

Taking stock of Islamic State 2.0

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"The belief in India and Sri Lanka that they are shielded from radical extremist tendencies needs a relook."

On Easter Sunday this year, April 21, Sri Lanka witnessed a series of coordinated bomb blasts, killing over 250 people. It was the heaviest toll in Sri Lanka in terms of lives lost since the civil war ended in 2009, thus ending a decade of peace.

The orchestrated attacks, on three churches and three hotels frequented by tourists, were clearly intended to forward a message. The way they were carried out further indicated that the dynamics were global though the perpetrators were locals. The pattern of attacks on the churches was not dissimilar from Islamic State (IS)-mounted attacks on churches in Surabaya in Indonesia in May last year, and in Jolo in the Philippines this January. The IS's statement soon after the attacks put to rest all speculation. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself was to announce subsequently that the attacks in Sri Lanka were revenge for the fall of the Syrian town of Baghuz, the last IS-ruled village overrun by Syrian forces in March this year.

Key setting for radicalism

The question most often asked is why Sri Lanka was chosen by the IS to announce that it was business as usual. A more relevant question might well be why an IS attack of this scale had not been seen in this region previously. South Asia today is a virtual cauldron of radical Islamist extremist activity. From Afghanistan through Pakistan to the Maldives to Bangladesh, radical Islamist extremism is an ever present reality. Both India and Sri Lanka, however, prefer to believe that they are shielded from such tendencies, but this needs a relook.

In the case of Sri Lanka, it is by now evident that officials had turned a blind eye to the fact that areas such as Kattankudy and its environs in the northeast have become hotbeds of Wahabi-Salafi attitudes and practices. Muslim youth here have been radicalised to such an extent that it should have set alarm bells ringing. The example of Zahran Mohammed Hashim, who founded the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ) in 2014 in Kattankudy, and within a couple of years expanded its membership multi-fold, was one index of what was happening. Hashim, who was among the terrorists who carried out the Easter Day bombings and died in the process, had swayed hundreds of impressionable youth with his oratory to support his radical agenda and was able to transform the moderate Islamic landscape to a more radicalised one. From this, it was but a short step to embark on the path of terror.

The advent of the IS occurred at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, at a time when a new breed of terrorists had emerged, inspired by the Egyptian, Sayyid Qutb, and the Palestinian, Abdullah Azzam. Combining this with the practical theology of Afghan warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani made for a potent mixture. In addition to this,

the IS introduced the concept of a new Caliphate — especially al-Baghdadi's vision of a Caliphate based on Islamic history. This further ignited the imagination of Muslim youth across the globe and became a powerful magnet to attract volunteers to their cause. Employing the themes of hijra and bay'ah, Sunni Muslims everywhere were urged to migrate to the Islamic Caliphate. At the peak of its power, the IS held territory both in Iraq and Syria, almost equal in size to the United Kingdom.

Pivotal role of the Net

Islamic State 2.0 remains wedded to this idea of a caliphate, even though the caliphate is no longer in existence. It retains its ability to proselytise over the Internet, making a special virtue of 'direct-to-home' jihad. It continues to manage a 'virtual community' of fanatical sympathisers who adhere to their doctrine.

IS State 2.0 includes several new variations from the original concept. Returnees from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq appear more inclined to follow tactics employed by other 'oppressed' Muslim communities, as for instance the Chechens. In Sri Lanka, a close knit web of family relationships has ensured secrecy and prevented leakage of information, thereby opting for methods of old-time anarchists. Reliance on online propaganda and social media has vastly increased. The IS has also refashioned several of its existing relationships.

Tactics have varied from 'lone wolf' attacks that were seen over the past year and more in the West, to coordinated, large-scale simultaneous attacks on multiple targets, as witnessed in Sri Lanka. The real threat that the IS, however, poses is that it is able to convince the Muslim extremist fringe that their time has come. The 'idea' is the medium. As the IS morphs into IS 2.0, 'territorial flexibility' is being replaced with 'strategic flexibility'.

Ideas have an enormous impact. Radicalisation, in any event, has less to do with numbers than with the intensity of beliefs. The struggle is not against presumed disparities or injustices meted out to Muslim minorities. Rather, it reflects the quest for a new militant Islamist identity. It has more to do with the internal dynamics of Muslim societies, which across the world appear to be tilting towards radicalist tendencies. Saudi funding and the role of foreign preachers are playing a significant role in this.

Lessons for India

India must heed the lessons of what occurred on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka. India is already in the cross hairs of the IS, and the announcement that the IS has created a separate 'province' should not be ignored. Some of the claims made may appear exaggerated but the threat posed by IS 2.0 is real.

Links between IS groups in Sri Lanka and India currently stand exposed and they should be cause for concern. The kingpin of the Easter blasts, Hashim, was linked to jihadis in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He had a corresponding unit in Tamil Nadu. Indian authorities may do well to revisit the September 2018 criminal conspiracy case registered in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, which contained certain over-arching plans by the IS to target Hindus and non-Muslim activists in India. The National Investigation Agency (NIA) during its investigations has since come across links connecting IS units in Kerala and Tamil Nadu with the NTJ in Sri Lanka. These need to be pursued further. Detailed investigation by the NIA is called for to unearth connections of the kind that involved Aadhil Ameer, a Sri Lankan software engineer suspected in the Easter bombings, in India.

The number of Indian returnees from Syria may be small, but each of them would have come back having lost 'all sense of purpose'. Their memories would only be of relentless artillery barrages, rocket fire and the air strikes that battered IS strongholds into submission. This is bound to nurture feelings of revenge — mainly against the West but extending to

other segments as well. The attacks on luxury hotels and churches in Sri Lanka do smack of revenge against so-called atrocities on the IS in their Syrian stronghold.

IS 2.0 is likely to nurture two types: the less informed rabid supporters and a band of highly radical ideologues who can entice Muslim youth to their cause. The path to radicalisation of both segments is through the Internet. Time spent alone online listening to propaganda can produce fanaticism of the most extreme variety. It could promote a binary world view of a conflict between ‘believers’ and ‘non-believers’, allowing radical Islamists to set the agenda. Zahran Mohammed Hashim is a striking example of how an individual can sway hundreds of impressionable youth in favour of a cause and not only transform the landscape from moderate Islam to radicalised Islam, but also induce the cadres to embark on terror. It is not so much the NTJ per se as propaganda by erstwhile leaders such as Zahran Hashim, who are the true flag bearers of a new era of radicalist Islam, and of the new brand of terror that they propound.

GS World Team...

The Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT)

What is it?

- This draft was prepared by India in the year 1996, which provides comprehensive and integrated legal framework against terrorism.
- CCIT provides a legal framework that imposes this obligation on signatory countries that they will not provide financial assistance or shelter to terrorist organizations.
- There is a provision that there should be a universal definition of terrorism, which would include all member states of the United Nations General Assembly in its criminal law.

an objective

- For the universal definition of terrorism all 193 members of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) will adopt this criminal law.
- To ban all terrorist groups and stop terrorist camps.
- To prosecute all terrorists under special laws.
- Declaring cross-border terrorism at the global level as an extraditable offense.
- Illegal Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967

What is it?

- This law was made for effective prevention of illegal activities in India.

- Its main purpose is to use legal power for anti-national activities.
- According to this act, if any anti-nationalist movement supports or supports a claim on the territory of India made by a foreign country, then it will be considered a crime.
- It was passed in 1967. Later it was first revised in 2008 and again in 2012.

Some disputed provisions of the Act

- The definition of terrorism in this is not so clear. Therefore, non-violent political activities and political opposition also come under the definition of terrorism.
- If the government bans calling an organization as a terrorist then it becomes a criminal act to be a member of such an organization.
- According to this act, anyone can be arrested for 180 days without charge sheet and police custody of 30 days can be taken.
- There is difficulty in getting bail and there is no question of advance bail.
- In this, on the strength of evidence, any crime is treated as a terrorist offense.
- Special courts are formed within this Act which has the right to hear the closure and can also use the secret witnesses.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements-

1. Islamic State 2.0 is dedicated to the subject of territory of Khalifa.
2. Heinous crimes have been perpetrated in Indonesia first, Philippines and then Sri Lanka by Islamic State.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. Q.What do you mean by Islamic State 2.0 in the news recently? Has Islamic State acquired its lost land? Present your views in the context of present events. (250 Words)**

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 18 May. is 1 (b)

