

## Lengthening shadows

Reshmi Kazi

*The Paris attacks should warn us that the threat from ISIS is real and poses a challenge to the security environment in India.*

The series of attacks in Paris in November 2015, styled on the 26/11 Mumbai attacks of 2008, has left the world a degree more unsafe than before. The multiple-coordinated terror attacks which left 129 people dead and many critically wounded demonstrated to the world just how far the terrorists are willing to go to impose costs on the world. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attacks, stating that it was meant to avenge the French airstrikes on their targets in Syria and Iraq. The complex assaults have already shaken France and the rest of Europe.

Will the Islamist State limit its terror operations to Europe? Will they target non-western nations like India?

The Islamic State (IS) poses dangers from two fronts. First, it is a terror organisation targeting potential random victims, as in the Paris attacks. Second, the ISIS acts as a mechanism to spread its ideology in an attempt to radicalise vulnerable youth far and wide. ISIS projects itself as the custodian of Islamic ideals determined to restore the Caliphate. Through various social media tools like the cyber, ISIS has appealed to Muslims worldwide to extend support and perform jihad against the western world.

In India, The manifestations of Islamic State's potential influence became first visible when, in November 2014, Arif Majeed, along with four other youths from Kalyan who had allegedly joined the IS, fled from Iraq and returned to India. He had reportedly received training and fought alongside the IS in Iraq and Syria. Thereafter in December 2014, Bengaluru-based Mehdi Masroor Biswas a qualified engineer was arrested on charges of international terrorism. He was reportedly operating the pro IS @ShamiWitness Twitter handle. Though not directly involved with the Islamic State, @ShamiWitness was a hub of ISIL propaganda and a source of

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*Reshmi Kazi is with the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. The opinions here are of the author's alone. Email: reshmikazi@gmail.com.*

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incitement to new recruits. He accumulated information put out in Arabic and translated it into English using online translation tools, before actively tweeting it. He also tweeted his own interpretations of events and situations. According to reports, “Through his social media

propaganda he supported ISIS in its agenda to wage war against the Asiatic powers.” Though now deactivated, the Twitter handle attracted more than 18,000 followers within two years. In May 2015, five men linked to the IS were arrested from Ratlam, Madhya Pradesh. They were in touch with the jihad cell of the IS and planning strikes within India. This was an alarming development as it reflected on the strategy of IS to plan and operate through widely dispersed sleeper cells. The busting of the five-member Indian cell was a pointer that perhaps more such modules were still active on Indian soil and elsewhere. Other evidence of slow but sure IS influence was seen when, in June 2015, a masked youth waved the ISIL black flags in Jammu and Kashmir. Noteworthy, this incident was preceded by similar gesture by youths only a week before in the State.

These above incidents are pointers that the ISIL is actively using social media tools to radicalise young minds and lure them as potential recruits. Home Ministry officials say that 23 youths have, until now, joined the ISIL of which six were reportedly killed. Another 150 Indians are under surveillance for their alleged links with ISIS *via* Internet. However, these are official estimates; the actual number may be more than this.

These developments portend a dangerous situation gradually evolving in India. In December 2014, Home Minister Rajnath Singh dismissed the ISIS influence in India as ‘negligible’. However, a year later things appear much different. The ISIL influence is steadily spreading in India. During interrogation, Afsha Jabeen an IS sympathiser and an online recruiter revealed that she was in close contact with at least nine IS sympathisers in Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Kashmir. These individuals are fully radicalised IS activists and strong supporters of the Caliphate. Investigations further revealed that there are 14 more active members from Jabeen’s Facebook group ‘Islam vs Christianity, a friendly discussion’ who are based in India and abroad.

Recently, the ISIL in a new manifesto *Black Flags from the Islamic State*, released online on jihadist platforms has pledged to expand its fight to India and several other South Asian countries. The manifesto has carefully analysed growing incidents of intolerance like the Dadri lynching and beef ban in India. It has used these incidents to incite and exhort the Muslims to come out of their comfort zones and fight the New World Order for the establishment of the Caliphate. The manifesto further threatens the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and caricatures him as the enemy of the Muslims. The ISIL is already believed to have developed links with existing indigenous militant groups like the Indian Mujahideen (IM). Following the arrest of Yasin Bhatkal, intercepted calls between him and his wife indicated that Bhatkal probably was seeking help from ISIL to escape from India.

Should India be worried? True that the number of radicalised youths who have displayed eagerness to join ISIL is very minuscule. However, it must be borne in mind that these are official estimates and the actual figures may be much more, and counting. It can be also argued that the Al Qaeda, which has been functional now for over two decades has not been successful in carrying out any terror attack within India. However, such assessments are not self-fulfilling by themselves. Unlike Al Qaeda, ISIL professes to establish the Caliphate by 2020, something that the Al Qaeda has not been able to do. Besides, unlike the Al Qaeda which operates through sleeper cells, the IS has a declared State under its control. This is more appealing for radical elements that triumph Islamic ideals and its notions albeit distorted ones.

The IS is making slow but steady inroads into India through the mechanism of virtual communication methods. The cyber tools are an effective medium for online radicalization of youths as potential recruits for championing the cause of the IS. According to official estimates, there are approximately 55 facilitators involved in recruitment process from within India. Unfortunate incidents and rising intolerance is only abetting the agenda of the IS and facilitating them to gain roots within India.

The ISIL threat to India cannot be ignored simply because terrorism has evolved and become more lethal in India. Terrorism found its roots in India with the 1993 Mumbai multiple bombings, graduated to the revelation of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorist Syed Abdul Karim Tunda's involvement in the 1997 Delhi bomb blasts, rise of the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), which transformed into the militant IM and now the Islamic State which slowly spreading its tentacles over vulnerable Indian youth. For India, the IS threat is closer home than one may believe. Apart from the online indoctrination mechanisms, Pakistan remains a potential factor for the spread of IS within India. Many of the militant groups like LeT and IM have their roots within Pakistan that allows them on its soil as a safe haven for breeding extremism. The radical environment in India is gradually shaping up and unless checked in time, holds the potential to be a significant challenge to India's political, social and security fabric.