

# Combating terrorism

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**5** 4 years ago, the Quaid-e-Azam, in his address to Pakistan's Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, outlined what, in his view, should be the priority of any government in Pakistan:

"The first duty of a government is to maintain law and order so that the life, property and religious beliefs of its subjects are fully protected by the state".

54 years later, on August 11, 2001, a big bomb blast, the latest in a series of terror strikes, killed and wounded children, women and men in Gujrat in the province of Punjab, which, together with Karachi, has bore the brunt of terrorism in different dimensions since 1995, when it assumed crisis proportions.

In the last six years, three different governments, two civilian and one military, share a 'continuity of failures' in containing terrorism that now has the capacity to strike at will in any part of Pakistan or hit any person without fear of retribution.

Ironically, this problem has gotten out of hand even under a military regime, since the khaki take great pride in their efficiency and ability to maintain 'law and order'. The last 22 months also testify to an abject failure to tackle terrorism, a failure that has been admitted as such even at the highest official level.

Stark statistics are pointers to what is undoubtedly Pakistan's number one problem today since this adversely affects revival of economy, the image of Pakistan, the confidence of people in the state by violating the most fundamental of all human rights, namely, the right to live, and the morale of the masses, which is shaken with each terrorist strike:

\* On an average, every third day an act of terrorism hits Pakistan, either a bomb blast or target killing of a person due to considerations other than personal enmity;

\* According to The Friday Times, 63 doctors and 34 lawyers have been killed by terrorists in Karachi alone over the last few years, with the result that some have fled to the West or others are taking refuge in Islamabad;

\* Over a thousand persons have been a victim of target killings in Pakistan since 1995;

\* Since 1995, there have been over 700 bomb blasts in Pakistan with hundreds of casualties (e.g., 200 bomb blasts in 1995 and 103 in 1999).

One major reason for recurrence of such criminal acts is that their perpetrators invariably get away with it with impunity. For example, within a month of the military regime taking over, on November 12, 1999, there were rockets fired on the Federal Capital, Islamabad, almost hitting diplomatic missions as well, but has there been a clue to that act of terrorism, or has someone even bothered to find out who was behind it?

The response of regimes, civil or military, is similar, almost predictable, starting with an impotent rage reflected in strong statements 'terrorism will be crushed ... terrorists deserve to be shot', followed by long meetings on 'law and order' with 'directives' given to 'launch an operation' and ending on an agreement on more 'severe punishments' by suitable changes in the law!

Take the case of actions and statements that fol-

lowed the latest round of terrorism. Newspapers on August 5 carried screaming headlines, which are almost funny but for the gravity of the issue: 'paramilitary troops to be used against terrorism' (as if they are facing a guerrilla war or an insurgency), 'provinces get green-light for crackdown on terrorism' (as if they were waiting for one from the Federal Government and till such time, they were barred from acting to protect peoples' lives).

In fact, these statements of officialdom are part of the problem why terrorism has not been effectively tackled over time. The basic approach is not only bureaucratic, but, more importantly; the will to lick the problem or take the bull by the horns is not just there. Political compulsions, vested interests, linkages with 'sensitive' issues and other considerations over-ride the duty of the government to preserve and protect the lives of citizens. This is the sad reality, but if the government cannot surmount the problem, then the problem will take over the state and make the state subordinate to terrorism by merely reacting

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with after-the-event pronouncements, which is what is slowly but surely happening.

There is now a 'standard operating procedure' of a regime's response to terrorism. After each terror strike, the Federal Government expresses its 'concern' but says that since 'law and order is a provincial subject'; it is tossed to the province. The provincial government retorts by blaming it on the proverbial 'foreign hand', thereby implying that since there are 'foreign policy aspects' to terrorism, the Federal Government needs to handle it at the 'higher level'. And the Intelligence agencies, too busy in domestic politics, smugly shrug off any responsibility by saying that tackling terrorism 'is not our mandate'.

As long as the Government treats terrorism as a provincial problem to be sorted out by the police, the issue will remain a non-starter, since it will be caught in a vicious circle of passing the buck without accepting responsibility. For instance, if it's a police problem, then the argument goes it can only be tackled after police reforms, and police reforms can only take place when there is a massive infusion of money, and the debate goes on, while lives are lost.

Terrorism is not something unique to Pakistan. It

has afflicted democratic societies as well, who have overcome it, without declaring an emergency or violating fundamental rights. The only difference between other countries and Pakistan is that in their case, the resolve to combat terrorism exists and they swiftly established the means to do it. In our case, there is neither the resolve nor any machinery to do so.

How did Italy smash the Red Brigades, the Germans the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Japanese the Red Army or the Americans trace the 'Unabomber' after a 20 year relentless pursuit during which he killed educationists and intellectuals through letter bombs? What is it that they did that we are still unable to do? These governments licked the problem within a democratic framework.

If the military regime is serious in surmounting this problem, then quick fix solutions should be avoided (like 'eliminating' terrorists in staged 'encounters') and the issue grappled within a clinical, professional, non-partisan manner in accordance with the rule of law.

Three things should be in order. First, get the facts right so that a right diagnosis brings out the correct prescription of the problem. In 1997, the Punjab Police chief had told the Federal Cabinet that there were 160 hardened terrorists trained for target killings operating in the Punjab, whose lists and profiles were with the relevant intelligence organisations. In Karachi, the Police had records of 137 'free lance terrorists', generally hired criminals who normally do 'contract killings' for the right amount at the behest of anonymous clients. This problem combines intelligence gathering, rigorous investigation and coordination among different outfits, namely, the 4 provincial police setups, 4 Special Branch organisations that provide intelligence reports to the Provincial Chief Executive, the ISI, the MI and the IB. There is virtually no coordination, no sharing of intelligence and no common strategy among these 11 different outfits to tackle terrorism.

Pakistan needs to develop a strategy to combat, contain and crush terrorism over a 3-5 year period, treating it as a national security issue that is today the single biggest source of domestic destabilisation of the state. No ministry or the military alone can do it. A special Anti Terrorism Task Force as a permanent body needs to be established which should include trained investigators, intelligence specialists, political analysts, psychologists, and technical experts. This Force should function as an information-cum-action centre, i.e., collecting, analysing information and ordering action. No outfit in Pakistan today, civil or military is trained to tackle terrorism, which is the biggest threat to national stability.

Terrorism can be successfully surmounted provided the government is able to demonstrate only a shade of the Quaid-e-Azam's indomitable will, determination and uncompromising pursuit of a single objective that made Pakistan possible in 1947, without sacrificing that goal at the altar of political compulsions, which is why terrorism has gotten out of hand.

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