



The Islamic State in India: Trends in Recruitment and Mobilisation

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Abstract

Amidst much speculation and contestation about the presence and strength of the Islamic State (IS) in India, two developments came in rather quick succession. On 10 May 2019, the IS's Amaq News Agency claimed that it has established "Wilayah of Hind" (province in India). This demonstrates an attempt by the outfit which had lost much of its footing in Iraq and Syria to gain foothold in new theatres, especially after the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka. On the same day, Indian security forces in Kashmir's Shopian district killed Ishfaq Ahmad Sofi, a militant associated with the IS. The IS in Jammu & Kashmir (otherwise known as the ISJK), according to security forces, is now left with only about three militants. Between the rhetoric of the IS and the claims of success by the security forces, lies a much larger area of understudied global jihadist mobilization in India. This article attempts to map the threat this phenomenon poses to the security of the country and the region.

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Analysis

Weakness of Global Jihadist outfits

The failure of the IS to 'rage a storm' in India needs to be analysed within the broader context of the lack of success of global jihadist organisations to find supporters among Indian Muslims, in the conflict theatres of India like Kashmir. The government of the day has periodically stressed upon the insularity of the Indian Muslims from what was happening in the Middle East, also near home in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Muslims in general and especially those in conflict theatres of Kashmir have not made common cause neither with the alleged sufferings of their fellow Muslims elsewhere in the world, nor did the prospect of living in a caliphate hold much of attraction to them. The fact that existing militant organisations and overground secessionists foresaw an existential threat from the global jihadists and hence, periodically criticized them, also played a part in limiting the latter's influence.

Apart from this, two other reasons prevented the growth of either the al Qaeda or the IS in Kashmir. Firstly, the AQ and the IS were attempting to find foothold in an extremely crowded jihadist landscape of Kashmir. Outfits like the Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen etc. had been operating in the region for many years and had captured the imagination of most militant sympathisers, either to fight for independence from India or to merge with Pakistan. The only way for the AQ and the IS to find cadres in such an area to was through mass-scale defection of existing outfits and reorienting them towards a goal of an Islamic Caliphate. They only had very limited success in this regard. Secondly, serious attempts by global jihadists, especially the AQ, to open shop in Kashmir started when their influence was waning in their core areas. Announcement of the al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was made in September 2014. By then the AQ central had weakened significantly. No one wanted to be a part of a lost cause.

As a result, barring a dozen militants who were part of the Zakir Musa-led Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH) and few others who joined the ISJK, Kashmir's contribution to global jihad was almost non-existent. A lone youth, Aadil Ahmad Wada of Jawahar Nagar locality of the Srinagar city, is known to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the IS. Adil, who has an MBA from Queensland University in Australia, joined the organisation in 2013. He is now reportedly being held as a prisoner in Syria by the US-led coalition forces.

Trends and patterns in Recruitment

The Islamic State, however, had bigger success outside Kashmir. Although meagre compared to the huge Muslim population of 180 million in the country, the number was significant enough to constitute a security challenge to the state. There is no consensus, however, on the actual number of people who managed to join the outfit. The official figure is 108 and is revised upwards every passing month. The actual figure, collated from various sources by the strategic research forum *Mantraya*, is in the range of 200. A similar number of people were prevented from joining the IS while attempting to go to Iraq/Syria. Some of them were simply sent back to their families and some others, depending upon their level of radicalization were arrested. It is possible to map these various patterns of radicalization and recruitment by the IS by identifying four major trends.

Firstly, IS recruitment has predominantly been targeted at Indian Muslims in general; maximum success has been achieved in southern Indian states like Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. Although in the initial days of the declaration of caliphate in 2014, four individuals from Maharashtra started the phenomenon



of outward journeys to join the IS, almost 90 percent of the subsequent recruitment have been from India's south. In 2016, for instance, 14 persons from Kerala had left India to join the IS in both Afghanistan and Syria. Several reasons such as contacts with the Gulf States, influence of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabism, and existence of home-grown radical outfits have been identified as some of the reasons for the phenomenon.

Secondly, the IS tapped successfully into the home-grown Islamist extremist organisations like the Indian Mujahideen (IM) and the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). Both the IM and the SIMI had lost considerable influence at the time when the IS established its caliphate. Their cadres, some who had been trained in explosives assembling and others who had operated as logistics providers, were lying low. It is this pool of people who were willing to become the part of the IS. Among the five Indians killed while fighting on behalf of the outfit are Abdul Qadir Sultan Armar from Bhatkal and Bada Sajid, both leaders of the SIMI/IM.

Thirdly, the IS tried to tap into the existing religious and sectarian faultlines in the country. Although it is difficult to assess the impact of such effort, IS' clarion calls to Muslims to join the outfit often broached upon the alleged pitiful state of Muslims in a Hindu India. Instances of communal tensions, banning of beef, and alleged lop-sided policies of the government were cited to elicit support. One of the calls, however, did express exasperation at the group's inability to inspire Indian Muslims to join the caliphate.

Fourthly, both online and offline efforts were made to find cadres and facilitators. Islamic State social media pages and Islamist forums have been the usual meeting points between recruiters and these youths. The arguably coherent and learned interpretation of Islam deeply rooted in prophetic methodology as well as its regressive practices have found reverberations in the youths attempting to join the outfit. This appeared to have impacted the youth with an inclination towards more puritanical sect of Islam. Such online radicalisation has further been backed up by a rather large group of facilitators/ recruiters who not only spotted the potential recruits, motivated them and even made logistical arrangements for their journey. Mansoor Biswas, an employee in a multinational firm in Bangalore who handled the twitter handle @Shamiwitness to propagate IS-related news is well known. While Biswas, arrested in December 2014, remained the only known amplifier of Islamic State related news in India, people like Haja Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, a Tamil Nadu resident and Afsha Jabeen, a lady from Hyderabad have played important role in directly recruiting people for the Islamic State.

Current state of Mobilization and Future threat

India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) has initiated investigations into at least 23 Islamic State-related cases since 2015 and has arrested approximately 100 people in connection with them. Since December 2018, 23 suspected IS operatives have been arrested from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Kerala. Additional raids have been carried out in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Investigations into the IS networks that pan across India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have been initiated. One of the new trends discovered through these measures is the use of innocuous overground Muslim religious organisations to radicalize and plot attacks. According to Maharashtra police, nine persons arrested in January 2019 for planning to carry out attacks on behalf of the IS belonged to a group named Ummat-e-Mohammadiya. Similarly, 13 people arrested in December 2018 and January 2019 from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh belonged to a group called Harkat-ul-Harb-e-Islam.

The IS narrative in India appears to have gained a new meaning and importance after the Sri Lanka bombings which revealed complex networks through which the Islamic State tends to radicalize people and facilitates terror plots. Self-financed attacks carried out by a close-knit group of educated and computer savvy individuals



without any criminal background are emerging as the newest set of perpetrators. The plans to carry out attacks, thus, remain within the group till the execution of the plot. India, thus far, has done well in thwarting threats posed by the radicalized individuals within the country. However, in the times to come, it has to deal with the spectre of terrorists taking advantage of neighbouring countries with inadequate preparedness and counter-terror (CT) legislations to plot attacks. In the absence of a regional counter-terrorism architecture in South Asia, it has to fall back on bilateral CT cooperation with individual countries and inputs from the major powers like the United States. With the rising spectre of the Islamic State threat, India will need to devise better strategies to prevent the spread of the IS influence and mobilization inside the country and the region.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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