

Daesh in South Asia

Maryam Nazir*

Abstract

Daesh has emerged out of the instability and chaos of the Middle East and aims to expand its influence across the world as stated in its motto of ‘remaining and expanding.’ The objective of this paper is to point out that Daesh ingress in South Asia must be seen as a threat to the entire region and not as a problem of individual states. It tries to assess in broad strokes the vulnerability of South Asian countries in conjunction with their historical background and current circumstances to analyse possible implications of the group’s presence. While Daesh may try to exploit the fault lines of religious militancy and sectarianism in South Asia, factors such as intact sovereignty and integrity of states along with stronger militaries could help contain this phenomenon. Meanwhile, it is the group’s technological hold and effective use of social media which highlights the need of collective regional cooperation for devising counterstrategies against this phenomenon.

Key words: Daesh, South Asia, Militancy, Middle East, Regional Implications.

Introduction

Born from an especially brutal Al-Qaeda faction, the Daesh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has grown from relative obscurity in recent years to overshadow its extremist patrons.¹ Daesh follows the ideology of Salafi *Jihadism*, and has been terrorising people in large swaths of Iraq and Syria, with deep ingress to the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, South and East Asia to establish its government. It has drawn inspiration from the ancient Caliphate and has divided the territory it occupies (and even others that it does not control, but aims to occupy), into various provinces called *wilayat* in order to validate itself as a state.² The rise of this self-proclaimed ‘state’ has signaled the

* The author is Assistant Research Officer at the Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), Islamabad, Pakistan.

¹ Lee Ferran and Rym Momtaz, “ISIS Trail of Terror,” *ABC News*, February 25, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/fullpage/isis-trail-terror-isis-threat-us-25053190>.

² Chiara Pellegrino, “A Brief History of ISIS Provinces,” OASIS International Foundation, December 23, 2015,

start of a new era of terrorism.³ In order to ensure its growth and survival, the Daesh strategy relies on a number of components which include a centralised military strategy, the use of ideology and the media as tools to control populations, recruit fighters, and raise funds alongside the control and development of its territories.⁴

As of June 2016, Daesh continues to occupy the areas of Northern and Western Iraq and Northern and Eastern Syria simultaneously. However, due to the offensive strategies of the United States and its coalition forces, it has lost territories in Northeast Syria and suffered a series of losses in Tikrit, Baiji, Sinjar, Ramadi, Hit, Haditha, Rutbah and Fallujah in Iraq.⁵ The U.S. and coalition forces are trying to weaken the group's hold on its remaining core areas of control in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, there is a special focus on preventing new infusions of support from affiliates and foreign fighters to avert Daesh-backed and inspired terrorist attacks in other regions.

Daesh, after Al-Qaeda, is considered to be a perfect case study of transnational terrorism which 'through its perpetrators, victims, or audience, has implications for two or more countries. If an incident starts in one country but terminates in another (e.g. 9/11 and 3/11)⁶, then the incident is a transnational terrorist event, as is the case for the hijacking of a plane in country A that is diverted to country B.'⁷ However, no distinction between 'transnational' and 'international' terrorism has ever been made as both terms refer to groups that use foreign bases, inspiration and support for operational purposes.⁸

<http://www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/jihadism-and-violence/2015/12/23/a-brief-history-of-isis-provinces>.

³ Lina Khatib, *The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding*, report (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/islamic_state_strategy.pdf.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, report (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2016), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>.

⁶ 9/11 refers to the September 11 attacks: a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda on the United States on September 11, 2001. 3/11 refers to the 2004 Madrid train bombings which were nearly simultaneous, coordinated bombings against the Cercanías commuter train system of Madrid, Spain, on the morning of 11 March 2004 – three days before Spain's general elections. The explosions killed 192 people and injured around 2,000.

⁷ B. Peter Rosendorff and Todd Sandler, "The Political Economy of Transnational Terrorism," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 2(2015): 172, <https://wp.nyu.edu/faculty-rosendorff/wp-content/uploads/sites/1510/2015/03/SpecialIssueIntro.pdf>.

⁸ Alexander Gutfaind, "Targeting by Transnational Terrorist Groups," in *Counterterrorism and Open Source Intelligence*, 1st ed, ed. Uffe Kock Wiil (New York: Springer, 2011), 11.

Due to the transnational nature of Daesh, there is a spillover effect across the globe, especially in the regions nearer to the Middle East. The concept of ‘spillover terrorism’ becomes transnational when, for example, political grievances in the Middle East motivate terrorists to stage attacks in European cities and other regions. In the specific case of Daesh, it has been observed that across the globe attacks such as those in Paris, Belgium, Brussels, and Turkey had actually been planned in some other country.

The primary objective of this paper is to highlight that Daesh ingress into South Asia is a regional problem. Its presence in one state could have consequences for others which calls for the need of adopting a collective strategy against this menace. Militancy has remained a serious problem for South Asia – one which Daesh can exploit. Official documents/statements, reports and research papers have been consulted to discuss briefly the vulnerability level of each country in conjunction with its historical background and current circumstances with possible implications for South Asia.

Daesh in South Asia

The Daesh stated motto is ‘remaining and expanding’ which explains its ambitions of claiming more and more territory in order to maintain its strongholds. Since its emergence, the group’s military strategy has increasingly relied upon theatre-level operations, tactics and offensive warfare in order to expand its territorial control.⁹ Various militant groups from other regions, including South Asia, have also pledged allegiance to Daesh, assuring support. The core leadership of Daesh, however, is in Iraq and Syria primarily which is a network of foreign fighters and affiliate groups that are bolstering the group’s influence across the Middle East, Africa and Asia.¹⁰ The volatile security architecture, conflict prevalence alongside militant tendencies in South Asia could become breeding grounds for Daesh to grow across the region with wide range of implications. The group’s presence in South Asia is suspect and has given rise to some important questions such as what is the magnitude of its footprint in South Asia? How are the South Asian Islamist militant organisations reacting to its growing influence? And is its foothold in South Asia enough to pose a threat?

There are three different scenarios under which Daesh can emerge as a potent force in South Asia. There are a few *jihadist* groups in South Asia that are fractured, with rebel factions inside and which are in complete

⁹ Khatib, *The Islamic State’s Strategy*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

misalignment with Al-Qaeda. There exists a possibility that these splinter groups can gravitate towards Daesh for rebranding themselves, and for financial and technical assistance. While these groups are similar to Daesh given their use of technology and their barbaric acts, these partnerships, if they occur could be considered marriages of convenience with the sole purpose of serving each other's interests.¹¹

South Asian militant groups in general have openly rejected the Daesh influence (such as Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban), few have readily reacted by joining the Daesh bandwagon (such as Jandullah, Ahrar-ul-Hind and Shahidullah Group) or they are fence-sitting (such as Hizb-e-Islami Gulbadeen and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar).

While discussing the existence of Daesh in South Asian countries, their demographics, cultural and ethnical backdrop, socio-economic structure and conflict dimensions need to be understood. There are certain factors that have enabled the growth and appeal of Daesh in different regions across the world which include the following pre-existing conditions i.e. weak state security forces; the availability of arms; limited international counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation; presence of armed groups and individuals to whom the specific ideology of Daesh appealed or for whom affiliation with Daesh offers potential material advantages; persistence of conflicts based on ethnic, sectarian, and/or political disputes and recruitment of foreign fighters and travel networks related to such conflicts.¹² By keeping these observations in view, Daesh existence in various South Asian countries is evaluated.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a war-torn country with a fragile economy, weak security forces, greater ethnic divide and an active insurgency. Under these circumstances, Afghanistan can provide Daesh the space for physical growth and on-ground bases as it has large swaths of lawless, ungoverned, undeveloped and remote areas. There is an active presence of Daesh in the south which could be devastating for a country already in chaos. The Daesh (Khurasan) is perceived to be concentrated in Zabul, Faryab, Helmand, Ghazni, Kunduz and Nangarhar provinces,¹³ trying to extend its holds beyond remote locations such as Jalalabad, Kunar and Nuristan. There have

¹¹ Michael Kugelman, "How ISIS could become a Potent Force in South Asia," *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2015,

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/20/how-isis-could-become-a-potent-force-in-south-asia/>.

¹² Blanchard and Humud, *The Islamic State*.

¹³ Arif Rafiq, "What Happened to ISIS's Afghanistan-Pakistan Province?" *Diplomat*, February 2, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/what-happened-to-isiss-afghanistan-pakistan-province/>.

been reports of militants recruiting, settling, and carrying out attacks under the Daesh banner in nearly 70 per cent of the Afghan provinces.¹⁴

The estimated number of Daesh fighters in Afghanistan varies widely. According to a 2016 estimate by the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), it boasts about 7,000-8,500 elements, counting both fighters and support elements.¹⁵ The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that the number is higher, at nearly 1,000-3,000 in Afghanistan, as of mid-February 2016.¹⁶

In January 2016, Daesh was suspected of attacks on the Pakistani and Indian consulates in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Daesh has been targeting the Shi'ite community in Afghanistan as it did in Iraq and Syria. The Afghan leadership is now seeing sectarian agendas behind Daesh ingress in Afghanistan, especially after the Kabul attack in which 80 people from Hazara Shi'ite ethnic group were killed.¹⁷ It is believed that Daesh in Afghanistan has the support of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and fractured and disenfranchised Taliban and ethnic groups.

Despite falling state apparatus, Daesh could face three-pronged challenges here. The first challenge is the U.S.-led coalition forces as they have been hitting Daesh hideouts and sanctuaries in Iraq and Syria and have vowed to replicate the same offensive strategy in Afghanistan. The second challenge is the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Though, there is much to be done regarding the capacity building of these forces, however, they have been conducting joint raids with U.S. forces to thwart Daesh presence in Afghanistan. The third and most potent challenge to Daesh is the Afghan Taliban who claim complete ownership over the country and would not allow Daesh ambitions to replace them. The Afghan Taliban want to abort Daesh (Khurasan) in its formative stage. At the end of 2015, they sent 1,000 'special forces' to fight them in their Nangarhar stronghold

¹⁴ Lauren McNally, Alex Amiral, Marvin Weinbaum and Antoun Issa, *The Islamic State in Afghanistan: Examining its Threat to Stability*, report (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 2016), http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12_McNallyAmiral_ISISAfghan_web.pdf.

¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, "The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': A Nuanced View" (Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, London, February 5, 2016), <https://rusi.org/commentary/islamic-state-khorasan-nuanced-view>.

¹⁶ Tim Craig, "The Top U.S. Commander in Afghanistan is Leaving, but the Troops Are Staying," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2016, <http://saskatoonlibrary.ca/eds/results/all?query-1=AND%2CAU%3A%22Craig%5C%2C+Tim%22&highlight=n&pagenumber=3>.

¹⁷ Masood Farivar, "Afghan Leaders See Sectarian Agenda in IS Kabul Attack," *VOA*, July 26, 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-leaders-sectarian-agenda-islamic-state-kabul-attack/3435967.html>.

as well as in Zabul, Helmand, and Farah provinces.¹⁸ Furthermore, in 2016, a U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan began carrying out airstrikes against Daesh,¹⁹ with at least 70-80 airstrikes between January and February.²⁰ Also, the local village leaders have raised militias with support from the Afghan government to hold these reclaimed villages, guarding against the possible return of Daesh fighters.²¹

It is believed that Daesh lacks the patronage and image that is needed to gain a strong foothold in Afghanistan. Their limited presence has more to do with issues of not being able to penetrate the grassroot level than the global politics of harbouring continuous conflict and chaos such as in Iraq and Syria.

Pakistan

Due to ongoing counterterrorism operations, terrorist sanctuaries and their command and control systems have been demolished in Pakistan. However, the rapprochement of Daesh can provide fractured and disenfranchised militants and groups, an opportunity to enter its fold for the purpose of rebranding. According to the Pakistan military, about 309 people who were part of the organisation have been arrested, which include men of Afghan and Middle Eastern origin.²² The walk-chalking and graffiti that appeared in the areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi was immediately dealt with and the perpetrators arrested.²³

The civil and military leadership is confident that state's security apparatus is fully capable of dealing with the global threat of Daesh. On multiple occasions, it has been said that not even the shadow of Daesh will be tolerated in Pakistan.²⁴ In a briefing, Corps Commander Peshawar, Lieutenant General Hidayat-ur-Rehman said:

¹⁸ Dawood Azami, "Why Taliban Special Forces are Fighting Islamic State," *BBC News*, December 18, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35123748>.

¹⁹ Kristina Wong, "U.S. Stepping up Airstrikes against ISIS in Afghanistan," *Hill*, February 12, 2016, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/269237-us-stepping-up-airstrikes-against-isis-in-afghanistan>.

²⁰ Corey Dickstein, "U.S. has launched more than 70 Attacks against Islamic State Targets in Afghanistan since Jan. 1," *Stars and Stripes*, April 14, 2016, <http://www.stripes.com/news/us-has-launched-more-than-70-attacks-against-islamic-state-targets-in-afghanistan-since-jan-1-1.404518>.

²¹ Jessica Donati and Habib Khan Totakhil, "Afghan Spy Agency Enlists Villagers to Hold off Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-spy-agency-arms-villagersto-hold-off-islamic-state-1459848602>.

²² "'War against Terror Cost Pakistan \$107bn': DG ISPR Asim Bajwa Briefs on Progress under Operation Zarb-i-Azb," *Dawn*, September 02, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1281352>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Zero Tolerance for Daesh in Pakistan: DG ISPR," *Dawn*, November 20, 2015,

For us, it's just a change of name, and there is no need for Pakistanis to worry. There are several defections in the Taliban now, which are becoming part of Daesh. But we're well aware of the situation and are able to tackle them effectively.²⁵

According to Sartaj Aziz, the National Security and Foreign Affairs Advisor:

Daesh is not a major threat for Pakistan... the threat of Daesh can be suspected in the tribal areas where the government believes that it has significant military operations in place to combat it.²⁶

Daesh and its subsequent growth in Pakistan could have been a question mark if the government had not initiated a full scale antiterrorism campaign across the country. In this regard, Pakistan has adopted a two-pronged strategy i.e. military operations in the tribal areas, alongside small scale intelligence based operations (IBOs) in urban areas. These IBOs and combing operations have been designed keeping in view the spillover effect of the military operation in North Waziristan. This strategy, particularly aims to target the sleeper and facilitation cells of terrorists in urban areas. This strategy across the country proves the seriousness of Pakistan's security forces to eliminate internal militancy.²⁷

According to an official progress report prepared by the National Counter Terrorism Authority, 'Terrorist activities have declined by 80 per cent in the past 17 months in Pakistan,'²⁸ while based on U.S. statistics, terrorist attacks have decreased by 45 per cent in 2015 as compared to 2014.²⁹

Daesh presence in South Asia has come at a time when there is now overall decline in extremist and violent activities given Pakistan's forceful and comprehensive counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaign

<http://www.dawn.com/news/1221026>.

²⁵ "IS not a Threat to Pakistan: Peshawar Corps Commander," *Dawn*, March 14, 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1169550>.

²⁶ "The Significance of ISIS in Pakistan," *Middle East Online*, accessed August 15, 2016, <http://www.themiddleeastmagazine.com/wp-mideastmag-live/2015/02/significance-isis-pakistan/>.

²⁷ Masood ur Rehman Khattak, Manzoor Khan Afridi, and Husnul Amin, *The Emergence of Islamic State: Implications for Pakistan and Afghanistan*, Spotlight on Regional Affairs xxiv, no. 10 (Islamabad: Institute of Regional Studies, 2015), 9.

²⁸ Zahid Gishkori, "Pakistan Witnesses 80pc Decline in Terror Attacks," *News International*, June 8, 2016, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/126219-Pakistan-witnesses-80pc-decline-in-terror-attacks>.

²⁹ Anwar Iqbal, "Statistics Show Marked Drop in Terrorist Attacks," *Dawn*, September 5, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1282160>.

initiated at the end of 2013.³⁰ With more than 160,000 troops deployed in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), it would be difficult for the Daesh-linked militants to gain any physical space or control.³¹ The ongoing operations in Pakistan are aimed at squashing any and every threat of militancy. Given this, the limited Daesh ‘leadership’ in Pakistan will be unable to extract the same levels of control its Middle Eastern counterpart has been able to in the short- to medium-term. However, Daesh’s symbolic capital does have the potential to galvanise and change militant dynamics in South Asia.³²

India and Bangladesh

India and Bangladesh being close neighbours are equally threatened by the ingress of Daesh and that’s why they have been discussed under one heading.

India is home to multiple religious and cultural ethnicities. According to the census of 2011, India has a population of 1210.2 million³³ which constitutes 80.5 per cent Hindus, 13.4 per cent Muslims, 2.3 per cent Christians, 1.9 per cent Sikhs and 1.8 per cent other religions.³⁴ Amid such diversity, there have been issues of communal violence, use of force and hate speech against minorities. Such issues have been a cause of disturbance between the state and minorities in certain parts of India. The greater ethnic/communal divide and presence of extremist Hindu factions are elements that could become fertile ground for the growth of Daesh in India.

In an interview, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju admitted to the presence of Daesh in the country. However, he categorically called it a challenge coming from the Muslims in Southern India:

³⁰ Arif Rafiq, “What Happened to ISIS’s Afghanistan-Pakistan Province?” *Diplomat*, February 2, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/what-happened-to-isiss-afghanistan-pakistan-province/>.

³¹ Sharafat Ali Chaudhary and Mehran Ali Khan Wazir, “Peace Building in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan: Conflict Management at State Level,” *Tigah II* (2012): 141.

³² Nikita Malik and Eleanor Beevor, *South Asian Militant Groups and Global Jihad in 2015*, report (London: Quilliam, 2015), <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/south-asian-militant-groups-and-global-jihad-in-2015.pdf>.

³³ Census of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, *Size, Growth Rate and Distribution of Population* (Government of India, 2011), http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter3.pdf.

³⁴ Census of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, *Distribution of Population by Religions* (Government of India, year), accessed August 23, 2016, http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/drop_in_articles/04-Distribution_by_Religion.pdf.

It is a reality (some South Indian Muslims getting attracted to ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]). It is a fact. But, we should not undermine our vigil in other parts of the country.³⁵

In a document released by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Daesh has been categorised as a Terrorist Organisation and included in the First Schedule of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 by the Central Government. While the outfit has been using both positive and negative imagery to attract fighters from all around the world, the Indian government claims that it has influenced/attracted very few youth from the country:³⁶

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) and the State Police in some States have registered cases and arrested some active cadres affiliated to ISIS in the recent past. So far, NIA has arrested 24 accused (Jammu & Kashmir - 01, Karnataka - 07, Madhya Pradesh - 01, Maharashtra - 07, Tamil Nadu - 01, Telangana – 04 and Uttar Pradesh - 03) in the cases being investigated by the agency.³⁷

However, multiple cases of missing youths have been registered and their disappearance has been linked with Daesh.³⁸ Many officials have refused to comment on the number of Indian youth who have been radicalised or influenced by Daesh, but according to one estimate, the figure is in the range of 7000-8000.³⁹ It has been reported that Abu Salman al-Hindi, a Daesh commander of Indian stock, along with the militant group known as the Indian *Mujahideen* (IM), has already trained more than 12 groups to join Daesh.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the latter has released an e-book titled *Black Flags from the ISIS* explaining its ambitions to target India. The book

³⁵ “India Admits Presence of Daesh in Country,” *News International*, November 28, 2015, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/77935-india-admits-presence-of-daesh-in-country>.

³⁶ Ministry of Home Affairs, “Lok Sabha: Unstarred Question no. 193 ‘ISIS Threat’” (Government of India, 2016), <http://mha1.nic.in/par2013/par2016-pdfs/ls-010316/903.pdf>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Makarand Gadgil, “100 Marathwada Youths in Touch with Daesh,” *Times of India*, July 23, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/100-Marathwada-youths-in-touch-with-Daesh/articleshow/53353147.cms>.

³⁹ Munish Pandey, “ISIS Bigger Threat than Pakistani Terrorists: NIA Official,” *Times of India*, August 22, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/ISIS-bigger-threat-than-Pakistani-terrorists-NIA-official/articleshow/53807070.cms>.

⁴⁰ Farzad Ramezani Bonesh, “India and the Prospect of Daesh Threat,” *Iran Review*, June 13, 2016, <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/India-and-the-Prospect-of-Daesh-Threat.htm>.

also talks about Prime Minister Narendra Modi, citing the Dadri lynching⁴¹ and issue of beef ban in India.⁴²

In the particular case of Bangladesh, its unstable economy, law and order situation and fragile civil-military relations are worrisome signs. Daesh footprints in Bangladesh have surfaced in a completely different manner here, with increased militancy, new trends are emerging.

The older strategy of bigger groups, rapid expansion of networks and spectacular terrorist acts to capture media and public attention has been abandoned, and low-profile successor groups are using small arms instead of explosives and isolated targeted assassinations rather than large, coordinated attacks... day by day, new groups are emerging.⁴³

Moreover, the use of homegrown violent groups by political parties has proven detrimental to the state security architecture. Under these circumstances, Daesh infiltration into the extremist folds of Bangladesh cannot be ruled out.

Bangladesh has experienced various alleged Daesh inspired attacks in 2015, including the killing of an Italian aid worker and Japanese agriculturist in Dhaka, alongside targeted killings of Shi'ite Muslims.⁴⁴ Moreover, the targeted murders of secular bloggers in the country over the recent past have come with an accompanying Daesh badge.⁴⁵ Among many, blogger Avijit Roy was allegedly murdered by an Islamist group named Ansarullah Bangla Team, with the purpose to avenge the war waged by the United States against Daesh.⁴⁶ These bloggers have also been targeted for their vocal criticism against extremist and fundamentalist Islam and support for secularism. Such prospective views are seen as ideological clashes with Daesh.

⁴¹ Editor's Note: On September 28, 2015, in the Bisahra village of Greater Noida following an announcement made from the loud speaker of a local temple that the family members of Akhlaq were consuming beef at home, a mob of 200 plus villagers gathered outside his house and beat him to death.

⁴² "Islamic State Threatens India, Targets PM Modi in Latest Propaganda Book," *First Post*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.firstpost.com/india/islamic-state-threatens-india-targets-pm-modi-in-latest-propaganda-book-2531772.html>.

⁴³ ICG, *Mapping Bangladesh's Political Crisis*, report (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2015), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/264-mapping-bangladesh-s-political-crisis.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Joe Frederick, "Daesh: Expansion into South Asia" (Comment no. 18, South Asia Democratic Forum, Brussels, 2016), <http://sadf.eu/new/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Comment.N.18.FREDERICK.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Kabir Taneja, "Corps Diplomatique: Decoding the ISIS Threat to India," *Daily News & Analysis*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/standpoint-decoding-theisis-threat-to-india-2157916>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Though Dhaka has largely been able to contain most traditional militant groups, new groups or a hybrid of old and the new, either inspired by the ideology of Daesh or Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), are gaining a slow but steady foothold in the country by manipulating the social media to radicalise and recruit followers, threaten enemies and rally individuals to violence in the name of *jihad* (holy war).⁴⁷ It is also suspected that a group named, Jamaat-ul-Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB) is aligning itself with Daesh and is involved in recruiting educated English-speaking tech savvy youth in Bangladesh for the terrorist outfit.⁴⁸ Abu Ibrahim Al Hanif, declared the ‘Amir of Khalfah’s soldiers in Bengal’, in an interview, detailed the vision of the terror merchants for the subcontinent, particularly for the eastern frontier. He also spoke against the political system, came down hard on even the Islamist political parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, and warned of large-scale violence against the Hindus.⁴⁹ It appears that Daesh aims to use Bangladesh as a *jihadi* base to plan attacks in India. Daesh’s vision highlights their strategy of geographical expansion, but undoubtedly more powerful are its efforts to influence generations of vulnerable people.⁵⁰ Bangladesh, being a close neighbour of India, with increasing sectarian clashes is vulnerable to the threat of Daesh.

Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan

The smaller states of South Asia are much more vulnerable to the threat of Daesh because these states have either experienced issues of militancy in the past or their current circumstances are causing internal instability. **Maldives** is a country known for its tourism. However, social problems, militancy and radical preaching are prompting Islamism.⁵¹ Moreover, the presence of Maldivian fighters in Daesh cadres has exposed the country to challenges such as radicalisation and recruitment by groups like Al-Qaeda and Daesh. In October 2013, 50-100 people, out of the total population of 300,000 reportedly fled to Middle Eastern countries, specifically Iraq and

⁴⁷ Rohan Gunaratna, “Annual Threat Assessment 2016,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis RSIS* 7, no. 11 (2016): 47, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/CTTA-January-2016.pdf>.

⁴⁸ D.P. Bhattacharya, “Bangladesh Key to ISIS’ Plans for the Subcontinent,” *Economic Times*, July 4, 2016, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bangladesh-key-to-isis-plans-for-the-subcontinent/articleshow/53045076.cms>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Frederick, “Daesh: Expansion into South Asia.”

⁵¹ Jason Burke, “Paradise *Jihadis*: Maldives sees Surge in Young Muslims Leaving for Syria,” *Guardian*, February 26, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/26/paradise-jihadis-maldives-islamic-extremism-syria>.

Syria to join Daesh. These mostly included students, convicted or accused criminals and religious fighters who had been gravitating towards the Daesh agenda. Means of recruitment and radicalisation is mostly being done online, this has become especially serious since Maldivians are well-versed in English language and almost 43 per cent of the population has access to the internet.⁵²

As **Sri Lanka** attempts to recover from the effects of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the remnants of the group and militant Islamist networks portend new challenges to the security of the country.⁵³ According to the U.S. Department of State, ‘LTTE’s financial network of support continued to operate throughout 2014.’⁵⁴ While still healing from its civil war, the ingress of Daesh in Sri Lanka is making recovery worse. It has been reported that in 2016 alone, 36 Sri Lankans (along with their families) left for Syria to join Daesh.⁵⁵ The first Sri Lankan, known as Abhu Shuraih Sailani who joined Daesh, was reportedly killed in an air strike in July 2016 in Syria. The Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe ordered a probe to investigate whether Sailani was alone in his voyage to join the group in Syria.⁵⁶

Though, there is no marked presence of Daesh in **Nepal and Bhutan** until now, the threat cannot be undermined. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal has left deep scars, and while the country is now trying to get back on its feet under democratic rule and a new Constitution, its poverty levels remain the highest at 25. 2 per cent after Bangladesh (31.5 per cent).⁵⁷ This may lead the young above 15 years of age who are unemployed (20 per cent)⁵⁸ towards finding quick and illegal sources of money. In October 2015, the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Nepal uncovered a criminal ring trafficking young girls to Daesh.⁵⁹

In late July 2016, there were unconfirmed reports that Daesh had threatened to blow up the Koshi Barrage which put the government and

⁵² Khattak, Afridi, and Amin, “The Emergence of Islamic State,” 3.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “36 Sri Lankans have Left to Join Daesh, Reports Say,” *Gulf News*, January 5, 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/news/asia/sri-lanka/36-sri-lankans-have-left-to-join-daesh-reports-say-1.1648629>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ ADB, “Poverty in Nepal,” Asian Development Bank, accessed November 11, 2016, <https://www.adb.org/countries/nepal/poverty>.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Christopher Sharma, “Nepal, Criminal Organisation that Sold Women to the Islamic State Uncovered,” *Asia News*, October 10, 2015, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Nepal,-criminal-organization-that-sold-women-to-the-Islamic-State-uncovered-33943.html>.

security agencies in both Nepal and India on high alert.⁶⁰ This warning came soon after the terror attack in a restaurant popular with foreigners in the diplomatic zone of Dhaka which claimed the lives of 20 hostages. Though the government of Bangladesh denied Daesh involvement, the group claimed responsibility for it.⁶¹ As discussed before, there was an immediate ripple effect of this attack with Nepal putting its embassies in Kathmandu on high alert and a senior counterterrorism official stating:

Although, there is no active presence of terrorist groups in Nepal and there are no proofs of Nepalis being associated with IS, we can't guarantee that Nepal is safe from the international terrorist group that has spread its wings in different countries.⁶²

Even though Buddhist state Bhutan measures its progress and prosperity based on the Gross National Happiness Index, its minority Christian population (a mere 2.8 per cent) face very tough times. In fact, it has been ranked 38th by the Open Doors 2016 World Watch List (an annual ranking of countries where life as a Christian is most difficult).⁶³ The Lhotshampa ethnic group that has lived in Bhutan since the 1800s have also been dispossessed and moved into refugee camps in Nepal.⁶⁴ Such state-sponsored 'cleansing' by the Bhutanese authorities, removing guarantees of citizenship, forcing Buddhist cultural and religious codes on the Hindu and Christian minorities and use of violence and coercion to expel people belonging to Nepali ethnic groups,⁶⁵ is reflective of deep societal divisions which may give space to belligerent agents to grow.

Is South Asia Really Vulnerable to the Threat of Daesh?

Daesh has grown up in regions where authoritarian states failed to govern such as the Middle East and North Africa. In the specific case of Iraq and Syria, Daesh was able to grab territory, wealth, arms and equipment by taking control of resources such as oil and natural gas, financial institutions

⁶⁰ Kanchan Sharma, "Daesh Threatens to Destroy Nepal's Koshi Barrage," *CrowdH News*, July 28, 2016, <http://www.crowdh.com/daesh-threatens-to-destroy-nepals-koshi-barrage/>.

⁶¹ Jason Burke, "The Bangladesh Attack is the Predictable Result of Unchecked Violence," *Guardian*, July 2, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/dhaka-attack-bangladesh-muslim-extremism-holey-artisan-bakery>.

⁶² Deepak Kharel, "Security Bodies Exploring Islamic State's Nepal Connection," *My Republica*, July 4, 2016, <http://www.myrepublica.com/news/1439>.

⁶³ "Bhutan - A 'Happy' Place but not for All," *World Watch Monitor*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/04/4408970/>.

⁶⁴ Apoorva Dutt, "The Ethnic Cleansing Hidden behind Bhutan's Happy Face," *First Post*, July 1, 2013, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/the-ethnic-cleansing-hidden-behind-bhutans-happy-face-918473.html>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

and distribution systems like banks and even disbanded respective armies, when their rulers were trapped in state-building initiatives (Iraq) or dealing with the chaos induced by the Arab Spring (Syria).⁶⁶

In South Asia, the situation is different as states are sovereign with their territorial integrity intact. With the presence of strong institutional structures and military might, Daesh could face serious obstacles in South Asia. The politico-economic structure in this region is also different from that of the Middle Eastern and North African region, thereby reducing the chances of a definitive Daesh infiltration.

However, under specific scenarios, states such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh have the least resilience to the threat of Daesh. Afghanistan is currently unstable and has serious security issues. Daesh emergence in such a volatile security environment is a matter of concern which needs an immediate response. The number of Daesh fighters in Afghanistan reportedly runs into thousands. Though, the Afghan Taliban would be a tough competitor for Daesh, but its support from elements such as ETIM and IMU must not be underestimated. Russia, China, Iran and Central Asian Republics (CARs), being immediate neighbours have genuine concerns regarding the possible spillover effects of Daesh activities.

Similarly, Bangladesh is vulnerable to the threat of Daesh because of heightened political and religious grievances, resulting in the fragmentation of society. The Government of Bangladesh has been oppressing political and religious freedoms. A policy of vengeance is being practiced by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government against Jamaat-i-Islami leadership. Such religious fragmentation could lend favourable support to Daesh, giving them an opportunity to use Bangladesh as a runway to launch militant activities. Similarly, the killings of sectarian activists by groups aligned with Daesh should force the state's security apparatus to take strong action. Under the umbrella of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), member states should outline strategies for their respective countries to fight this menace.

In the case of Pakistan and India, there exist fault lines which could be exploited through subversive plots, but this would not be enough for Daesh to gain physical control. The extensive unregulated cyber space for radicalisation, however, must not be ignored. Daesh, through social media has the power to lure in support without making any physical appearance.

Given a checkered history of mistrust, South Asian states have been hesitant in sharing clear details of Daesh ingress in their respective territories due to the stigma associated with militancy and extremist ideologies. However, if states really aim to shield themselves against this

⁶⁶ Gunaratna, "Annual Threat Assessment 2016," 7.

organisation, there is a need to have a realistic look at its spread and its recruitment patterns to devise counter strategies. While Daesh may not be able to annex South Asia into its ‘Caliphate’ in the foreseeable future, however, if new agents remain successful, they will be able to rally support and further deteriorate the fragile security of the region.⁶⁷

Possible Implications

- **Polarised and complicated militancy:** It is believed that with prospective entry of Daesh into the region, South Asian states could face episodes of sporadic terrorism. There are fault lines such as sectarian issues, use of political violence, state-sponsored terrorism and territorial disputes that could be exploited at least to create short-term conflict. While most South Asian states have experienced issues of militancy in the past, Daesh is another beast altogether which is technologically more advanced and savvy; and its particular brand of fundamentalism may be more appealing to the existing militant ideologies. Such prospects would further damage the already fragile security architecture of South Asia.
- **Mutual mistrust and security apprehensions among South Asian states:** The mutual mistrust among the South Asian states is perceived to be the biggest impediment in developing a framework ensuring security. There are various apprehensions being held by one state against the other that can provide favourable space to extremist ideologies to grow. The fragile situation of Afghanistan, territorial disputes between India and Pakistan and lack of regional connectivity are the few factors burgeoning tensions in the region. Moreover, these apprehensions have been overshadowing the prospects associated with regional cooperation, undermining the establishment of a multilateral security charter which could also be helpful in clarifying the misperceptions and apprehensions, thus, revitalizing trust between neighbours.
- **Ideological and operational transformations among the *jihadist* groups:** Even the tiniest presence of Daesh in the region could fan more extremist ideologies. Daesh is more like a corporate terrorist organisation, with wealth and technical assistance which it can offer to militant groups in South Asia who are in need of ‘rebranding’. Newer narratives and deeper penetration of the Salafi *jihadist* ideology will not bode well for South Asia.

⁶⁷ Malik and Beevor, *South Asian Militant Groups*, 26.

- **Cyber radicalisation:** Cyber space in South Asia is largely unregulated with a damaging impact on its users, particularly the youth which constitute the largest proportion of South Asian states. The region has 480 million internet users, out of the total 3.4 billion, which is the second highest number of users worldwide.⁶⁸ Daesh has expertise in radicalising masses through online means. Given the large numbers of internet users concentrated in South and East Asia, the threat of radicalisation amplifies. Daesh can accumulate maximum support through online means from areas where it has been denied physical space. Besides, through easy internet access, Daesh is able to upload its e-books, magazines and videos, containing its ideological literature and account of activities to influence the masses.
- **Difficulties in law enforcement and security maintenance:** The fragile security situation in South Asia vis-à-vis emergence of Daesh could intensify the issues of law enforcement and counterterrorism. Though some states like Pakistan (under Operation Zarb-e-Azb⁶⁹) and Sri Lanka (against the LTTE) have been successful in largely eradicating terrorists from difficult areas, the online existence of Daesh could disrupt the maintenance of peace. Monitoring and surveillance mechanisms must be introduced to curb extremist ideologies in the region.

Conclusion

Daesh is a brutal force implementing a manipulated version of *Shariah* which is completely inconsistent with the teachings of Islam. It has become a global threat and South Asia cannot pretend that it is somehow cloaked under an iron dome which will protect the region and its people from it. With its motto of ‘remaining and expanding’, growth across the globe is part of its grand plan.

As elaborated above, the history of militancy in South Asia is a crucial factor that may provide fertile ground for the growth of Daesh even if governments have been able to fight against insurgents successfully through military action. High poverty levels also make the populace vulnerable to exploitation by belligerent agendas. In order to control and limit Daesh globally and regionally, there is a need to target its affiliate groups, severing their links with the core group in order to reduce its strength indirectly. There is a need to counter the ideology of Daesh by

⁶⁸ Simon Kemp, “Digital in 2016,” *We are Social*, January 27, 2016,
<http://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/digital-in-2016>.

⁶⁹ ISPR, “Operation Zarb e Azb,” Inter Services Public Relations, accessed November 11, 2016, <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/front/main.asp?o=t-zarb-e-azb-archive>.

initiating an interactive dialogue among Muslims and other religious and ethnic communities. The religious clerics and scholars have the responsibility to address the issues of radicalisation through lectures and sermons that could be used as a counternarrative to wash away the influence of extremist ideologies. A regional framework should be established to monitor Daesh facilitation networks, flow of foreign fighters, finances and propagation of literature. The fighters who have been joining Daesh are using indirect routes to reach Iraq and Syria, for which South Asian states need to ensure strict border surveillance and monitoring. Such a framework can be developed by SAARC's coalition of member countries. Moreover, such a regional framework should also focus on rehabilitation of conflict-hit areas from where such extremist ideologies have been emerging. While sustainable development and economic growth through trade is important for the region, Daesh ingress and its level of penetration must be analysed realistically on priority basis since the group can threaten the very peace and prosperity all governments and people want. The fight against terrorism requires collective action in order to save our future generations from facing similar circumstances.■