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Issue Brief

Rise of the Daesh in India

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Concerning the rise of Daesh in India, this is what the Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar had to say in a statement in December 2015 ""We are trying to reduce the numbers (of youths getting attracted towards the ideology of the Islamic State) and we have achieved success in it."

A year on, various reports have showcased a contrary story. Newspapers have stated that ISIS is using the current political narrative of intolerance surrounding the beef ban and alleged attacks on Muslims by the Hindu right wing groups to institute radicalisation.

A longstanding notion has been that extremist movements in various parts of the world recruit their followers from only amongst the poor and uneducated. Recently however, circumstantial evidence has brought forth a different view: Radicalisation is not the sole cartel of the unschooled and economically deprived. The number of young professionals joining or pledging allegiance to extremist and jihadist movements and organisations is on the rise. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), one of the main jihadist groups fighting government forces in Syria and Iraq, has a number of members managing various facets of the organisation such as the group's refineries, banking and communication.

Recent reports about a group of Indians joining ISIS have raised alarm about the possibility of an increasing number of young people joining global jihadist groups. Some argue that in India, the jihadist movement is not an outcome of a particular interpretation of religious texts. Rather, it is the outcome of dissatisfaction over political and social issues, and it appeals the most to certain classes of youth. These issues, coupled with religious conservatism, may lead to jihadist inclinations.

It is important to note that the strength of ISIS comes from the ideological plague that they have created in the region. This is further bolstered by threatening and sabotaging the locals who happen to disagree with their teachings. ISIS is quick to eliminate any dissent. This combined effect of ideology, propaganda and threat has cumulated to such an extent that, now millions of people are directly or indirectly complicit in the deeds of ISIS or are it's sympathizers. Since the group has been taking heavy losses in its own territories in Iraq and Syria, the group has begun to call on believers to prove their allegiance by staying exactly where they are and inflict pain locally instead of migrating to the so-called Caliphate. The spate of attacks since June, namely in Istanbul, Dhaka and Medina, are in sync with this shift in narrative.

There is a definite ISIS presence in South Asia and recent occurrences provide enough evidence to safely say that they have already set up shop in India. In May 2016, in a video monitored by the US intelligence group SITE, ISIS mocked Muslims living in harmony with Hindus who worship cows, trees and the sun, and urged them to travel to territories which fell under the Caliphate. An examination of its mouthpiece *Dabiq*, clearly shows ISIS blatantly threatening Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, and declaring to avenge atrocities against Muslims in Mumbai, Gujarat and Assam, along with highlighting the group's all-encompassing hatred for the "cow-worshipping, pagan" Hindus. The attack in Dhaka earlier this month and the news of twenty-odd missing Indians who possibly joined the Islamic State have sparked an intense discussion on the group's presence, appeal and capabilities in India.

In its sole propaganda video that Islamic State has released targeting India, one of the six featured jihadists vowed to return to avenge the crimes committed against Muslims. As Islamic State loses territory in Iraq and Syria, desperate fighters returning home to continue the struggle is a very real possibility. An important question is: What is the Indian government doing to stop ISIS recruits returning home, and who are fully capable of orchestrating an attack inside India.

The Internet is emerging as a highly powerful instrument for recruitment and training. Increasing numbers of youths are indoctrinated through propaganda that is freely streaming on the internet. India has a fast-growing number of Internet and has the third-highest number of Internet users in the world. The possibility of online radicalisation gaining wider and deeper ground in the future, therefore, cannot be dismissed. Access to the Internet is, at present, still restricted to higher socio-economic strata to whom the ISIS's message is easily available. This factor especially has helped ISIS's emergence as the new choice of jihadist-leaning for radicalised youth in India and its immediate neighbourhood. Furthermore, the recent trend in India's domestic politics where radical groups and ideologies are being propagated, have caused greater polarisation and marginalisation among minority communities. This is a clear-cut catalyst for radicalisation. A closer examination of global terrorist organisations that have sworn allegiance to ISIS- such as Boko Haram in Nigeria- shows that these ISIS-inspired recruits continue to rely on local networks to survey targets and access weaponry and explosives. Thus, the focus should very much remain on disrupting these networks while probing and mending grievances at home.

There are also questions of whether ISIS might collude with other terrorist outfits in the subcontinent. It is well-established that there is no love lost between Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is firmly branded "a leader with no real authority" in the pages of the group's magazine *Dabiq*.

The subcontinental manifestation of Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, is also viewed by Islamic State as conniving with Pakistan - The IS's denunciation of Pakistan army as an "apostate" force allied with America speaks for itself on how they view India's neighbour.

Hence, Delhi would do well to not go on an accusing spree against Islamabad of sponsoring terrorist ensembles as they have been so prone to do. It is high time India stops blaming Pakistan for every terror attack on its soil and should instead be looking towards other possible reasons for the incurrence of violence and bloodshed. Therefore, it is essential for not only India, but for every country in the region to not be swayed by Islamic State's penchant for the spectacular and its seemingly unstoppable global rhetoric. The threat in each country remains very much local, and its networks familiar. A blame game will lead no where. A united front will.