The War on Terror is in peril

The world needs to be united on the issue of terrorism and resolve contradictions

SUHASINI HAIDAR

The brutal attacks on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, for which the Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility, have reignited discussion on the global 'War on Terror'. Scholars and officials across the world are studying the links of the bombers to the IS's former 'Caliphate' in Syria, where at least two of the bombers are believed to have travelled, and several leaders have now called for a greater focus on the global dimensions of the counter-terrorism effort. The attacks in Sri Lanka, however, also underline the many cracks in the concept of a global 'War on Terror', and raise questions on what it has achieved in the time since the term was coined by former U.S. President George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks in 2001.

A floundering war

First, the original mission that the War on Terror was named for is floundering. Not only has the coalition of about 60 countries that sent troops and offered logistical support for 'Operation Enduring Freedom' failed to end terrorism in Afghanistan, it appears it is preparing to hand the country back to the oppressive Taliban regime that it defeated in December 2001. This, despite the fact there is no guarantee that the terror groups living in safe havens in Pakistan will not also have the run of Afghanistan once the coalition pulls out.

The war in Afghanistan was only one of the many coalitions the U.S. led in the name of the War on Terror: 46 nations joined the 'coalition of the willing' to defeat Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003, and 19 were a part of the coalition that ousted Muammar Qaddafi from power in Libya in 2011. The U.S. and allied countries were sidetracked by the 'Arab Spring' in 2011, which led them to bolster anti-Bashar al-Assad groups in Syria. This eventually paved the way for the IS to establish a 'Caliphate' in territories in Syria and Iraq. The next coalition was formed to fight the terror of the IS. The number of global terror attacks (maintained in a Global Terrorism Database by the University of Maryland of events from 1970 to 2018) per year went up from 1,000 in 2004 to 17,000 in 2014. It is clear that the countries in question – Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Iraq – are far from free of the spectre of terrorism. Despite the defeat of the 'Caliphate' territorially, the IS or its franchises are appearing in newer parts of the world. Sri Lanka is the latest on that list.

Second, rather than helping fight pan-Islamist terror groups, the War on Terror appears to help the IS and al-Qaeda more, giving them a footprint far bigger than their actual abilities. This helps them recruit and radicalise Muslim youth from around the globe, and allows them to own terrorists around the world as their own, as IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did in a rare video posted shortly after the Easter Sunday attacks.

Not a 'fight for Islam'

Third, the narrative they build of a "fight for Islam" is equally false. According to the Global Terrorism Database, of the 81 terror attacks in which more than 100 were killed (high casualty) since 2001, more than 70 were carried out in Islamic or Muslim-majority countries. In a specific search of high casualty terror attacks on religious institutions since 2001, 18 of the top 20 were by Islamist groups on mosques. The War on Terror thus appears to be a concept peddled mostly by pan-Islamist groups and propagated most often by extremists of other religions as a motive for terror attacks, such as the 2011 Utoya island attack in Norway or the New Zealand attacks this year. Governments in countries affected by terrorism must not subscribe to this narrative blindly.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the reason the members of the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) were successful in their diabolical plot had as much to do with the fact that intelligence inputs given by India were ignored as it did with the fact that since the defeat of the LTTE, Sri Lankan authorities had let their guard down and ignored growing internal fault lines. As a result, despite complaints about the speeches that suspected mastermind Mohamed Zahran Hashim made as a preacher of a mosque in Sri Lanka's Eastern province, he went unchallenged. Police and intelligence agencies also failed to keep a stern eye on other NTJ bombers who were IS returnees, despite the fact that only about 32 Sri Lankans in all are believed to have travelled to IS territory.

Approaches to fighting terror

Fourth, it is necessary for countries fighting terrorism to learn more closely from their differences, rather than try to generalise from experience. Comparing European states like the U.K., France and Belgium, where hundreds of immigrant Muslims have enlisted for the IS, to South Asian states like India, where Muslim populations are indigenous and only a few dozen are believed to have left for Syria, is akin to comparing apples and oranges. Indian officials have also claimed a higher success in deradicalising IS returnees, because they have enlisted whole families, neighbourhoods and local Maulvis in their efforts. In Bangladesh too, after the 2016 attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery, government advertisements asked mothers to check on their children's activities. This acknowledgement that radicalised terrorists are a part of a community is in stark contrast to the current debate in many European countries that are refusing to take IS returnees and their families back. Similarly, several Central Asian states propagate a much more hardline approach on counter-radicalisation, by banning beards and hijabs, while China's re-education internment camps in Xinjiang have raised questions about human rights. The success or failure of each of these approaches must be studied before deciding their applicability elsewhere.

Fifth, the world community must address contradictions in the War on Terror. For 20 years, the world has failed to agree on a common definition of terrorism at the United Nations. This has held up the passage of the Indian-sponsored proposal for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Despite the fact that Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar has been targeting Indians incessantly for years, they must ask why China allowed his UN Security Council designation as a global terrorist only after mentions of his attacks in India were removed. They must ask why the U.S. is focused on billing Iran the "world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism", while states like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that have funded and sheltered Islamist terror groups are still treated as "frontline allies" on terror. And why, despite all their resources and expertise, the alliance of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand that share global intelligence was unable to see the impending threat in Sri Lanka. Unless the world is truly united on the issue and resolves such contradictions, the global War on Terror will only be as strong as its weakest link.

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"The attacks in Sri Lanka underline the many cracks in the concept of a global War on Terror." Security personnel inspect the interior of St. Sebastian's Church in Negombo, Sri Lanka, on April 22, a day after the Easter Sunday blasts. • AFP

More is expected from the reporting team

When the credibility of major institutions is undermined, a journalist's role becomes all the more important

A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

We are witnessing an erosion of credibility of three crucial institutions: the Supreme Court, the Election Commission (EC), and the Central Statistics Office, responsible for computing the GDP numbers. While political scientists will reflect on the problems arising out of such a trust deficit for democracy, the Readers' Editor's office is concerned with how this newspaper has been covering developments concerning these institutions.

Covering the judiciary

There seems to be a fairly comprehensive approach in covering the crisis in the judiciary. The judiciary was subjected to scrutiny after the tug of war between the judiciary and the government broke over the National Judicial Appointments Commission. The number of reports, analytical stories, and opinion pieces by legal scholars increased after the four senior-most judges of the Supreme Court – Justices J. Chelameswar, Ranjan Gogoi, M.B. Lokur and Kurian Joseph – held a press conference last year and raised issues affecting the institution". There has been an excellent balance of opinions and reportage since. For instance, various issues concerning the judiciary's handling of the sexual harassment case against the Chief Justice of India were raised in the editorial "Prisoner of procedure" (May 8, 2019), as well as reports and opinion pieces in the newspaper.

Ignoring an early warning

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the controversy over data. Last week, the financial newspaper *Mint* reported that about 38% of companies, which the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) surveyed from the MCA-21 database of companies used for calculating GDP, could not be traced or were wrongly classified. The same issues were raised by R. Nagaraj in 2016 in "Why 7.6% growth is hard to square" (*The Hindu*, February 12). He wrote: "The revised NAS has used the Ministry of Corporate Affairs MCA-21 database of about 5.2 lakh companies to estimate PCS's contribution to domestic output. It is then 'blown up' (scaled up) to over 9 lakh 'active companies' that claimed to have filed their financial returns at least once during the previous three years. Detailed investigations suggest shortcomings in these procedures, leading to an overestimation of the size and growth rates of PCS in the new GDP series – a tentative result that can be verified only if the MCA-21 database is made available for independent verification." Professor Nagaraj's warning was confirmed by the latest NSSO survey. Why was such an early warning from an eminent economist not taken up by the reporting team?

In "The Election Commission must act tough" (May 7, 2019), former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi pointed out how unfortunate it is that the Supreme Court had to step in recently to remind the EC of powers that it always had. In "What is missing in the 2019 election coverage" (April 1, 2019), I had pointed out that the media, including this newspaper, has been too gentle in the coverage of the election body despite numerous issues cropping up on a daily basis.

Need for meticulous reportage

I have mentioned elsewhere that if claims of policy success are not backed by field reports, people suspect the claims. The government's pronouncements alone cannot build trust when there are reports of data suppression. Meticulous reportage backed by solid empirical data is the best validation for any policy pronouncement.

In 2011, the London-based Frontline Club conducted a survey among journalists on the role of investigative journalism. The responses exemplified the importance of the spirit of inquiry: "Journalism can hold individuals and institutions accountable in the way that elections every five years or AGMs do not... Investigative journalism simply does in a more detailed and comprehensive way what all journalism should do, namely act as a watchdog in the public interest."

When a cloud of suspicion is undermining the credibility of major institutions, and trusted methodologies are tortured for narrow political gains, a journalist's role becomes all the more important. Journalistic rigour is not restricted to data journalism and the editorial pages alone. The official growth numbers and the functioning of the EC have not been subjected to proper journalistic scrutiny in the news pages.

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Protecting forest fringes

How city-forest cooperation can be facilitated

SIDDHANT NOWLAKHA

India is among the fastest urbanising major countries and forest-rich nations of the world. The current trend of fast-paced, spatial urban expansion is increasing the proximity between forests and the cities. In the next 10 years, this situation is likely to pose a severe sustainability challenge.

In major cities such as Gurugram, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Jaipur and Bengaluru, forests have already faced the brunt of encroachments, roads and highways, local extinction of wildlife, contamination of water bodies, and disturbances originating from the urban neighbourhoods. Across India, many more critical wildlife habitats and biodiversity areas are going to face a direct impact from cities in the near future.

Despite this disconcerting pattern, neither the ongoing urban programmes such as 'Smart Cities', nor the draft of the new Forest Policy, 2018, look ready to tackle this challenge. Urban planners and city administrators have ignored the fact that forests are natural shock-absorbers that provide green relief to our grey cities, shield them from the effects of climate change, and aid in urban issues such as air pollution, scarcity of drinking water, flood control and 'heat islands'. Prioritising forest-city proximity will put the onus on cities to incorporate nature in their design. The question is, where and how will city-forest cooperation kick-start?

Recently notified eco-sensitive zones (ESZ) around protected areas hold the key to the place and the process in this regard. These zones are strips of land outside national parks and wildlife sanctuaries earmarked by the Ministry of Environment for sustainable management. The ESZ committee and its plans fulfil basic conditions to facilitate inter-departmental collaboration of the forest departments, urban bodies and civil society.
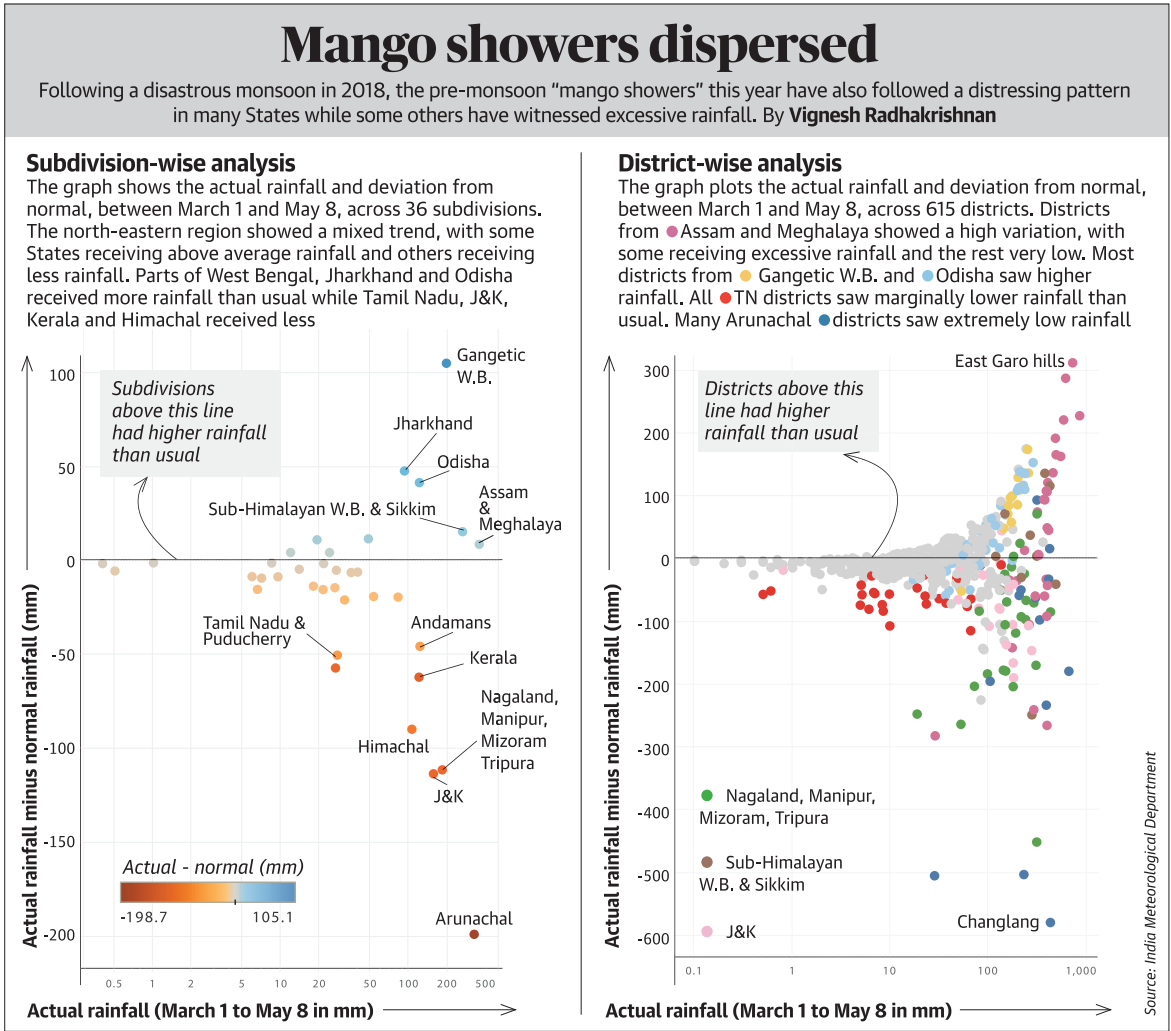
However, urbanisation close to forests often means that dense neighbourhoods expand up to the fringe of the forest, as has happened in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai, Bannerghatta in Bengaluru, and the Guindy National Park in Chennai. In the absence of physical buffers and hard fences, therefore, these forests will have to be softfenced from unscrupulous development. To create a working ground for soft-fencing, urban masterplans must recognise land use at forest fringes, according to ESZ guidelines. In addition, cities should secure wildlife corridors and 'green belts' that connect urban forests with a wider natural landscape.

Most importantly, urban residents need to create social fences by strongly advocating for forests in their cities. The urban citizenry today aspires for a green, pollution-free and serene living environment. Integrating forests with urban planning and governance provides an opportunity to shape cities that not only cater to citizens, but also have the citizens actively involved in shaping the city's future.

The writer is associated with Social Fencers, an urban forest conservation initiative, and his current research focus is Bannerghatta National Park

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PHASE 7

ARE THERE NO MORE PMs LEFT TO CRITICISE OR BLAME?

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE LEFT SIR...

DATA POINT

Mango showers dispersed

Following a disastrous monsoon in 2018, the pre-monsoon "mango showers" this year have also followed a distressing pattern in many States while some others have witnessed excessive rainfall. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Subdivision-wise analysis
The graph shows the actual rainfall and deviation from normal, between March 1 and May 8, across 36 subdivisions. The north-eastern region showed a mixed trend, with some States receiving above average rainfall and others receiving less rainfall. Parts of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha received more rainfall than usual while Tamil Nadu, J&K, Kerala and Himachal received less

District-wise analysis
The graph plots the actual rainfall and deviation from normal, between March 1 and May 8, across 615 districts. Districts from ● Assam and Meghalaya showed a high variation, with some receiving excessive rainfall and the rest very low. Most districts from ● Gangetic W.B. and ● Odisha saw higher rainfall. All ● TN districts saw marginally lower rainfall than usual. Many Arunachal ● districts saw extremely low rainfall

Source: India Meteorological Department

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 13, 1969

Swatantra urges ban on Communist Parties

The Swatantra Party leaders to-day [May 12, New Delhi] urged the Union Government to impose a ban on all the three Communist parties in the country. Mr. Y B. Chavan, Home Minister, to-day [May 12] held talks - the first in the series - with the Swatantra Party leaders on the question of taking action against unsocial elements, parties and individuals who were creating a security problem. Mr. N. G. Ranga, leader of the Swatantra Party in the Lok Sabha, Mr. Dahyabhai Patel and Mr. M. R. Masani told Mr. Chavan that the first thing the Government must do was to ban all the three Communist parties, namely the C.P.I., C.P.I. (M.) and the Naxalites who had formed a new Communist party based on the theory of armed insurrection.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 13, 1919.

Madanapalle Sanatorium.

The Madanapalle Union Mission Tuberculosis Sanatorium is doing beneficent work and is most worthy of public support. The Report which we have received is for the year October to September 1917-18. Some facts will be of interest to our readers. It is not generally understood that the Madanapalle Institution is primarily a sanatorium and not a hospital. During the year a larger number of men patients than usual sought relief in an advanced stage of consumption; so that the sanatorium was more like a hospital than a health resort to combat tuberculosis, in its earlier stages. Many women were admitted for relief during the earlier stages of the disease and the percentage of recoveries was consequently larger. The total number of males admitted was 159 and women 128, and the number discharged was 151 and 118 respectively.

Instant run-off

This is a voting method used in a single seat-election in which there is not just a choice of candidates, but also a preferential ranking of them. Ballots are initially counted for each voter's top choice. If a candidate has more than half of the votes, she wins. If no candidate secures 50% of the votes, the candidate with the fewest first choices is eliminated and a second round of counting takes place. The votes of supporters of the eliminated candidate are not "wasted". Instead, their vote counts for their next favourite candidate as indicated on their ranked ballot. In each round of voting, a voter's ballot counts for whichever remaining candidate is ranked highest on the ballot. Eventually one candidate emerges as a majority winner. This system has been used to elect Australia's Lower House, The Republic of Ireland's President and a number of official bodies. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has touted this system as ideal for democracies as it always allows for a majority vote which is closer to the preferences of the electorate.

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