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New Delhi, February 25, 2014

First Published: 00:16 IST(25/2/2014)

Last Updated: 00:18 IST(25/2/2014)

 Print

Terrorism incubator : The growing terror of foreign jihadists

The conflict in Syria is nearing its third anniversary, with increasing numbers of deaths, displaced persons and refugees. The Geneva conference has failed to reach an agreement. Meanwhile, foreign ‘volunteers’ are flocking to Syria to participate in a jihad, turning the country into an incubatory of jihadist terror that promises to spread death and destruction across the globe.

By now, Syria’s conflict has killed over 1,40,000, displaced over 6 million out of Syria’s 22 million population, and cast out over 2 million refugees. Its heritage and monuments, built over 2,000 years, have been ravaged by bombing and shelling. Syria’s economy will take many years to recover. The country’s rich mosaic of cultures and religions has been torn apart.

The conflict has attracted some 7,000 fighters from over 50 countries. They have been lured by predictions in a version of Islamic ideology that ‘the final battle at the end of time will take place in the area encompassing Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel’. This is further inflamed by stories of atrocities against Sunni Muslims said to be committed by the Assad regime and its principal Shia backer, Iran.

The bulk of these are under the banner of the Jabhat Al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), both linked to al Qaeda, in northern and eastern Syria. However, al Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has recently denounced the ISIS and severed connections, and clashes are taking place among these groups. A prominent ISIS leader Abu Khalid al-Suri, closely linked to al Qaeda, was recently killed.

Saudi Arabia, with the US’ approval, has begun supplying portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to the rebel groups in the south. A major conflict is raging around Yabroud, a city 80 km north of Damascus, as the regime seeks to secure the highway from Damascus to the north.

The foreign fighters are getting trained in using IEDs, car bombs, suicide attacks and grisly acts such as beheading of captured infidels. A Pakistani-origin British national recently carried out a car bomb attack at a jail in Aleppo, releasing hundreds of prisoners. There is the spectre of Muslim sectarian conflict that threatens to spread beyond Syria. Lebanon and Iraq are witnessing an upsurge of terrorist attacks against Shias because of the support extended by the Hezbollah to the Assad regime.

It is important that the Geneva process produces results at the earliest. The structure and role of a transitional arrangement should be negotiated without preconditions. Iran and Saudi Arabia can play a positive role. The UN Security Council resolution recently adopted is a welcome development but needs to be translated into action on

the ground. While the conflict continues, the Geneva process should get the combatant parties to agree to comply with and enforce the Geneva Protocol II on internal armed conflicts.

The foreign jihadist elements involved in the Syrian conflict pose a threat in their countries of origin and in other conflict areas such as Chechnya and Kashmir. Other areas that could be affected by foreign jihadists from Syria range from Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan to South and Southeast Asia. Governments should strengthen and coordinate monitoring the movement of fighters, and take measures to combat the movement, financing and operations of foreign fighters in Syria.

Bhaskar Balakrishnan was ambassador to Syria

The views expressed by the author are personal

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