IS Threat in South Asia:
A Growing Reality

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The recent high-profile attacks by Islamic State in Dhaka, Kabul, and Quetta have dispelled the notion that its presence in South Asia was just media hype. The growing IS footprint in the region calls for a revision of the existing counter-terrorism frameworks.

Commentary

THE RECENT spate of high-profile terrorist attacks in Dhaka, Kabul and Quetta, together with the "migration" of radicalised youth from India and Maldives to Iraq and Syria, have highlighted the growing footprint of IS in South Asia. Contrary to the views of policymakers and the strategic community in the region, which tended to dismiss the threat posed by the terrorist group as media hype, the level of planning, sophistication, and coordination exhibited by these attacks indicates the growing presence of IS in the region.

In less than two years, the network of IS supporters and sympathisers in South Asia has evolved from a potential security risk to a tangible threat, reflecting the traction of its ideology among disaffected and radicalised youth across the subcontinent. The growing IS influence, the spread of its ideology, and the nature of its presence in South Asia warrants a deeper examination of the phenomenon, its enabling factors and structural causes of its growth.

Growing IS Footprint in South Asia: Three Key Nodes

The sudden increase in IS activities in South Asia is not a coincidence given the group's intentions, since its inception, to carve out a niche in the region. Through its

online monthly English magazine *Dabiq* and videos, the militant outfit has been routinely hinting at increasing its operations and activities in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

A terrorist group needs physical sanctuary (ungoverned spaces), social sanctuary (chaotic living conditions) and the demographic sanctuary (vulnerable and disenfranchised youth) to flourish. The prevalence of these factors in South Asia has provided IS with a conducive environment and ideal conditions to gain a foothold, notwithstanding traditional barriers of geography, language and culture among them.

Additionally, political squabbling, blame games, self-denials, and the dismissive attitudes of regional states have further augmented IS' efforts to increase its regional presence. Long standing disputes like Kashmir and Afghanistan, the militarisation of sectarian conflicts and the politicisation of religion has further helped IS to galvanise support in the region.

IS' presence in South Asia has three key nodes. The first of these are *lone-wolf individuals* who get inspired by IS' ideology through the Internet and other social media platforms. Secondly, there are *lone-wolf groups* (packs or cells) of self-radicalised individuals who are connected to the IS-central through a facilitator and are engaged in disseminating the group's extremist propaganda, collecting funds, and planning future attacks. The third are *like-minded militant groups* who have jumped on the IS bandwagon and rebranded themselves under the banner of the so-called Caliphate after taking an oath of allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

IS' Growing Influence: Four Trends

From a policy perspective, four trends are of particular concern. Firstly, the growth of Salafism under the garb of a self-styled Caliphate is being packaged in a jihadist narrative. It is contrary to pacifist and populist Sufi traditions of South Asian Islam. Secondly, the IS is inspiring and influencing the educated youth of middle and upper-middle class from urban areas who do not fit the traditional profiles of militants such as madrassa students from impoverished backgrounds.

This trend is similar to the mobilisation of youth from Europe who has travelled to Syria and Iraq as foreign fighters. The participation of educated and well-to-do youth in terrorism has raised new policy questions for researchers and policymakers.

The ability of Islamist militant groups like IS to connect isolated and individual grievances with the meta-narrative of global jihadism enables them not only to transcend geographical barriers but also helps them overcome diversity by surpassing linguistic, socio-cultural and political constraints, making the IS an unprecedented transnational terrorist threat. So, the advent and rise of IS has created new symbols, new leaders, new ideas, new iconography of terrorism and new narratives which are markedly different from previous jihadist narratives.

Need to Look Beyond Self Interests

Thirdly, a critical factor relates to the proliferation of extremist ideas and discourses in cyberspace and social media platforms. While the underlying structural factors of

extremism and its enabling elements exist in the real world, such discourses take a particular shape in the virtual world of the Internet. Thus, the battlefield has expanded from real space to cyberspace. The war within a cyberspace pertains to the war of ideas, which can only be fought with better, stronger, and smarter counter-ideas. Empty rhetoric cannot overcome extremist ideology.

Lastly, the overtly sectarian outlook of IS not only apostatises Shias but also ex-communicates other Sunni groups, such as Barelvis, Sufis and Deobandis. Thus, the growing IS influence in the region will target both inter-sectarian divisions (Sunni vs Shia) as well as intra-sectarian (Salafi vs Sunnis) cleavages.

The IS-directed attacks against the Ismaili Shia community in Karachi (2015), the targeting of a Muharram procession in Dhaka and the sporadic kidnapping and targeted killings of the Hazara Shia community in Afghanistan provide glimpses into the sectarian ideological outlook of IS. Moreover, the critiques of the Afghan Taliban and other militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba by IS in *Dabiq* magazine offers further insights into its ideological stance vis-a-vis other Sunni extremist groups.

To overcome the threat posed by IS, South Asian states will have to look beyond their self-centred interests and forge a functional relationship in which they could cooperate against this common enemy. The absence of regional counter-terrorism and counter-extremism frameworks will hinder separate efforts of regional states to defeat IS.

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