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India faces a new challenge: jihadist radicalization

By VINAY KAURA
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Jihadist terrorism in India is on the verge of acquiring a global footprint, as radicalization and recruitment have become more sophisticated thanks to social media and the Internet. This marks a clear departure from the past when jihadist terrorism was almost synonymous with the insurgency in Kashmir.

It was often held that ideologically motivated Islamist terror had bypassed mainland India and that even though there had been a separatist insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir state, Muslims in the rest of the country had spurned the radical revivalist movements plaguing other Islamic countries. This is no longer the case, as a growing number of Muslims from mainland India are becoming radicalized.

Last week, in a joint anti-terror operation by the police teams of five states, an allegedly ISIS-inspired terror module spanning Maharashtra, Punjab, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh was busted with the arrest of three suspected terrorists.

The police had received intelligence that some known terror suspects in Uttar Pradesh had become active and were trying to recruit new members to launch a major terror attack in the

country. Initial investigations into the Bhopal-Ujjain passenger train blast in March convinced the security agencies that it was first major ISIS operation in India.

Saifullah, the alleged ISIS-inspired terrorist killed in a shootout with police in the first week of March in Lucknow, had also been tasked with securing arms and training facilities for a new ISIS-linked terror cell in Uttar Pradesh. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) first came to know of Saifullah from Mudabbir Mushtaq Sheikh, a resident of Maharashtra state. Mudabbir is now facing trial for his alleged role as chief of the Jund-ul-Khalifa-ul-Hind, an organization of Indian jihadists inspired by ISIS.

It is feared that India may become a soft target in the global jihadist plan of outfits such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, which are not only instigating violence through sleeper modules, but are also attracting educated Muslim youths through the Internet to spread their agenda. Though ISIS has declared its intention to expand its footprint in the subcontinent, it has not managed to make considerable headway in India. However, it is also an undeniable fact that a few of India's misguided Muslim youth are being swayed by Wahhabist propaganda.

What has been most surprising is that many of the individuals arrested for involvement in some recent attacks are young men with good educations and prestigious occupations, such as doctors and engineers. These men are often motivated through the Internet or through Pakistan-based terrorist networks.

The majority of the home-grown terrorists are apparently self-radicalized, self-motivated and inspired by the extreme jihadist ideology of ISIS as well as by local grievances. The groups formed to carry out attacks are loose conglomerations, and it is still unclear whether there is an overarching commanding element directing the different cells.

To compound the challenge emanating from Pakistan-based jihadist outfits, there are believed to be many Indian Muslim youths fighting for ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Indian Intelligence Bureau estimated in 2016 that ISIS' Indian cell engaged more than 700 people in conversation – and raised more than 20 identified volunteers.

During the past two years, the NIA has arrested several persons accused of forming ISIS modules, whose members use social-media platforms for plotting terrorist attacks. The data suggest that people subscribing to ISIS ideology are present across India, making it increasingly difficult for the law-enforcement agencies to keep track of them.

The Ministry of Home Affairs informed the Rajya Sabha, upper house of the Parliament of India, in March that 75 people had been arrested for suspected links to the ISIS terror network. Of these 75 persons, 21 were from Kerala, 16 from Telangana, nine from Karnataka, eight from Maharashtra, six from Madhya Pradesh, four from Uttarakhand, three from Uttar Pradesh, two from Rajasthan, four from Tamil Nadu and one each from Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal.

The NIA has also revealed that it arrested 52 people for allegedly being ISIS terrorists last year, including a few converts from Hinduism and Christianity. While releasing data on the arrests, the

NIA gave details of the religious affiliations of the accused: 50 per cent belonged to Ahle Hadith, 30 per cent to Tabligi Jamat, and 20 per cent followed Deobandi ideology.

Indian security agencies need to be worried on three accounts. First is the risk of a “lone actor” attack, similar to some recent terror attacks in European cities, including one in Paris just a few days before the first round of French presidential elections. Second is the presence of distinct terror modules that could be activated at short notice. And third, there is the concern of radicalized youth approaching other terror organizations for logistical support.

Because of these factors, ISIS is seen as posing a serious security threat, as its ideologues are not part of an organized syndicate such as the Indian Mujahedeen, which was relatively easy to crack. ISIS is a different phenomenon, as every module is different and is handled by different operators abroad. As ISIS has been under pressure in Iraq and Syria and many of its members are on the run, a major worry of security agencies is about their return to India.