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Is India Likely to be the Next Major Target of ISIS?

- An Analysis of Post-Manhattan Terror Attack

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Is India Likely to be the Next Major Target of ISIS?

- *An Analysis of Post-Manhattan Terror Attack*

As far as India is concerned, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, or IS) threat has thus far been assessed by the strategic experts and government sources at a relatively moderate level. There are a few identified pockets of IS influence in ideological terms, mostly in the southern states from where most of the IS modules have so far emanated. Based on information available in the public domain, it would be reasonable to presume that the activities of the IS sympathisers are under observation of the intelligence and security establishments, and hence under control or within manageable limits. This presumption draws strength from the fact that lately there have been no reports of radicalised youth trying to migrate to known centers of IS activities, nor have there been reports of any return of fighters who had earlier opted to join the movement. According to media reports (Times of India Nov. 28, 2017), the number of identified IS sympathisers is estimated at just about 100 of which only around half are Indian residents, the remaining being Indians settled overseas.

However, two recent ISIS related events/news items have attracted attention; both of these are connected to the State of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The first report appeared in the Times of India (Nov. 16, 2017) referring to an 'audio clip transmitted via Telegram app by an IS recruiter from Kasargod, asking 'Indian Muslims to launch attacks by driving a truck through devotees'. "Poison their food. Use trucks. Drive over them (devotees) at Thrissur Poornam or Maha Kumbh Mela. Islamic state Mujahideen are doing it in several parts of the world...", the recruiter said. He has been identified as Abdul Rashid, the

prime accused in the Kasargod IS case, investigated by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in which 15 accused have been charge sheeted.

The above incitement by Abdul Rashid gains significance for two reasons. First, these instructions of IS, first issued in November 2016, came to notice during a careful analysis of the Daesh literature in connection with the recent Manhattan attack in the USA, in which the attacker verbatim followed the steps defined by the Daesh leadership in their magazine, 'Rumiyah' published on November 2 (Safar-22, 1438). In a chapter dedicated to terror tactics in vehicle attack section, inspiring lone wolves were ordered that that, "In a bid to ensure utmost carnage upon the enemies of Allah, it is imperative that one does not exit his vehicle during the attack. Rather, he should remain inside, driving over the already harvested *kuffar*, and continue crushing their remains until it becomes physically impossible to continue by vehicle. At this stage, one may exit the vehicle and finish his operation on foot, if he was able to obtain a secondary weapon. He could also remain in the vehicle, targeting pedestrians, the emergency services, or security forces who arrived at the scenes of just terror, until he is martyred" (ISIS 2016). *(Details of the Manhattan attack is discussed in detail in the later part of this paper)*

The second significance at this stage comes from the fact that IS has now for the first time claimed a terror incident in Kashmir as its handiwork, a claim quickly and firmly denied by the state's security establishment though. According to a media report (Indian Express, November 20, 2017), in its publication (Amaq Nov. 18), IS claimed responsibility for the attack on a police post at Zakura on the outskirts of Srinagar, on Nov. 17. In this incident, one militant, Mugees Ahmad Mir and a J&K policeman were killed in a shootout on Nov. 16 at Zakura. Mir was wearing a black T-shirt with IS stamp and later at his

funeral, his body was wrapped in a black flag. Police sources were quoted in the media report that Mir was actually a district commander of Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen and was loyal to the former Hizb-ul-Mujahideen commander Zakir Musa's group.

Neither of these two incidents conclusively establish IS presence in the Kashmir Valley. Yet, it may be recalled that black flags have been seen often in the Valley during protest demonstrations and funeral procession of militants. The Zakura incident is thus claimed by the IS, Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen as well as the Zakir Musa's group.

For the security forces, what could be of significance is the detailed directive issued by the IS recruiter Abdul Rashid as mentioned above. Is the Manhattan style lone wolf attack going to be the new *modus operandi* of the terror organisations in India and elsewhere? So, before proceeding further let us briefly look at what happened in Manhattan.

The Manhattan Attack

On October 31, 2017, in an IS inspired terror attack, a lone-wolf terrorist carried out a spectacular action in the heart of New York City, at the famous bike path along the Hudson Riverside on the West Street, Manhattan. A Daesh inspired driver, identified as Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov, a 29-year-old immigrant from Uzbekistan, drove a hired pickup truck through a crowded bike lane, killing eight and causing injuries to 11 others. The rampage ended when the driver slammed his truck into a school bus and jumped out, running up and down the street, waving a palette gun and paintball gun till he was shot at and overpowered by a New York Police Department (NYPD) officer (Prokupecz, et al. 2017).

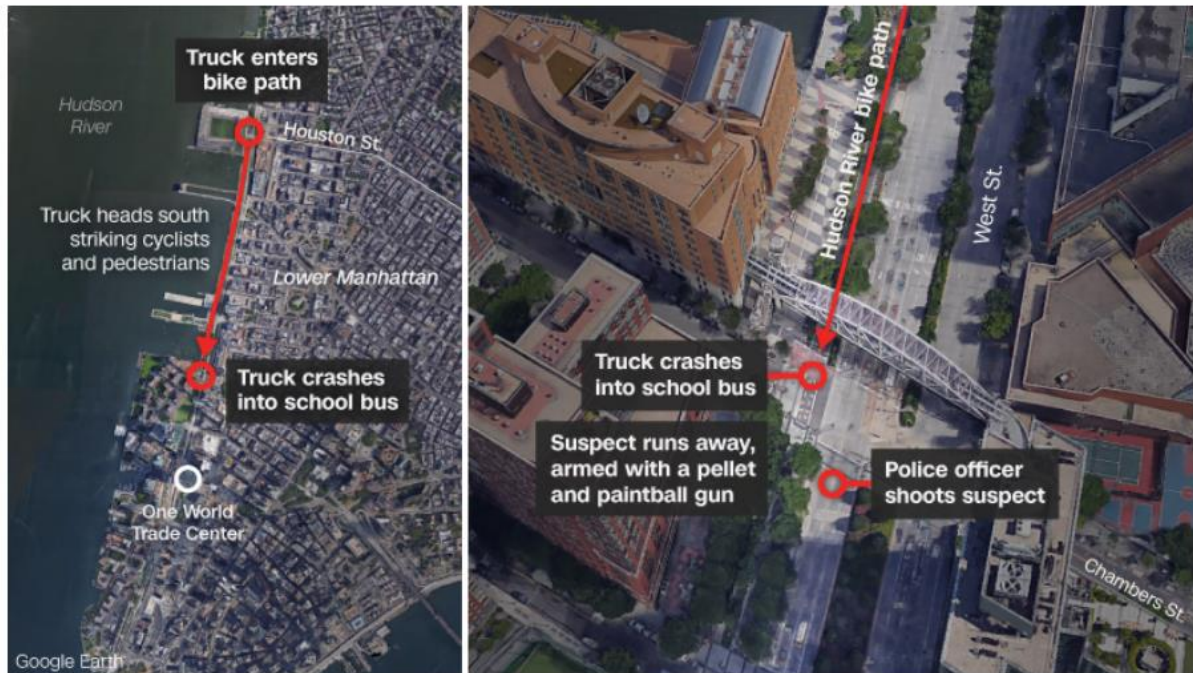


Image Courtesy CNN News Network - <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/31/us/new-york-shots-fired/index.html>

The Mayor of New York, Bil De Blasio, described the incident as a terrorist attack stating, “Based on the information we have at this moment, this was an act of terror, and a particularly cowardly act of terror aimed at innocent civilians.” Federal law enforcement agencies recovered a handwritten note in Arabic indicating Saipov’s allegiance to the Daesh, though no direct connection has yet been established with the terror organisation. Thus, the US federal agencies, treating it as a Daesh inspired attack, filed charges against Saipov on November 1, 2017, accusing him of ‘carrying out a long-planned plot, inspired by Daesh propaganda videos, to kill people celebrating Halloween (The New York Times 2017).

Investigations revealed that Saipov had arrived in the US in 2014, getting the benefit of the lottery system in the award of immigrant visa. This immediately prompted US President Trump to order the Department of Home Land Security to step up the Extreme Vetting Program policy on immigrants that

entails more stringent investigative measures intended to identify those who may sympathise with extremists or pose a national security risk to the US (Pixti News 2017). He had earlier been on the radar of federal authorities for his minor involvement in another criminal case. In this terrorism related case, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Homeland Security, New York Police and Federal Prosecutors in Brooklyn have conducted several investigations which has resulted in prosecution of five men from Uzbekistan and one person from Kazakhstan for providing logistic support to the IS. In this case, several men have pleaded guilty.

In 2015, the US-trained elite police commander of Tajikistan, Gulmurod Khalimov, joined Daesh. Khalimov flew to Iraq with family where he was appointed as the successor of slain terrorist Tarhan Batirashvili who is also known as Abu Omar al-Chechani. Khalimov had gone through a special forces training in both Russia and the US. After this shocking confirmation, the US had announced a bounty of \$3 million for information leading to location, arrest, and conviction of Khalimov (Mohammed 2016). Based on lineage of the attackers from Saint Petersburg, Istanbul and Stockholm, many commentators derived a conclusion that Uzbekistan -and central Asia as a whole - is the new vanguard of global terrorism. Lack of opportunity and harsh repression from various religious groups in various Central Asian Republics made it a fertile ground for Islamic extremism (Dalton 2017).

The present investigation of Manhattan incidence is yet to establish connection of Saipov with IS. (Kilgannon and Goldstein 2017). Saipov himself was not suspected to be directly linked with Daesh but possibly had links earlier with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

Daesh too has not claimed responsibility, but it may be mentioned that in similarly inspired attacks in Paris and Brussels, no direct claims were made; suggesting that the deadly rampage at Manhattan could well be linked to the terror group. IS/Daesh had not claimed responsibility for the truck-ramming attack in Stockholm on April 07, 2017, but investigating agencies in that case too had found that the attacker, Rakhmat Akilov, 39, of Uzbek origin, was a recruiter for Daesh (Chan 2017). There are instances of Daesh not claiming direct responsibility of attacks where the attacker survives or the recruit falls into the hands of the law enforcing agencies.

Europe in Focus but US too did not Remain Unaffected

While the focus of discussions on Daesh inspired attacks in the recent past has been on the series of daring and deadly incidents reported from different places in Europe and the UK, the table below shows that the US/North America too has been receiving its share of Daesh inspired attacks since the establishment of so-called Caliphate in Mosul (Iraq) in mid-2014. The list may not be exhaustive but includes available details of thirteen such attacks in US and Canada and 25 in Europe & UK.

North America						
No	Incident	Country	Date	Deaths	Injured	Terrorist name
1	2014 Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu ramming attack (Claim published in Dabiq – October 2014)	Canada	Oct 20, 2014	1 – terrorist shot dead	2 Canadian Soldiers	Martin Couture-Rouleau
2	2014 shootings at Parliament Hill, Ottawa	Canada	Oct 22, 2014	2 (including 1 – terrorist shot dead)	3	Michael Zehaf-Bibeau

3	Queens hatchet attack (Claim published in Dabiq – October 2014)	USA	Oct 23, 2014	1 – terrorist shot dead	7	Zale H. Thompson Zaim Farouq Abdul-Malik
4	Curtis Culwell Center attack Simpson linked himself to ISIS in a tweet posted before the attack, according to a federal law enforcement source.	USA	May 3, 2015	2 terrorists shot dead	1	Elton Simpson Nadir Hamid Soofi
5	University of California Stabbing	USA	Nov 4, 2015	1 – terrorist shot dead	4	Faisal Mohammad
6	San Bernardino attack (Mass Shooting by Couple)	USA	Dec 02, 2015	14 including a terrorist couple	22 seriously injured	Syed Rizwan Farook Tashfeen Malik
7	Shooting Philadelphia Police officer	USA	Jan 08, 2016	0	2 (including the terrorist)	Edward Archar
8	Orlando Gay nightclub shooting		Jun 12, 2016	49	58	Omar Mateen (Afghan Origin) – 29 – Security Guard
9	Ohio State University attack (vehicle ramming and stabbing)	USA	Nov 28, 2016	1 terrorist	13	Abdul Razak Ali Artan
10	Las Vegas Shooting	USA	Oct 01, 2017	56	546	Stephen Paddock
11	Manhattan Rampage (vehicle ramming and stabbing)	USA	Oct 31, 2017	8	10	Saifullo Habibullaev--ich Saipov (29)
12	Shooting at a Colorado Walmart, Thornton, Colorado	USA	Nov 01, 2017	3	0	Terrorist fled Shooting at a Colorado Walmart

13	Edmonton attack	Canada	Sep 30, 2017	0	5	Abdulahi Hasan Sharif
Europe						
1	Jewish Museum of Belgium shooting (Daesh Inspired attack)	Belgium	May 24, 2014	4	0	Mehdi Nemmouche
2	Tour Police Station Stabbing 9 the attacker had posted the Daesh flag on his Facebook page)	France	Dec 20, 2014	1 terrorist shot dead	3	Bertrand Nzohabo-nayo
3	Charlie Hebdo shooting (Montrouge shooting) (Daesh Inspired attack)	France	Jan 07 - 09, 2015	20	22	Amedy Coulibaly
4	Copenhagen shootings – Omar Hussein swore fidelity to Baghdadi on Facebook	Denmark	Feb14-15, 2015	2	5	Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein
5	Saint-Quentin-Fallavier attack (Daesh Inspired)	France	Jun 26, 2015	1	2	Yassin Salhi
6	Paris Attacks claimed by Daesh	France	Nov 13, 2015	137	413	See Serial 1-10 below
7	Leytonstone tube station knife attack (Daesh Inspired)	UK	Dec 05, 2015	0	3	Muhaydin Mire
8	Istanbul Bombing – Turkish authorities confirmed Daesh attack	Turkey	Mar 19, 2016	5 including terrorist	36	Mehmet Öztürk
9	Brussels twin attack	Belgium	Mar 22, 2016	32	340	See Serial 11-15 below
10	Magnanville stabbing (in midst of attack on	France	Jun 13, 2016	2	0	Larossi Abballa

	FB he pledged allegiance to Daesh)					
11	Atatürk Airport attack (Daesh Inspired)	Turkey	Jun 28, 2016	48	230	See Serial 16 below
12	Promenade des Anglais, Nice, Nice attack – Van Rampage - (Daesh Inspired)	France	Jul 14, 2016	87 including terrorist Bouhlel who was shot dead	434	Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel
13	Würzburg train attack (Daesh Inspired attack)	Germany	Jul 18, 2016	1 terrorist shot dead	5	Riaz Khan Ahmadzai (Afghan National)
14	Ansbach bombing (Daesh Inspired attack)	Germany	Jul 24, 2016	1 terrorist shot dead	15	Mohammad Daleel - pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi
15	Normandy church attack (Daesh Inspired attack)	France	Jul 26, 2016	3 including both terrorists	1	Adel Kermiche, Abdel Malik Petitjean
16	Charleroi police officers stabbing	Belgium	Aug 6, 2016	1 terrorist shot dead	2	Initials K.B, name not released by Belgium authorities
17	Berlin attack Vehicle Ramming - (Daesh Inspired attack)	Germany	Dec 19, 2016	12 including a terrorist	56	Anis Amri
18	Istanbul Night Club Attack - (Daesh Inspired attack)	Turkey	Jan 1, 2017	39	70	Abdurakhmon Uzbeki from Uzbekistan
19	Westminster attack - Vehicle Ramming - (Daesh Inspired attack)	UK	Mar 22, 2017	6 including 1 terrorist shot dead	49	Khalid Masood
20	Champs-Élysées attack	France	Apr 20, 2017	2 including 1 terrorist shot dead	3	Abu Yusuf al-Beljiki

21	Manchester Arena bombing	UK	May 22, 2017	23 including the Bomber	512	Salman Ramadan Abedi
22	London Bridge attack - Vehicle Ramming	UK	Jun 3, 2017	11 including 3 terrorists	48	Khuram Shazad Butt, Rachid Redouane, Youssef Zaghba
23	Barcelona and Cambrils attacks Vehicle Ramming	Spain	Aug 17-18, 2017	21 including 8 terrorists	137	See Serial 17 -24 below
24	Parsons Green bombing	UK	Sep 15, 2017	0	30	Ahmed Hassan
25	Marseille stabbing	France	Oct 01, 2017	2	0	Terrorist with multiple identities

- 1) Abdelhamid Abaaoud (killed), Mastermind
- 2) Bilal Hadfi (detonated self),
- 3) Ahmad Al Mohammad (detonated self),
- 4) Unknown Suicide Bomber - (detonated self),
- 5) Samy Amimour (detonated self),
- 6) Foued Mohammed-Aggad (detonated self),
- 7) Ismael Omar Mostefai – Shot Dead by Police,
- 8) Brahim Abdeslam (detonated self),
- 9) Mohammad Abrini – arrested,
- 10) Salah Abdeslam – arrested.
- 11) Ibrahim El Bakraoui,
- 12) Najim Laachraoui,
- 13) Khalid El Bakraoui,
- 14) Mohamed Abrini,
- 15) Osama Krayem.
- 16) The perpetrators were identified by Turkish authorities as from the central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and from the Dagestan region of Russia.
- 17) Younes Abouyaaqoub,

- 18) Houssaine Abouyaaqoub,
- 19) Moussa Oukabir,
- 20) Said Aallaa,
- 21) Youssef Aallaa,
- 22) Mohammed Hychami,
- 23) Omar Hychami,
- 24) Abdelbaki Es Satty.

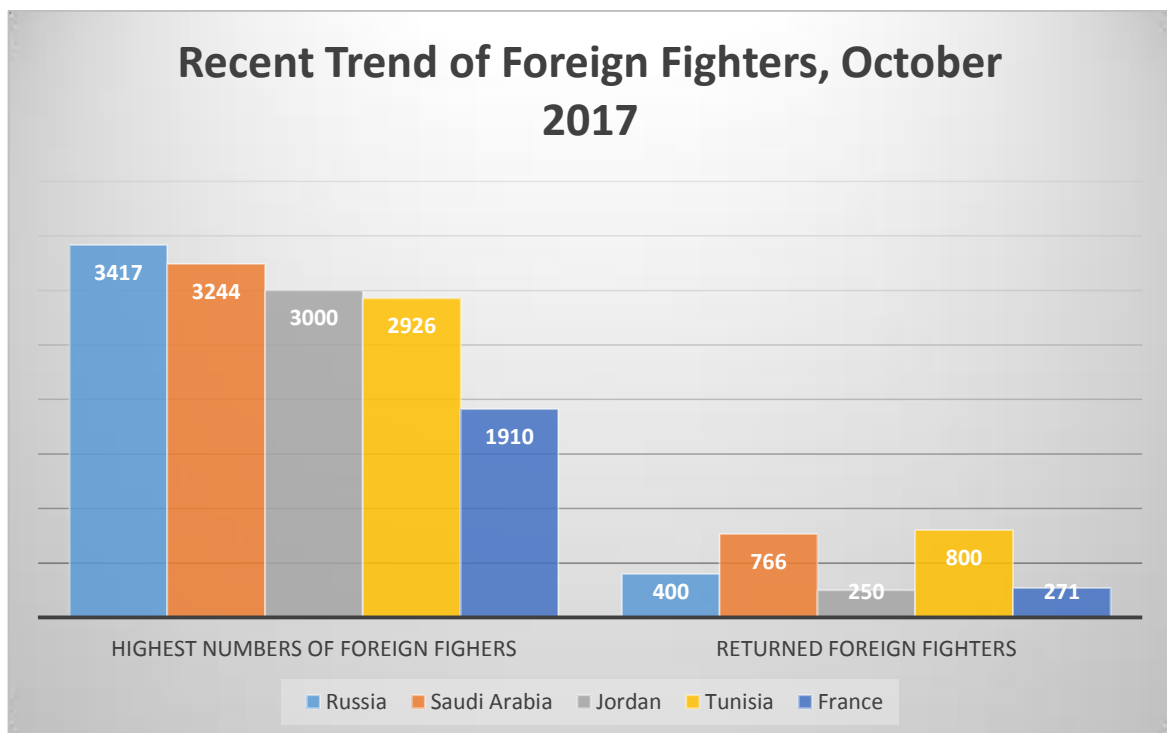
Militarily Defeated - not yet Vanquished

Details of terror incidents listed above highlight the basic point that despite the successes achieved in the ongoing military campaigns in Iraq and Syria, the fall of its *de facto* capitals, Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, and Daesh's territorial expanse shrivelling to just a handful scattered outposts, the terror machine of Daesh/ISIS still retains the capacity to inflict heavy damages at varied locations of their choosing. In fact, the trend indicates a significant rise in IS inspired terrorist violence, suggesting that the ideological appeal of Daesh/IS continues to resonate and inspire people across the world. The defeats at Mosul, Raqqa may have brought some temporary decline in their aggressive terror agenda, but their foreign fighters are likely to continue to project that the caliphate has not vanished. They may be facing military defeat but have not been vanquished.

Of course, fighting outfit of the organisation is severely dented and in a degree of disarray. Most of its surviving leaders and foot-soldiers are on the run. It is widely believed that IS as a politico-military entity is on its last leg. Sooner than later, they will be hunted down and/or driven out of its remaining sanctuaries. Most of the foreign terrorists will either get killed or manage to eventually escape to new locations to regroup or to realign with existing local

movements in those areas. They may not welcome in their own countries of origin, as was the case with the vast majority of foreign mercenaries mobilised globally in the context of the earlier Afghan Jihad.

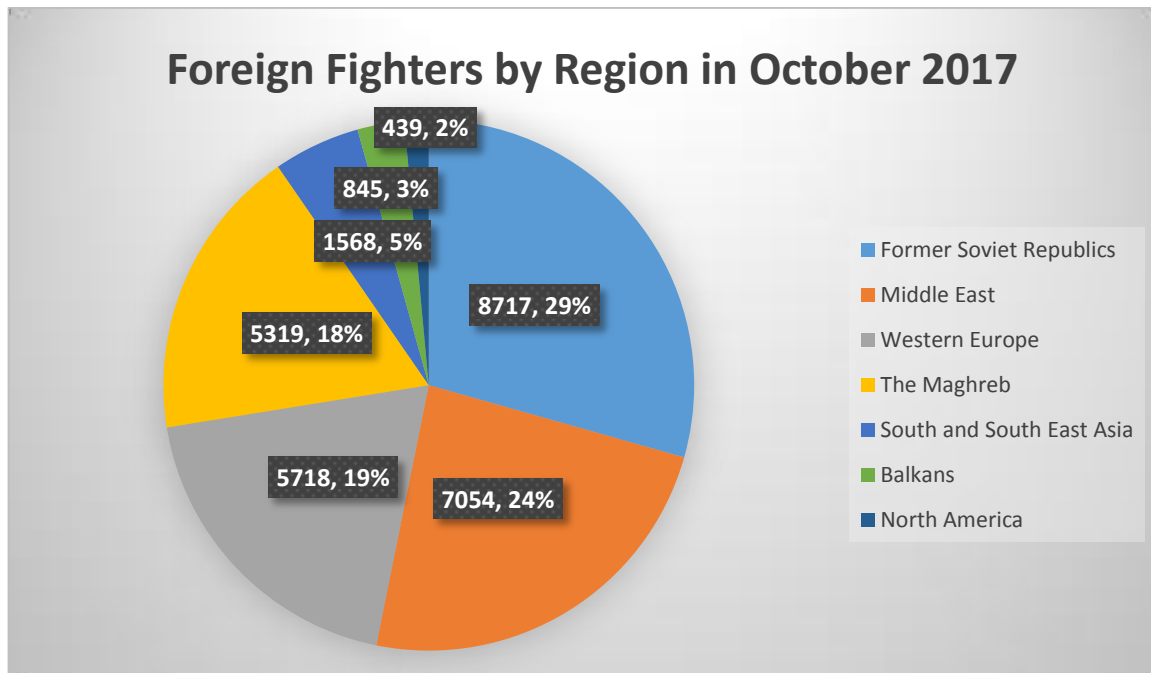
An estimation carried out by the Radicalisation Awareness Network suggests that only 30 percent of the Europe-based foreign militants have actually returned home (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2017). Similarly, in February 2017, Russian President Putin revealed that only about 10 percent of the 9,000 foreign fighters from Russia and former republics of the Soviet Union had returned (News Desk 2017).



Data Source - (Barett 2017)

Apart from Europe and the former Soviet Republics, in other areas, groups such as Somalian terror group Al Shabab had pledged allegiance to Daesh in October 2015 (Kriel and Duggan 2015). This marked the transition of this Somali group from Al Qaeda to Daesh. This grouping started attracting recruits

from other African countries like Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania etc. (Warner 2017). Similarly, the spread of Daesh started happening in certain parts of Afghanistan since January 2015. Despite setbacks in Central Asia, Daesh gained limited momentum in Afghanistan and was able to survive attacks from competing groups of Taliban as well as action by the Afghan Forces. The Uzbekistan based terror group has pledged its formal allegiance to Al Baghdadi in August 2015. Thus, the Khorasan module of Daesh got some foreign militants from Central Asia and Western China (Barett 2017). The table below gives a fair approximation of region-based representation in the Daesh.



Data Source - (Barett 2017)

The Future Scenario

In the above backdrop, the questions that naturally arise are as to how and why the ISIS/Daesh terrorists are able to carry out such series of high profile attacks and what kind of terror pattern is expected to emerge in the post-Daesh era? These issues would also have relevance to the study of likely future

activities of Daesh/ISIS in India and the sub-continent. While it may be safe to forecast the end of ISIS as an organised military force, it would be rather premature to conclude that its terror activities would end that soon. A careful analysis of the Daesh literature indicates that the Manhattan attacker followed the steps defined by the Daesh leadership in their magazine, *Rumiyah* published on November 2 (Safar-22, 1438). Details of this have already been mentioned at the beginning of this paper. What is noteworthy is the fact that immediately after the publication of this *modus operandi* in the *Rumiyah* article, terror rampage took place at Ohio the State University in which 13 people were injured. This was an attack similar to that in Manhattan. The leadership of Daesh, through various means like journals and online tutorials, signalled a year ago in November 2016 and providing a contingency plan, appealed to the aspiring people to revert to their roots i.e. guerrilla force. This was the phase when Daesh had begun to lose its territories in Iraq and Syria. It is a proven strategy readily adopted by Daesh sympathisers to devastating effect in Manchester, England, and Orlando, Fla (Coker, Schmitt and Callimachi 2017).

It is likely that ISIS would devise and follow a new multi-pronged strategy in operation. One aspect of this strategy will aim at preservation and consolidation of its assets through a renewed and more vigorous propaganda campaign through its well established machinery to tell its followers that loss of territorial control in Syria and Iraq was not significant; it was merely a setback and that its ultimate ideological success is preordained and attainable.

The other part of the strategy would evolve around what is being promised in their propaganda campaign as more attacks on the western soil (Barett 2017). This opens up the possibility of likely attempts by Daesh to carry out high visibility and high impact attacks against western targets, largely resorting to

lone wolf methods, following the Manhattan pattern in line with the directive issues in November 2016 referred to above. In fact, the geographical expanse of its terror campaign is also likely to spread beyond the European, American and African theaters into countries in South and South East Asia with significant Muslim population such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and the Philippines. Some evidence of their presence and activities, though yet limited, have already been witnessed. The modus operandi will be to make inroads into some of the existing radical groups in these countries, carry out intense radicalisation campaign, exploiting existing socio-political fissures and carrying out deadly terror strikes. Diminishing financial resources would be sought to be compensated through more intense radicalisation programmes.

Indian Perspective & Recommendations

As stated earlier, it would be unwise for the Indian counter-terror strategists to yet conclude that the military reverses suffered by the IS in Iraq and Syria have effectively wiped out the ideological imprint of the movement from the minds of the radicalised sections of the population, though it is still very limited in terms of numbers and on-ground spread. Knowledgeable Indian experts concede that radicalisation has taken roots in a segment of the Muslim society that needs to be cautiously, yet effectively, countered. Reference has already been made to IS presence in the southern states and its debatable emergence in Kashmir. Interestingly, in the vast hinterland of the northern Indo-Gangetic plains of UP and Bihar, both with significant Muslim population, ISIS ideology does not seem to have drawn much traction. The reasons for this need to be studied and the lessons learnt be used elsewhere in the country.

Experts and scholars also agree that the key to dealing with the problem lies in designing and implementing a sustained programme of de-radicalisation, primarily built around the community and family networks, local mosques and madrassas. The primary role here would have to rest with the community and religious leaders/scholars. Role of family network cannot be over emphasised since the first symptoms of radicalisation can be easily discerned at that level.

Since net-based cyber platforms have been vastly used by entities like Al Qaeda and ISIS as their most effective tools for spreading radical ideology, special attention will have to be paid to propagating a credible counter-narrative to radicalisation through net-based platforms and the social media. In so doing, it would be highly useful to extensively draw from the best practices evolved in other countries facing similar challenges.

Experts maintain that the government machinery can and must play an important role in countering this enormous challenge. But this can only be as enabler/facilitator rather than actual drivers of various initiatives. However, at the field level, government officials need to be sensitised to the initial symptoms of spread of radicalisation to enable them to initiate soft measures to nip the trouble in the bud.

Media too has an important role to play in these efforts. Regrettably, in the recent times, both the print and electronic media give an impression to the contrary. A degree of self-restraint is strongly recommended while reporting and debating events and issues that have implications of furthering communal divide and fuelling radicalisation in the society.

The above mentioned approach is endorsed by the experts as long-term measures. In the short and medium term perspectives, the Government

machinery will have to vigorously implement a kinetic approach of identifying and neutralising radicalised terror modules, plugging their sources of funding, taking legal action against individuals and institutions involved in spreading radicalisation and in recruitment of activists. Local law enforcement and intelligence agencies have their roles cut out for this.

Of course, all these suggested measures will require seamless synergy between all the stake holders, namely the Central and State governments, community leaders and institutions. A well-defined and consistent policy approach and its effective implementation by all the stake holders will be India's best insurance against the country becoming the next play ground for ISIS.

About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media fields have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organization to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelize fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its establishment, VIF has successfully embarked on quality research and scholarship in an effort to highlight issues in governance and strengthen national security. This is being actualized through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive-dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of the VIF form the lasting deliverables of the organisation's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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