



The Undiminished Threat of the Islamic State

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September 2020

Abstract

In August 2020, a lone wolf terrorist belonging to the Islamic State was arrested in New Delhi with explosives. The same month, a doctor was arrested with similar charges from Bangalore. Notwithstanding Government of India's policy of downplaying the threat, the appeal of the global jihadist organisation is attracting India Muslims to its fold. These men are found to be in various stages of planning to carry out attacks or have been involved in facilitating the activities of the group. As a resurgent Islamic State carries out its terror attacks across in several theatres around the world, India is likely to witness an increase in jihadist mobilization in the coming months.

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Analysis

The Arrests

Arrests of two persons associated with the Islamic State (IS), within a week, has brought back attention on the undiminished threat of the global jihadist organization to India's national security. While the 28-year-old Abdul Rahman, working as an ophthalmologist in a Bangalore medical college, was arrested on 18 August, Mohammed Mushtaqem Khan, aged 36, was arrested in New Delhi with IEDs and explosives following a brief exchange of fire with the Delhi Police on 22 August. Rahman had reportedly visited an IS camp in Syria to treat injured fighters. Khan had never left Indian shores and had reportedly taken up the role of being a lone-wolf fighter on the advice of an IS recruiter.

A Failed Attempt

Since its founding in 2014, the IS in Iraq and Syria has posed a rather subdued threat to India. Its repeated calls to the Indian Muslims have largely been ignored. Close to 200 people have either left the country or have attempted to do so to join the group. This has been interpreted as a failure of the global Jihadist force, whose appeal to the Muslims of Europe, Africa and even Southeast Asia have been far more successful than the South Asians. Even in Kashmir, where anti-India sentiments are high, the IS as well as the al Qaeda phenomenon has failed to emerge as a major security threat.

Cyber wing of intelligence agencies as well as those of the state police establishments have done well to arrest self-radicalized individuals and bust modules. Individual state police wings have been able to infiltrate into chat rooms, social media groups to track online communication, activities and exchanges of IS recruiters. While government does not stress much on either unleashing a counter-messaging to the IS propaganda or engaging in a de-radicalization initiative, adequate promotion seems to have been given to tracking and neutralizing the online recruitment efforts. And till now, this approach has been successful.

Growing Sophistication

What, the IS, however, has succeeded, through its regular online propaganda and recruitment efforts, is to create a rather dispersed band of followers in several states of the country. While a few of them are linked to a common recruiter and have operated with a vague sense of unity, most others like Rahman and Khan have been lone wolves, using their motivation, skills and energy to further the cause they believe in. Amid the sporadic and intermittent nature of their operations a degree of sophistication is clearly visible. Compared to other cadres arrested previously who were still in their planning stage or had access only to basic weapons, Khan reportedly had learnt to assemble pressure cooker IEDs online and had even carried out a test in his village. Rahman, the ophthalmologist from Bangalore, was developing a weapons-related mobile application to benefit the IS fighters. In contrast, Mehdi Mansoor Biswas, the IS sympathizer who was arrested in December 2014, used his twitter handle @ShamiWitness mostly for propaganda purpose.

Uttar Pradesh, a new hotbed?

For long, security as well as academic interest has been centred on the 'South Indian'-ness of the Islamic State, buttressed by the fact that overwhelming majority of the IS operatives who have travelled out of the country



or have been arrested are from the four southern Indian states. However, this trend could possibly be undergoing a small change.

Number of arrests of IS cadres in the recent past have either been from India's biggest state, Uttar Pradesh (UP) or have links with that state. Khan belonged to the small UP village Balrampur. Members of a 10-member IS module, named Harkat-ul-Harb-e-Islam (HUHI), arrested in April 2019, belonged to Amroha and Meerut. The HUHI's efforts to carry out a massive attack in the national capital arguably remains the most sophisticated attempt by the IS operatives in recent times. Close to 25 kilograms of explosives had been recovered from them.

In 2016, four members of another IS-inspired module, Junud-ul-Khalifa-e-Hind (JUKH, Soldiers of the Caliph in India), had been arrested from Haridwar. Similar to the HUHI, the JUKH too was attempting to indulge in terror strikes in major cities across India. Other cities where IS cadres have either been arrested or killed include Lucknow, Saharanpur, Kushinagar and Azamgarh. The impact of the online propaganda and recruitment efforts seem to have found a degree of resonance in the erstwhile SIMI/Indian Mujahideen cadres, who are reviving their old linkages, at a time of their own choosing.

This UP phenomenon, if true, could have larger security implications on the National Capital Region compared to other mega cities.

The Jihadist Reboot

The hullabaloo in the Indian media centering around individual arrests of IS cadres notwithstanding, threat of global jihadist outfits to India's national security has been played down in the policy making as well as academic circles. The arithmetic division of the number of known IS sympathizers by the total Muslim population in the country has remained a much (mis)used method to play down the threat. While such a public posturing does have its utility in not allowing the IS narrative much media space, the policy making apparatus need to be aware of two basic points.

First, unlike 2017, the narrative on the Islamic State is no longer that of a vanquished force, but one that has orchestrated a dramatic revival in several new theatres around the world, aided by the West's early declaration of victory. This could be providing a fillip, reigniting some short of a Jihadist reboot, for those who wish to identify themselves with it. Second, the group continues to harp on the importance of lone individuals in executing terror. Its online publications earlier this year spoke of how the Corona Pandemic has created unique opportunities for inclined individuals to plan and execute attacks. This has a potential to shape thought processes of the DIY brand of terrorists, who sense an opportunity for themselves.

The undiminished threat, therefore, has the potency of sustaining itself in multiple ways in the near and medium term. The state agencies need to gear up for that.

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

This analysis first appeared on rediff.com on August 25, 2020 under the title "Islamic State in India: The Jihadist Reboot", <https://www.rediff.com/news/column/islamic-state-in-india-the-jihadist-reboot/20200825.htm>



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