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South India: The Islamist Connection

By Jasminder Singh

SYNOPSIS

Indian authorities have arrested several individuals with links to radical Islamist networks in the country's south in recent months. Following the bomb attacks in neighbouring Sri Lanka, there have been fears of similar attacks in South India.

COMMENTARY

THE SERIES of deadly bomb attacks on Easter Sunday, allegedly orchestrated by a group linked to Islamic State (IS), on Sri Lankan churches and luxury hotels that killed more than 250 people, has heightened concerns about the growing spread of terrorism-related activities in the wider South Asian region.

India has mostly been spared violence at the hands of IS; the group has not conducted any major attacks or succeeded in recruiting a large number of members in the country. However, India has its fair share of IS sympathisers and individuals who have travelled abroad to join and fight for the group in Syria and Iraq. Over the past year, Indian security agencies have also foiled several domestic plots by IS-linked operatives around the country.

IS Province in the South?

A surprising development was the group's declaration of a province (*Wilayat al-Hind*) in May, soon after a devastating suicide attack targeting Indian security forces in the Jammu and Kashmir region. The attack was reportedly perpetrated by an IS-linked cell. Equally surprising was the revelation of tentative connections between radical Islamist networks operating in Kerala and Tamil Nadu and the suicide bombers involved in the Easter Sunday attacks in Colombo.

Historically, India has faced a variety of threats from militant separatists, Maoist rebels and radical Islamist groups. Compared to other countries, IS has largely failed to gain a significant foothold in India, except in the Kashmir region, where local militants affiliated with IS have formed the Islamic State in Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK).

In the South, there have been few instances of armed violence linked to radical Islamists, although since 2014, the National Investigations Agency (NIA), India's main anti-terrorism agency, has arrested several hundred IS-linked operatives in a series of raids of hideouts in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Various pro-IS websites have also been shut down and individuals radicalised online more closely monitored. The authorities have accused the arrested operatives of "propagating" IS ideology and attempting to recruit "vulnerable youth" to carry out attacks in Southern India.

Sri Lanka–India Connection

In June, police raids in the city of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu saw the arrest of a man with alleged links to the suicide bomber who planned Sri Lanka's deadly Easter Sunday attacks. Investigators said Mohammad Azharuddin, 32, had been friends on Facebook with Zahran Hashim, the alleged ringleader.

Although the precise involvement of IS in the Sri Lanka attack is unclear, Sri Lankan security officials have said they received prior intelligence from their Indian counterparts – extracted from IS sympathisers in Tamil Nadu – that an attack in the country was likely. This suggests IS-connected individuals in India had advanced knowledge of the Easter attack.

Moreover, when IS claimed responsibility for the Sri Lanka bombings, it issued statements in Tamil and Malayalam, in addition to English and Arabic. This suggests the organisation has recruits fluent in Tamil and Malayalam, which are respectively spoken in [Tamil Nadu](#) and northern and eastern Sri Lanka, as well as the southern Indian state of Kerala.

Radicalisation Factors

IS' influence in South Asia is limited. According to the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), a think tank in New Delhi, about 180 Indians have been identified as foreign fighters who joined IS in Syria. A majority of them, however, were from the South.

Both in Syria and Afghanistan, South Indians have also held leadership roles in armed jihadist networks. For example, Shafi Armar, who is from the state of Karnataka, was the main IS recruiter in India. Another individual, Rashid Abdulla, was believed to be the leader of a group of 21 Indian nationals who migrated to Afghanistan to join IS. Both were reportedly killed recently.

Although various socio-political factors contributed to the initial lack of traction of jihadist narratives in South India, the emergence of IS in 2014 appeared to alter the landscape to some extent in parts of the South. Like other militant groups, IS has a

track record of capitalising on disenfranchisement among Muslim minorities, speaking to their particular grievances.

The spread of hostile anti-Muslim rhetoric across South Asia, fuelled by social media, as well as other local grievances, has been seized on by militant groups in the post-caliphate era.

Online Radicalisation

Hard-line Salafi ideas also appear to have made inroads in South India in recent years. Indeed at least half of the Indian nationals believed to have travelled to Syria to join IS are believed to come from Kerala. Although the reasons for this are not well established, Kerala has a labour force numbering in the millions residing in the Gulf. Security officials say such migrants may have come under the influence of ultra-conservative forms of Islam.

The role of online radicalisation and radical preachers is equally important. In India, IS has found some traction by targeting mostly youth on various social media platforms. Most are radicalised by India-specific material that purports IS ideology, including speeches and videos in languages such as Tamil and Malayalam.

Preachers who propagate radical interpretations of Islam are also a factor. In Kerala, an Islamic preacher M M Akbar who heads a chain of schools, was arrested in 2018 as textbooks used in one of his schools were deemed to propagate extremist ideologies. Four staff associated with the schools are also believed to have joined IS.

Potential Spill-over?

In India there are groups that have been attracted to both Al Qaeda (AQ) and IS. Both groups have claimed India to be part of their target zone. AQ has established Al Qaeda in the Indian Sub-continent while IS has described the region as a Khorasan, and more recently established a 'Hind Wilayah' in Jammu and Kashmir.

The quest for influence by both AQ and IS is likely to make India an important zone of contestation with security implications for the region and beyond.

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