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LAHORE - The Institute for Policy Reforms IPR held a seminar on Pakistan's terrorism challenge on Wednesday.

Dr Moeed Yusuf, Director of the South Asia Program at the US Institute of Peace in Washington, author of books on Afghanistan, counter terrorism and insurgency and well-known media commentator, was the main speaker.

Participants comprised largely retired senior civil and military officers, intellectuals, and known media personalities.

Chairman of the IPR Board Humayun Akhtar Khan in his welcome note with reference to the ongoing North Waziristan operation said that a discussion on counter-terrorism strategy and addressing issues at this point of time is of paramount importance.

He said it is vital to consider what preparations the government has made to respond to the likely fallout from the action and to meet the sleeper-cells in urban centres that can be a potential threat to the large populations.

Dr Yusuf discussed the North Waziristan operation and stressed that there is a long road ahead and that the next phase against terrorism will be fought to clear out the cities of terrorist cells. He argued that it will be the performance of the police and the criminal legal system that will ultimately determine how quickly the state is to win this upcoming phase. He said if a military action is five per cent effective, 95 per cent have to be done by these institutions to counter terrorism.

Dr Yusuf said that many states fighting terrorism use force and negotiate with the terrorists as part of their strategy but it is necessary that a balance is maintained between the two. However, he said, talks very seldom worked in South Asian countries unless the state approaches these from a clear position of strength. The TTP certainly could not have been characterised as a clear loser in Pakistan's case.

He argued that states that win insurgencies create a narrative against the enemy for a long period of time. He said that is crucial to create clarity in the minds of state organs and win the backing of the people for executing all aspects of counterinsurgency.

"No South Asian state seems to have won an insurgency without winning the narrative war unequivocally," he said. He painted a fairly bleak picture in terms of where Pakistan stood in this regard. His number one finding is the great confusion among the population and parts of the state apparatus on "who the enemy is."

He said that the confusion about internal and external hands in the unrest in Pakistan, the status of terrorism in Afghanistan versus Pakistan in the religious context, and the pervasive anti-Americanism in the minds of average Pakistanis is replicated within the state apparatus.

Experiences in and outside South Asia suggest this is detrimental for the state and could undermine its ability to ensure sustainable peace.

He also did not support spending on poverty, health and education cause in the areas of insurgency for the sake of addressing deprivations and bring the insurgent to the mainstream. He said this strategy often strengthens hands of insurgents to act more aggressively.

Yusuf worried that the growing intolerance of religious, sectarian, and ethnic diversity in Pakistan and the obvious lack of ability of the state apparatus to provide day-to-day security and its failure to deliver basic needs to the people had discredited government departments and limited acceptance of their action.

Dr Yusuf said that we must not forget the fact that operations such as North Waziristan, even when successful, hit the physical center of gravity of the enemy and therefore create space to pursue non-kinetic policies that would eliminate their ability to re-strengthen their ranks permanently.

He opined that Pakistan's challenge is deep as he sees confusion. He said that sentiments on the street have switched often-favouring operations and talks. He argued that this cannot change overnight and thus we should manage the society's expectations about the operation. He said that if the backlash is high and terrorism in cities continues for some months, some political parties may cash in and motivate public to push for halting operations before terrorists are decisively weakened.

The speaker recommended the state to prioritise three strategies to overcome terrorism for the long term: improve performance and capacity of the police and criminal justice system, promote moderate religious clerics to challenge the Islamist narrative, and remove the confusion in the Pakistani minds about who the real enemy is and what strategy is being employed to eliminate terrorists of all kinds from Pakistani soil. So far, we see no leadership in this regard, he said.