

IS in South Asia: Blessing in disguise?

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The rise of Islamic State poses a great threat to South Asia, but also provides the region with a rare opportunity. A collective threat by a non-State actor to the entire region may mean the countries will rise to meet the threat collectively. This commentary looks into the nature of the threat and a possible response – individually and collectively – through and outside the SAARC process.

ISIS in South Asia: Separating facts from fiction

First, a caution on the nature of ISIS attacks and its presence in South Asia. From Kabul to Dhaka, there have been numerous stories on the presence of the Islamic State. Scaremongers and vested interests have been linking several recent terror attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh with ISIS.

| *Jihadis from Europe are more equipped, motivated and educated*

Has the ISIS reached South Asia? If not, why are the recent attacks being claimed in the name of the ISIS? Who are the perpetrators and how does the ISIS tag come into those recent terrorist attacks in South Asia?

Although there have been reports and statements by the ISIS “spokespersons” in South Asia – from Afghanistan to Bangladesh, and at times even covering Myanmar – it is not clear whether they were actually made by the ISIS headquarters in Iraq. It is entirely possible that a group or a few individuals in the region are using the ISIS tag to project their own atrocities.

The ISIS, given its contemporary realities and geographic and ethnic contiguities, will rather look towards West, especially Turkey and rest of Europe, and other countries in West Asia. Other than that, it would prefer moving south towards North Africa rather than taking a leap into South Asia. ISIS also has a steady inflow of jihadis from Europe, who are well equipped, highly motivated and better educated than a ragtag group of butchers and murderers from South Asia.

Instead of ISIS looking towards South Asia, one could assume that individuals or groups in South Asia are looking towards ISIS in an attempt to pull it into the region. A “franchise” and “franchisee” relationship could develop between ISIS and such groups in South Asia. Such a trend was present even during the heyday of Al Qaeda, and one can identify it more clearly now. The ISIS today, as Al Qaeda then, is an international brand of terrorism. Terrorists and small groups of militants look at them as a franchise. Individuals at the local level see the international brand as a source of ideology, as an idea to replicate in their own areas, and importantly, to use its tag.

In South Asia, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the loyalties of the individuals and factions keep changing at the ground level, an international affiliation may be based on an attempt at survival, rather than ideologically oriented. In most cases, groups or collections of a few individual militants or commanders who owe allegiance to ISIS are factions of either the Afghan Taliban or the TTP, or belonged to these organizations and defected from them for one reason or another. It is highly likely, in certain cases, that there was no formal correspondence between them and ISIS.

| *Internet provides the links, contacts and even the safe havens*

What is clear is that these groups and individuals use an international brand to fight locally. For the local fighters, the target is clear – the state and civil society, especially liberal sections. They are also making use of the existing sectarian faultlines and going after minorities within these countries. Until now, it is not clear whether these groups and individuals in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh have a pan-South Asian agenda or regional linkages cutting across national boundaries. There have been no reports in the mainstream media of these groups leaving their countries of origin to fight along with the ISIS in Iraq or Syria.

The fighters professing loyalty towards the ISIS are therefore a threat to South Asia and not to Iraq or any of the countries in the West. They are a clear and present danger.

A radical ideology

While there is adequate emphasis and awareness on threats posed by the ISIS to South Asia – either directly or through their franchisees – there is not enough appreciation or understanding of a larger threat – a radical ideology that is substantially different from the Sufi tenets in South Asia.

Cutting across national boundaries, except for Bhutan, there is a sizeable South Asian population working in the Gulf. The number of daily flights from various cities of South Asia to Gulf destinations would reveal the quantum of movement between these two regions. Substantially drawn from lower-middle and lower classes, the South Asian work force in the Gulf countries also contribute to the economy at the national level, and more importantly at the local levels.

Economically better placed now, there is a new section in rural South Asia looking for corresponding social and perhaps even political status. The mushrooming of religious institutions and places of worship with a particular architectural style will reflect the changing realities at the ground level. Along with the funds, remittances and grand religious structures, a new ideology is also getting entrenched in rural and semi-urban South Asia. This new ideology is radical, and certainly not a tolerant one.

The threat from radical ideology from outside in fact is a greater threat to our societal peace than groups like ISIS.

A regional response?

Clearly, there is a threat to South Asian peace from an external organization and ideology. While the group and ideology may be external to the region, those individuals or groups making use of the above two are local and home grown. These groups are less likely to leave South Asia and fight in West Asia. Nor is the ISIS likely to give an emergency call inviting them to fight with them. The franchisees need the franchise more than the other way around.

As of now, some of us in South Asia are waging a lone battle against these groups. Some are ignorant and indifferent. Others may acknowledge the problem but do not consider it our fight.

Can we as a region, fight these groups and ideology together? If yes, these local ISIS affiliates present an opening for the South Asian intelligence agencies and security forces. Until now, starting from Al Qaeda to the TTP, various militant groups were believed to be supported by one State or another for political reasons. For the first time in South Asia, one could argue with an element of certainty that groups linked with ISIS are not supported by any of the state agencies. As an extension, one could also argue that there are no vested interests in South Asia at the state level to support these groups.

Secondly, any radical ideology from outside has the potential to undermine the Sufi nature of South Asia. The entire South Asia and Southeast Asia believes in Sufism, which needs to be protected and be made the dominant narrative. Unfortunately, both as an ideology and as an institution, Sufism is declining in our part of the world and also in our immediate neighbourhood – Central Asia and Southeast Asia. Any counter narrative against radical ideology should aim at making the Sufi nature of our social fabric stronger.

Finally, online radicalization and educated youths falling prey to violent ideology is a new trend in South Asia. The

recent attack in Dhaka amplifies this new threat. With an ever expanding youth bulge and our inability to provide them with livelihood, this is likely to become a major challenge for the entire region. The new



Pictures of gunmen involved in last month's Dhaka Cafe terrorist attack claimed by ISIS

groups or individuals owing allegiance to ISIS are not influenced by direct contact, but through the internet. Internet provides the links, contacts and even the safe havens.

These problems present enough "security" related reasons for the region to find some means to cooperate in South Asia. Despite the signing of the protocols on drug trafficking and terrorism, our achievements at the SAARC level on serious issues is far from satisfactory. Perhaps there is too much pressure on the SAARC to deliver, given the huge expectations.

One good strategy may be to plan a regional security dialogue outside the SAARC, but at the South Asia level, to look into emerging threats. If "security" dialogue is too sensitive, we can consider a dialogue on external threats to South Asia and learning from each other in addressing them. Let us start with exchanging notes first. If physical exchange is tough, let us do it online and sensitize each other in South Asia about this new threat.

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