

Fighting Daesh: regional counter strategy

From Sehwan in Sindh to Baba Ghulam Shah in Rajouri to Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan, our strength remains in the Sufi nature of our society



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Recent terrorist attacks in Kabul, Sehwan and Dhaka have been claimed by Daesh or more commonly known as the Islamic State (IS). The region cannot be a mute witness to the emergence of the IS in South Asia, for it would lead to its further consolidation and subsequent expansion. An early counter strategy is imperative with the region coming together and chalking out a strategy.

Three issues are pertinent in this context: is the IS, with its base in Syria and Iraq looking for new recruits and regions, or the individuals and groups in South Asia looking at it as an opportunity for franchisee? Second, what circumstances in South Asia enable our youth to get influenced by the IS? Third, is the region helpless in addressing the IS threat, or, are there certain inherent strengths in the society to fight such radical groups?

IS and us: The franchise and franchisees: In terms of structure and outreach, there is a substantial difference between al Qaeda and the IS. While al Qaeda attracted individuals and groups from different countries to a particular location/region, for example Afghanistan, the IS phenomenon is doing the opposite. Individuals and groups from the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia flocked to al-Qaeda and fought its battles — in Afghanistan, and then later on in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas

(FATA) of Pakistan. In a sense, al Qaeda acted as a black hole, absorbing militants from multiple regions. On the other hand, instead of (or, along with) attracting individuals and groups to Iraq and Syria, the IS is using them to organise terror attacks in their home countries.

It also appears that individuals and groups are looking at IS as a credible banner for three specific reasons. First, al Qaeda is losing its prominence in the terror pantheon, especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden. It has been unable to regroup due to lack of credible leadership with constant pressure from the US forcing it to descend down the road.

Second, the IS is a relatively new group in the terror pantheon, with a larger image. Though in recent weeks, there have been serious reverses for the IS in Syria resulting in loss of territories, the group did make remarkable advances during 2016, creating an illusion of invincibility to those who want to pursue its path.

Third, for reasons that are yet to be properly researched and documented, the IS succeeded in creating a domino effect, in terms of foreign fighters. From the UK to Indonesia, it managed to recruit fighters; a process that wasn't planned. Had it not been for the social media, the IS would have never succeeded in getting the desired publicity and subsequent recruitments.

Enabling factors: Why is the IS alluring?: Unlike al Qaeda, the IS is largely alien to South Asia. More importantly, certain intelligence agencies used these groups for political and strategic calculations including the CIA.

IS does not enjoy such support, that al Qaeda had. Yet, it allures youths and groups from South Asia. How?

Strategists emphasise building a 'counter-narrative' to the IS. Yet we should aim to build the mainstream narrative — not a counter one. For it is the failure of the mainstream that has provided the space to the periphery to move and create a narrative

First, the phenomenon of online radicalisation. Undoubtedly, this is one of the evil effects of technology. All one needs is a decent phone with basic internet connection. Gone are the days of accessing computers in libraries and internet cafes. Each individual is a walking internet café, with access to information on real-time basis, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to trace.

Second, the inability of the state to understand, address and prepare counter measures further accentuates the process of online radicalisation. While one makes use of digital technologies, our agencies are still bound by 19th-century British laws, and following policing protocols of the previous eras. Both the law and the enforcers are in a time warp. South Asia needs better legislations to govern the internet, and importantly, also need enforcing officials who would understand the magnitude of the problem. The era of policing with a stick is awfully outdated today to address such issues.

Third, in light of the latest trends in offline radicalisation at social levels, our society is increasingly

becoming sectarian; in this context, the IS looks more appealing for those people buoyed by sectarian ideology. It is not that South Asia did not have sectarian fault lines earlier; it is much more pronounced now.

Fourth, the group dynamics within South Asia are more conducive to the IS, especially in the AfPak region. Post-Osama al Qaeda and post- Omar Taliban are unable to keep local groups cohesive; repeated military offensives by states such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States have also been successful in breaking the coherence of these entities. The creation of smaller factions suited IS both on operational and financial levels.

Finally, the growth of IS cannot be seen in isolation. It finds support in an environment already infused with radical ideologies. The region is shy to address, at times to even accept that there is a serious problem with an influx of radical ideology stemming from West Asia. The entire region is witnessing this; while we as a region appreciate the inflow of remittances from West Asia, we have to make cold calculations on the nature and extent of radical ideology stemming into South Asia.

A counter IS strategy: A counter IS strategy has to start with addressing the above five issues — from online radicalisation to street level sectarian violence.

Second, strategists would emphasis on building a 'counter-narrative' to the IS. We should aim to build the mainstream narrative, and not a counter one. In fact, it is the failure of the mainstream that has provided the space to the periphery to move and create a narrative. The best way to counter the IS to make the main narrative stronger.

The above would bring us to the third point — playing on our strengths. The Sufi nature of our society in South Asia is the biggest asset for the region to build any counter-narrative. In fact, if we succeed in strengthening our Sufi nature, the other will automatically subside.

From Sehwan in Sindh to Baba Ghulam Shah in Rajouri to Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan, our strength remains in the Sufi nature of our society. Perhaps, the IS and other militants understand the strength of Sufism, hence they are targeting it in the recent years. From Data Darbar to Lal Shabaz Qalandar, our enemy seems to be aware of our strength. Do we?

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