches do provide a moral high ground to the terrorists and

help them in rallying support around their cause to accomplish their objectives. The terrorists could project themselves as warriors against injustices in such a situation (of a polarised world). The US-Saudi strategic alliance and September 11 tragedy in New York need to be seen in this perspective as well. It seems that International community is increasingly growing conscious of this predicament. In this vein, the responses to US President George W Bush's 'axis of evil', which have remained, by and large, from lukewarm to cool, is an indication of this very consciousness on the part of International Community.

The States and societies, the world over, are beset with faultlines, which need to be corrected. The human beings belonging to one human whole should genuinely feel concerned about the plight of their fellow beings besieged with many a social and political problem. This formulation has greater relevance in the third world countries. However, the individual states should not arrogate the right unto itself to correct these faultlines in the selective individual cases with a view to humiliate the adversaries and assume the position of a 'moral policeman'.

Historical records reveal that 'terrorism' has been used in entirely different contexts during different periods of history. For a long time the repressive measures of the state were described as terrorism, hence the term 'state terrorism' was coined. The earlier editions of dictionaries define terrorism in this very context and ascribe it to the state repression of the dissent or protest in their varied manifestations. It was much later that the extremist and violent activities of individuals and groups using arms and ammunition in pursuit of some political ideology were brought within the scope of the definition of terrorism. This definition had both inclusive and exclusive dimensions, depending upon the political position of the individual/group/state. Thus, in the 1930s and the 1940s, the underground armed Jews in Palestine who were forcibly expelling Palestinians in pursuance of the objective of setting up an Israeli state were described as 'terrorists'. However, by mid-1940s these very terrorists were branded as 'freedom fighters'. And from 1950 onwards, the armed resistance of Palestinians was described as 'terrorism'. This resistance has been perceived and defined from varied perspectives around the world. Even the UN has perceived and dealt with Palestinian resistance in an entirely different manner according to its own perception.

The phenomenon of terrorism assumed new forms and manifested in diverse ways after the end of Cold war. The collapse of Soviet Union and decline of communism as an ideology were followed by the eruption of armed secessionist movements in different parts of the world. This phenomenon had three crucial dimensions. First, these movements challenged the territorial sovereignty of state. Second, these armed movements, by and large, held a potential threat to the multi-cultural and pluri-religious states. Third, most of these armed upsurges made religion as a pivot for

mobilization, organization and execution of their strategies to achieve their objectives. Ironically, the big powers remained indifferent to these developments and in certain cases did not even hold the temptation of describing the terrorists as 'freedom fighters'. The recruitment, training, financing and deployment of Arab-Afghan fighters against Soviet Union created an illusion that objectives of redrawing the borders and installing or removing the regimes could be achieved through violent means and terrorist techniques. In this process the terrorist groups projected an *utopia* and using the modern techniques of communications disseminated the *utopia* particularly among the younger and impoverished segments of society. Some violent upsurges in Asian countries may be viewed in this background. The terrorist outfits were well aware that some countries had the capacity to forestall their advances, hence they meticulously identified the forces that could create impediments in realising the objective of *utopia* and went about targeting these very forces. The International community woke up only when the flames of terrorism started engulfing their drawing rooms.

That existing faultlines of societies, particularly in Asia, which provided the required social atmosphere to generate, promote and export terrorism, deserves a deeper analysis. Terrorism could not have flourished in absence of sympathisers, financiers, regular recruits and in some cases the covert official patronage also. In the context of Asia, case studies of terrorist infested societies reveal that multiple factors are responsible for the growth of terrorism. In some cases it is the lack of democratic avenues, in other cases it is the marginalisation of chunks of population in the system of governance, and yet in some other cases it is the underdevelopment, mal-development or lopsided development of sections of societies which provided the required social and political atmosphere for terrorism to thrive in. The easier and convenient means of communication and availability of modern technology facilitated its access to other parts of the world and it started growing up in different parts of the world. An elaborate analysis of global terrorism can hardly afford to ignore these factors to reach some definite conclusions and in devising a strategy to deal with this menace in future.

The war against global terrorism commenced with the tragic events of September 11, perceived to have been led by Osama bin Laden and his now infamous Al-Qaeda network. Since the *Utopia* of Osama bin Laden was grounded in religion, Islam naturally became a focus in studying the phenomenon of terrorism. A host of literature has appeared examining the tenets of Islam and seeking to establish if not linkages, at least the approval of terrorism in Islam. Most of these studies are superficial and completely devoid of scholarly and analytical depths. Some of these studies project a biased mindset as well. Be that as it is, Islam as a faith followed by more than a billion people located in different parts of the world will be a focus of inquiry, particularly in the context

of its use by the terrorists operating in different parts of the world. In this regard the first prerequisite is to transcend the 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis which has provided a theoretical basis for terrorists to justify their actions. Second, neither Islam nor Muslim states are a monolithic whole. There are sharp sectarian differences prevalent among Muslims. The sectarian killings in Pakistan and even in Afghanistan during Taliban rule provide illustrations to the point. The factor of cultural differentiation also divides Muslim community and the perception of a united Muslim *Ummah* (large community) is a myth. It is yet another matter that Osama Bin Laden and his associates were perpetually projecting this myth in order to build their support system.

Muslim states erroneously defined as Islamic states are equally divided according to their strategic interests. The end of colonialism saw the emergence of independent and sovereign Muslim states, which are quite zealous and strict in guarding their territorial integrity. The bloody eight-year long war between Iran and Iraq and lately the gulf war involving Iraq and Kuwait provide illustration to the point. Thus, projection of a united group of Muslim states is a fallacy.

The monumental work of interpretation of Islam took place when Muslims conquered vast territories in Europe and Asia and subsequently established a monarchial and feudal order. It is yet another point of debate that this very order was against the spirit of Islam. Be that as it is, these very interpretations created new sectarian divisions in Islam. No wonder that Osama Bin Laden chose one particular Sunni school of Islamic theology and law to set up his network and pursue his objective. The challenge of terrorism starkly stares at the face of many a Muslim state and the same is grounded in one or the other sectarian Islamic school of thought. Thus, in case the *Wahabbi* construction was convenient to the founder of Saudi Arabia in setting up and stabilizing that particular state at that point of history, the same very construction is throwing up a big challenge to the authority of Saudi monarchs at this point of history.

The Muslim states are not oblivious to the challenge of terrorism. They are equally conscious that Islamic texts, torn out of their contexts, are being used selectively by terrorists to sustain their campaign of terror. The reactions from these states are coming in bits and pieces. And more often than not their responses are defensive, to say the least. The scholars and analysts, ironically, quote the same very selective texts torn out of their contexts and used by terrorists in rallying Muslim support, in their bid to establish linkages between terrorism and Islam. It is in fact a trap astutely laid down by terrorists to create confusion and should be avoided at all costs.

The Muslim states in general and knowledgeable Islamic scholars in particular need to recognise that the process of interpretation and reconstruction, which was halted in 14th Century, has to

restart at this juncture of history. This process would save Muslim states from political and social anarchy awaiting them. Moreover, the external constructions of Islam lacking depth and ignoring the diversity of interpretations would lead to strengthening the hands of terrorists. These distorted constructions sustain the mediocre formulations of terrorists, which they impose upon the ignorant and the gullible. The campaign against global terrorism would remain unfinished until the ideological sources of this menace, ostensibly grounded in religion, remain unchallenged.

[To be Concluded]