QUAD-PLUS Dialogue

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ISIS and the Quad-Plus Countries

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Introduction

The menace of the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), also known by other names such as the Islamic State or Daesh, has become a global phenomenon. As the tentacles of this dreaded terror outfit have penetrated into the Asia-Pacific region, governments and security establishments of countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Japan, and Australia are showing great concerns. In some forms or the other, each of these countries has already witnessed ISIS-connected activities either within their sovereign territories or in the conflict-ridden Middle Eastern countries, Syria and Iraq. One of the most important developing trends is the increasing traction received by this outfit from the citizens of these countries and that of various domestic terror organisations. The departures of several Southeast and South Asian citizens towards Syria/Iraq to fight for ISIS are a worrisome unfolding. In short, the region is increasingly becoming a recruiting hub for this outfit. Tellingly, a few of these countries, long considered to be moderate Muslim states, have started witnessing its citizens supporting or joining this outfit. The impact that the returnees would have on a particular country, prevention of radicalisation of citizens, containment of recruitment process, and implementation of effective counter-measures are some of the challenges different governments in the region are facing. In light of this, there is a need for a robust regional cooperation to prevent further advancement of this outfit into the region, both ideologically and physically.

Recent Developments and Concerns

One of the unique characteristics of this outfit is its ability to attract large numbers of supporters and sympathisers from different parts of the world. Today, it boasts of having recruited approximately 30,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries since 2011 (according to a report by the Pentagon). While there are several tactics which have been attributed for the successful recruitment, it is the usage of social media tools which have remained as an effective mechanism in this regard. Because of this highly professional social media propaganda campaign carried out by ISIS, even the moderate countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are impacted adversely. Similar recruitment pattern is widely visible in the aforementioned countries as well. Social media is not only facilitating the recruitment process but it also helps in spreading the extremely radical ideologies of the outfit. Furthermore, there is a process of self-indoctrination or self-radicalisation going on in many of these countries. And, this exacerbates the problem, particularly in those societies where a few Muslim youths are increasingly radicalised with the help of online contents and through the support of the local ideologues. In connection to this, the threats of lone wolves are also on the rise. While the Sydney hostage crisis of December 2014 did not have any direct link with ISIS, the ill-fated incident triggered a major alarm not only in Australia but in various countries where ISIS influence has penetrated. The repetition of such attacks should not be downplayed, and this particular incident should, however, be eye opening for everyone.

It is to be noted that since mid-2014, several young men have reportedly travelled from the previously mentioned countries. This has serious implications for the respective governments. Going by the available figures from different sources, it is estimated that around 500 Indonesians travelled to Iraq and Syria (although the exact number joining ISIS is not yet clear), approximately 40 to 70 (and in some sources this number ranges between 60 and 150) Malaysians, two to three Singaporeans, and about 200 Filipinos. In the case of India, the number is estimated to be about 17, while that of Australians is 100 to 200. Howsoever these numbers might appear to be less than significant; the involvement of these fighters in the ranks of ISIS, or for that matter with an outfit such as Jabhat al-Nusra should not be taken lightly. This is mainly because many of them are likely to return home after their stint in the war-torn region. Although it cannot be said with certainty that the returnees will not pose any threat to their countries, there is always a possibility of them aligning with the local terror outfits in planning for further attacks and their role in indoctrinating like-minded people should not be overlooked.

There are a few important factors attributed for the departures of several fighters to join ISIS. Ever since this outfit came into prominence in 2014, numerous radicalised Muslims from the region are increasingly getting adhered to its extremist ideology, particularly as they started to cultivate a feeling of affinity for the outfit on theological lines. These people view parallels between the mission of ISIS and the "prophecies in Islamic holy texts" regarding the creation of the caliphate. Furthermore, the growing sectarianism amongst Shias and Sunnis in a country like Malaysia has triggered radicalisation, and this, in turn, provides a suitable reason for some of its citizens supporting the outfit.

In Malaysia, the domestic politics of political party such as United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which is heading the coalition government, gives rise to serious

resentment in the country. The issue of sectarianism is growing at an alarming pace, whereby, many of the religious and political hardliners are antagonistic towards minorities, particularly, the Shia brand of Islam. The ongoing conflict in Syria has further exacerbated the hatred for the Shias. The strengthening of anti-Shiite rhetoric is increasingly providing important "religious justifications" for several radicalised youths to travel to Syria and Iran and join ISIS. The extreme politicisation of Islam inside Malaysia is fuelling radicalism in the country.

Added to these factors is the ongoing unrest in Syria which is also attributed to the rising support for the terror group. In other words, the recruitment into ISIS cannot be isolated from the "context of humanitarian crisis in Syria." In other words, the perceived "injustices" meted out to their Muslim citizens have become a reason for these people to take up the path of terror by pledging allegiance to ISIS.

Furthermore, the involvement of Indonesians with ISIS is mainly due to the outfit's appeal for the creation of an Islamic state. The commonality in their objective has become an incentive for the home-grown terror organisations to pledge support for IS. Aceh, a Muslim-majority area, which is also a special region of Indonesia, is becoming a haven for Sunni extremists as thousands of them, including former militants from the Free Aceh Movement, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi last year. As this province abides by Sharia law, strict regulations are imposed even in educational establishments and public places. Thus it has become a fertile area for growth of extreme radicalisation. And, the process of self-radicalisation which is going on in Singapore is becoming an equally worrying development. The effective usage of social media recruitment tactic had some impact on this tiny nation.

What is more worrying for countries like the Philippines and Indonesia is the allegiance pledged by home-grown terror outfits such as Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), respectively. On a similar note, Malaysian fighters in ISIS are increasingly being trained to become snipers and suicide bombers, and this is an extremely worrisome unfolding. As it is, the country witnessed its first suicide bomber in Iraq in May 2014, followed by another attack in Syria during late 2014. And, the recent report of the death of 14 such fighters in Iraq and Syria is, further, an indication of the staunch participation of these people. Currently, it is believed that there are about 20 to 22 Southeast Asian–origin terror organisations that have pledged allegiance to support ISIS.

In India, too, a few Muslim youngsters departed for Syria and Iraq to fight in the ranks of ISIS. The number is estimated to be about 17; however, this is uncertain and it can be more also. The factors for them joining this outfit are almost the same with those explained earlier. The numbers of radicalised youth is increasing.

Indian-origin fighters' involvement in the ongoing armed conflict either in Iraq or Syria has been evidenced by the report of the death of six people, which is indeed an alarming development. As it is with other foreign fighters, this category of Indians were radicalised through social media forums before they fled towards the epicentre of the ongoing

conflict. The role of online recruitment was exposed during the investigation of Arif Majeed who returned to the country during late 2014. Another serious discovery from this lone case is the involvement of a few Indians who are residing in the Gulf countries, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia in the recruitment process, with an active assistance from handlers inside India. This is a common trend that could be seen in all the countries mentioned above. There is a strong nexus between those residing in the Gulf countries and in these parts of Asia. For instance, the recent deportation and the arrest of a UAE-based Indian woman Afsha Jabeen for her alleged role in radicalising and recruiting for the outfit is the proof. She also confessed "that there is a need to spread the geographical area of ISIS caliphate with Muslim youth supporters." In all probability, there could be many such cases, which need to be prevented before meeting their desired objectives.

Similar to the profiles of the fighters, say, from the European Union (EU) countries, the Indians who have already joined the outfit, or those rendering their supports and sympathies, are educated people and with decent jobs. For instance, the incident of the boys from Kalyan in Maharashtra (in India) is a good case and that of Mehdi Masroor Biswas, a techie based in Bangalore, who, recently, was charged as "No empty propagandist of the global jehadist outfit Islamic State (ISIS), but he was allegedly tweeting details of the border crossings to those on their way to enlist as fighters with the ISIS." From this, it is evident that there is a growing radicalisation of youth in the Muslim society and that of the home-grown recruiters, who rely heavily on various social media tools. Apart from this, there had been several instances of youngsters showing their support for the outfit in places such as Jammu and Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, etc. In the presence of such radicalised youths, lone-wolf attacks cannot be ruled out in India.

The threat of ISIS in Australia comes in different forms. But the most imminent is the ISIS-inspired domestic attacks, similar to the one carried out by Man Haron Monis in December 2014. There is also a possibility of the returnees carrying out terror activities inside the country. Beyond these possibilities, the Australian citizens might get "caught up or targeted in regional attacks." Moreover, as Australia conducted its first airstrikes (in response to a request from the United States) against ISIS inside Syria in September 2015, these threats from the terror group will likely become more serious. This was acknowledged by the former Prime Minister (PM) Tony Abbott. It is also reported that the Goulburn jail in New South Wales is housing a gang of about 30 ISIS extremists, who have threatened to behead the jail staffs and the inmates if they fail to convert to "radical Islam." This brings in the rising phenomenon where the radicalisation process is going on in prisons, and how they become an offshoot of ISIS.

Japan is not insulated from the threats of ISIS. It had paid a heavy price for its humanitarian aid programmes for the Middle Eastern countries fighting against this outfit. The beheading of two of its nationals in Syria in early 2015 exposed the vulnerabilities faced by Japanese in the said region. As PM Shinzo Abe pledged to "continue to play an active and constructive role abroad," further attacks targeting Japanese citizens cannot be ruled out. As a result, this gives a sound reason why this

nation should cooperate with the other countries in fighting the menace of terrorism collectively.

Realisation of the Threat Perceptions and the Steps Taken

Considering the pace at which the ISIS influence has seeped into these countries, the concerned government establishments as well as the civilian organisations have realised the threat perceptions. Efforts are already underway to tackle this menace with the involvement of several entities. The immediate concern for all these countries is to prevent any further departure of their citizens towards Syria/Iraq, and to keep a check on recruitment via social media forums. While a direct ISIS attack seems to be unlikely anytime soon, it cannot be said with a certainty that there will not be lone-wolf attacks or any trouble by terror organisations, inspired by the Sunni outfit thriving in the region. Therefore, the security apparatuses need to be prepared for any attacks.

The aforementioned countries have taken certain steps to tackle the rising phenomenon of ISIS. For instance, Indonesia has decided to crack down on its citizens who tried to join ISIS. A close coordination between its anti-terror squad Detachment 88 and the police is putting up a commendable task. Their tasks also involve the prevention of radicalisation within their own jurisdictions. President Joko Widodo, agreed to "issue a regulation allowing the authorities to revoke passports" of those who choose to support ISIS. For this country, the unity between the state authorities and several civil Muslim society organisations, while condemning the entire establishment of ISIS, is a strong counter-narrative measure. There are groups which are critical of the declaration of the caliphate by Al-Baghdadi.

Similarly, Singapore, which is a financial hub, has taken the ISIS threat seriously. It is more concerned about the cases of its youths getting attracted to radicalism. By going a step further, it agreed to provide an air-to-air refuelling and imagery analysis team to the U.S.-led air coalition in Iraq. Another significant step taken by this country is the "East Asia Summit Symposium on Religious Rehabilitation and Social Integration"—which is a counterterrorism meeting to share best-suited practices with like-minded states.

Likewise, the Philippines is also gearing up to fight the ISIS influence inside its territories. It specifically targets the online recruitment tactics. In order to prevent radicalisation in the society, the government should address certain grievances amongst the young adults who are susceptible to falling prey to radical elements.

Malaysia is also cognisant of the ISIS threats; as a result, Kuala Lumpur has initiated a holistic approach of countering extremism. A combined effort of various government establishments, including a few ministries, religious institutions, police, strategic think tanks, and educational institutions have all been roped in to combat religious extremisms, including the penetration of ISIS influence. Lecture programmes on religious preaching in mosques and prayer halls are reportedly underway. This is a good initiative, which is not militaristic.

In India, too, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has begun with certain efforts to stop the youths from falling prey to ISIS and its recruiters, both inside the country and abroad. Other steps that have been decided to be taken up include counselling of youth, involvement of community or religious leaders to persuade the younger generation not to succumb to any form of extremist ideology, constant monitoring of the Internet and social media sites, quick response to reports of young people planning to join ISIS or any terror group, counter-propaganda strategies, etc. A considerable section of the Muslim society in the country is gradually raising their opposition to ISIS and its portrayal of Islam. Several clerics have started to take up measures to counter online propaganda and recruitment process. This is a welcome move.

Counter-Strategies

In the interest of maintaining a regional stability, it is high time the countries in the Asia-Pacific region cooperate robustly to counter the ISIS menace collectively. For this, one has to cut across all political, ideological, religious, ethnic, and sectarian differences. And, while maintaining a military readiness to face any unwanted attacks, other soft counter-narratives need to be promoted. Intelligence and information sharing, cyber monitoring, and constant scrutiny of people moving towards the conflict-ridden parts of the Middle East should be given utmost importance. Importantly, management system of prisons requires an immediate attention. Otherwise, these places of detention will continue to give birth to more extremists.

An important counter-narrative approach to tackle radicalisation and online recruitment is to have an equally effective online-based anti-ISIS social media propaganda campaign. Newspapers columns and television and radio programmes should be flooded with such programmes where myths and realities about this outfit should be exposed. For this, vernacular languages should be used to reach the messages to the deeper core of the society. Tools such as Twitter and Facebook should be deployed for this purpose.

Serious efforts have to be made to prevent the involvement of religious and educational establishments in propagating extremist ideologies, not only that of ISIS'. This is a common phenomenon which is prevalent in almost all the mentioned countries. Furthermore, the role of the expats from the Asia-Pacific countries, who are in Gulf countries, needs to be closely monitored. It is found that quite a few of them are assisting in the indoctrination and recruitment of young people. Another counter-narrative is to start a special lecture series on basic tenets of Islam in various institutions, and this need not be only in the Muslim-run institutes. Reaching out to a wider audience will play an important role in promoting tolerance. This will also bust several myths and false ideologies spread by ISIS. For this to be effective, a close coordination between Muslim religious clerics, leaders of all faiths, cybersecurity establishments, security officials, civilian groups, and political leaders with willpower is required. Tellingly, the entire Muslim community needs to vehemently oppose ISIS in one voice. In the absence of this, any strategy will remain counterproductive.

Political, social, and economic integration of all communities should be promoted further. Although the issue of marginalisation is not the sole factor for many foreign fighters travelling towards Iraq/Syria and joining ISIS, this aspect still has some relevance. This is more common in the Indian and Malaysian cases. In connection to this, any respective ruling government should, at best, prevent communal violence, which otherwise will fuel radicalisation and anti-state posture.

A tactful handling of the defectors from ISIS will be a strong counter-narrative. Their firsthand accounts or testimonials of their experiences in the battle zones can be used as a mechanism to deter others from joining the outfit. Their insights could perhaps challenge the narrative of ISIS.

It is suggested that a multi-pronged, innovative approach has to be adopted to build a counter narrative. It cannot be sterile lectures by clerics or community leaders. While it will be a humongous task, the governments will have to organise interesting workshops, interactive sessions, even come up with talk shows, podcasts, YouTube videos, apps, and video games, etc., to rope in the target audiences.

Messaging must not remain limited to religious messaging but must also be about the virtues of religious diversity, pluralism, tolerance, and inclusiveness. Equally important, the discourse must be in an idiom and a vocabulary that resonates with the target audience and not in something that is alien to the local ethos.