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Countering Jihadist Ideology: The Crucial Battlefront

The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group faces setbacks on several fronts as it continues to come under heavy pressure from the US-led coalition forces, the Russians and Syrians. On the military front in Iraq, it is slowly losing western Mosul while in Syria, its de facto capital Raqqa is being surrounded for the inevitable showdown. On the propaganda front, it is experiencing a decline in the output and quality of its media products, such as videos and publications. It fares no better on the religious front where it remains marginalised within the Islamic world and faces continuous denunciations from mainstream religious leaders for its exploitation and misrepresentation of Islam. It has failed to gain legitimacy and has in fact been branded as un-Islamic, deviant, even heretical.

As IS loses its lustre and appeal with the loss of territories and impending collapse of its so-called caliphate, counter-ideology efforts should be intensified to further delegitimise IS' theology of violence and debunk its misinterpretations of religious texts. IS' hard-core ideology encompassing violent *jihad*, suicide bombing, takfirism (excommunication) and hijrah (migration), among others, have to be exposed as unquestionably flawed, transgressing Islamic legal principles and juristic process and methodology. This issue of CTTA features a critical examination of one of the principal tenets of IS' jihadist ideology – takfirism – by **Dr Muhammad Haniff Hassan**. His article contrasts IS takfiri doctrine with mainstream Sunni position on the subject, exposing IS' deceptions and deviations from true Islamic teachings.

Despite the evident errors and distortions, IS ideology has gained some traction among the disillusioned and alienated. This issue is examined by **Mohd Mizan bin Mohammad Aslam** who focuses on the impact of IS ideology on some university students in Malaysia. He explores what causes students to join or sympathise with an extremist group such as IS, and how the government should respond to this phenomenon. Social media platforms and chat applications as well as religious discussion groups are among tools used by IS to cajole and lure students to IS activities. The author proposes the formation of a critical partnership between the government, security officials and parents to curb the radicalisation of students.

Mohamed Sinan Siyech in his article analyses the relatively syncretic nature of Salafism in India and stresses the need to distinguish such Salafist groups from those that preach extremism and violence. Established Salafist organisations and non-Salafist groups are facing challenges from the spread of intolerant strands imported from the Middle East and coming through the Internet. He calls for greater attention to be paid to self-radicalised social media-savvy youngsters who are divorced from their community, draw inspiration from IS ideologues online, and take orders from IS operators in Syria and elsewhere.

From India the focus shifts to Turkey where in the last one year, it has become the central target of IS' overseas terrorist campaign; Turkey suffered the largest number of IS attacks outside Iraq and Syria. **Nodirbek Soliev** argues that Turkey's capability to fight terrorism is crucial to contain the growing threat domestically and globally. Major and regional stakeholders should closely work with Ankara to boost the effectiveness of its counterterrorism efforts. In the long term, there is a need for sustained measures by Turkey to disrupt cross-border movement of foreign fighters and to dismantle IS supply and support networks in the country.

The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication): Exposing IS' Takfiri Ideology

By Muhammad Haniff Hassan

Introduction

The Islamic State (IS) terrorist group has attracted wide condemnation from mainstream Muslim scholars for its misrepresentations and misinterpretations of Islamic doctrines.[1] These range from the concepts of *jihad* and *hijrah* (emigration) to the resurrection of the 'caliphate', treatment of non-Muslims and punishment of opponents and offenders. In September 2014, over 120 prominent Muslim scholars issued an Open Letter to IS leader al-Baghdadi, his fighters and followers, denouncing IS for committing numerous religious transgressions and abominable crimes.[2] The letter pointed out that IS has "misinterpreted Islam into a religion of harshness, brutality, torture and murder" and committed "a great wrong and an offence to Islam, to Muslims and to the entire world".

IS also faces criticism from fellow jihadists, notably Al Qaeda Central and other rival groups such as Jabhah Al-Nusrah (now part of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).[3] One of the many criticisms directed against IS is its permissiveness in the practice of *takfir* (declaring a Muslim as apostate). This makes IS a *takfiri* group that can be equated with the Kharijites, a rebellious group which has been denounced by Sunni Muslims since its emergence in 7th century Arabia.

This article will focus on the declaration of a Muslim as an apostate to highlight IS' exploitation of the concept to justify the killing of fellow Muslims, including Muslim rulers, political leaders, scholars and clerics. It is divided into two parts: the first part provides an overview of mainstream Sunni Islam's position on *takfir* that will become a basis for countering IS' warped understanding and application of the concept, while the second part analyses IS' *takfir* doctrine, exposing its deviation from mainstream Sunni Islam and its own doctrine.

Part One: Mainstream Position on *Takfir* [4]

Takfir is a theological declaration that a Muslim has become an apostate or a person is an infidel or an act or idea constitutes a disbelief in Islam. Engaging in takfir is a serious matter in Islam because it is considered a great sin with punishment in the afterlife.[5] In this sense, *takfir* has serious consequences for both the accuser and the accused. For the latter, it has possible adverse impact on relations with the person's Muslim spouse, rights to inheritance, and other aspects. For the accuser, *takfir* obligates the person to provide clear evidence, failing which the person would have committed a sin as grave as committing apostasy, as warned by the Prophet in the following *hadiths*:

> "When a person calls his brother (in Islam) a disbeliever, one of them will certainly deserve the title. If the addressee is so as he has asserted, the disbelief of the man is confirmed, but if it is untrue, then it will revert to him" (narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

> "Whoever calls a man '*kafir*' [disbeliever] or said 'O, enemy of Allah', when he is not one, (the accusation) will rebound to him" (narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

"A man does not call another as *fasiq* or *kafir*, except that he will be the apostate if the other is actually not" (narrated by Al-Bukhari).

Given the serious implications, mainstream Muslim scholars have always exercised caution on the subject.[6] *Takfir* is only permissible if it is based on clear and indisputable evidence.[7]

Despite *takfir* being a grave issue, extremist groups have taken liberties and misused the concept by declaring various categories of Muslims as *kafir* as enumerated below:

- Muslims who commit sins;
- Rulers who do not rule according to the *Shari`ah*, and their followers;
- Muslims who are not members of their group (e.g. IS);
- Muslims who refuse to label others extremist groups consider as *kafir*;
- Muslims who live in an 'un-Islamic' society and do not migrate; and
- Muslims residing in *dar al-harb* (lands ruled by non-Muslims).

They also declare the whole Muslim society as *jahiliyah* (in a state of disbelief as per the Arabs before the prophet hood of Muhammad).[8]

Understanding *kufr* (disbelief)

The above declarations of disbelief ignore the different types and grades of *kufr* which do not always result in a Muslim being excommunicated or ceasing to be a Muslim. Mainstream Muslim scholars hold that there are two types of *kufr*. The first type of *kufr* involves acts such as disparaging the fundamental teachings of Islam or denouncing any of the articles of faith. This is known among scholars as major *kufr*.

The second type of *kufr,* known as minor *kufr*, involves the commission of vice. Any individual who commits acts such as fornication, murder and theft will be guilty of sin but he will not cease to be a Muslim. There is significant scriptural evidence that points to this second type of *kufr*. For example, the Qur'an says:

"Verily, We have shown him the way: [and it rests with him to prove himself] either grateful or ungrateful [*kufr*]." (The Qur'an, 76:3)

"...However, he who is grateful [to God] is but

"Despite takfir being a grave issue, extremist groups have taken liberties and misused the concept.."

grateful for his own good; and he who is ungrate-ful [*kufr*] [should know that], verily, my Sustainer is self-sufficient, most generous in giving! (The Qur'an, 27:40)

Muslim scholars understand the word *kufr* used in the above verses to mean ingratitude. In Islam, being ungrateful to God by committing a sinful act does not lead to excommunication. The same meaning can also be found in many *hadiths*. For example, the Prophet had said, "Do not detest your fathers; he who detested his father committed *kufr*" (narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim). In this *hadith*, the Prophet used the word *kufr* to denote ungratefulness, which does not cause a person to be excluded from the religion; it is only considered a sinful act.

The Prophet had also said, "Abusing a Muslim is *fusuq* (an evil doing) and killing him is *kufr* (disbelief)." (narrated by Al-Bukhari and Al-Turmuzi). *Kufr* here does not mean falling out of the religion because it is stated in the Qur'an, "Hence, if two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them…" (The Qur'an 49: 9). In this verse, the two groups that are fighting with one another are still regarded as believers (*mu'min*). As such, *kufr* in the hadith denotes sin rather than falling out of the religion.

Several pertinent positions of mainstream Muslim scholars on *takfir*

The following are several pertinent positions of mainstream Muslim scholars on *takfir*:

- Since not all acts of *kufr* will cause a person to be excommunicated, it is important to be careful in understanding the Quranic verses that judge certain actions as *kufr*.[9]
- As *kufr* exists in the heart, prudence is required when judging matters related to

the unknown. Given that *kufr* can only be ascertained by the heart's intentions, physical or outward acts alone cannot justify *takfir*; the only exception is when there is indisputable evidence to support it[10] because the Qur'an says:

> "And never concern thyself with anything of which thou hast no knowledge…" (The Qur'an, 17:36);

> "O you who have attained to faith! Avoid most guesswork [about one another]…." (The Qur'an, 49:12).

One of Prophet Muhammad's companions caught someone during battle and the man quickly declared his conversion to Islam. Suspecting that the man's declaration was done out of fear of being killed, the companion proceeded to kill him. When the Prophet found out, he reprimanded the companion with this retort repeatedly, "Did you cut open his heart to know whether his heart uttered it or not?" (narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim). Hence, where *takfir* is concerned, the benefit of the doubt must be given to the accused.

- It is not permissible to rule a person as a disbeliever *(kafir)* for committing vice as long as he does not declare the vice as *halal* (permissible).[11] This is applicable for sinful acts like adultery and drinking alcohol.[12] This is a known position of the Sunnis as opposed to the Kharijites and Muktazilites.[13]

- It is not permissible to unequivocally declare a Muslim ruler as *kafir* just because he does not rule according to the *Shari`ah*. Similarly, the people who do not try to change such a ruler cannot be deemed as *kafir*. Mainstream Muslim scholars regard the declaration of *kafir* in such instances as extremism.[14] They do not automatically rule such Muslim rulers as *kafir* as the Qur'an distinguishes such rulers into three categories: disbeliever *(kafir)*, oppressor *(zalim)* or corrupt *(fasiq)*.[15] Ibn Abi Al-`Iz in *Sharh Al-`Aqidah Al-Tahawiyah* wrote:

> "If he [the ruler] believes that ruling by what Allah revealed is not

"As kufr exists in the heart, prudence is required when judging matters related to the unknown."

obligatory or that he has an option in the matter or he is showing disdain for it while he is certain that it is the rule of Allah, then that is the greater *kufr*. If he believes that it is obligatory to rule by what Allah revealed and he is aware of that fact, however, he abstains from doing so while admitting that he is deserving of punishment, then he is a sinner. He is called a *kaafir* (disbeliever) in a metaphorical sense or [in other words] it is the lesser *kufr*."[16]

In this respect, Muslim scholars point out that the Prophet did not condemn King Najasyi (Negus) for not judging by the *Shari`ah*, neither did God condemn Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) for serving in the government of a non-Muslim king.[17]

- It is also not permissible to make an absolute declaration of *kufr* upon all the people under the rule of a government that does not judge by the *Shari`ah*. Here again, Muslim scholars refer to the past examples of Najasyi (Negus), Prophet Yusuf (Joseph), and the stay of the Companions in Abbysinia, which was not ruled by the *Shari`ah*.[18]

- It is not permissible to rule a person as *kafir* for not being with an Islamic group or for leaving the group.[19]

- It is not permissible to perform *takfir* on people for residing in a non-Muslim country and refusing to migrate from there.[20]

- It is also not permissible to perform *takfir mu`ayyan* (on specific person or group) without indisputable evidence, authority and due process. Although Muslim

scholars often issue rulings (*fatwa)* on whether a certain thinking or deed is *kufr*, they avoid passing such judgment on specific individuals or groups. In their view, it is preferable to give them the benefit of the doubt rather than err in *takfir*.

Furthermore, the responsibility for determining whether a person is a *kafir* lies with the appropriate judicial authority. The accused person has to be tried in court and accorded the right to defend himself; the judgment regarding the person is based not just on evidence presented by the accuser but other considerations as well.[21]

- It is not permissible to rule another as *kafir* just because the person refuses to refer to another person declared by an unauthorised person or group as *kafir*. As mentioned above, judgement of *kufr* is not the right of any individual or group, but that of an Islamic judicial authority. If there is no Islamic judicial body that is able to try people who are accused of being apostates, that right is not transferable to any other party as this will cause chaos in society. This is especially so when such accusations of *kufr* are open to various possibilities. Therefore, if one does not agree to accuse another of *kufr*, then he cannot be ruled as *kafir* for refusing to do so. On this, Ibn Taimiyah said:

> "…declaring another person a disbeliever is a right of Allah. Hence, one cannot declare a person an unbeliever save for that person whom Allah and His Messenger have declared a disbeliever [that is, by having a clear proof from the Quran and Sunnah that such a person is a disbeliever]."[22]

- It is also not permissible to rule the whole Muslim community as *jahiliyah*.[23] Tellingly, Al-Bukhari named a chapter in his book *Sahih Al-Bukhari* as '*Vice is part of ignorance (jahiliyah); an offender cannot be judged as kafir, unless the vice is shirk (associating God with others)'*. One cannot judge all mankind or all Muslims today as living in ignorance (*jahiliyah*), as the term refers to ignorance in the times before the prophets. Such a view also contradicts the Prophet's hadiths:

"..the responsibility for determining whether a person is a kafir lies with the appropriate judicial authority."

"There will always be a group of my followers who will fight for the truth, till the Day of Resurrection" (related by Al-Bukhari and Muslim);

"Allah will not let my followers agree on deviation" (narrated by Al-Turmuzi).

These are some of the relevant points on the subject of *takfir* held by mainstream Muslim scholars that differentiate them from extremists.

Part Two: *Takfir* **according to IS[24]**

IS' position on *takfir* is publicly enumerated online in `*Aqidah Wa Manhaj Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah Fi Al-Takfir* (IS' Creed and Methodology of *Takfir*),[25] *Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid Li Al-Mu`askarat* (Standard Text for Islamic Creed for Military Camps)[26] and *Hazih `Aqidatuna Wa Haza Manhajuna* (This is our creed and our way).[27] These documents classify various categories of Muslims as *kafir;* they include:
- all Twelver Shiites – both ordinary persons and scholars;[28]
- those who reject the *takfir* of Twelver Shiite scholars as disbelievers;
- all parties based on communism, secularism, nationalism and liberalism;[29]
- proponents of democracy and those who participate in its process;
- all governments that do not rule by the *Shari`ah* and members of its military, police officers, intelligence, executive and judiciary apparatuses;[30] and
- all those who seek to judge by civil laws.[31]

IS claims that its method of *takfir* on a specific person or organisation is premised on the following conditions:

- it must be based on clear and strong evidence that are soundly established, not speculations;
- it must meet all the necessary requirements required by the *Shari`ah*;
- it must be free from inhibitions recognised by the *Shari`ah*;
- the person involved must be presented with evidence; and
- it must be issued by IS' authorised bodies.[32]

IS also asserts that its stand on *takfir* is based on the creed of the Sunni and guided by the tradition of noble Sunni scholars. In addition, the group claims that it regards all who proclaim the *Shahadah* (Testimony of Faith) as Muslims, until proven otherwise.

Exposing IS' False Claims

In practice, however, IS' application of *takfir* is contrary to the above claims which appear to have been made to counter criticisms that it is a *takfiri* movement, and to project itself as an authentic Sunni movement deserving support. Accusations of *takfirism*, which come together with the Kharijite label, are levelled against IS not only by prominent mainstream scholars and Muslim organisations all over the world, but also by jihadist circles such as leaders of Al-Qaeda. Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi who led Al-Qaeda in Iraq – the forerunner of IS – was counselled by his religious mentor Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi on, among other things, the former's blatant use of *takfir* to justify his group's indiscriminate killing of Iraqi civilians.[33]

Takfir on Muslim scholars and leaders

A close examination of IS' position on *takfir* reveals several instances of contradictory statements and erroneous claims of its purported adherence to mainstream Sunni tradition and doctrines. For instance, IS' pronouncements of *takfir* on respected Muslim scholars, leaders and activists through its official magazine *Dabiq* (now replaced by *Rumiyah*) are without basis or justification and not in accordance with the *Shari'ah*.

IS had declared Muslim scholars like Hamzah Yusuf (who heads Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California),[34] and Yasir Qadhi (who holds a teaching position in the Religious Department of Rhodes College and is also the Dean of Academic Affairs at Al-Maghrib Institute),[35] as

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"*murtad*" (apostate) for their condemnation of the terrorist attack on the French weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015 in which 12 people were killed.[36] Other prominent Muslim scholars and clerics whom IS has denounced include Dr Abdullah Hakim Quick (prominent scholar, UK), Hisham Kabbani (prominent scholar and Sheikh of Nashabandi Sufi Order, US), Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi (prominent scholar, Syria) and Tawfique Chowdhury (scholar and Executive Chairman of Mercy Mission, Australia).

IS did not explain the process that was adopted to make such pronouncements, and whether the group had communicated its ruling to them and allowed them to refute the charges; neither did the group disclose who were the scholars involved in making such rulings. Based on its *takfir* methodology, *takfir* cannot be made based on speculation and must go through proper processes; no Muslim should be judged otherwise, except with evidence that is beyond doubt (*yaqin*). IS' failure to adhere to its own doctrine of *takfir* constitutes a serious non-compliance with the *Shari`ah*.

Takfir over Democracy

Another example of IS' failure to adhere to mainstream Sunni doctrines is its pronouncement of *takfir* on all Muslims who accept democracy and regard it as compatible with Islam. This pronouncement is problematic

on two grounds.

First, although there is some disagreement among Muslim scholars on the issue, many of them today would support a democratic system and permit Muslims participating in its process, regardless whether they live in a Muslim country or a non-Muslim country or participate as voters, election candidates or members of parliament.[37] This position is supported by many scholarly works,[38] as well as by the participation of Islamic parties (which include Muslim scholars) in democratic processes and governments in many Muslim-majority countries. IS' pronouncement, therefore, go against the mainstream position of Sunni scholars, and is tantamount to pronouncing *takfir* on them and hundreds of millions of ordinary Muslims.[39]

Second, it is an established Sunni doctrine to refrain from *takfir* on contentious theological issues where differences of opinion arising from *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) are inevitable. This includes the issue of democracy in Islam. Due to the serious consequences of *takfir*, some conservative scholars who reject the compatibility of democracy with Islam and discourage Muslims' participation in it, prefer prudence and refrain from pronouncing *takfir* on those who disagree with them.[40] They are also guided by a *hadith* that says, "Avert the legal penalties from the Muslims as much as possible, if he has a way out then leave him to his way, for if the Imam makes a mistake in forgiving it would be better than making a mistake in punishment" (narrated by Al-Turmuzi). IS' pronouncement of *takfir* therefore contradicts its own claim in its *Muqarrar Fi Al-Tawhid* that its creed and doctrine are based on Sunni doctrines.[41]

At Odds With Contemporary Muslim Scholars' Standpoint

IS' failure to live up to its own claims of abiding by Sunni precepts is clearly demonstrated in the letter signed by more than 120 Muslim scholars from all over the world denouncing IS. The letter, signed by renowned scholars such as Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah (President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies), Sheikh Shawqi `Allam (Grand Mufti of Egypt), Hamzah Yusuf and Dr. Din Syamsudin (President of Muhammadiyah and Chairman of the Indonesian Council of Ulama), lists down more than 20 points of IS' serious transgressions of Islamic teachings. *Takfir* is one of the points addressed

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by the letter:

> "…..disbelief requires the intention of disbelief, and not just absentminded words or deeds. It is not permissible to accuse anyone of disbelief without proof of the intention of disbelief. Nor is it permissible to accuse anyone of being a non-Muslim without ascertaining that intention. …
>
> It is forbidden to interpret the implications of a person's deeds; only the person himself or herself may interpret their own deeds - particularly when there is a difference of opinion among Muslims regarding that particular deed. It is also forbidden to declare others as non-Muslim based on any matter in which there is a difference of opinion among Muslim scholars. It is forbidden to declare an entire group of people non-Muslim. Disbelief applies only to individuals depending on their deeds and intentions… scholars - including Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah - distinguish between the actions of a disbeliever (kafir) and declaring people non-Muslim (takfir). Even if a person performs a deed that has elements of disbelief, this does not necessitate that that person be judged as a disbeliever for the reasons presented earlier. Al-Dhahabi related that his teacher, Ibn Taymiyyah, used to say near the end of his life: 'I do not

declare any member of the ummah non-Muslim … The Prophet said: "Anyone who maintains his ablution is a believer", so whoever observes the prescribed prayers with ablution is a Muslim.'…."[42]

The above categorical statement clearly refutes IS' pronouncement of *takfir* against Muslim scholars and masses. The statement also challenges IS' use of *takfir* in contentious theological issues, such as the compatibility of democracy with Islam. IS' indiscriminate application of *takfir* against a wide range of people and organisations also goes against the prudence recommended in the final part of the above letter. IS has so far failed to respond to the criticisms of these scholars.

Contradicting the Amman Message and Mardin Declaration

IS' *takfir* doctrine and declaration of all Shiites as disbelievers are also at variance with the Amman Message (issued in 2005) that has been endorsed by hundreds of eminent Muslim scholars and thinkers, such as the late Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (former Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar), Sheikh Ali Gomaa (former Grand Mufti of Egypt), Professor Kamal Hassan (former President of International Islamic University of Malaysia), and Prof. Ingrid Mattson (former President of Islamic Society of North America). The Amman Message pronounces:

"(1) Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four Sunni schools (Mathahib) of Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi`i and Hanbali), *the two Shi'i schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Ja`fari and Zaydi)*, the Ibadi school of Islamic jurisprudence and the Thahiri school of Islamic jurisprudence, *is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible and impermissible. Verily his (or her) blood, honour, and property are inviolable* [emphasis added]. Moreover, in accordance with the Shaykh Al-Azhar's fatwa, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to the Ash`ari creed or whoever practices real Tasawwuf (Sufism) an apostate. Likewise, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to true Salafi thought an apostate.

Equally, it is neither possible nor

"IS' takfir doctrine and declaration of all Shiites as disbelievers are also at variance with the Amman Message.."

permissible to declare as apostates any group of Muslims who believes in God, Glorified and Exalted be He, and His Messenger (may peace and blessings be upon him) and the pillars of faith, and acknowledges the five pillars of Islam, and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion."[43]

This declaration also refutes IS' claim that Sunni Muslim scholars are in consensus regarding the disbelief of all Shiite scholars. IS is shown to be clearly wrong in using this false reason to justify *takfir* against Sunni scholars who refuse to *takfir* Shiite scholars. In Islamic jurisprudence, any claim of consensus (*ijma'*) among scholars is hardly uncontested, be it in the classical period or current times, as shown by the present Declaration. As such, IS owes the Sunni world an explanation as to why it deviates from the pronouncement endorsed by hundreds of contemporary distinguished scholars.

The Mardin Declaration is another major source exposing the divergence of IS' doctrine of *takfir* from Sunni Islam's position. It was adopted in 2010 by a group of prominent Muslim scholars, such as Sheikh Mustafa Ceric (Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Habib Ali Aljifri (Director of Tabah Foundation), at a conference in Mardin (in Turkey) to deliberate on the exploitation of Ibn Taimiyah's *fatwa* by extremist groups to justify *takfir,* killing of 'apostates' and waging perpetual war against non-Muslims. The Declaration stated *inter alia* that:

"1) Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa concerning Mardin can under no circumstances be appropriated and used as evidence for levelling the charge of *kufr* (unbelief) against fellow Muslims, rebelling against rulers, deeming game their lives and property, terrorising those who enjoy

safety and security, acting treacherously towards those who live (in harmony) with fellow Muslims or with whom fellow Muslims live (in harmony) via the bond of citizenship and peace. On the contrary, the fatwa deems all of that unlawful, notwithstanding its original purpose of supporting a Muslim state against a non-Muslim state. Ibn Taymiyya agrees with all of this, and follows the precedent of previous Muslim scholars in this regard, and does not deviate from their position. Anyone who seeks support from this fatwa for killing Muslims or non-Muslims has erred in his interpretation and has misapplied the revealed texts….

7) The notion of loyalty and enmity (*al-wala wa al-bara*) must never be used to declare anyone out of the fold of Islam, unless an actual article of unbelief is held. In all other cases, it actually involves several types of judgement ranging according to the juridical five-fold scale: (permissible, recommended, not-recommended, non-permissible, and required). Therefore, it is not permissible to narrow the application of this notion and use it for declaring a Muslim outside the fold of Islam."[44]

Although the Amman Message and Mardin Declaration precede IS which was established in June 2014, its predecessors Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and later the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), were already in existence and applying *takfir* indiscriminately. IS should explain its *takfir* doctrine *vis-à-vis* these major declarations and live up to its claim of honouring Muslim scholars and adhering to Sunni traditions.

Conclusion

The Letter to Al-Baghdadi, the Amman Message and the Mardin Declaration, endorsed by hundreds of eminent Muslim scholars, constitute sufficient evidence that IS' doctrine and practice of *takfir* are contrary to Sunni creed and tradition. Mainstream scholars are circumspect on dealing with *takfir* in view of its serious implications. IS in contrast adopts a cavalier attitude, declaring large numbers of Muslims as *kafir*. In view of IS' deviation from established Sunni positions, its claims of holding mainstream scholars in high esteem and following the Sunni tradition are erroneous and deceptive. More importantly, IS'

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position deviates from the well-known advice of the Prophet (narrated by Ibn Majah): "My people/followers will not be in agreement over misguidance. When you differ in opinions, be with the *Al-Sawad Al-A`zham* (the majority)." Not only is IS not with the majority, it is trying hard to undermine their unity and position of moderation, tolerance and peaceful co-existence with others.

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23. *Jahiliyah* is a characteristic that refers to the era before Prophet Muhammad was appointed as Allah's Messenger. That era was full of *kufr*. Therefore, the accusation of being *jahiliyah* means *kufr* and *shirk*.

24. This part is extracted with some editing from the author's article in Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: An Analysis of Islamic State's *Takfir* Doctrine", *Eurasia Review*, 12 August 2015.

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Threat of Daesh in Universities: Malaysia's Experience

**By Mohd Mizan bin Mohammad Aslam**

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The growing traction of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) terrorist group amongst youth, especially university students, is a worrying trend in Malaysia. It is imperative for the government to formulate a holistic strategy to overcome IS influence in universities

Introduction

Malaysia's Minister for Higher Education Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh stated that university enrolment rate is at an all-time high with almost 40% of eligible students pursuing higher education. In contrast, only four percent of Malaysian students were enrolling into universities 40 years ago.[1] The increasing number of students in universities is however viewed by the 'Islamic State' (IS) terrorist group or Daesh as opportunity to recruit vulnerable students for its jihadist agenda.

Since the emergence of IS in June 2014, over 420 Malaysians have been arrested for clandestine activities related to the group.[2] Police and security agencies in Malaysia fear that terrorist ideology is gaining traction amongst university and school students, and have been briefing them on the dangers of joining IS.[3] This essay explores what causes university students to join or sympathise with an extremist group such as IS, and how the government should respond to this phenomenon. Below is a graph showing the number of people detained for terrorism-related activities over the years:
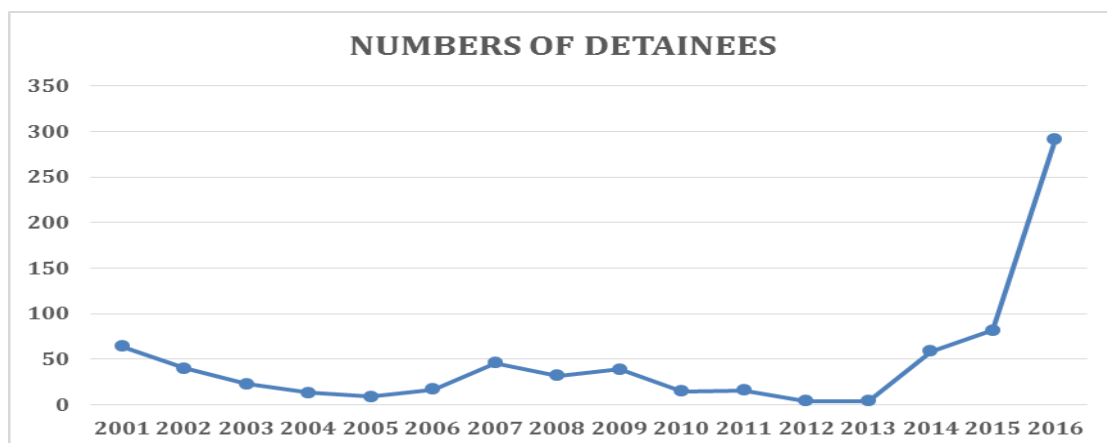
NUMBERS OF DETAINEES

Source: Data collected and analysed by Malaysia Research Institute of Strategic Studies (MyRISS), Islamic University Perlis, Malaysia[4]

Statistics also show that at least 40 students from schools, colleges and universities have been arrested for their involvement in IS-related activities.[5] Three students from public universities have been detained

in 2016 and four more were arrested in the first three months of 2017. They included two female students who were planning to travel to Turkey before entering Syria and Iraq. Most of them were in contact with Abu Muhammad Wanndy and Zainuri Kamarudin who are part of the IS' Southeast Asian militant wing, Katibah Nusantara, in Raqqa and Aleppo. Four private university students have also been detained — two of them had connections with another two graduates from Malaysian Monash University who were directly involved in the Dhaka restaurant bombing in July 2016. In January 2017, two more students from Madinah International University (MEDIU) were arrested for having links with IS terror network by mostly channelling funds to the group's terrorist activities; the university in Shah Alam also came into the spotlight after police announced that two of its students, who were planning an attack against an international school in Malaysia, were arrested on suspicion of involvement with IS. So far, eight secondary school students have also been found to be involved in IS-related activities. The youngest detained student was 16 years old from an Islamic private school in Kedah; he was in possession of IS flag, symbols, books and his written oath of allegiance (*bai'ah*) to IS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.
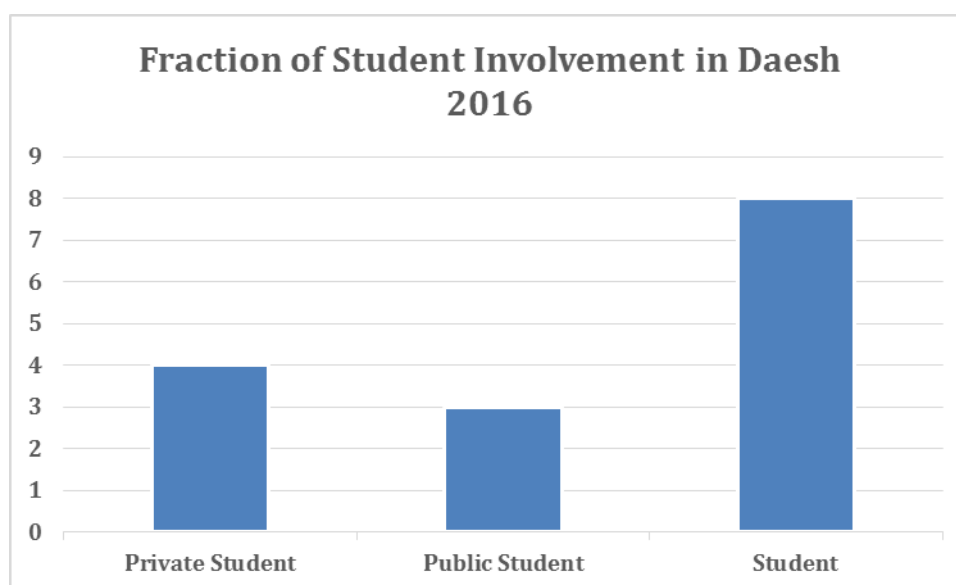
Source: Data collected and analysed by Malaysia Research Institute of Strategic Studies (MyRISS), Islamic University Perlis, Malaysia[6]

Recruiting Students for IS

Youth below 25 years old have been found to be more susceptible to radical ideology. Their relatively young age and inexperience render them vulnerable to exploitation by groups such as IS. The latter is able to recruit them for *jihad* in the Middle East through a number of avenues. This includes social media and *usrah* groups (religious discussion group) in local schools, colleges and universities.[7]

Students lacking in critical thinking skills and whose worldview is black and white in nature are more easily influenced by jihadists. According to Assistant Professor Guy Burton of the University of Nottingham Malaysia "Radicalisation is especially prevalent among younger individuals, who are more liable to see the world in black and white, to have a sense of idealism in stark contrast to the grubby realism and pragmatism of the day to day world."[8]

Teenagers and youngsters also have this incessant urge to act like adults, driven by notions of independence and feelings of adulthood. As such, they would engage in adult activities. As discussed by a renowned psychology consultant Zac Parsons, "Teens tend to be more vulnerable to the appeals of IS for similar reasons that they are attracted to sex, drugs, alcohol, and other 'adult' activities — it's a world that is clearly run by adults, and they want to be a part of that."[9]

Additionally, some younger individuals who have been engaged in wrongdoings seek an avenue through which they can atone for their past misdeeds and return to the correct path. Some seek a short cut to this atonement. Radical preachers and ideologues exploit such individuals by asserting that they can achieve redemption through violent *jihad*.[10]

IS also tailored its message to recruit female university students. The group used the romanticised notion of *jihad* and the symbolic heroicness latent in the image of the IS fighter to allure young women into engaging in IS activities. They become love-struck and fall for the Arab or white Caucasian fighter in IS. For instance, on 24 December 2014, police arrested a 27-year-old female university student in Klang Valley, who had married a Western IS fighter through skype.[11] This underscores the vulnerability of female students to the romanticised notion of IS militants.

New media technological platforms such as YouTube, social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and chat applications (WhatsApp and Telegram), are used to cajole and lure university students to join IS activities.[12] For instance, the 20-year-old Syamimi Faiqah, a former student at the International Islamic University College of Selangor, was allured into IS in October 2014 through Facebook. Another 22-year-old male student from the Public University in Perlis became an IS sympathiser after watching the latter's propaganda videos on YouTube[13]; he was arrested at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

IS has also used *usrah* groups to propagate its message. University students join *usrah* groups not only to expand their religious understanding but also to seek guidance. Traditionally, an *usrah* group would follow a particular teaching or idealism espoused by certain groups. Some of these teachings and narratives are extremist in nature. For instance, the 24-year-old Muhamad Razin Sharhan Mustafa Kamal, who was arrested in Beirut in 2012, admitted that he was exposed to IS ideology through his *usrah* group which was led by the former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) member Yazid Sufaat.[14]

Students who come from broken families are also susceptible to radical ideology. Followers of Islamist political parties can also be a problem. Some adhere to the '*bai'ah*' system (oath of allegiance to the leader) that compels them to be

> ## "Technological tools such as YouTube, social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and chat applications (WhatsApp and Telegram), are used to cajole and lure university student to join IS activities."

secretive and be obedient to the group's leader. Introvert students who do not mix around with other students, can also be exploited by IS jihadist recruiters. Most of the 'lone wolfs' who get involved in attacks around the world are introvert students with anti-social tendencies and live in hatred of America and Israel.

Overcoming IS influence

Given the growing number of people, including young university students, arrested for having ties with IS,[15] the Malaysian authorities should formulate a comprehensive strategy to reverse this phenomenon.

First, the government needs to provide more space for students to express their views, ideas and desires. This freedom and inclusion into the system would dissuade them from looking at alternative avenues. One such program is the #Mahasiswa IslamTolakKeganasan (Muslim University Students Reject Terrorism), which was launched in 2015 by the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) at the National Muslim Undergraduate Leadership Convention, Selangor.[16] This program was initiated by the Malaysian government to allow students to convey their ideas on religion and politics. The government hopes to stimulate discussion and address potential problems faced by students.

Second, Ministry of Higher Education must provide more training for the university administration officials in charge of managing students and their problems. Additionally, according to Rais Yatim (President of International Islamic University), the university's security staff should do a background check on the students and monitor their activities on the internet.[17] University staff should also provide students with activities that can offer them recreation and distraction from potential radical outlets. This includes activities such as futsal, aerobics, paintball, FitMalaysia and horseback riding.

Third, the university should monitor students who are known to have extremist views on Islamic issues. Fourth, the university campus should be a restricted area and closed off to any unauthorised activities. Security at university access points must be enhanced. Class attendance should also be monitored. For instance, for foreign students, Elizabeth Lee, the Sunway University Senior Executive Director said "they must achieve at least 80% attendance and must pass all subjects taken in the past year…missing classes could lead eventually to a police report and the cancellation of the student's visa."[18] This is to prevent students from getting involved in clandestine or undesirable activities.

Fifth, universities need to partner with the police and the special branch to monitor extremist activities. Malaysia's Inspector General of Police Khalid Abu Bakar said on 9 July 2016: "We already have working relationships with the institutions of higher learning and we will work closer with them to identify those that are suspected of being involved."[19]

Sixth, there is a need to establish *usrah*/religious studies that promote religious moderation, and programmes that counter IS narratives and expose the group's atrocities. For instance, in 2014, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCCM) ran a programme that highlighted IS crimes and brutalities.[20]

Seventh, parents are important stakeholders and should be involved in detecting early signs of radicalisation. There is a need to approach parents of students who are involved in extremist activities and ask them to persuade their children to change. Mothers, who share a deep emotional

"There should be programmes that counter IS narratives and expose the group's atrocious activities."

bond with their children, can play a crucial role in this regard.[21]

Conclusion

IS has adversely impacted Muslim countries. Some have become targets of attack by the group. Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, have been mentioned as targets for IS attacks and recruitment. This makes the youth, especially science students in institutions of higher learning, important because of their technical expertise that can be exploited by IS. It is therefore critical that a partnership is established between the government, policy-makers, security officials and parents to prevent IS' recruitment of university students and the latter's participation in IS activities.

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Salafism in India: Diversity and Challenges

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

Since the revelation in 2016 that around fifty radical Muslim youth from India have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the 'Islamic State' (IS) terrorist group, Salafism has become a buzzword in the Indian media as the major contributor to Islamist extremism. Salafism in India is, however, not homogenous. It is relatively syncretic, embedded within the Indian socio-political milieu and diversified with multiple denominations in northern and southern parts of the country. Even so, there are extremist variants posing challenges to traditional Salafist groups and radicalising social media-savvy youngsters towards exclusivism and extremism.

Introduction

After Indonesia and Pakistan, India is home to the third largest Muslim population in the world. Of India's 1.2 billion people, over 170 million are Muslims. In recent years, media punditry has attributed the rise of Islamist extremism in India to the growth of Salafism.[1] For instance, the 21 residents of Kerala (South-western India) who travelled to Afghanistan via Dubai in May 2016 to join the so-called Islamic State of Khurasan, the local affiliate of IS in the Af-Pak region, are described as adherents of Salafism.[2] Similarly, half of the 55 Muslim radicals detained in India in 2016 on terrorism charges are also said to be followers of the Salafist school of thought.[3]

These detentions have raised concern, with some writers linking the growth of violent extremism with Salafism. It has been branded "the new threat to Islam in India".[4] Many older non-Salafist Muslim organisations have indeed attacked Indian Salafist organisations for its intolerance towards other sects, and the practice of visiting graves and celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday, which have been going on in India since the advent of Islam itself in South Asia.

Concerns have also been raised about the large amount of funding coming in from Saudi Arabia, the home of present-day Salafism and its variant Wahhabism, to fund madrassas in states like Kerala, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh.[5] Information on WikiLeaks has revealed that Saudi Arabia has spent about 1700 Crore Rupees (about US$250 million) to set up madrassas, mainly to counter Iran's outreach to Indian Shias.[6] These criticisms and allegations warrant a closer look at Salafism in India.

Diversity in Salafism

Generally, Salafism refers to a set of ideas subscribed to by its followers who advocate strict adherence to their understanding of Islamic practices as enjoined by Prophet Muhammad, and subsequently practised by the early pious predecessors known as the *salaf al-salih*.[7] It is not homogenous and includes various strands and orientations, especially on issues of jurisprudence and politics.[8] They include: (a) mainstream Saudi Salafism which is the largest and most prominent strand whose followers are described as pacifist, loyal to the Saudi rulers and critical of extremist jihadi groups; (b) the Ṣaḥwa movement of Saudi Arabia which advocates peaceful political reform; (c) Egyptian Salafism which is characterised by a wide spectrum of views on jurisprudence and politics, with some Egyptian Salafis supportive of

President el-Sisi while others are opposed or apolitical; (d) Takfīri-Salafīsm whose followers engage in excommunication (*takfir*) of Muslims, and preach the divisive doctrine of 'Wala wal Bara' (loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of non-Muslims); and (e) Jihadi-Salafism which is represented by militant groups like Al Qaeda and IS.[9]

Given the diversity of the Salafist movement, it is crucial to have a nuanced understanding of Salafism when examining the ideology and its various manifestations and organisations in countries like India. The Indian movement, which also encompasses a few characteristics of the above-mentioned groups, has its own localised version as well.

State of Salafism in India

In India, Salafism is quite diverse and multi-layered. The long-established Salafist organisations are well entrenched within Indian society and preach multi-culturalism and tolerance. They have a rich history of peaceful co-existence and are noted for their syncretic Indian characteristics and diverse nature. They claim to teach "the principles of mutual benevolence, unity, peace, brotherhood, love of the country and respect of human values rejecting the causes of conflict and disunity".[10]

The oldest Indian Salafist movement, the Jamiat Ahle Hadith (JAH), was founded in 1906. It operates in about 20 states mainly in the northern and central parts of India.[11] The JAH claims to represent about 22 million Salafists in India (about 13 per cent of the total Muslim population) and holds various annual conferences and events.[12]

In South India, the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahedeen (KNM) and its offshoot, the South Karnataka Salafi Movement (SKSM) are the two major Salafist movements. Founded in 1947, the KNM has a history that traces back to the 19th century Kerala-based scholar Sayyid Sanaulla Makti Thangal. This organisation differs slightly from JAH in that its (KNM) approach is influenced, at times, by the Marxist movements in Kerala.[13] Both the KNM and the JAH have madrassa and school networks operating in many districts. Together they represent a majority of Indian Salafists and have frequent collaborations and exchanges with one another.

> **"Given the diversity of the Salafist movement, it is crucial to have a nuanced understanding of Salafism when examining the ideology and its various manifestations and organisations in countries like India."**

Adaptability: A Key Feature of Indian Salafism

While jihadist terror organisations like IS and Al-Qaeda reject democracy as a system of governance, and seek to overthrow Muslim governments and establish the rule of God, such a belief is not completely subscribed to by Salafist organisations in India. One of JAH's chief ideologue, Sheikh Wasiullah Abbasi (who teaches in Makkah, Saudi Arabia), noted that Salafism has characterised democracy as a flawed concept. Despite this, he exhorted Muslims to vote against present Prime Minister Modi in the 2014 elections, stressing that, given the circumstances, it was strategically more beneficial for the Muslim community to vote.[14]

In its 33rd All India Conference in 2016, JAH leaders emphasised the importance of Indian culture: "we cannot make progress by ignoring Indian culture".[15] Moreover, its annual conferences are attended by many luminaries from different faiths and organisations such as the Arya Samaj, an institution (founded in 1875) that based its practices on the infallibility of the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas.[16] Some speakers have also stressed the theme of Hindu-Muslim unity by elaborating on the legacy of the freedom fighter and senior leader of the Indian National Congress, Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad.[17]

The KNM also takes such an approach with regards to democracy and the constitution. In one of his speeches, Mustafa Tanveer, an ideologue of the Mujahid Students Movement, a branch of the KNM, expounded on the importance of following the constitution. He also said that as long as freedom of religion is promised by the Indian government, abstention from the democratic process becomes not just anti-national but also anti-Islamic.[18] Furthermore, Mujeeb Rehman Kinaloor, the ex-president of Ittehadul Subhanil Mujahideen (the youth front of KNM), also encouraged revamping the syllabus of madrassas to battle extremist ideologies in a conference in 2016.[19]

Evolving Nature of Salafism in India

Despite the seeming inclusiveness of these two major Salafist organisations, many sectarian altercations and arguments have been reported over the past few years. This can be attributed to a 'new age' Salafism imported into India from the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This occurred after the oil boom of 1973 when the Gulf states attracted more Indian economic migrants who brought back Salafist ideas with them. The Gulf States were also able to funnel money into projects in India for various purposes.[20]

This 'new' brand of Salafism is loosely-organised. Most of its followers pick their knowledge from online preachers across the world. The new Salafism is more puritanical and intolerant of other beliefs, and its adherents are more critical of the older established Indian Salafist organisations. For instance, puritanical Salafist websites have called the JAH "an organisation upon a mish-mash of confusion".[21] Similarly, certain Gulf-based Salafist clerics have criticised the KNM movement for being a "deviation from the true path".[22]

Media houses have not picked up much on these developments within the Indian Salafist movements, especially the growing trend of educated jihadists with links to English-speaking clerics online rather than clerics in neighbourhood mosques. This is a trend that has picked up pace across the world with internet preachers playing crucial roles in radicalising youth.[23] Many Muslims who joined IS were not known to frequent mosques but rather attended programmes held by their peers, a proclivity that has been observed in other parts of South Asia too.[24]

> "Despite the seeming inclusiveness of these two major Salafist organisations, many sectarian altercations and arguments have been reported over the past few years."

Many people who turned to violent-extremism operated independently among friends and family, a less-acknowledged fact at the official level. Some reports have also identified individuals with no links to anyone else but IS operators from Syria whom they met online.[25] They are the ones that are most prone to violence and who pose the real danger to peace in India.

This development is probably best illustrated by the IS terror cell disrupted in Hyderabad in June last year. Operating under the command of the leader of a group of Indian jihadists in Raqqa, Syria, the cell was at an advanced stage of planning strikes on multiple targets in the city, including a temple, markets, malls and a police station.[26] The group, which included graduates in software engineering, computer science and management, studied online manuals on bomb-making, purchased fertilizers and assembled quantities of chemicals for making bombs. Police recovered two pistols, forged identity documents, and literature on making explosives, among others, during raids.

Mischaracterisation of Muslim Organisations

Another problem in understanding Salafism in India is the fact that the term 'Wahhabi' has been used liberally by Indian lay-Muslims to describe anyone who is against the veneration of Sufi saints.[27] This has led to organisations such as the Deobandi Movement (a nationalist Hanafi seminary founded in 1866), the Tablighi Jamaat (a global apolitical missionary movement

founded in 1927) and the Jamaat -e- Islami (a political organisation founded in 1941) being erroneously labelled as Salafists.[28]

These groups are not regarded by the Salafists as one of their own, and have had, in many cases, major disagreements with them over issues of theology and jurisprudence. For example, the Salafists do not agree with the Deobandi view that the schools of jurisprudence and its scholars should be unconditionally followed.[29] Furthermore, seminaries like the Deoband have issued strong fatwas condemning IS and its activities categorically, apart from previous fatwas that spoke against terrorism in general.[30] Salafist organisations like KNM too have categorically denounced all forms of terrorism and violent extremism, including IS in various conferences. KNM, for instance, launched a social media campaign to target and combat IS ideology on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp in the year 2015.[31] This is in addition to various conferences where the KNM condemned terrorism.[32]

Conclusion

The Salafist movement in India is as multifaceted as Islam in India itself. While some strains of Salafism in India are connected or similar to the violent movements in other parts of the world, the main Salafist movement itself is opposed to terrorism. Many of the Salafists are inclusive, syncretic and nationalistic. These intrinsic characteristics account largely for the relatively insignificant number of Indian Muslims who have heeded IS' call to migrate to Iraq and Syria. Even so, established Salafist organisations such as JAH and KNM and non-Salafist groups are facing challenges from the spread of intolerant strands imported from the Middle East and coming through the Internet. It is therefore necessary to distinguish the various Salafist groups in India and identify those that preach religious extremism and violence.

In the present discourse and debate over Salafism in India, three significant points should be noted. First, there is a lack of nuance in the characterisation of the different Salafist organisations. This can be counter-productive and may result in dissipating attention on Salafist groups that preach intolerance, extremism and violence. Second, while jihadists would require close watching, there is also a clear need to monitor the growth of new Salafi groups that preach exclusivism and extremism. Third,

"The Salafist movement in India is as multifaceted as Islam in India itself."

greater attention would have to be paid to self-radicalised social media-savvy youngsters, who are divorced from their community, draw inspiration from IS ideologues online, and take orders from IS operators in Syria and elsewhere.

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The Terrorist Threat in Turkey:
A Dangerous New Phase

By Nodirbek Soliev

The Reina nightclub massacre in Istanbul in January this year was the first time that the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group publicly acknowledged its involvement in a mass-casualty terrorist attack in Turkey. It heralds the beginning of a new and dangerous transition in IS' confrontation with the Turkish state. The attack also highlights a trend of Central Asian jihadists being employed for the group's operations in Turkey. A similar spate of IS-directed attacks will likely recur in Turkey in the coming months, posing an increasingly tangible threat to the country's security.

Introduction

In the last one year, Turkey has become the central target of the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group's overseas terrorist campaign. This can be seen as an attempt to raise the stakes of Turkey's active engagement in the war against IS and an attempt to divert attention from IS' battlefield losses. Based on the author's estimate, the terrorist group has been accused of perpetrating at least 14 terrorist operations on Turkish soil since 2014 – the largest number of attacks carried out by the group outside of Syria and Iraq. These attacks have killed more than 330 people and wounded 1,200 others. However, until recently, IS has not claimed responsibility for the attacks in Turkey it had been thought to be behind nor publicly declared war against the Turkish state.

In the past, IS claimed responsibility for the March 2016 assassination of a Syrian journalist in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, which can be regarded as a targeted killing of an individual but not a direct aggression against Turkey. In

November 2016, the terrorist group announced itself to be behind a car-bomb attack on a police station in the south-eastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir. However, IS' claim was disputed after Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), the military wing of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), claimed responsibility for the attack. Turkish authorities also confirmed that the Diyarbakir bombing was the work of TAK.[1]

The 1 January 2017 shootings on Istanbul's Reina nightclub which killed 39 people, including 18 foreigners and injured 69 others, was the first high-profile terrorist attack claimed by IS in Turkey. In an online statement released through its Amaq news agency, IS hailed the attacker as "a heroic soldier of the caliphate" and described Turkey as "the servant of the cross", stating that the attack was in retribution for Turkish military offensives against the group in Syria and Iraq.[2]

The Reina nightclub attack signalled that the IS threat to Turkey has escalated into a new and dangerous phase. The bloodbath demonstrated that the terrorist group now stages indiscriminate attacks against 'soft targets', Sunni Muslim civilians who follow a secular lifestyle. Most of the dead in the attack were reported to be foreign tourists from Muslim countries. In the past, IS, which portrays itself to be "defenders" of Muslims from what it describes as "enemies of Islam", has been reluctant to claim responsibility for attacks on fellow Sunni Muslims in Turkey in order not to alienate sympathisers and potential recruits, as well as to avert government retaliation on its networks of cells. The attack was also a further confirmation of IS strategic move to mount terrorist attacks in and beyond Turkey in compensation for its territorial losses in

the Middle East.

An Escalating Confrontation

It is important to analyse the past trajectory of IS' confrontation with Turkey in order to understand the current magnitude of the threat posed by the terrorist group to the country. The conflict between IS and Turkey has evolved in four phases.

The First Phase: Turkey's and IS' "Non-Aggression" Posture

Throughout 2014 to early 2015, IS and Turkey appeared to be pursuing a tacit "non-aggression" policy, in which both sides attempted to avoid a direct conflict with each other.[3] In 2014, IS did not carry out any major terrorist operation in Turkey, with the exception of the March 2014 armed clash in Nigde, a town in Central Anatolia, in which three non-Turkish members of IS killed three security personnel and wounded five soldiers during a road checkpoint. However, Turkish authorities downplayed the threat, claiming the incident not to be premeditated.

In January 2015, a suicide attack carried out by an IS' "black widow" from the Russian republic of Dagestan in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square killed a police officer and injured another. IS did not claim responsibility for both attacks.

IS' reluctance to antagonise Turkey was likely calculated to ensure that Turkey did not become an active participant in the war against the jihadist group in Syria and Iraq. Turkey's open hostility would have jeopardised IS' ability to use Turkey as a convenient territory for carrying out recruitment, transiting, fundraising and logistics.

During that period, Turkey had been largely inactive towards IS. Although Turkey already designated IS as a terrorist organisation in 2014, it has long downplayed the threat posed by the jihadist group. In spite of international pressure, Ankara refrained from participating in the international fight against the terrorist group. Turkey's main strategic interest in Syria was to overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime as the key to ending the conflict, rather than defeating IS.

The Turkish government regarded IS as a potent tool to defeat Assad's forces on the ground and to prevent the establishment of a 'Kurdish belt' in lawless parts of Syria and Iraq.[4] In fact, in 2014

> **"The Turkish government regarded IS as a potent tool to defeat Assad's forces on the ground and to prevent the establishment of a 'Kurdish belt' in lawless parts of Syria and Iraq."**

and 2015, Turkish security services and police did not conduct any premeditated, intelligence-led counter-terrorism raids against IS and its networks in the country, while making little effort to impede the flow of foreign fighters crossing its borders to join IS in Syria and Iraq.[5] Foreign jihadist recruits were able to slip into Syria from Turkey almost without hindrance. As of early 2016, more than 25,000 foreign recruits had travelled to Syria and Iraq via Turkey to join IS.[6]

The Second Phase: IS' Change of Course and its Attacks on Kurdish and Pro-Kurdish Targets

In the spring of 2015, IS started to attack Kurds and pro-Kurdish targets in Turkey in retaliation for the advance of Syrian Kurds in the north of Syria and Iraq. From May to October 2015, IS staged a total of four attacks against Kurds inside Turkey, including simultaneous bomb blasts in the cities of Adana and Mersin in May 2015, which was followed by three other bomb attacks in Diyarbakir in June, in Suruc in July, and in Ankara in October of the same year. The attacks killed nearly 150 people and injured 700 others.

The attacks appeared to be designed to undermine the country's social fabric and to fuel ethnic tension with Turkey's largest ethnic minority, the Kurds; they also contributed to the failure of the peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which has accused the Turkish government of supporting IS. For instance, it blamed the July 2015 Suruc bomb attack, not only on IS but also the Turkish government.[7]

Many hoped that the peace talks, which were announced way back in 2013, would lead to lasting peace and end three decades of conflict between the Turkish state and PKK that has killed at least 30,000 people. However, it has failed like previous ones.

In July 2015, Turkey made a decisive move against IS. The launch of indiscriminate and mass-casualty bomb attacks by IS against Kurds prompted Ankara to shift towards a "preemptive defence" counter-terrorism strategy which allowed the Turkish military to launch cross-border offensives against IS even before a direct attack by the terrorist group.[8] In the same month, the Turkish government also allowed the US-led coalition to launch airstrikes against IS militants in Syria and Iraq from its Incirlik airbase. Additionally, the Turkish air force conducted its first airstrikes against IS targets in Syria, while reinforcing security along its border with Syria in order to prevent the border-crossings.[9]

In retaliation, in October 2015, IS carried out twin suicide bombings during a pro-Kurdish peace rally in Ankara. The attacks killed 107 people and injured 500 others and was one of the deadliest attacks by IS on Turkish soil directed at the Kurdish people.[10]

The Third Phase: IS' Undeclared War Against Turkey

Following a series of high-profile attacks orchestrated or inspired by IS across European cities, including Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin, and under huge pressure by the West, the Turkish government had to further tighten its borders and take serious measures against IS and its networks on its own soil. Turkey's decision to actively engage in the war against IS was a turning point in Turkey's engagements with IS.

The year 2016 saw a dramatic increase in terrorist attacks in Turkey. IS switched its focus from Kurdish targets to indiscriminate attacks on civilians including foreign tourists. The January 2016 suicide bombing against a group of German tourists in Istanbul's Sultanahmet Square was the first attack by the group which was targeted at tourists in Turkey. This was followed by a wider range of attacks attributed to IS, including a suicide bombing against tourists in Istanbul in March, a car bombing at a police headquarters in Gaziantep in May and the Ataturk airport assault in Istanbul in June 2016.

> **"The launch of indiscriminate and mass-casualty bomb attacks by IS against Kurds prompted Ankara to shift towards a "preemptive defence" counter-terrorism strategy .."**

IS was also accused of perpetrating a suicide bomb attack – by a child possibly as young as 12 – at an outdoor wedding in Gaziantep that killed more than 57 people and wounded 66 others.

The Fourth Phase: Open Confrontation

In November 2016, IS stepped up its confrontational posture towards the Turkish state and declared Turkey a "war zone". In an audio recording released online by IS' al-Furqan Media on 2 November 2016, IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ordered fighters to take the battle into Turkey, declaring that "Turkey entered the zone of your operations, so attack it, destroy its security, and sow horror within it. Put it on your list of battlefields. Turkey entered the war with the Islamic State with cover and protection from Crusader jets."[11] Baghdadi was referring to Turkish military incursions into northern Syria since the summer of 2016. In December 2016, IS released a video purportedly featuring the killing of two Turkish soldiers and urged its supporters to "conquer" Istanbul.

The Reina nightclub attack, which came two months after al-Baghdadi's call for all-out war against Turkey, was part of a broader IS strategy. The attack appeared to be a reflection of growing desperation within IS amidst significant military setbacks that the militant group is presently facing in Syria and Iraq. The attack might also signal IS' determination to defend the strategic areas that it has been losing in al-Bab, Raqqa, Aleppo and Mosul and to reduce the significant pressure by the

international coalition.

IS puts blame on Turkey for its losses in Syria.[12] In August 2016, Turkey launched a ground operation, known as Operation *Euphrates Shield*, to clear a strategic border area of IS militants and to contain the gains of Kurdish fighters in the north of Syria. Turkey is now the only foreign country, alongside the US, fighting IS with regular troops on the ground. The Turkish military intervention has inflicted significant losses on IS. In August and October 2016, Syrian opposition forces backed by Turkish military captured the Syrian towns of Jarablus and Dabiq. The latter is symbolically important as it has been central for IS propaganda. Turkey declared that it has made further advances in al-Bab, where the terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and Nice were orchestrated.

IS Networks in Turkey: The Role of Central Asian Fighters

The Reina nightclub massacre highlighted the increasingly important role Central Asian jihadists are playing in IS' operations in Turkey. In fact, the attack was the second time that Central Asian operatives were implicated in IS' overseas terrorist campaign. The 28 June 2016 suicide assaults at Istanbul's international airport was the first terrorist attack carried out by the IS' Central Asian militants on Turkish soil. The attack was a coordinated suicide operation carried out by a semi-autonomous clandestine IS cell that included a Russian, a Kyrgyz and an Uzbek. The cell operated under the command of a Russian citizen of Chechen origin named Akhmed Chataev who is believed to be one of the key Chechen IS commanders and cell leaders in Istanbul.

Investigation of the Reina attack revealed new details on IS' command and control structure over its sleeper cells and their modus operandi in Turkey. IS has built up extensive networks of sleeper cells for recruitment, fundraising and logistics in key urban centres across Turkey, including safe-houses in several Turkish cities such as Istanbul. The arrest of a total of 2,936 jihadists in 2016,[13] and 820 suspected IS sympathisers and operatives in February 2017 by the Turkish police confirms the establishment of robust networks of active members and supporters across Turkey by IS to sustain terrorist activity.[14]

IS appears to have two categories of cell

"The Reina nightclub massacre highlighted the increasingly important role Central Asian jihadists are playing in IS' operations in Turkey."

structures in Turkey. The first category is local cell structures consisting of local Turkish members. IS has steadily exploited these cells to recruit fighters, transport them into Syria and to carry out attacks inside Turkey. More than 3,000 Turkish citizens have reportedly joined IS in Syria and Iraq.[15]

The second category is foreign cell structures which include members predominantly from Russia's North Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia), Central Asia and some Uyghur militants.[16] The Reina nightclub attack was carried out by a Central Asian cell with ground support provided by a large network. IS reportedly mobilised more than 50 individuals and allocated USD 500,000 to plot and carry out the attack.[17] The attacker was an Uzbek national named Abdulqodir Masharipov aka Abu Mohammed Khorasani. Masharipov was born in 1983 in Uzbekistan's Fergana region and had left for Afghanistan in 2011 where he joined and spent five years with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a former Al Qaeda-linked terrorist group. Investigations by Turkish police after his arrest in January 2017 revealed that Masharipov had travelled to Iran in 2015 and claimed to have joined IS while staying there. At some later point, he was detained by Iranian authorities for carrying a fake passport and released after a month.[18]

In January 2016, Masharipov, his wife and two children entered Turkey illegally through its eastern province called Ağrı and later settled down in Konya. There, Masharipov was approached by a Tajik national named Ilyas Mamasharipov, who ordered and instructed Masharipov to plot the Reina nightclub attack. Ilyas Mamasharipov @ Yusuf Tajiki, was arrested by the police in Istanbul a few days after

the attack. He is believed to be a deputy to "Haji aka", a Kazakh national who operates as the leader of the IS cell in Raqqa.

Today, Turkey has one of the largest Central Asian diasporas. It is possible that IS has exploited Central Asian militants to carry out attacks inside Turkey in order to foment distrust and division between local Turkish people and the Central Asian diaspora. It also suggests how successful IS has been at cultivating sources of support within the diaspora communities in Turkey.

The mobilisation of representatives of Central Asian diaspora communities for its operations in Turkey seems to be a deliberate attempt by IS to recruit more volunteers by alienating them from their host country. Furthermore, due to ethno-linguistic, cultural and religious features, which are very similar to the Turkish people, Central Asian militants can easily pass themselves off as Turks and avoid unnecessary attention.

Looking Ahead

The recent increase in IS' attacks in Turkey appears to come in response to Turkish military operations against the terrorist group in the north of Syria. Turkey is likely to witness increasingly dangerous blowback as IS positions are squeezed in Syria and Iraq. IS will probably seek to carry out and inspire as many attacks as possible in Turkey and coalition countries.

Unlike in the past, the terrorist group has moved on to claim responsibility for attacks, so as to demonstrate its capability to carry out attacks around the world and trumpet its success story. Given their well-established covert networks in Turkey, Central Asians will continue to play an important role in IS' future operations in the country. Thus, it is important for Turkish security authorities to establish operational cooperation and intelligence-sharing mechanisms with their Central Asian counterparts in order to detect and prevent possible terrorist plots in future.

Turkey's capability to fight terrorism is crucial to contain the growing threat domestically and globally. Major regional stakeholders should closely work with Ankara to boost the effectiveness of its counter-terrorism efforts. In the long-term, there is a need for sustained measures by Turkey to disrupt cross-border movement of foreign fighters and to dismantle IS' supply and support networks in the country.

> **"It is possible that IS has exploited Central Asian militants to carry out attacks inside Turkey in order to foment distrust and division between local Turkish people and the Central Asian diaspora."**

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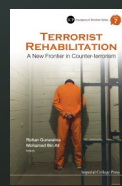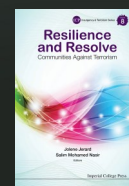## STAFF PUBLICATIONS
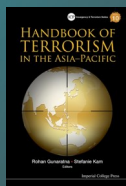
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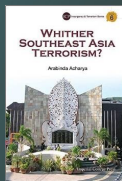(Imperial College Press, 2016)
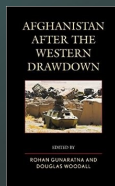
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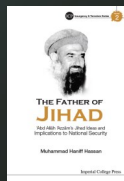(Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015)

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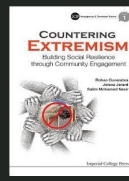(Imperial College Press, 2015)

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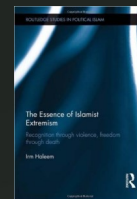(Imperial College Press, 2015)

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(Routledge, 2011)

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Global Pathfinder is a one-stop repository for information on current and emerging terrorist threats from the major terrorism affected regions of the world. It is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, terrorist personalities, terrorist and counter-terrorist incidents as well as terrorist training camps. This includes profiles from emerging hubs of global terrorism affecting the security of the world, as well as the deadliest threat groups in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The database also contains analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles. For further inquiries regarding subscription and access to Global Pathfinder, please contact Ng Suat Peng at isngsp@ntu.edu.sg.