

## Evolution of the Islamic State After its Territorial Defeat

Jennifer Dhanaraj

## Terrorist Networks in Southeast Asia and Implications for Regional Security

Bilveer Singh

## Why Has the Islamic State Failed to Grow in Kashmir?

Mohamed Sinan Siyech



# Defeating Terrorist Groups and Terrorism

Arguably, terrorism ends in at least three distinct ways: (i) the non-state violent groups achieve their political and ideological objectives, (ii) they compromise with the governments as a result of negotiations, (iii) or they are defeated militarily. However, defeating a terrorist group does not always lead to an end to terrorism because the operational capabilities of the group are distinct from its ideological prowess and traction. Thus, instead of dying out, there is a possibility that the terrorist threat could morph and grow more complex. Most often, ahead of an impending defeat, terrorist groups withdraw tactically, decentralise their organisational structures, reform their ideological objectives and evolve their tactics with changing circumstances.

The recent claims of defeating the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group in Iraq and Syria are a case in point. Barely six months after the claims of victory, emerging reports indicate that the group and the terrorist threat it poses is far from defeated. The loss of territory, destruction of its organisational and physical infrastructure and damage to its sources of revenue were equated with elimination of the threat it posed to regional and global peace. However, the recent military flare-up between Russia and the United States over Syria will provide IS with the pretext and the much-needed space to stage a comeback. Furthermore, the basic issues of contention, the Sunni-Shia strife in Iraq and standoff between the Assad regime and the opposition forces remain unresolved. Given this, it is important to determine a realistic and long-term approach to tackle terrorism and terrorist groups actively even as the political disputes in conflict zones in Syria, Palestine, Kashmir and Afghanistan continue unabated.

Notwithstanding its apparent defeat, IS has virtualised its so-called Caliphate, moved from open to encrypted social media platforms, decentralised its organisational structure and directed its fighters to either prepare for lone-wolf attacks in their home countries, particularly in the West, or move to their respective wilayat (governorates).

Against this backdrop, the current issue of Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) features three articles. In the first piece, **Jennifer Dhanaraj** discusses IS' creation of a 'virtual tribe', which indicates the group has not been defeated despite losses of top leaders, territory and depletion of financial resources. Through its cyber presence, IS has tapped into a sense of 'aspirational tribalism' whereby radicalised individuals seek to form links with IS beyond racial, ethnic and citizenship affiliations, due to alienation within their own communities. IS' virtual tribe is further strengthened by the creation of harder to detect, smaller and leaderless networks formed by lone-wolf actors, such as those that have emerged in Europe post-2015. This indicates that the creation of social media bonds, or the virtual tribe, has now eclipsed IS' desire to create a territorial stronghold, morphing the group into smaller and more clandestine networks that continue to pose a security threat.

Secondly, **Bilveer Singh** observes IS' organisational-networking with other terrorist groups in Southeast Asia. Cooperation with other groups and forging tactical and strategic alliances is one of the primary strategies for terrorist groups to expand, survive and acquire weapons and new recruits. Particularly, the capture of Marawi was made possible both through inter-organisational cooperation and cooperation among individuals by a number of

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# Defeating Terrorist Groups and Terrorism

pro-IS militant factions and leaders in the Philippines. The author maintains that ASEAN countries need to focus on factors contributing to resource-sharing and cooperation among the terrorist groups in addition to the causes of radicalisation and violent-extremism.

Lastly, **Mohammed Sinan Siyech's** article examines factors which have hindered IS endeavours to create a foothold in the Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir (IAJK). Beyond a nominal presence in the cyber sphere, IS has not made any substantial gains in the region. According to the author, factors such as the difficulty of penetrating into Kashmir, given the strict security measures and the lower chances of victory i.e. liberation of Kashmir from India, have hindered the presence of foreign jihadists in the valley. In addition, the nature of the Kashmir dispute as a territorial issue between India and Pakistan as opposed to an ideological issue cast in Islamist overtones has also decreased the likelihood of IS focusing on Kashmir as a source of recruits.

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# Evolution of the Islamic State After its Territorial Defeat

Jennifer Dhanaraj

*The Islamic State (IS) lost its most prized battlefield victories in Mosul and Raqqa by November 2017, effectively ending the physical Islamic “caliphate” three years after it was proclaimed.<sup>1</sup> This, as widely acknowledged, does not mean that IS has been decisively defeated. While their networks and financial sources have been disrupted and some of their top leaders were killed, IS continues to pose a security threat.<sup>2</sup> But IS’ mastery of modern technologies such as open social media platforms and closed messaging applications are key tools used to radicalise individuals and create a virtual tribe.<sup>3</sup>*

## Introduction

IS’ defeat in Iraq and Syria has not stopped the group from continuing to espouse its radical Islamist ideology to radicalise people through its skilful use of social media. The resulting virtual tribe becomes a perceived kinship that will continue to inspire more people to become lone wolf terrorists or to form small, autonomous cells that will be part of a larger leaderless jihad movement. As IS no longer controls territory and will likely find it difficult to establish a physical “caliphate” in the near future, the group will continue to use social media to exploit indigenous grievances. The resulting intensification of kinship bonds will motivate IS lone wolves and autonomous cells to perpetrate violent attacks in their own countries.

## IS’ Use of Social Media and a Sense of Belonging

An increasingly globalised world has resulted in a more homogenised identity that threatens and dilutes local cultural identities and ethnicities in favour of a larger, unifying culture that is often dominated by the Western world.<sup>4</sup> As a result, racial diasporas and minorities often find that their cultural values are being threatened or side-lined by the forces of globalisation, causing feelings of marginalisation or discrimination within their societies. In part, this phenomenon leads to a vulnerable segment of the Muslim community seeking a sense of belonging, thus increasing IS’ attractiveness and ability to radicalise. IS also provides this group with a sense of solidarity and unity against Western influence and perceived immoralities.<sup>5</sup> IS has been able to capitalise on the alienation of some Muslims within their communities and has tailored its propaganda to evoke a sense of belonging to lure potential jihadists into joining its virtual tribe. Virtual tribe, in this case, refers to a group that consists of potentially vulnerable members that are tied together by their religion. They do not have a physical space, but instead organise and communicate in the cyber space. The creation of a virtual tribe is triggered by disassociation and alienation from their communities.

IS has achieved the creation of a virtual tribe through their regular publication of well-designed magazines, which are produced in various languages including English, Malay, French and German. The diversity of languages has helped IS target Muslim

<sup>1</sup> However, not all physical territory of IS was lost, as they still control small areas within Iraq and Syria.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wright, “The Ignominious End of the ISIS Caliphate,” *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-ignominious-end-of-the-isis-caliphate>.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan, Helene Loow, Leena Malkki, “Introduction to the Special Issue on Lone Wolf and Autonomous Cell Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, 1 (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Omar Lizardo, “The Effect of Economic and Cultural Globalization on Anti-US Transnational Terrorism 1971-2000,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 12, 1 (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Ian R. Pelletier et al, “Why ISIS’ Message Resonates: Leveraging Islam, Sociopolitical Catalysts, and Adaptive Messaging,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, 10 (2016).

majority and minority communities in different parts of the world. IS' publications and videos often show fighters relaxing and singing with each other and this depicts a sense of brotherhood and camaraderie that potential jihadists may feel is lacking in their own country.<sup>6</sup> Charlie Winter, in his report on IS propaganda, also stated that the sense of belonging is one of the main themes that IS exploits to target new recruits. He added that the group focuses on recruiting foreign fighters to replenish its ranks.<sup>7</sup>

During its growth from 2014 to 2015, IS used Facebook and Twitter to spread its message and effectively cement its branding as a social movement. On Twitter, IS had about 46,000 overt supporter accounts and a maximum of 90,000 supporter accounts from September to December 2014. Each account had an average of about 500-1,000 followers each, which was higher than the normal average for the typical Twitter user.<sup>8</sup> This shows how social media has amplified IS' branding and its message. Research by Jeffrey Kaplan and Christopher P. Costa suggests that terrorists seek to become a part of a movement that will change the world. Potential lone wolf attackers as well as individuals looking to form small autonomous cells subscribe to IS' propaganda of establishing a caliphate because they want to become a part of a "cohesive and supportive milieu".<sup>9</sup>

While Al-Qaeda had also inspired attacks by recruiting lone wolves and creating small autonomous cells, these attacks were often undertaken for the ideology and not for Al-Qaeda as an organisation.<sup>10</sup> However, IS' virtual tribe of followers are willing to perpetrate violent attacks in the name of IS. This can be seen in the case of Omar Mateen, the lone wolf terrorist behind the fatal shootings at a nightclub that killed 49 people

in Orlando, Florida in 2016. Omar Mateen was a lone wolf who was inspired by IS to conduct violent attacks in the hope that he could be part of a virtual tribe. He was born and raised in the United States (US), but experienced alienation and a lack of belonging. He was also taunted for being a Muslim while he was at work, making him feel marginalised and discriminated.<sup>11</sup> Omar's experience in the US may have made him more receptive to extremist material online and this eventually resulted in his radicalisation. In a 911 call during the attack, Mateen described himself as an 'Islamic soldier' and pledged allegiance to "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi... on behalf of the Islamic State", which indicates his desire to belong to a group or IS' virtual tribe.

He also said that the US military operations against IS in Iraq and Syria motivated him to carry out the attacks. These actions also fall in line with the characteristics of lone wolves as described by Ramon Spaaij.<sup>12</sup> Spaaij asserts that lone wolf terrorists often combine their own personal vendettas with broader political or religious grievances, which is apparent in Mateen's case. In addition, the strikes in Syria made him identify with the Muslims there, after which he took action to avenge the attacks and join the group. As IS espoused values that made him feel like he belonged to a group, Mateen carried out the attack on behalf of the organisation that gave him an identity, while the role of ideology was secondary. In the 911 call, he also referred to the Tsarnaev brothers, who were the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombings. They were radicalised by *Inspire*, an English-language Al-Qaeda magazine made available online. Mateen's inability to distinguish between Al-Qaeda and IS shows that ideology did not play a huge role in his radicalisation. Instead, it can be argued that a desire to belong was one of his primary motivations. This was also evident in his

<sup>6</sup> Charlie Winter, "The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence*. Quilliam, 2015, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/charlie-winter-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," *Brookings Institution*. Center for Middle East Policy, March, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan, Helene Loow, Leena Malkki, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Lone Wolf and Autonomous Cell Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, 1 (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan and Christopher P. Costa, "The Islamic State and the New Tribalism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, 5: 926-979 (2015).

<sup>11</sup> "Orlando Shooting: Gunman Complained Of Anti-Muslim Taunts," *BBC*, July 19, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36831270>

<sup>12</sup> Ramon Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

Facebook posts written just after the attack. He wrote “Now taste the Islamic State vengeance”, and also denounced “the filthy ways of the west”. This clearly indicates that he does not identify with the West even though he was born and grew up there. He also added: “You kill innocent women and children by doing *us* [sic] airstrikes”.<sup>13</sup> This further confirms that he developed a ‘Us Versus Them’ thinking where he identified as a Muslim whose group tent was being threatened in Iraq and Syria. This perceived threat then spurred him to act.<sup>14</sup>

### Forging an Aspirational Tribe

IS’ creation of such a virtual tribe after declaring a “caliphate” in 2014 has helped to compensate for its subsequent losses in Iraq and Syria. IS had been developing its virtual tribe since its creation, but has now been forced to largely rely on it as a means of showcasing its strength in view of its territorial losses. IS has now projected an image of success by indirectly ‘carrying out’ high-profile operations with mass casualties and high media visibility as well, especially in the West. This ensures that the group does not lose relevance and more importantly, is still able to attract recruits. To continue attracting recruits, IS needs to show that it has a strong tribe that many will aspire to be a part of. Kaplan and Costa argued that there were two main types of tribalism: ascriptive tribalism and aspirational tribalism. Ascriptive tribalism refers to groups that are formed based on primordial ties like blood and racial ethnicity.<sup>15</sup> Aspirational tribalism, on the other hand, constitutes groups made up of actors, both actual and virtual, that are ‘born outside of the tribal system’ but desire to be part of the tribe. While they can aspire to be part of an ascriptive tribe, it is more common for them to aspire to be a part of an aspirational tribe, whose messages are usually broadcasted globally through social media. Such

aspirational tribes are usually formed with the use of both traditional platforms and social media applications like Facebook and Twitter and encrypted messaging applications.

IS has masterfully exploited these tools to create a strong aspirational tribe that lone wolf terrorists and small, autonomous cells desire to be a part of. The group projects the image of IS as a ‘messianic organisation’ as opposed to a group that is simply perceived to be Al-Qaeda’s political rival.<sup>16</sup> In addition, much of IS’ success also stems from its ability to declare a “caliphate” by securing territories and this is what their branding relies on, even now. It is important to note that the image of IS as a ‘messianic organisation’ and a virtual tribe is not just made possible by the dissemination of information from the group’s official social media channels. A large part of why the group has seen so many aspirants is because IS supporters on social media share personalised information, including poetry, memes, photos and video montages derived from official propaganda. The creation of such content is more appealing, personalised and is more likely to inspire others. Even though IS material is taken down regularly, the shelf life of such material is lengthened as members download and share it on personal messaging applications. These posts on social media are also able to reach a much larger group as opposed to just their official propaganda on magazines or official social media channels. As such, social media allows anyone to publish posts or disseminate information to a ‘limitless audience’ and in an interactive and two-way exchange. Social media and messaging applications are inexpensive and accessible and so they allow individuals and communities to ‘share, co-create, discuss and modify content’.<sup>17</sup> The content that results from such engagement helps to further sharpen and focus the image of IS as an aspirational tribe that has already been disseminating its official material.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ross, Brian, Rhonda, Rhonda Schwarts, Alexandra Dukakis and Lee Ferran. “Orlando Shooter on Facebook: Now ‘Taste’ ISIS ‘Vengeance’,” *ABC News*, June 15, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/orlando-shooter-facebook-now-taste-isis-vengeance/story?id=39875518>.

<sup>14</sup> Blinder, Alan, Robles Frances and Richard Perez-Pena, “Omar Mateen Posted to Facebook Amid Orlando Attack, Lawmaker Says,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2016,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/us/orlando-shooting.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan and Christopher P. Costa, “On Tribalism: Auxiliaries, Affiliates, and Lone Wolf Political Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, 13-44 (2014)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Gabriel Weimann, “Terrorist Migration to Social Media,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 16, 1 (2015).

<sup>18</sup> Charlie Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda

## Creating a Geographical Space for IS' Virtual Tribe

Social bonding plays an important role in the online radicalisation process, and this cements bonds within a virtual tribe. Gabriel Weimann argues that online radicalisation is a multi-step process which begins with the group uploading videos on all platforms, including websites, YouTube and Facebook to cast a wide net. But this does not necessarily radicalise all individuals who come across the material. It is the interactivity that the internet and social media applications provide that encourage interested individuals to cultivate the mind-set of a terrorist.<sup>19</sup> Individuals who are receptive to the material posted on the wider platforms will begin to seek out one another and go through processes of “social bonding” where they exchange their grievances and expose one another to similar ideological material. The next step occurs when selected target members are directed to further self-radicalise through “continuous exposure to online radical material” and online guidance, which may include virtual packs that may guide potential lone wolf terrorists on how to conduct attacks. Virtual packs refer to guides and instructions, including bomb-making recipes or methods of perpetrating violence, which are published online by terrorist groups.<sup>20</sup> For example, Sayfullo Saipov, the perpetrator behind the New York truck attacks in 2017 was self-radicalised online and was exposed to virtual packs. As such, he “followed exactly almost to a ‘T’ the instructions that ISIS has put out in its social media channels before, with instructions to their followers on how to carry out such an attack”.<sup>21</sup>

As Facebook and Twitter continue to crack down on accounts supporting IS, social bonding now takes place on encrypted

messaging applications such as Whatsapp and Telegram. Telegram is arguably the more popular of the two because Facebook owns Whatsapp and terrorist groups are deterred by the possibility of their conversations being monitored by a technology giant.<sup>22</sup> Telegram, on the other hand, has consistently insisted that the core strength of the application is user anonymity, making it the preferred tool for jihadists. Arguably one of Telegram’s most important features that has helped to facilitate the growth of IS’ virtual tribe are its public channels that were first launched in 2015. Telegram’s public channels enable private one-to-one conversations as well as one-to-many communications, and this has allowed IS followers and affiliates to disseminate and distribute information without the instructions or directions from a more central command. The free exchange of information on the application has created a semblance of geographical space that enables the social bonding that strengthens the virtual tribe. This space transcends traditional boundaries, but still functions like a geographic space where people can exchange opinions, information and even assemble.<sup>23</sup> While the members of the tribe lack primordial ties, they are instead bound together by their “internet ethnicities”, a phenomenon that was discussed by Mark Juergensmeyer in his book “Terror in the Mind of God”.<sup>24</sup> People who do not share primordial ties, are bonded culturally through the internet despite the fact that they have diverse places of residence. People who have such Internet ethnicities transcend borders and physical boundaries and are instead united by social media. However, they should not be dismissed just because they may not resemble typical traditional societies. Their ties are still strong and exist in reality as ‘extensions of traditional societies’ whose cultures are dispersed throughout the world. This is exemplified in the increasing popularity of ‘virtual seminaries’ that refer to exclusive,

Strategy,” *NATO Stratcom Centre of Excellence*. Quilliam, 2015, <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/charlie-winter-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy>.

<sup>19</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008)

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel Weimann, “Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves,” *The Wilson Center*, February 25, 2014,

<https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>.

<sup>21</sup> Nicole Chavez, Holly Yan, Eric Levenson and Steve Almasy, “New York Attack Suspect Charged

with Federal Terrorism Offences,” *CNN*, November 2, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/01/us/new-york-attack/index.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Shehabat, Teodor Mitew and Yahia Alzoubi, “Encrypted Jihad: Investigating The Role Of Telegram App In Lone Wolf Attacks In The West,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, 3 (2017).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

invite-only ‘mentoring circles’ and closed social media group pages that do not outwardly indicate any links to IS. Instead, any dissemination of IS ideology is only done through peer-to-peer interactions.<sup>25</sup>

### Leaderless Jihadi Movements: Not Just Leaderless

Arguably, while other online networks are restricted to a specific ethnicity, the IS network is extremely diverse. As such, a tribe filled with people who identify with having an ‘internet ethnicity’ should not be dismissed, as they form a much stronger and even coordinated leaderless jihad movement that can pose a significant threat to state security agencies. “Leaderless jihad” is a term coined by Marc Sageman and the concept is based on leaderless resistance, developed by Louis Beam, who was the leader of a right-wing militia. Beam argued that a leaderless resistance is necessary to continue the fight against the FBI opposition. In addition, amid heightened global security, Al-Qaeda’s Abu Musab al-Suri also advocated for a leaderless jihad strategy in his book, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*. Sageman stated that leaderless jihad can be identified as, “a strategy of fighting an overwhelming enemy using self-organising clandestine networks”.<sup>26</sup> The strategy was a result of desperation because it was becoming easier for law enforcement agencies to detect traditional hierarchical organisations. Once the leaders of those organisations were decapitated, the group was operationally weakened and it became more difficult for them to plan high-level terrorist attacks. Leaderless jihad movements, which can comprise lone wolf actors and small, autonomous networks, are much more likely to survive and adapt. If members of a particular group are detained, the other networks are protected from detection by law enforcement agencies as they operate independently. Though they can adapt easily, Sageman stated that leaderless jihad movements could also be weak due to the lack of clear direction and political goals.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Charlie Winter and Jade Parker, “Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State’s Evolving Strategy,” *Lawfare*, January 7, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/virtual-caliphate-rebooted-islamic-states-evolving-online-strategy>.

<sup>26</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

However, I argue that as IS continues to strengthen its virtual tribe, the lone wolf actors and clandestine networks within this imagined community will begin to form loose, abstract structures and become harder to detect, therefore increasing their effectiveness. However, Sageman argues that as disparate lone wolf actors conduct attacks with different, seemingly random targets, weapons or locations, that leaderless resistance can ultimately become a message-less resistance. There are no clear political messages that can be derived from such seemingly random attacks, even if they were meant to be acts of terror. More importantly, such acts of message-less resistance do not inspire others within the movement to act. This can be seen in the example of serial killer Joseph Paul Franklin, who was a member of the National Socialist White People’s Party in 1966. Franklin was a lone wolf actor, who conducted shooting rampages on random targets in different locales. It was only when fellow white supremacist William L. Pierce wrote the book, *Hunter*, based on Franklin’s killings that more people were motivated to emulate his example.<sup>28</sup> IS lone wolves often use similar methods for killing (knives or vehicle-ramming) and commit acts of terror, that have gained attention worldwide. It is therefore possible that their attacks might become more coordinated in the form of timing, for example, to heighten the impact of the attacks.

Encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram and more recently, Zello, a walkie-talkie application that allows for large groups to communicate regardless of distance, enable IS to broadcast its message to the tribe and glorify it. They facilitate the formation of these loose structures within a tribe. These actors are still able to act on their own and are not limited to instructions or directions from anyone else. However, the level of coordination among these actors should be a cause for concern as it poses a much bigger threat than that of a typical leaderless jihad

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan and Christopher P. Costa, “On Tribalism: Auxiliaries, Affiliates, and Lone Wolf Political Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, 13-44 (2014).



movement. Technology now allows one actor to motivate another actor while giving him or her guidance on how to conduct specific attacks. For example, a plot to attack an exhibition of pictures of the Prophet Mohammad by three men in Garland, Texas was uncovered in May 2015.<sup>29</sup> It was first classified as an attack that was planned entirely inside the country, and merely inspired by IS. However, later developments showed that Junaid Hussain, a Syria-based IS follower, had given the men very specific directions, including the choice of target.

This shows how virtual networks can coordinate attacks, targets, weapons, locations, and even timings so that the impacts of these violent acts can be enhanced. They may in turn inspire more lone-wolf actors and autonomous cell networks to carry out their own attacks. As such, it can be argued that the resistance has become less “leaderless”. More accurately, they are virtual networks that have the characteristics of a leaderless resistance movement, but social media and messaging applications permit them to be more interactive and therefore more organised. Members of these networks focus on providing logistical support to one another. This support can include tactical guidance such as the choice of weapons or methods for conducting attacks as well as theological advice.<sup>30</sup>

There have also been concerns that previous terror attacks that were believed to be conducted by lone wolf actors and were classified as ‘IS-inspired’ attacks were actually planned with the help of high-level operatives. An April 2017 terror attack in Stockholm where the suspect Rakhmat Akilov ploughed into a busy shopping street and killed four, was initially believed to be an IS-inspired attack.<sup>31</sup> However, investigations revealed that Akilov was in “direct contact with

high-level members of IS before, during and after the April 2017 attack”.<sup>32</sup> Akilov said that he received guidance from Abu Osama Noraki, who he believed was the ‘Emir’ of Tajikistan. It was also reported that Akilov was in contact with other high-level non-Arab leaders in Mosul, indicating that it was a coordinated attack.<sup>33</sup> This shows that seemingly leaderless resistance movements, with the help of social media and messaging applications, are becoming less leaderless as lone-wolf actors can now seek guidance from high-ranking members.

### IS Not Completely Defeated

Adapting itself as a partially leaderless resistance movement is IS’ strategy, but it is one borne out of weakness and loss. Ultimately, IS wants to maintain its position as the leader of the global Salafi-jihadist movement. However, to be the true leader of the movement, IS recognises the importance of declaring a caliphate and securing territory in different parts of the world. In order to achieve that, IS will regroup, recoup and recover. It has already been reported that some IS foreign fighters have not returned to their home countries after the group lost control of Raqqa, the group’s self-proclaimed capital.<sup>34</sup> Instead, many fighters have escaped and gone into hiding near the Syrian capital of Damascus and the country’s northwest. These fighters would continue to wait for orders sent by insurgent leaders on encrypted communications channels and are ready to fight in the future. The Vice - Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Paul J. Selva, has said that the senior IS leadership is maintaining ‘fairly robust’ communications with its network of fighters, who are now on the run.<sup>35</sup> *The New York Times* also reported that IS has been placing more importance on asymmetric tactics like “suicide bombings against soft targets in

<sup>29</sup> Shoichet, Catherine and Michael Pearson, “Garland, Texas, Shooting Suspect Linked Himself To ISIS In Tweets,” *CNN*, May 5, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/04/us/garland-mohammed-drawing-contest-shooting/index.html>

<sup>30</sup> Charlie Winter and Jade Parker, “Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State’s Evolving Strategy,” *Lawfare*, January 7, 2018,

<https://www.lawfareblog.com/virtual-caliphate-rebooted-islamic-states-evolving-online-strategy>.

<sup>31</sup> The Local, “Stockholm Terror Suspect had Contact with High-ranking ISIS Officials,” *The Local*,

February 2, 2018,

<https://www.thelocal.se/20180202/stockholm-terror-suspect-had-contact-with-high-ranking-isis-members-swedish-report>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Schmitt, “Thousands of ISIS Fighters Flee in Syria, Many to Fight Another Day,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/world/middleeast/isis-syria-al-qaeda.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

government-secured areas like Baghdad”.<sup>36</sup> As it attempts to regroup, IS will use its virtual tribe to achieve real-world objectives. IS will now be relying more on successful terrorist operations. These operations are now a strategic necessity.<sup>37</sup>

### Policy Implications

In order to prevent the creation of social bonds in the online space and a stronger virtual tribe, it is necessary for technology companies to work with law enforcement agencies to regulate the ‘geographical spaces’ that allow the free exchange of ideas, information, opinion and the freedom to assemble. This could assist in weakening the virtual tribes and in turn reduce the impact of leaderless jihad movements. When such movements are weakened, the relevance of groups like IS would likely decrease as there will be less recruits willing to join them. In addition, it is also important for states to combat the global Salafi-jihadist movement as a whole. IS and Al-Qaeda are representatives of the movement that continues to garner great support by bereaved and alienated individuals. However, even if specific groups are decimated, it is possible that another group will rise to assume the leadership of the global Salafi-jihadist movement.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Charlie Winter and Jade Parker, “Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State’s Evolving Strategy,”

*Lawfare*, January 7, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/virtual-caliphate-rebooted-islamic-states-evolving-online-strategy>.

# Terrorist Networks in Southeast Asia and Implications for Regional Security

**Bilveer Singh**

*The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group's organisational-networking with other like-minded extremist and terrorist groups in Asia and Africa has resulted in a spatial spread of varying degrees of violence. In Southeast Asia, the capture of Marawi in southern Philippines signifies this trend. As such, regional countries should broaden their focus from factors causing extremist recruitment to factors that explain the cooperation of terrorist groups and efforts to link fighters, arms and resources.*

## **Introduction**

Even though terrorist networking is not a new phenomenon, its large-scale impact was only recently evident. In the Middle East, the self-proclaimed Islamic State's (IS) short-term success was due to its ability to network with other like-minded terrorist and extremist groups in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. This resulted in mass casualties, bloodshed and damage to infrastructure in Iraq and Syria with implications for regional and global security. In Southeast Asia, terrorist networking was particularly evident during the siege of Marawi in the southern Philippines with IS-linked militants holding the city hostage from March to October 2017 and killing more than 1,000 people.

## **What is Terrorist Networking?**

Inter-terrorist relationships can be either cooperative or adversarial with cooperation taking place at the inter-individual or inter-group levels. Cooperation among terrorists can be of different quality and nature. The cooperative ties can be loose and limited to a single domain or extend to multiple arenas. Whether the cooperative endeavours are of short, medium or long-term duration depends on the degree of ideological similarities and equivalent goals and agendas. Cooperation among terrorist groups can manifest itself

through mergers, at strategic and tactical levels, or can be temporary and of a transactional nature.

## **Aims of Terrorist Networking**

The avenues of collaboration between terrorist groups could be confined to one or more domains involving ideology, logistics and operations. However, the ultimate objective is to achieve multiple goals. This is applicable to terrorist groups in Southeast Asia as well. First, it aims to boost the groups' capacity and performance through aggregation of capabilities. Second, groups hope to prolong their longevity and sustain themselves through recruitment of personnel, media attention and recognition and acquisition of material. Third, through cooperation, terrorist groups hope to enhance the degree of violence and lethality of their attacks. Finally, groups also seek cooperation to adopt innovations that would enhance their power, recognition and attainment of goals.

## **Factors Facilitating Terrorist Networking**

A number of factors have facilitated inter-organisational cooperation and linkages in Southeast Asia. First, military training has been extremely important, whether it was conducted in Afghanistan, southern Philippines, Ambon or Poso in Indonesia. Second, prisons have become another bonding institution where militant detainees, regardless of their original crimes have often developed close bonds, especially after being radicalised by imprisoned ideologues. Marriages have also played a key role in building organisational bonds among militant groups. Bonds built during education in religious or non-religious institutions, have also been critical in facilitating networking. The experience of migrant workers in the Middle East or elsewhere is an example of

how bonds are built and furthered through on and off-line radicalisation.

### **Southeast Asia's experience with Terrorist Networking**

In Southeast Asia, terrorist networking has been noted in the case of both Al-Qaeda and IS. Jemaah Islamiyah, with links to Al-Qaeda, brought together various groups that were originally associated with Darul Islam, Negara Islam Indonesia, KOMPAK and Ring Banten in Indonesia as well as groups such as Kumpulan Mujahidin in Malaysia, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation in Myanmar.

In the case of Jemaah Islamiyah, there were also unique elements that led to inter-organisational cooperation of groups in the region. The presence of personal ties as well as charismatic leaders such as Abdullah Sungkar, Abu Bakar Bashir, Abu Rusydan and Hashim Selamat among others, helped to gel these groups together. The broad consensus on the importance of the 'near enemy', which in this case was the regional governments that had to be attacked, also contributed to increased linkages. Third, the bonds among the Afghan, Poso-Ambon and Mindanao insurgents played a key role in uniting Southeast Asian groups. These groups were also integrated in their anti-US and anti-West stances, their desire for an Islamic state and opposition towards national governments in the region. The quest for sanctuaries, finance, training and weapons also brought members of these groups together. Additionally, bonds were established through marriages within prominent families, especially in Jemaah Islamiyah, further enabling it to become a lethal regional terrorist group. For instance, Hambali is married to Noralwizah whose sister is married to Abu Yusuf, a key JI leader. Noordin Top was married to Rahmah Rusdi, whose brother, Rais was a JI leader. The younger sister of Dulmatin, a top JI leader, was married to Hery Kuncoro, a JI member.

A similar pattern is discernible with regards to cooperation among groups affiliated with IS. First is the role of individual leaders, many of whom were associated with the pro-Al Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah group in the past. Abu Bakar Bashir is a key example, as he played

a critical role in developing ties with top leaders such as Mochammad Achwan, and Son Hadi bin Muhadjir, who eventually formed the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia and later, Jemaah Ansharut Tauhid. Second, in conditions of weakened and divided outfits, many groups have been compelled to cooperate and support IS which was seen as marching towards victory between June 2014 and 2016. Third, bonds between many individuals and groups were cemented through common goals of taking revenge against the security forces, a desire to establish an Islamic state, regroupings that took place in prison, and galvanising support across a broad spectrum of individuals and groups at the national, regional and global levels with the power of social media. The allegiances of various extremist groups to IS were also aimed at enhancing cooperation among themselves.

### **The Marawi Project**

In recent times, the Marawi project stands out in terms of inter-organisational and inter-individual terrorist cooperation in Southeast Asia. The terrorist offensive in Marawi showcased groups such as IS Basilan, IS Cotabato, IS Maguindanao, IS Lanao, and Ansharut Khilafah Philippines collaborating with the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. Cooperation also transcended borders where an Indonesian jihadist contingent called Katibah Mujahir and other individual fighters from Indonesia, Malaysia, parts of Africa and the Middle East participated in the fight. As such, Marawi represented a whole-of-terrorist operation to replicate a 'Mosul' or 'Raqqa' in the Philippines, but failed in its larger goal of maintaining control.

### **Implications of Terrorist Networking in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia's experience with terrorism since the 1980s has led to the emergence of a new phenomenon that needs to be understood. Terrorist groups will seek each other out to leverage on their strengths and advantages if there are facilitating factors and common goals. This was clearly manifested by Jemaah Islamiyah in the past and the pro-IS groups in the region today. The Katibah Nusantara, the Southeast Asia-wide group, brought together fighters from different

countries in the region on the basis of being loyal to IS and sharing its objectives of establishing a caliphate.

IS' territorial defeat in parts of the Middle East did not affect this trend in 2017 as different groups and fighters from Southeast Asia fought together during the Marawi siege from March to October last year. Considering this, security planners must not only focus on motivating factors for radicalisation and joining a terrorist group but also factors accounting for cooperation and resource-sharing by such groups to achieve their objectives. In short, the war against terrorism is moving beyond the individual and climbing the ladder up to inter-organisational terrorist collaboration. If Southeast Asia is to prevent future 'Marawis' or for that matter, future 'JIs' and 'ISs' in the region, it is imperative to counter this trend in order to sustain regional security.

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# Why Has the Islamic State Failed to Grow in Kashmir?

Mohammed Sinan Siyech

*Global jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have failed to exploit the Kashmir conflict, unlike conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, given that it is framed as a territorial issue and political dispute as opposed to an Islamist conflict. This article maps out the nature and magnitude of the IS footprint in the Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir (IAJK) by examining the local dynamics of the insurgency. In doing so, it explains that opposition by local insurgent groups and citizens as well as the difficulty of penetration have denied IS any substantive presence in the valley.*

## Introduction

Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir (IAJK) has been mired in diplomatic and international tensions between India and Pakistan. Decades of poor governance, corruption, political disenfranchisement and lack of socio-economic development in the region culminated in a mass insurgency in 1988 and is still continuing today with an estimated death toll of 45,000 to 80,000.<sup>1</sup>

The Indian government has fought off various Kashmiri groups such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), as well as Pakistan-supported militant groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)

among others. Following a relative lull in violence in the 2000s, the insurgency was reignited in 2016 after the killing of Burhan Wani, a local militant commander with extensive social media following.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the protracted insurgency in Kashmir, global jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and IS have struggled to cultivate a substantial presence in the region. Given the two groups' success in attracting foreign militants into other conflict zones such as Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan, their limited traction in Kashmir is notable. This contribution examines the reasons for the limited IS' presence in Kashmir by looking at the strength of the Kashmir narrative and Kashmiri identity over translational Islamist identities, and opposition by local insurgent groups.

## IS' Footprint in Kashmir

Initial signs of IS presence in Kashmir became visible in 2016, after the locals waved the organisation's flag on multiple occasions.<sup>3</sup> Most of these incidents were driven by the frustration of the Kashmiri populace. Towards the end of 2017, its media channel Al-Qaraar increased its Kashmir-centric propaganda<sup>4</sup> when it released a document that criticised the role of 'groups with links to Pakistani intelligence agencies' who, they believed, were fighting for national causes rather than for Islam.<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, Al-Qaraar

<sup>1</sup> "Fatalities in Terrorist Violence 1988 – 2018," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, March 11, 2015, [http://www.satp.org/satporqtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data\\_sheets/annual\\_casualties.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporqtp/countries/india/states/jandk/data_sheets/annual_casualties.htm). It is important to note that casualties are often underreported and the number is likely much higher than the one quoted.

<sup>2</sup> Fahad Shah, "Burhan Wani's Death Has Inspired A New Wave Of Militancy In Kashmir, As Young Men Pick Up Guns," *First Post*, January 08, 2017, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/burhan-wanis-death-has-inspired-a-new-wave-of-militancy-in-kashmir-as-young-men-pick-up-guns-3189286.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Interview With: The Amir of Khurasan," *Dabiq*, January 2016, <http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/Issue-13-the-rafidah.pdf> Amira Jadoon, "An Idea or a Threat? Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir," *CTC Sentinel*, February 09, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/idea-threat-islamic-state-jammu-kashmir/>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Realities of Jihad in Kashmir and Role of Pakistani Agencies", *Al-Qaraar*, Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir Telegram channel, January 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

released another document specifically naming various leaders of Kashmiri political and separatist parties and censuring their secular credentials and willingness to accede to international mediation by the United Nations (UN).<sup>6</sup>

Operationally, IS has claimed two separate assassinations of security officials in 2017 and 2018.<sup>7</sup> However, given IS' propensity to falsely claim responsibility for attacks, these reports are unconfirmed and flimsy at best.<sup>8</sup> Indian security agencies have maintained that IS does not have a strong presence in the valley, citing a lack of members as the major determining factor.<sup>9</sup> As such, IS' influence in Kashmir is mostly limited to the online sphere where it is struggling to recruit youth.

### Non-existent Global Jihad in Kashmir

The IS-led global Jihadist movement has displayed an affinity to latch itself onto conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, by attracting foreign fighters from various countries. Despite this, IS has abstained from directing fighters into, or attracting fighters from Kashmir and the insurgency there has remained a primarily indigenous Kashmiri and Pakistani based movement. Three broad factors explain the disinterest in sending foreign fighters (FF) to the valley: (i) access to the battlefield, (ii) cohesion between local and foreign actors and (iii) chances of Victory.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Amira Jadoon, "An Idea or a Threat? Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir," CTC Sentinel, February 09, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/idea-threat-islamic-state-jammu-kashmir/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, see also "Jammu & Kashmir: After ISIS Claims Killing Cop, State Police Chief Confirms Presence Of Terror Outfit," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2018, <http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/jammu-kashmir-after-isis-claims-killing-cop-state-police-chief-confirms-presence-of-terror-outfit/1081686/>.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Qui, "False ISIS Connections, Nonexistent Victims and Other Misinformation in the Wake of Las Vegas Shooting," *New York Times*, October 02, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/us/politics/viral-claims-and-rumors-in-the-las-vegas-shooting.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Yusuf Jameel, "Has ISIS Succeeded in Making Inroads In Kashmir?" *Deccan Chronicle*, December 22, 2017,

<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/in-other-news/221117/has-isis-succeeded-in-making-inroads-in-kashmir.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)," *ICCT Research Paper*, October 2015,

### (i) Access to the Battlefield

In the case of Afghanistan in the 1980s and Syria since 2011, major mobilisation of foreign fighters was witnessed with strong access to conflict zones (the battlefield).<sup>11</sup> This was facilitated by the Maktab Al-Khidmat headquartered in Peshawar, run by Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam, that arranged logistics for foreign fighters who intended to fight in Afghanistan. For instance, due to the cold war between the US and Russia in the 1980s, many countries including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Yemen among others were eager to facilitate foreign fighters to topple the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in Afghanistan and develop closer ties with the US.<sup>12</sup> This was further reflected in Pakistan's decision to keep its borders open to fighters who were travelling to Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> More or less the same dynamics were at play in Syria where Turkey played the facilitating role.<sup>14</sup>

However, in the case of Kashmir, two factors have hindered or discouraged IS from establishing a foothold. First, the Kashmiri conflict is framed as a territorial and political dispute between India and Pakistan rather than an ideological dispute driven by religious factors.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it does not occupy the same level of importance for Muslims as

<https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Duyvesteyn-Peeters-Fickle-Foreign-Fighters-October2015.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. The Battlefield is defined as the conflict zone. In this case, the battlefield is the state of Indian administered Kashmir where fighters often enter to launch attacks.

<sup>12</sup> Mohammed Hafez, "Jihad After Iraq: Lessons From The Arab Afghans," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 32 (2) (2009): 75

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Bram Peeters, "Fickle Foreign Fighters? A Cross-Case Analysis of Seven Muslim Foreign Fighter Mobilisations (1980-2015)," *ICCT Research Paper*, October 2015,

<https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Duyvesteyn-Peeters-Fickle-Foreign-Fighters-October2015.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Despite the mainly local nature of this conflict, it has been packaged as a religious one to garner support from countries like Turkey, UAE etc. However, over the years, this support has waned. Despite the ongoing propaganda, Kashmir has never been presented as an attractive destination to fight even for groups predating the Islamic State.

conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Barring one attempt, IS has not overtly reached out to Kashmiri groups or made it a central focus of its online propaganda. Secondly, Kashmir is a heavily militarised conflict zone that has a strong presence of over 700,000 Indian military personnel.<sup>17</sup> This means that Indians or global members of IS who might use mainland India to travel into Kashmir will find it difficult to escape the elaborate security measures of Indian security forces.

### **(ii) Internal Cohesion**

In Kashmir, current insurgent groups are broadly united in their desire to bring Kashmir under the control of Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country. While this may seem like a religious ambition, the reality is different since these groups use Islamist rhetoric for furthering recruitment and ideological justification. This was evident during the demise of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) during the 1990s. As Chowdhary noted, the JKLF's demands for independence instead of a merger with Pakistan was heavily undermined by pro-Pakistan militant groups such as HM and LeT.<sup>18</sup> This was done through targeted assassinations of its leaders and HM passing information regarding JKLF's key positions to the Indian military.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the IS rhetoric of a so-called global Sunni caliphate has discouraged the local Kashmiri jihadist groups from joining, thereby reducing its chances of expanding in the valley. The groups fear that IS will not only dilute the indigenous character and nationalist outlook of the Kashmir conflict, but any internationalisation of the dispute will also

<sup>16</sup> Renuka Chowdhary, *Jammu and Kashmir: Politics and Identity of Separatism*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3 – 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ajaz Ashraf, "Do You Need 700,000 Soldiers To Fight 150 Militants?" Kashmiri Rights Activist Khurram Parvez," *Scroll*, July 21, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/812010/do-you-need-700000-soldiers-to-fight-150-militants-kashmiri-rights-activist-khurram-parvez>.

<sup>18</sup> Renuka Chowdhary, *Jammu and Kashmir: Politics and Identity of Separatism*, 111.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ryan Clarke, *Crime-Terror Nexus in South Asia: States, Security and Non-State Actors*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Amira Jadoon, An Idea or a Threat? Islamic State Jammu & Kashmir, *CTC Sentinel*, February 09, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/idea-threat-islamic-state-jammu-kashmir/>

provide the Indian military with increased space and justification to eliminate armed opposition. Moreover, IS' criticism of Kashmiri militant groups in its propaganda also undermines its chances of making any gains in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Other than rejection of IS by Kashmiri militant groups', the local population had its apprehension of the group as well. Even though most locals disapproved of the internationalisation of the Kashmiri conflict, some of these individuals supported the notion and externalised their frustrations towards India, Pakistan and Kashmiri groups by draping slain militants with IS flags.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, security officials reported the presence of IS flags in many areas, representing their displeasure towards all the actors involved.<sup>22</sup> Thus, such efforts by Kashmiri locals were mainly due to political frustration rather than ideological devoutness with regards to IS.

At its core, this resistance to Islamism stems from the concept of 'Kashmiriyat' that the locals adhere to. 'Kashmiriyat' or 'Kashmiriness' is an ideology rooted in the ethnicity of the Kashmiri people that propagates love for the motherland, shared language and customs.<sup>23</sup> Given the 14th century origin of this ideology and its deep seated nature among the Kashmiri populace,<sup>24</sup> there is little space for external ideologies to uproot it, especially due to the exclusivist nature of IS' ideology that seeks to dominate and eliminate sub-identities (including those driven by ethnicity, language and nationality).<sup>25</sup> Hegghammer has argued that the evolution of Islamism played a strong role in globalising jihad in any country, lending

<sup>22</sup> Toufiq Rashid, "ISIS Flags In Kashmir 'More Adventure And Mischief Than Inspiration'," *The Hindustan Times*, December 26, 2015, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/isis-flags-in-kashmir-more-adventure-and-mischief-than-inspiration/story-ZfufsiXSzsYhNI7ZZfzXO.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Rattan Lal Hangloo, "Kashmiriyat: The Voice of The Past Misconstrued", in Nyla Ali Khan et. al. (coords.), *The Parchment of Kashmir, History, Society and Polity*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 36 – 38.

<sup>24</sup> Irfan Ahmed and D. P. Saklani, "Evolution of Kashmiriyat, a Case of Socio-Cultural Assimilation During 14th and 15th Century" in *Remarking an Analisation* (India), 1(8) (2016): 73.

<sup>25</sup> Alia el Didi, 'Understanding ISIS Ideology: The Evolution of Political Islam (Part 4),' *NAOC*, March 04, 2015, <http://natoassociation.ca/understanding-isis-ideology-the-evolution-of-political-islam-part-4/>



credence to the idea that the presence of a pervasive ideology such as ‘Kashmiriyat’ makes it difficult for IS’ ideology to penetrate the population.<sup>26</sup>

### **(iii) Chances of Victory**

Low chances of achieving a victory or separation from the Indian state in Kashmir have also discouraged IS from creating a foothold in the region. In fact, even with their strongest operational capabilities, the insurgent groups could not have toppled the Indian administration in Kashmir. The presence of militant outfits was often used to direct increased expenditure on security to quash the insurgency.<sup>27</sup> Even though Kashmir sporadically faces internecine violence, it remains relatively stable given the implementation of the rule of law, elections and other processes essential to peace, unlike conflict zones in Iraq and Syria.

In addition, the positioning of IS within the Kashmiri conflict would not result in support from the Indian Muslim population (which would act as a recruitment pool for IS). This is primarily because Muslims in India largely refrain from discussing Kashmir in weekly sermons or social activist events for fear of being seen as Pakistani agents<sup>28</sup> – a highly popularised and predatory narrative peddled in India.<sup>29</sup> Thus, IS might not consider India and Kashmir as attractive areas for operation and recruitment.

### **No Allegiances**

So far, IS has failed to garner a pledge of allegiance from any Kashmiri militant group, which remains the group’s primary method of establishing a formal presence in any region. Militant groups often pledge allegiance in

order to enhance tactical capabilities and training, increase funding and fight off other terrorist groups operating in the same conflict theatre.<sup>30</sup> In Kashmir, none of these factors have compelled any group or breakaway faction to pledge allegiance to IS.

As long as the larger groups are reasonably well funded and logistically powerful, there is not much that IS can offer them. Yet, IS has made an effort to attract smaller breakaway factions like Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind, which is a splinter group of the Hizbul Mujahideen, even though the group pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda.<sup>31</sup> The group has maintained ties with Al-Qaeda possibly due to the fear of drawing the ire of the Pakistani leaning terrorist groups like LeT and JeM, which are dominant in the valley. Another reason to explain why local militant groups have kept a distance from IS ideologically and operationally, would be that they want to prevent international condemnation and reduced legitimacy of the Kashmiri cause.

### **Prospects of IS in Kashmir**

The penetration of IS in Kashmir remains highly unlikely. However, Islamist groups in the valley and India are generally strengthened by feeding off pre-existing groups. For instance, IS in India’s chief recruiter Shafi Armar, was previously a member of the Indian Mujahideen.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Al-Qaeda’s Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (which IS has been trying to win over) is a breakaway faction of the current Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).<sup>33</sup> If IS’ ideological narrative resonates with the members of existing local militant factions, the group may then have a chance to grow in Kashmir.

<sup>26</sup> Thomah Hegghammer, ‘The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,’ *International Security*, 35(3) (2015): 53-94.

<sup>27</sup> V.G. Patankar, “Insurgency, Proxy War and Terrorism in Kashmir,” in *India and Counterinsurgency: Lessons Learned*, eds. Sumit Ganguly, David P. Fidler (London: Routledge, 2009), 65-79.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interviews with members of the Indian Muslim community belonging to parts of East, South and North India.

<sup>29</sup> Yoginder Sikand “Sayyed Abul Hasan ‘Ali Nadwi and Contemporary Islamic Thought in India,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 88.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Vijaita Singh, “Islamic State, Al-Qaeda Competing For Indian Recruits,” *The Hindu*, December 24, 2017,

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/islamic-state-al-qaeda-competing-for-indian-recruits/article22270385.ece>

<sup>32</sup> Vicky Nanjappa, “Who Is Shafi Armar, The Karnataka Born Global ISIS Terrorist,” *One India*, June 16, 2016,

<https://www.oneindia.com/india/who-is-shafi-armar-the-karnataka-born-isis-terrorist-2465884.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Hurriyat Decries Hizbul Line”, *The Telegraph*, March 18, 2017,

[https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170318/jsp/nation/story\\_141320.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170318/jsp/nation/story_141320.jsp).

Additionally, repression by the Indian state and specifically the harsh counter insurgency campaigns could continue to alienate the locals from the wider Indian state and increase the traction of extremist narratives.<sup>34</sup> Given that younger Kashmiris have not witnessed an end to the instability in the state, they are likely to view older insurgent groups as incompetent and subsequently join Global Jihadist groups. However, even then, IS would have to compete with Al-Qaeda for popularity in Kashmir. In this case, there is no certainty that IS will gain more traction than Al-Qaeda.

In conclusion, IS has not made inroads into the Kashmiri militant landscape, and this status quo will remain unchanged in the near future due to the factors discussed. However, the incidences of IS' presence in Kashmir suggest that the Indian state needs to rethink its approach towards the Kashmir insurgency. The problematic military approach of suppressing the insurgency has created pockets of marginalised citizens who may be at risk of joining IS. India's approach to countering the problem in Kashmir has to combine this with soft measures, and the authorities would have to be more mindful of the population if it wants to continue its current record of defeating and weakening insurgent and terrorist groups in the valley.

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<sup>34</sup> Ajaz Ashraf, "Do You Need 700,000 Soldiers To Fight 150 Militants?" Kashmiri rights activist Khurram Parvez," *Scroll*, July 21, 2016,

<https://scroll.in/article/812010/do-you-need-700000-soldiers-to-fight-150-militants-kashmiri-rights-activist-khurram-parvez>.

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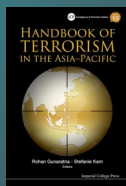
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The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. RSIS' mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS' activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific. For more information about RSIS, please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg).

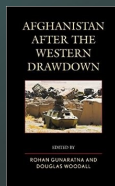


The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) is a specialist research centre within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. ICPVTR conducts research and analysis, training and outreach programmes aimed at reducing the threat of politically motivated violence and mitigating its effects on the international system. The Centre seeks to integrate academic theory with field research, which is essential for a complete and comprehensive understanding of threats from politically-motivated groups. The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, counter-terrorism analysts and other research staff. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America as well as Islamic religious scholars. Please visit [www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/](http://www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/) for more information.

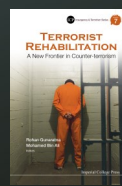
## STAFF PUBLICATIONS



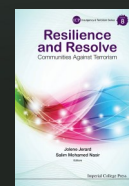
**Handbook of Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific**  
Rohan Gunaratna and Stefanie Kam (eds)  
(Imperial College Press, 2016)



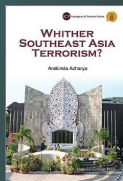
**Afghanistan After the Western Drawdown**  
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(Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015)



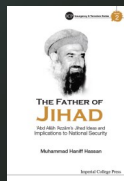
**Terrorist Rehabilitation**  
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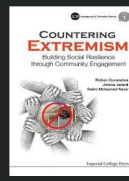
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(Imperial College Press, 2015)



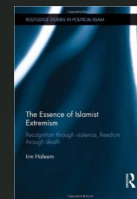
**Whither Southeast Asia Terrorism**  
Arabinda Acharya  
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**The Father of Jihad**  
Muhammad Haniff Hassan  
(Imperial College Press, 2014)



**Countering Extremism**  
Rohan Gunaratna, Salim Mohamed Nasir and Jolene Jerard  
(Imperial College Press, 2013)



**The Essence of Islamist Extremism**  
Irm Haleem  
(Routledge, 2011)

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Global Pathfinder is a one-stop repository for information on current and emerging terrorist threats from the major terrorism affected regions of the world. It is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, terrorist personalities, terrorist and counter-terrorist incidents as well as terrorist training camps. This includes profiles from emerging hubs of global terrorism affecting the security of the world, as well as the deadliest threat groups in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The database also contains analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles. For further inquiries regarding subscription and access to Global Pathfinder, please contact Ng Suat Peng at [isngsp@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:isngsp@ntu.edu.sg).

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