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The Urban and Educated Jihadists of South Asia

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Contrary to popular perception that the jihadists in South Asia come from poor socio-economic backgrounds with madrasah education, a new breed of educated and urban militants with the urge for a sense of belonging has emerged in the region. The desire to create a global Sunni caliphate, among other factors, has contributed to their violent-radicalisation.

Commentary

TRADITIONALLY JIHADISTS in South Asia have been associated with militant organisations like the Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the Indian Mujahideen (IM) and Harkatul Jihadul Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B). These jihadist outfits recruited people from the rural and poor socio-economic backgrounds with madrasah education.

Contrary to these perceptions, in the last two years, a new breed of educated jihadists from urban middle and upper middle class has emerged in South Asia. This breed of South Asian jihadists is manifested in self-radicalised cells and lone-wolf individuals.

Driving Factor: Double Alienation

For instance, the pro-IS cell in Karachi that targeted members of the Ismaili Shia community in Karachi in May 2014 and the five-member cell which carried out the Holey Artisan Bakery attack in Dhaka in July 2016 were educated scions of rich families. More recently, the terrorists who targeted the Quetta police-training academy in Balochistan were college and university educated students except for the suicide bomber who was a madrasah student.

Similarly, in November last year, Sri Lanka's Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe briefed the parliament that 32 Sri Lankan Muslims from well-educated and elite families joined Islamic State in Syria. Likewise, the aspiring jihadists who travelled to Syria and Iraq from India had educated and urban backgrounds.

The path to violent-extremism of these jihadists has been paved by an identity crisis, quest for a sense of belonging, a struggle for recognition and resentment towards their respective states due to unemployment, corruption, and bad governance. They suffer a double alienation: from the irresponsive states failing them as citizens and societies where a lack of consensus on what constitutes a 'good Muslim' pushes them to extremist discourses for answers. This set of grievances falls within the broader parameters of contemporary Political Islam and the Salafist narrative.

Traditionally, the Jihadist and sectarian organisations in South Asia have been grassroots movements linked to madrasahs and mosque networks whose target audience remained poor and lower-income class segments of the society. Meanwhile the educated middle- and upper-middle class sections of urban areas have been targeted by evangelical and missionary organisations like Hizbut Tahrir, Al-Huda and Tanzeem-e-Islami whose teachings and lectures revolve around contemporary discourses on political Islam.

Three Reasons

Three reasons account for the emergence of educated and urban militants in South Asia. Firstly, the deeper Internet penetration and the onset of social media that has decreased the distance between local and global developments, accelerated the flow of communication, democratised violence and eroded states' monopoly on information. The unregulated cyber space in South Asia of 480 million users is the second largest in the world. IS has exploited it to further its ideological narrative. This has had a huge impact on patterns of violent-extremism and terrorism.

The IS' ability to universalise local grievances in its meta-narrative of global-jihad and offer a putative solution in the revival of the so-called Caliphate has resonated with some of the educated population in urban areas. Other than addressing individual grievances, such rhetoric also provided them with a stronger sense of belonging and empowerment.

Secondly, the lower-threshold of radicalisation and violence because of IS' violent and cinematic tactics has also played a critical role in mobilising the South Asian-educated and urban youth. They may have harboured radical thoughts but they did not find Al Qaeda and its associates' jihadist platforms attractive. IS' radical message provided them an alternative jihadist platform to create a global "Sunni Caliphate" and a spiritual fight for the glory of Islam.

Thirdly, the generational shift undergone by social, political and religious movements creating a rift between the old and the new generations. This rift can lead to the creation of splinter factions by the young and rebellious membership impatient and hungry for change and driven by grand ambitions while the older generation is seen as status quo-oriented and rigid.

Traits and Characteristics of Urban Jihadists

Characteristically, this generation of South Asian urban militants is tech and media savvy, compared to the traditional South Asian jihadists, and has Salafi-Takfiri leanings.

Most of the militants of this generation are between 18-30 years and they have gone through a relatively shorter period of radicalisation. They all seem to be obsessed with ideas of the so-called Caliphate, *hijrah* and the end-times narratives. It is extreme in its methods, unapologetically brutal and morally consequentialist: for them the ends justify the means.

In the rapidly changing global and regional environment, especially the reshaping of the Sunni-Shia conflict in the Middle East arising from civil wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, the disaffected and disfranchised Muslim youth in South Asia are facing an ideological dilemma. This unique challenge, in addition to operational and traditional law enforcement responses, requires counter-narrative and counter-ideological responses.

The existing policy frameworks for counter-terrorism and extremism will have to be revised in line with the evolving trends and patterns. However, the counter-ideological components within the broader Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks do not need to borrow foreign concepts. The answers to the ideological threat are local and enshrined within the pacifist tradition of Sufi Islam in South Asia.

Sufi Islam promotes communal and sectarian tolerance and preaches peaceful-co-existence which needs to be promoted and strengthened. The concept is indigenous to the South Asian socio-cultural milieu and political environment.

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