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Bangladesh on al-Qaeda's cross hairs?

Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury

THE release of a taped message from al-Qaeda's ideologue and its current head, Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, warning the government of Bangladesh of dire consequences unless it stops what he termed as “wanton killing of Islamic scholars” and other anti-Islamic acts, has created a flurry of excitement. Indeed, this is the first time that a warning message was aimed directly at Bangladesh. We are not sure if the message was indeed from Zawahiri, only a voice scanning machine can do the job.

We are not even sure if Zawahiri is still alive; for years he has not been seen alive on the video. Even if he is alive, we are not sure of his whereabouts. He might be in Afghan-Pakistan border, where he was last seen with Osama bin Laden more than a decade ago. He could be in the Yemeni hills or even in an ISI safe-house in Pakistan, with his 3 wives and half a dozen children.

Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician born in 1951, who once took the Hippocratic oath of practicing medicine for saving lives, has been involved in masterminding many terror attacks, causing death of thousands across the world.

He studied in Cairo University, became a surgeon, and served in the Egyptian army for three years before turning to radical Islamist theology of Sayyid Qutub, the founder of Ikhwanul Muslemin, (Islamic Brotherhood). He travelled to Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1981 as a doctor to take care of the Mujahedin forces wounded in the anti-Soviet war, but gradually teamed up with Osama bin Laden in 1998 to form al-Qaeda.

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, both Osama and Zawahiri had been on the run. Yet, al-Qaeda had been able to organise its franchise in Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, East Africa, West and Central Africa and now in Syria. Al-Qaeda's original aim was to fight the West to get their troops out of the Arabian Peninsula, but over the years it has metamorphosed into a global jihadi organisation aimed to set up a world-wide Islamic caliphate by violent revolution against what it considers to be un-Islamic rulers of Muslim states. Interestingly, its professed jihad against the 'Crusader' West, principally USA, Israel and their allies, never materialised. Al-Qaeda had always had a small but active support base in Bangladesh. In the fatwa issued by al-Qaeda in 1998 under the banner of “World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders,” there were three signatories beside Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri; one of them named Fazlur Rahman was from Bangladesh, probably representing HUIJI (B). During Taliban's heydays in Afghanistan, Osama was a hero to the Islamists here. Large portraits of Osama used to be seen fluttering in the rallies of the Islamist parties. “Amra shobai Taliban, Bangla hobe Afghan” (We all are Taliban, Bangla will be Afghan) was a favourite slogan of their youth fronts. However, with the defeat and decline of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the slogan lost its appeal. In the later part of the 1990s, we saw the rise of Islamic militant organisations such as

HUJI (B) and JMB who had close links with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Their rise and eventual fall is all part of the current history that is still fresh in our mind. While those two organisations are in limbo, we have seen new organisations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Ansar-ul-Islam Bangla Team -- both claiming to be pan-Islamic in their character. Jamaat-e-Islam (JI), the most well-organised Islamist party in Bangladesh, and its student front Islami Chattra Shibir avowedly do not believe in terror as a weapon of politics, yet in the recent anti-government protests across the country JI and Shibir carried out the most violent attacks, often targeting innocent bystanders. In the post-election communal incidents too, JI and Shibir activists were often cited by the victims as the perpetrators.

The dramatic rise of Hefajat-e-Islam and their march to Dhaka on May 5 last year was another eye opener for us of the gathering strength of the Islamist forces. Since then Hefajat, an organisation of the students and teachers of Qawmi madrasas in the country, has shown its power in all local elections and has been recognised as a force to be reckoned with. Hefajat's 13-point demand appears almost identical to the demands of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). TTP has grown so powerful that the central government in Islamabad is forced to negotiate with it while it continues its attack on Pakistani military and civilian targets. We only pray that we do not end up in a similar mess.

Those of us who dream of a democratic state, a multi-religious, multi-cultural society, an educated, healthy and prosperous nation, the Zawahiri message, even if it is a hoax, is a stark reminder that we have an enemy at the gate, and only together we can defeat it. We as a nation need to close ranks on the minimum agenda, and on the question of fighting religious extremism there is no other option but a national consensus.

The writer is Air Commodore (Retd), and Registrar, East West University

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