



## **Islamic State in India: Wilayat-e-Hind**

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**May 2020**

### **Abstract**

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The Islamic State and its affiliates have been expanding their activities in Africa and Afghanistan. However, similar attempts to find a foothold in India have not been successful till now. Months after Indian government's August 2019 decision to revoke the statehood of Jammu & Kashmir, the outfit is making a new bid to gain relevance among the aggrieved Kashmiris and other Indian Muslims. Although currently it lacks the basic wherewithal to be militarily potent, the attempt to blend local grievances and conflicts into its global ideology, may find some takers.

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## Analysis

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### Introduction: Bidding for time

It is rare for a terrorist organization to advise patience to its followers. However, leader of the Islamic State's Wilayat-e-Hind, who goes by the nom de guerre, Abu Hamza al Kashmiri<sup>1</sup>, advises precisely that. In the second issue of its new English language publication, *Voice of Hind*, Abu Hamza asks the group's potential supporters to be patient and steadfast as "victory comes with patience"<sup>2</sup>. He specifically asks the group's followers to "keep away from the protests, sloganeering and stone pelting and use the alternate methods like petrol bombs and knives"<sup>3</sup>, to attack the unbelievers.

These prescriptions are part of the Islamic State's renewed efforts to gain relevance and popularity in India by romanticizing alternate modes of violence. These are also part of its sustained effort to make some among the Indian Muslims, the third largest in the world, to overcome their reluctance to be drawn into a violent Jihad against the non-Muslims. Owing to the absence of local infrastructure and its own reputation of being an outfit in decline, there is little possibility that the outfit will succeed this time. However, in view of the large-scale alienation among the locals following the administrative changes in Kashmir and the communal flareups in many parts of the country in recent times, the outfit may be able to get few listening ears.

### Messaging

February and March 2020 have been busy months of the Islamic State's publication houses. At least three sleek publications, either focusing on or carrying articles on India, have hit the web. In the first half of February, the weekly newsletter of the group, al-Naba, carried an editorial criticizing India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). The editorial bemoaned the fact that 'regardless of Indian Muslims' loyalty towards their country, they are being kicked out.'<sup>4</sup> Blaming democracy and polytheists for the ills of Muslims, the article predicted that Muslims in India would 'face "bad torture", killing, capturing, and have their money confiscated'<sup>5</sup>.

In the last week of February, the Islamic State released the first issue of *Voice of Hind*, which featured the photograph of Mohammad Zubair, a Muslim man who had been beaten up by a mob during the communal riots in Delhi. The group, quoted from the Quran, calling for retaliatory action against the act. The magazine teased the Muslims with its lead article titled, 'So where are you going? A call to Muslims of India.' Without making direct mention of the riots that claimed the lives of 53 persons- mostly Muslims- it again mocked the country's Muslims for their faith in democracy and warned that they were "on the verge of being stripped from your last shred of dignity"<sup>6</sup>.

Article two of *Voice of Hind's* Issue 2, on the other hand, contains lots of specific in terms of the nature of attacks that can be carried out on the 'enemy', especially when corona virus has become "a source of chaos amongst the nations of disbelief"<sup>7</sup>. The Islamic State tends to believe that the security forces deployed on the streets are

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<sup>1</sup> Although the magazine carried a photo of Abu Hamza al Kashmiri, his real identity is unknown. Indian Intelligence sources have told the author that he is unlikely to be from Kashmir.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Words of Advise by Abu Hamza al Kashmiri', *Voice of Hind*, Issue 2, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Srijan Shukla, "Hindus are in a hurry to deprive Muslims of citizenship: ISIS newsletter on CAA", *The Print*, 18 February 2020, <https://theprint.in/world/hindus-are-in-a-hurry-to-deprive-muslims-of-citizenship-isis-newsletter-on-caa/367353/>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> 'So where are you going', *Voice of Hind*, Issue 1, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> 'Corona Virus', *Voice of Hind*, Issue 2, p.7.



relatively easy targets. “So, use this opportunity to strike them with a sword or a knife or even a rope is enough to stop their breath, fill the streets with their blood”, it exults the ‘people of Islam in the land of Hind’.

### State of Play

The Islamic State’s influence on India is relatively small, but not insignificant. Apart from the 200 odd men and women who travelled to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan to join the groups, hundreds of others got radicalized while surfing the web. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 155 Islamic State members and sympathizers had been arrested till May 2019.<sup>8</sup> In Maharashtra alone, 400 persons underwent de-radicalization by the state’s Anti-Terrorism Squad in 2017 and 2018.<sup>9</sup> In June 2019, senior police officials in claimed that claimed 3000 people have been de-radicalized in 21 government centres and are being monitored.<sup>10</sup> However, in active conflict theatres like Kashmir, the Islamic State’s attempt to set up base remained mostly a non-starter. Few militants from other outfits joined the group, but were killed by security forces. Mantraya’s special report<sup>11</sup>, published in September 2018, provides a comprehensive analysis on the subject.

In May 2019, following the terror attack in Sri Lanka and more specifically the death of an Islamic State commander Ishfaq Ahmad Sofi alias ‘Abdullah Bhai’ in Shopian (Kashmir), Islamic State’s news website ‘amaq’ announced the establishment of two new provinces in South Asia: Wilayat-al Hind, a new province in India was established on 12 May, followed by the declaration setting up Wilayat-e-Pakistan on 14 May. However, three incidents of arrests young men and a lone woman who, the police described were ‘attempting to indulge in terrorist activities’, provide some indications to the strategy of the Wilayat-e-Hind.

In November 2019, a self-radicalized IS module<sup>12</sup> consisting of three men- Muqaddas Islam, Ranjit Ali, Lewis Jamil Jamal<sup>13</sup>- were arrested from Assam. Special Cell of Delhi Police and their counterparts in Assam claimed to have recovered Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) from them which were meant to be used for carrying out explosions in Assam and New Delhi.<sup>14</sup>

In the first week of March 2020, a couple identified as Jahanzaib Sami Wani and his wife Hina Bashir Beigh from Srinagar were detained by Special Cell of Delhi Police. Police said that the couple were not only involved in the anti-CAA protests, but also were planning to carry out suicide attacks in the country. Police claimed that Wani,

<sup>8</sup> “155 Islamic State members, sympathisers arrested so far: Home Ministry”, *Economic Times*, 25 June 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/155-islamic-state-members-sympathisers-arrested-so-far-home-ministry/articleshow/69941601.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

<sup>9</sup> “Once under ISIS influence, men in Maharashtra make a new beginning”, *Economic Times*, 10 February 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/once-under-isis-influence-men-in-maharashtra-make-a-new-beginning/articleshow/67924932.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 31 March 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “Sri Lanka, India targeted as IS shifts strategy away from Middle East: Report”, *Economy Next*, 20 June 2019, [https://economynext.com/Sri\\_Lanka,\\_India\\_targeted\\_as\\_IS\\_shifts\\_strategy\\_away\\_from\\_Middle\\_East\\_Report-3-14875.html](https://economynext.com/Sri_Lanka,_India_targeted_as_IS_shifts_strategy_away_from_Middle_East_Report-3-14875.html). Accessed on 31 March 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, “Islamic State in Kashmir: Black Flags and Black Shrouds”, Mantraya Special Report 14, 27 September 2018, <http://mantraya.org/special-report-islamic-state-in-kashmir-black-flags-and-black-shrouds/>. Accessed on 30 March 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Bikash Singh, “Digital footprint led to the arrest ISIS terror module in Assam”, *Economic Times*, 27 November 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/digital-footprint-led-to-the-arrest-isis-terror-module-in-assam/articleshow/72246453.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Another media report spelt the names as Mukadir Islam, Ranjit Islam and Luit Zameel Zaman. Such discrepancies in media reportage have been rather common.

<sup>14</sup> Arvind Ojha, “Terror strike averted in Delhi, police arrest 3 men linked to Islamic State, recover IED”, *India Today*, 25 November 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/delhi-terror-strike-averted-islamic-state-isis-men-arrested-with-ied-1622420-2019-11-25>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.



who had been under electronic surveillance, was involved in the production of the inaugural issue of 'Voice of Hind'. However, second issue of the magazine came out even after Sami's arrest.

In February, Jammu and Kashmir Police claimed to have busted an Islamic State terror module and arrested five persons who were allegedly "involved in providing shelter and logistic support to terrorists."<sup>15</sup>

### Pattern of Recruitment & Mobilization

Notwithstanding the veracity of police claims regarding arrests, it is evident that the recent publications by the Islamic State highlight a renewed focus among transnational Islamist extremist groups to radicalize the Indian Muslims, especially at a time when they could be feeling increasingly marginalized by the government's decisions. Critiquing democracy, nationalism, and secularism has remained a standard component of Jihadist literature, since the days of the erstwhile Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).<sup>16</sup> However, the Islamic State's end objectives this time around could be qualitatively different. The recent arrests bear testimony to what the police and its cyber cell experts have pointed at, i.e. they believe the group is attempting to put together self-radicalized cells with a clear action plan to carry out attacks. In fact, the outfit's end objective could even be much wider.

Since New Delhi's August 2019 decision of abrogating Article 370 of the constitution ending Kashmir's special status, India has witnessed a series of disquiet episodes underlining anxiety, alienation, and subsequent mobilization among the Muslim population in Kashmir and beyond. The official policy of non-engagement with the affected population, use of harsh measures on protesters, and refusal to act on self-righteous vigilante groups involved in several violent incidents targeting Muslims may eventually lead to the creation of a hospitable environment that breeds violent extremism. It is in this context that the Islamic State's call for patience and steadfast violent actions using alternate modes becomes relevant. Experts believe that the repeated calls by the outfit may find resonance among few youths.

Most of the terror plots by the Islamic State busted so far demonstrate negligible amount of sophistication both in terms of arms procured or explosives assembled. However, with motivation as well as technical assistance freely available on the web, upgrading quality of attacks may not be too difficult a task even for the novice terrorists.

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**Remarks:** The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

<sup>15</sup> "J-K: IS terror module busted in Budgam, five arrested", *Economic Times*, 13 February 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/j-k-is-terror-module-busted-in-budgam-five-arrested/videoshow/74111217.cms>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Praveen Swami, "Communal riots in India are playing into the hands of Islamic State's jihadists and realising their dystopic dreams", *Firstpost*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/communal-riots-in-india-are-playing-into-the-hands-of-islamic-states-jihadists-and-realising-their-dystopic-dreams-8148281.html>. Accessed on 27 March 2020.



This analysis first appeared in Mantraya, Policy Brief#33, 1 April 2020 and is published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Islamic State in Asia", "Fragility, Conflict, and Peace Building", "Mapping Terror and Insurgent Network" projects. All Mantraya Briefs are peer reviewed publications.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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Routray specialises in decision-making, governance, counter-terrorism, force modernisation, intelligence reforms, foreign policy and dissent articulation issues in South and South East Asia. His writings, based on his projects and extensive field-based research in Indian conflict theatres of the Northeastern states and the left-wing extremism affected areas, have appeared in a wide range of academic as well as policy journals, websites, and magazines.



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