

Terrorism in South Asia; Challenges for the West

von

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Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the organizers of this Congress. I feel privileged that you have invited me here to share my views.

Today the world finds itself on the frontline in the fight against terrorism and religious radicalisation. The human costs of the phenomenon has been felt in every corner of the globe. Terrorists keep intending to inject a narrative of fear, aimed at destabilizing governments, undermining law and order, threatening socio-economic developments, weakening the credibility of States and thereby jeopardizing peace and security, which unfortunately has also resulted in the scapegoating of certain minority communities as a reaction.

The multi-layered dimensions of the phenomenon clearly demonstrate the blurring of lines between internal and external security and between the domestic and international dimensions of counter-terrorism policies. Therefore, effectively tackling radicalisation in the West also entails a better understanding of local drivers in other regions, such as South Asia.

The region of South Asia harbours many interrelated conflicts. Conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan, between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, accusations of Pakistani sponsored terrorism by Iran against their Shia community, destabilizing factors like insurgencies in Balochistan and Sindh, inside of Pakistan, forced conversions, Hindu ultra-nationalism and recently, Chinese expansionist designs. All these conflicts have the potential of becoming stimuli for clashes amongst countries, including large scale wars. This could, of course have a divisive impact on security challenges in the region, and also on Western interests. History has proven that even non-related Western commercial enterprises and Westerners are vulnerable to terrorist attacks in the region. Air India flight 182 in 1985, the Mumbai attack in 2008, and the sudden calls for troop mobilization along the borders in reaction to terrorist attacks, are some incidents in this regard.

In addition to the already mentioned conflicts, the issue of Jammu & Kashmir along with its many interrelated layers like proxy warfare, political and historical sensitivities, contention over water resources and State-sponsored cross-border

terrorism, has been one of the biggest threats to peace and development in South-Asia.

On the other hand, contentions which are seemingly unrelated, can fuel confrontations and influence opinions in separate countries and have recently proven to exacerbate religious extremism. The conflict between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar has incited elements from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to broaden the boundaries of their belligerency with religion as its only, debatable, basis.

One can also not afford to underestimate the formidable infrastructure of terrorism in South Asia. The disturbing mushrooming of Madrassas in the region should certainly not be trivialized. The Taliban were born from one such Madrassa in Pakistan. There are tens of thousands of Madrassas in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh which only promote religious education based on the tenet of extremism. Individual donations, charity and at times monetary assistance from local government bodies are their source of income and hardly any of their operations, finances or even curricula are regulated.

Like many other regions, South Asia also encounters a rapidly transforming violent extremist landscape that is increasingly transnational in nature. Local grievances and socio-political dynamics have been exploited by terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIL, Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taibah, the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, and many others, generating a global master narrative of conflict. Many of these groups are known to receive active support from State actors to pursue strategic objectives.

Break-up of such unholy alliances, as the one between the Pakistani Army and religious terrorist groups, is constrained by the country's Military Establishment and its belief that terrorism still has an external strategic utility. The explanation for this ambivalence is the selective counter terrorism efforts and their characteristic focus on contention with their eastern and western neighbours. The Pakistani Army along with the country's powerful intelligence agencies still distinguishes between '*bad*' terrorists, those who target Pakistani Security Forces like the TTP – the Pakistani Taliban and '*good*' terrorists, those who advance its strategic objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan, India and Indian Administered Jammu and Kashmir, like the Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taibah and Hizbul Mujahideen.

Many terrorist organizations having their origins and stronghold in South Asia or individuals inspired by these organizations, have been involved in terrorist attacks in the West, made explicit threats to attack the West, and also claimed

responsibility for such attacks. Research substantiates the fact that more than often these extremists are known to have derived inspiration from terrorists organizations in South Asia and remain in close contact with leaders of such organizations. A large numbers of these extremists have also claimed to have undergone psychological and military training in terrorist camps in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

From the expansion of terrorists groups and their worldwide recruitment policies, it has become evident that the threat of terrorism is not restricted to its region of origin anymore. The mass use of Internet and social media has further obscured the borders of extremism in South Asia, and poses an undeniable menace to global peace;

Three of the pilots involved in the 9/11 attacks were trained at Al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and were specifically chosen by Osama Bin Laden to carry out the mission.

The 2002 Bali bombings in the tourist district of Bali were carried out by Jemaah Islamiyah, a violent Islamist group. Umar Patek, one of the members this group, who was wanted in the United States, Australia, and Indonesia on terrorism charges and had a 1 million Dollar reward on his head was finally arrested in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in early 2011. The same city in which Osama bin Laden was hiding before he was killed in a US operation.

The key connection between Al-Qaeda's central leadership and the 2004 Madrid train bombings network was Amer Azizi, a Moroccan who lived in Madrid, yet who had received military training in terrorists camps in Afghanistan, managed by Al-Qaeda. Azizi travelled from Pakistan to Spain at the end of 2003, to finalize the bombing preparations.

Three out of the 4 bombers involved in the 7/7 London bombings in 2005 were British-born sons of Pakistani immigrants. The coordinated suicide attacks left 52 people killed and more than 700 injured.

Uzair Paracha, a Pakistani National was sentenced to 30 years in federal prison by a Court in New York City in 2006 for providing material support to Al Qaeda.

Khaleel Ahmed, an Indian National was sentenced to more than eight years in prison in 2010 in Ohio for conspiring to provide material support to terrorists and planning attacks on US Forces stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A dozen Pakistanis and two Indians were arrested in Spain and accused of plotting to attack Barcelona's public transportation system, in the so-called Barcelona plot, which was revealed in January 2008. In a videotaped interview released in August that year, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan took responsibility for the plot and indicated that the attacks were motivated by Spain's military presence in Afghanistan. One of the group's members claimed to have received training in Waziristan, Pakistan.

In December 2015, 14 people were killed and 22 others were seriously injured in a terrorist attack consisting of a mass shooting and an attempted bombing in San Bernardino, California. The perpetrators were a married couple of Pakistani descent. The investigation found that both were inspired by Islamic terrorists organizations.

In June, 2016, Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old American citizen from Afghan descent, killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in a terrorist attack inside Pulse, a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, United States.

A 27-year-old Bangladeshi born lone wolf terrorist detonated an improvised low-tech explosive device inside a busy New York City subway transit hub in December 2017, injuring himself and four other people and setting off panic during the morning rush hour. Earlier in 2009, Najibullah Zazi, an American of Afghan descent had been arrested because of planning suicide bombings on the New York City Subway system and admitted having undergone weapons and explosives training at an Al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan in 2008. A year later, in 2010, a terrorist attack was attempted in Times Square by Faisal Shahzad, a 30-year-old Pakistan-born resident of Connecticut. According to US officials, he admitted to having been trained at a Pakistani terrorist training camp.

In the attacks on Mumbai in 2008, which killed more than 160 people, it was the other way around, where a radicalized Westerner went to South Asia, in this case to Pakistan, to assist in perpetrating attacks in India. Under the direction of Lashkar-e-Taibah, David Coleman Headley, an American citizen, performed five spying missions to Mumbai to scout targets for the deadly attacks. In 2013, a US court sentenced Headley to 35 years in prison for his role in the Mumbai attacks.

These and other attacks in Europe have exposed the deficiencies in counter-terrorism policies across the continent which have left Europe and, in the case of David Headley, South Asia, particularly vulnerable.

Cooperation between Europe and South Asia could assist in prevention of radicalisation which needs to be a cardinal strategy to effective and comprehensive counter-terrorism policies. European countries need to invest in education, housing, job opportunities in South Asia as well as encourage the healthy integration of South Asian communities living in the continent, in order to tackle the problem in its initial stages. Europe should also, in bilateral relations with South Asia, assert heavy diplomatic and economic pressure on States which covertly support religious extremists and terrorist organizations and continue to view them as strategic assets.

In addition, access to social services and public health should be improved, while broadly advocating for more efficient and available national institutions. NGOs, think tanks and civil society groups in Europe and South Asia should be empowered to act as positive role models in these communities in order to increase the resilience of vulnerable individuals in regard to the threat of religious radicalisation and cultural and social alienation. A vibrant civil society in Europe, as well as South Asia, is essential for successful prevention strategies.

The regulation of Madrassas and introduction of mainstream education should be encouraged so that the expansion of extremist religious ideologies can be curbed. Simultaneously, a system of checks and balances on foreign funding and providing local financial alternatives is required to relieve South Asian religious organizations from their dependency on donations from the Middle East. There is also a need for a mechanism to regulate and regularize donations from Europe and America.

Pakistan and Afghanistan, in cooperation with NATO, need to do more to take away these security concerns. As both, Pakistan and Afghanistan, are members of NATO's Global Partnership, these countries need to be strengthened while taking into account that it is a partnership that requires equal commitment and dedication from both sides. Recent history has proven that some influential players in these countries are either lacking or not willing to comply fully to the intended spirit of this engagement.

Presence of Western forces in the region has in many ways also instigated perceptions which are anti-Western. This can be explained, as the ethos in South Asia does not appreciate formalized influence from the West regarding domestic policies and interests. Moreover, Western policies have failed to encourage engagement among South Asian countries in order to build a conducive atmosphere for long lasting cooperation on economic and political fronts which

could contribute to durable peace. Economic interdependency is key to the stabilization of South Asia; It will help demolish walls of hatred, eventually paving the way for favourable conditions to resolve long standing conflicts.

The West can play a significant role in facilitating engagement among countries in the region. To this end, the EU could formalize policies in cooperation with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the SAARC, which has been established to pursue the very objective of integration in South Asia. Subsequently this would create space for potential bilateral cooperation among these countries without disturbing the political and social equilibrium in the region. In the end, a strong and stabilized South Asia will inarguably satisfy any security concerns the West might have.

It should be clear that there is a critical need in raising awareness across Western countries and offering practical guidance and training on addressing terrorism and violent extremism that originates in South Asia, and has seen an increase in recent years.

First and foremost, this should include understanding South Asia and its complexities, before we can embark upon a path of devising strategies which can successfully challenge extremist narratives and ideologies.

Thank you.

Speech of Junaid Qureshi, Director European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS), during 23rd Congress, ‘Violence and Radicalism - Current Challenges for Prevention’, organized by the German Congress on Crime Prevention in Dresden, Germany.

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