



Research Paper

Islamic State: A New Threat to India's Security

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ABSTRACT: *The Paris terror attacks by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) have quite naturally fueled concerns about the threat posed by this group to India. The concerns deepen given the backdrop that India has been the target of various terror outfits in different geographies for nearly thirty years. A recent report by the Global Terrorism Index 2015 (GTI) ranked India 6th out of 162 nations most affected by terrorism in 2014. The biggest threat that ISIS poses to India is that it will act as a totem for local Indian terror outfits. Such groups would want to claim association with ISIS regardless of whether they agree or know about the ISIS ideology. With the dismantling of the Indian Mujahideen, several radical extremists groups are looking for an alternate identity and ISIS may well provide the much desired character. The appearance of black flags in Jammu and Kashmir preceding the Indian PM's visit was one such instance where local insurgent outfits were using the name of ISIS in order to garner attention. It is this threat that is most likely to hurt India in the short to medium term.*

KEY WORDS: *ISIS, India's Security Islamic state*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State (IS) is generally considered to be a very modest threat to Indian national security when compared to Kashmiri separatists, Naxalites, and the North East insurgencies. Yet, paradoxically, of all such violent non-state actors it has been IS that has garnered the most national attention in recent years (1, 2). On May 10, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed that it had established a province, Wilayah of Hind, in India after security forces killed a militant with alleged ties to the group in Kashmir. The ISIS flags had been spotted at some mosques in Srinagar previously but the group had never claimed to have established a foothold in India. So far, India had been dealing only with Pakistan-backed cross-border terrorism but now a well-funded global terrorist organization is allegedly operating in India. Moreover, local terror outfit Indian Mujahidin, which has carried out multiple attacks in India, recently declared its affiliation to the Islamic State. This is a grave threat to the Indian security as well as that of the region (3).

However, the ISIS didn't move from West Asia to India and South Asia overnight, and we need to understand how and why these developments occurred in order to better protect ourselves against this evolving threat (4).

Evolution of Terrorism: An overview

Terrorism as we are witnessing it today has primarily evolved in three phases. The first, which began in the 1960s with the Palestinian militant groups hijacking Israeli airlines passenger plane, was largely confined to specific regions. The victory of Mujahedeen in Afghanistan against the Soviets and the resultant chaos in Afghanistan in the 1990s marked the beginning of the second phase. During this period, the centre of terrorism moved from West to South Asia. There were two important reasons for the shift. First, the rise of Taliban in 1998 in Afghanistan. It was completely facilitated by Pakistan. The Taliban regime provided a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan where international terror groups such as Al Qaeda flourished spread through South Asia between 1998 and 2002. Second and most important, the US war on terror after the 9/11 attacks. Al Qaeda and its affiliates became a major global threat after 9/11 and the ensuing US hunt of these terrorists forever changed the security calculus in region (5).

By 2014, the US-led coalition forces had turned the tide on Al Qaeda. The Taliban were at the negotiating table in Afghanistan and the Ayman al Zawahiri-led terror group, which once seemed all powerful and was a global threat, had disappeared into oblivion (6).

The third and the most violent phase which we are witnessing today began around 2014 with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from the rubble of Syrian civil war and chaos in Iraq. This new terror outfit was nothing like its predecessors. The ISIS had a standing army and bank accounts with millions of dollars. By early 2015, the ISIS had run over about 35% of Iraq and Syria. For the first time in history a terrorist organization had occupied a territory and declared a sovereign state the Islamic Caliphate (7).

In March this year, the US-backed forces defeated the ISIS after an intense four-year war which led to large scale civilian displacement and casualties. But the Islamic State had not been decimated. Just after a month on April 21, seven suicide bombers struck Churches and luxury hotels in the heart of Colombo in Sri Lanka. A few days later, the IS claimed responsibility for the deadliest attacks in the island nation since the end of civil war in 2009. The IS had communicated to the world that it had not been defeated and was active. The targeting of churches and luxury hotels frequented by foreign tourists was also an attempt to attract a larger chunk of the Zakat fund (8,9).

The Islamic state carried out the Colombo attacks with the help of a local extremist group, National TowheedJamath (NTJ). The NTJ had earlier been involved in anti-Buddhist riots in Sri Lanka. Its cadres had been among the hundreds of South Asian Muslim youths who had fled to Iraq and Syria to fight under the IS flag. Radicalized and battle-hardened, these youths returned to their respective homelands after the IS lost ground. The NTJ is also said to have links with the ISI-sponsored LeT. Therefore, Pakistan's hand in the attack cannot be ruled out. The Indian investigators are also probing a Tamil Nadu-based outfit for its alleged links with the NTJ (10).

The Colombo bombing is not the first ISIS strike in the region. The ISIS has been on a rampage in South Asia for some time now. A The terror outfit had moved into Afghanistan a few years ago because of the continuous onslaught of the coalition airstrikes. There the group established a Waliyat or a province to begin its South Asia operations. This was followed by the Ester Sunday bombing of a Church in Lahore in March 2016 which killed about 76 people. The attack was carried out by the ISIS-funded Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a break-away faction of the Pakistan Taliban. The ISIS used the outfit to grow and spread across Pakistan. Just three months later in July 2016, another ISIS-backed group bombed the Holy Artisan Bakery in Dhaka.

Though the ISIS has garnered support from Muslims of Europe, it is increasingly trying to woo South Asian Muslim youths. This is a major threat to India as well the region and therefore we need to understand why this is happening (11).

Why is ISIS turning towards South Asia?

The ISIS came into existence in 2012 because of the NATO withdrawal from Iraq. The terror outfit quickly overran the newly-formed and inexperienced Iraqi Army and filled the power vacuum left behind by the Western forces. Similarly, the ISIS had slowly started moving into Afghanistan when the NATO forces had started moving out of the war-ravaged country.

The ISIS knows the strategic importance of Afghanistan. The war-torn country is a gateway to South, West and Central Asia as it shares borders with Pakistan in the south, Uzbekistan in the north and Iran in the west. Hence, the ISIS is trying to establish itself in Afghanistan. The ISIS, however, cannot dominate Afghanistan presently because of the presence of the US-led coalition forces. Hence it is turning towards Pakistan and South Asia (2, 12)

Today, Pakistan is playing the same role for the ISIS which the then Taliban regime played for Al Qaeda in Afghanistan in late 1990s. It is a very dangerous news for India and the region. The ISIS flags are frequently seen in Kashmir. India cannot rule out Pakistan hand in certain ISIS-related activities on its soil. It is also likely that these activities may be an ISI ploy to mislead India. Pakistan's role in nurturing terrorists is an open secret. In his last State of the Union address, the then US President Obama had said that Pakistan has grown into a paradise for terrorists. Hence, Pakistan is now trying to change this perception. It wants to show the world that Indian Muslims are increasingly attracted to the ISIS and that India is the new paradise for terrorists (13).

Another most important reason behind the ISIS move to South Asia is recruitment. Al-Qaida and the ISIS are competing for supremacy. The Taliban in Afghanistan has also opposed the ISIS. As a result, the ISIS has lost the Pathan fighters from these organizations. Hence, the ISIS is looking at South and South Asia for new recruits. Moreover, the entrenched poverty in South Asia and the recent Rohingya crisis have made the region a perfect ground for the ISIS recruitment. Maldives and Sri Lanka have become vulnerable to the ISIS due to the political instability in these countries. The group has been using freely available social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Whatsapp to indoctrinate and recruit urban Muslim youths. Tracking extremist activities on these platforms is a major challenge for the investigative agencies due to privacy laws (12, 13).

Indian Muslims and ISIS

Though the ISIS is not a direct threat to India today, it can become a major security challenge in the future. So far, Indian authorities have arrested about 50-75 ISIS operatives and sympathizers in India. Most of these, who had contacted the ISIS after being radicalized via social media platforms, were between 22 and 30 years old and hailed from metro cities such as Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai. The age group is easily manipulated through bribes and propaganda. However, the elders of the community as well as those residing in the rural areas have strongly opposed the ISIS. Multiple Muslim organizations in Maharashtra and other parts of India have taken out many anti-ISIS rallies. There are cases where parents have reported their children's radicalization to the police. Most of the community has shown faith in the Indian security system and that is a victory of the Indian democracy. The interrogation of the youths arrested for ISIS-related activities has shown that the youngsters were victims of the ISIS propaganda. The youngsters were particularly drawn to the ISIS promise to reestablish the Muslim empire with all of its 18th century glory. Hence, it is important to create awareness about the ISIS propaganda (14).

Combating the ISIS Menace

The present Indian security apparatus has been designed to counter regional and cross border terrorism threats. However, it must undergo a major change to tackle a global terrorist organization such as the ISIS which has already made inroads into the country. The Centre must enhance coordination between various central agencies and rapidly modernize its cyber security apparatus. Unlike Israel, India does not regard terrorism as an external threat or a state of emergency. It views it as an internal security threat. As per the Constitution, the state governments are responsible for maintaining law and order in their respective states. Therefore, the state police of the respective state has to respond to a terrorist attack. This creates problems as the police are neither trained nor equipped to combat such threats. Hence, terrorism must be seen as national security threat. India needs to establish a National Counter Terrorism Centre in order to streamline coordinated counter-terrorism operations and intelligence gathering (15).

Enhanced Intelligence Sharing and Security Cooperation

The ISIS is a major threat to international peace and security. Given the reach of the terror group, it is impossible for any one nation to contain or counter it. Any fight against the ISIS will require security cooperation at the international level. We must not forget that intelligence inputs from the US and France played a crucial role in the arrest of ISIS terrorists on the eve of the Republic Day in India in 2016. The French President was the chief guest and the French intelligence had warned of a Charlie Hebdo-style attack in India. New Delhi must expand such security cooperation with other major powers and regional states. The Israelis have developed various ways to tackle social media radicalization which India can also adopt. Regional blocks such as SAARC can play an important role in deepening regional intelligence sharing and cooperation. The South Asian states can also rope in private security firms for enhanced intelligence gathering (16).

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