

Needed, national strategy against domestic terrorism

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OPINION

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India has been consistently facing a full range of terrorism threats, both domestic and international, for decades. Some of the handmaids of terrorism are arms trafficking, drug trafficking, human trafficking, gold smuggling, foreign exchange racketeering and hawala operations, cyber-terrorism, organized refugee influx into sensitive international border districts, trapping young girls from other communities into deceitful marriage traps, inducing drug consumption habits among the youth to make them unfit, controlled and directed demographic changes, vicious anti-government protests by a formidable number of foreign-funded non-governmental organizations (NGO'S), sold-out media. All these constitute the full array of domestic terrorism elements, and the wide range of evolving forms that it can manifest into, in the coming decades. The intelligence and law enforcement agencies are fully conscious of the hydra headed monster that domestic terrorism is evolving into, but political

parties and the judiciary are extremely reticent to adopt a no-nonsense approach. This pusillanimity has emboldened domestic terror groups to espouse a range of violent religious motivations, expressing hatred in the form of foreign-funded and directed anti-government and anti-authority sentiment. They take a variety of forms, from lone actors and small groups of informally aligned individuals, to networks exhorting and targeting violence toward specific communities, self-proclaimed "militias" that assert a baseless right to wipe out other communities, and convert them by taking the law into their own hands. These elements have been galvanized by recent political and societal events to carry out massive, violent rallies, and prolonged mega blockades, to demonstrate their numerical strength and financial capability to paralyze normal life and trade, over extended periods.

This unlawful violence that constitutes domestic terrorism is the result of a complex, multi-layered set of societal and foreign inspired religious dynamics. As the nation gets engulfed by multifaceted domestic terrorism threatening our democratic society, and national security we need to counter aggressively, comprehensively, and responsibly.

The foremost challenge is

defining "domestic terrorism". Though all the elements that constitute domestic terrorism are familiar to enforcement agencies, politicians and judiciary, India is yet to enunciate a comprehensive law that defines "Domestic Terrorism". The US has a provision of federal law that defines "domestic terrorism" as "activities that involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States."

India's domestic terrorism has its roots in foreign funded and inspired, religious fundamentalism, that constantly motivates followers to harbour hatred, animosity and violence against indigenous religions and communities. Their insistence on violence is very often explicit, lurking in ideologies rooted in a perverse perception and abhorrent notions about their religious superiority and purity.

Another key component relates to the idea that their religious rules and laws are superior to government authority and laws. Hence, their religious laws relating to marriage, divorce, property, dress and even food are regarded as inviolable and sacrosanct. This view is very often at conflict with modern, progressive ideas and norms, but conspiracy theories and other forms of disinformation and misinformation are floated, leading to rapid com-



Security personnel patrol near an encounter site where the longest surviving Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) commander Ashraf Molvi and other militants were killed at Srichand Top forest area, Pahalgam, in Anantnag on Friday. ANI

munity mobilization, that culminates in stone pelting, arson, stabbing, looting and destruction of public property. Instead of seeking to prevent, and deter domestic terrorism, political forces compel enforcement agencies to indulge in massive cover-ups, filing incorrect and incomplete FIRs, tardy investigations and protection to key accused. Another standard ploy is to order a "Judicial probe", which drags on interminably, thereby diluting the case and also enabling key accused to cover up.

These elements misuse internet based communications platforms like social media, file-upload sites, and end-to-end encrypted platforms, to connect with each other and point to ideologically similar foreigners as inspiration for their acts of violence. Some domestic extremists seek ties and connections to violent organizations overseas. Identifying, confronting, and addressing this international dimension must be part of a comprehensive strategy for tackling domestic terrorism.

Exploring ways to enhance the identification and analysis of financial activity of domestic terrorists and their foreign counterparts is needed. High stakes gold

smuggling is an everyday occurrence in many international airports, especially in Kerala. Beyond detaining a few carriers, investigations have not been able to unravel the source of funding nor the final recipients. The most sensational case that rocked the nation was on 5 July 2020, when customs officials at the Trivandrum airport seized gold weighing over 30 kg and valued at around Rs 15 crore inside diplomatic baggage addressed to the UAE consulate. The seizure snowballed into a major political controversy, embroiling bureaucrats, politicians, diplomats, and sharply divided the State and Central enforcement agencies into opposing sides. In 2021, Kerala's four international airports seized 232 kilograms of gold. Finance Ministry figures reveal that 7,288 kg of gold was seized during 2019-20 to November 2021. Though widely accepted that gold smuggling fuelling domestic terrorism, India is yet to term gold smuggling as a "terrorist activity".

Another grave concern is the quantum jump in narcotics seizures and the sharp rise in drug smuggling using the maritime route. Heroin seizures rose from 2,146 kg in 2017 to 7,282 kg in 2021, indi-

cating a 300% increase, 172% increase in seizure of opium, from 2,551 kg in 2017 to 4,386 kg in 2021, and 191% increase in seizure of cannabis, from 352,539 kg in 2017 to 675,631 kg in 2021.

Gujarat coast has become highly sensitive as massive drug hauls are taking place. In September 2021, the DRI seized 3,000 kg of heroin at Mundra port, one of the largest seizures in the world. The value of this single consignment alone is pegged at over Rupees 21,000 cr. If an individual or a cartel can command such a massive budget, bigger than the annual budget of many Indian states, it is a major threat for internal peace and stability. Yet, drug smuggling is not recognized as a "terrorist activity".

Religious conversions have become another major source of friction. Massive external funding is sponsoring continuous religious conversions. Terror link in religious conversion activities involves many converts being whisked away to conflict zones in West Asia and being enrolled in terror organizations. Hence, a temporary legal ban on religious conversions by deeming it as a terror activity, is needed.

Finally, judiciary needs to be made an active partner in the fight against domestic terrorism. Domestic terrorism will not fade away by hoping for its disappearance. It requires concerted action and strategy to unite the different elements involved in responding to this challenge.

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