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Egypt and the waning threat of jihadists

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THAT Egypt is traditionally a base for jihadists needs no reiteration. Jihadists advocate that the "Islamic solution" – for example, to world problems – can be realised only via armed jihad, not democratic participation.

Terrorism analysts are now asking themselves: Will the instability in Egypt increase the threat of jihadist terrorism? How much influence do the jihadists have in determining the outcome of the uprising?

The uprising of the Egyptian people, which last Friday culminated in the end of the 30-year rule of its strongman, Mr Hosni Mubarak, seems to have overshadowed the global fear of the jihadist terror threat. Various indicators support this point.

Firstly, the popular uprising has stayed away from the tendency for violence from the outset, although a number of people have been killed mindlessly, as evident from videos now circulating online. Secondly, there is no sign of jihadist influence in motivating or sustaining this people's revolution. Thirdly, even the claim that the ceasefire of former jihadist group Gama'a Islamiyya in 1997 was a tactical manoeuvre and that it will again resort to violence when the opportunity arises, now seems baseless.

Most importantly, the revolt is neither about Islam nor jihad; rather, it is more about freedom and bread and butter. This people's revolution which started on Jan 25, triggered by the uprising in Tunisia, seems to have caught everyone off guard. Their one clear demand is the most repeated sentence in Egypt right now: "Irh-al, ya Mubarak!" (Get out, Mubarak!). Whatever the main motivation was, the protest was certainly far from any jihadist (or Islamist) motivation. Even the non-violent Muslim Brotherhood, dubbed as the most influential mobilising power in Egypt and the largest Islamist movement, initially took an unusual backseat. Unlike the jihadists, the Muslim Brotherhood believes the "Islamic solu-

tion" can happen via democratic process. Also, none of the other opposition political parties seems to be claiming credit for starting or sustaining the revolution, although the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition parties are now coming forward to support the "people power" uprising.

The faceless organisers of this youth-backed protest seemed adamant to keep the political parties out of this and portray this as a non-violent people's revolution. There were only about two instances of violence from the protesters, and they were in response to pro-Mubarak actors: When instigated by the police on the first few days of the uprising; and when pro-Mubarak "supporters" stormed into the square on horses and camels.

In this protest, the non-Islamists seem to be more influential. The Islamists do not seem to have a supporting majority. If Islamists, who are much closer to the masses than the jihadists, are finding it difficult to pursue their Islamist agenda, the jihadists will no doubt face even greater challenge, if not resistance. Should the jihadists have a major influence on the uprising, one would surely expect violent tactics such as bombings to be employed, or at least instigated. Thus far, little has come out of the jihadist forums; and none of the jihadist leaders is known to have capitalised on this situation. This is quite unusual given that Osama bin Laden himself at one time had even jumped on the issue of global warming.

Nevertheless, one significant issue was recently raised in the forum of Minbar al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad, the largest jihadist website. A question was asked whether involvement in the protests was permitted. The response was that Muslims should participate and that suicide bombings are encouraged. This instigation, however, did not find any resonance among the millions protesting throughout Egypt, after three weeks of mass protest. There has been some chatter in the jihadist forums, but there currently seems to be no significant role played by the jihadists.

A significant point to raise here is the stand of the Gama'a Islamiyya, the most influential former jihadist organisation –



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now a social organisation – in Egypt. This group announced its ceasefire initiative in July 1997. Then seen by some to be a tactical manoeuvre to postpone its violent agenda, there has been no indication whatsoever that this group is capitalising on the Egyptian uprising to resume its pre-ceasefire stance. If there is a best time to exploit the situation in Egypt, this certainly may well be the only opportunity the group has in its lifetime.

In contrast, by maintaining a neutral stand, the Gama'a group has lent more credence to its ideological revisions. But the group was surprised – as stated on its website – not to be invited to recent talks initiated by Vice-President Omar Suleiman with representatives of the opposition, which included the Muslim Brotherhood.

Even if jihadists want in, it is unlikely that the protesters would want to allow jihadists to hijack their cause. That the protesters held Tahrir Square firmly within their grip amid fierce instigation bears testimony to this. The uprising so far instead indicates that the jihadists are truly on the fringe.

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