



# The many and different faces of terror

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## **It is premature to read the Islamic State's defeat as the start of a more peaceful phase**

- Terrorism is a well-recognised form of asymmetric warfare, and has been around for centuries.
- The Munich Olympics massacre in 1972, the 9/11 terror attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, and the November 26, 2008 terror attack on multiple targets in Mumbai are, for instance, more deeply etched in the memories of people than many other terror events.
- It is important, however, not to take an episodic view of terrorism, since history is relevant to a proper understanding of the threat posed by terrorism.

## **Since the 1980s**

- Radical Islamist extremism has been the dominant terror narrative, post the 1980s.
- This was possibly an off-shoot of the decade-long Afghan war (1979-1989), which let loose an avalanche of 'mercenaries' who had honed their skills during the Afghan Jihad, and employed violence indiscriminately.
- Over time, terrorist outfits seemed to gain greater transnational reach, and were no longer fettered to geographical locations.
- New organisations, such as al-Qaeda and its acolytes, as also the Islamic State (IS), gained pre-eminence among a growing multitude of terror groups.
- Regional variants such as Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, the Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) in South Asia, and the Boko Haram in Africa were no less deadly.
- More recently, especially in the West, a new narrative has been unfolding.
- Sporting different labels, extreme right-wing elements are proving to

be no less violent and dangerous than jihadi terrorist groups.

- Clearly, the topographical anatomy of terrorism does not change, even if motivations differ.
- The evolution of terrorism in the 21st century, and the constantly shifting tactics of terror groups, does make terrorism look like an 'existential threat'.

### **New breed of terrorists**

- Pakistani terror outfits randomly carried out daring attacks on the Pathankot Air Force base, an Army brigade headquarters in Uri, and an Army base in Nagrota.
- It is representative of the newer breed of terrorists, as also the transmutation in the nature of terror.
- Globally, spectacular jihadi attacks may be fewer, but attacks are on the increase.
- Meanwhile, terrorists are further honing their skills, and are able to strike at targets at will.
- Cross-pollination of concepts and ideas among terror groups, and in many cases even pooling of resources, has made this possible.
- It would, hence, be premature to celebrate the decline of terrorism, based on the so-called demise of the IS.

### **Caliphate as an idea**

- The Caliphate is an idea which is still relevant.
- The Internet remains its main vehicle for radicalising Muslim youth.
- What is most likely is that the IS will make a shift to guerrilla warfare tactics. It is likely to strengthen its 'Emni' (intelligence and security branch) to carry out reconnaissance before launching attacks.
- Violence by al-Qaeda affiliates might have been overshadowed by the IS more recently, but al-Qaeda affiliates in Africa, such as the Boko Haram, have not been far behind.
- Al-Qaeda affiliates in East and South Africa, the Sahel and Yemen are the largest and most feared terrorist groups in their regions.
- Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) is said to be exploiting alleged incidents of violence against Muslims in the subcontinent to strengthen itself.
- Pakistan is also reportedly training outfits to carry out underwater operations.

- Developments in technology, information and doctrine will in all likelihood alter the character of 21st century terrorism.
- It is difficult at this point to determine which of the disruptive technologies will turn out to be the most dangerous.

### **Guided by controllers**

- The concept of 'enabled terror' or 'remote control terror', viz, violence conceived and guided by controllers thousands of miles away, is no longer mere fiction.
- Internet-enabled terrorism, and resort to remote plotting, will grow as the 21st century advances.
- Counter-terrorism experts will need to lay stress on multi-domain operations and information technologies, and undertake 'terror gaming' to wrestle with an uncertain future that is already upon us.

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