

# Islamist Radicalization in India

## Exploring the Realities

Ajai Sahni\*

### THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES

A flood of contemporary literature on, and concerns regarding, Islamist radicalization and terrorism has flowed from vastly exaggerated Western fears, particularly after the 9/11 attacks in the US; this has been enormously exacerbated by later developments with regard to the Islamic State (also *Daesh*). A rash of relatively small incidents in Europe and the US, linked – often tenuously – to *Daesh*, unsettled the complacency and sense of impunity with which Western powers had acted over decades, destabilizing other theatres and collapsing ‘distant’ states. In the shrinking ‘global village’, however, distances proved notional and illusory, and a ‘blowback’, small but unprecedented, was visited on the Western powers. The inability to comprehend and absorb this ‘blowback’ and the loss of impunity in the West, generated a great deal of strident commentary on the ‘global threat’ of *Daesh* and, indeed, in some imaginings, a purported ‘world war’ at the height of the Islamic State’s depredations.

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\* Dr. Ajai Sahni is a Founding Member & Executive Director of the Institute for Conflict Management; Editor, South Asia Intelligence Review; Executive Director, South Asia Terrorism Portal and Khalistan Extremism Monitor; and Executive Editor, Faultlines: The KPS Gill Journal of Conflict & Resolution.

And yet, Western powers have demonstrated no capacity or willingness to abandon past paradigms of mischievous and irresponsible power-projection that have collapsed relatively stable states, and that created political vacuums and conditions of anarchy in wide areas across the world. These vacuums came to be filled by authoritarian, extremist and terrorist forces, producing tremendous instability in the context of failing Western power.

It is crucial, therefore, to understand the realpolitik that underpinned recent conflicts in West Asia, and the fact that these had been provoked in significant measure by a global great power competition to gain control over resources. Significantly, the West displayed little interest in other countries where critical resources are not available, and where sanguinary terrorist campaigns attracted no more than sporadic international attention.

The intellectual dominance of Western commentary and media also produced imitative and poorly informed assessments across the South Asian region, including India. Such distortions were, at one stage, warped further by the dramatic success of *Daesh*'s sophisticated media projections of its most grotesque atrocities as well as its battlefield victories, and by the perverse agendas of various ideological and political groups among various intervening states. Crucially, Indian commentators in particular were seduced to ignore the very long histories of Islamist radicalization within the country and the region, the far greater scales of terrorism experienced here, and the multiple and competing overlays of affiliation and opposition among radical formations that the unique South Asian dynamic has produced over decades.

While no historical review is here intended, it is useful to remind ourselves of the rather obvious reality that Islamist

terrorism did not begin with *Daesh*, or even with the 9/11 attacks in the US; and that contemporary global *jihadi* terrorism has arisen, in an almost linear evolution, from the US-backed anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan,<sup>1</sup> principally executed through the agency of Pakistan's military intelligence apparatus, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, for nearly 26 years, all Islamist terrorist formations operating in South Asia were proxies of, or graduated to terrorism with the support of, the Pakistani state.<sup>2</sup> Across South Asia, these organizations created networks that have engaged in widespread and sustained movements of terrorism and, indeed, produced the "Islamist contagion carried by the returning Afghan veterans"<sup>3</sup> that spread gradually across the world.

Within South Asia, consequently, while Islamism was instrumentalized, these groups served the nationalist strategic calculus of Pakistani state agencies, and received aid and prominence in proportion to the loyalty and obedience they demonstrated. Pakistan's calculus was relatively predictable, limited and susceptible to strategic counter-measures (though

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- 1 Indeed, Abdullah Azzam, the ideologue of the early hordes of foreign fighters who travelled to join the *jihad* in Afghanistan and inspiration to the successor organizations of the "global *jihad*", declared, "This duty (*jihad*) shall not lapse with victory in Afghanistan, and the *jihad* will remain an individual obligation until all other lands which formerly were Muslim come back to us and Islam reigns within them once again. Before us lie Palestine, Bukhara, Lebanon, Chad, Eritrea, Somalia, the Philippines, Burma, South Yemen, Taskkent, Andalusia..." Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, I.B. Taurus, London, 2002, p. 147.
  - 2 See Ajai Sahni, "South Asia: Extremist Islamist Terror and Subversion", in K. P. S. Gill and Ajai Sahni, *The Global Threat of Terror: Ideological, Material and Political Linkages*, Bulwark Books & ICM, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 181-239.
  - 3 John K. Cooley, *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, Pluto Press, Virginia, Second Edition, 2000, p. 6.

such counter-measures have been adopted rarely and inadequately).

Al Qaeda dramatically altered this calculus, overwhelming and emphasizing the millenarian religious ideology of *jihād* that sought global domination and offered rewards in the afterlife, rather than any necessary and quantifiable strategic gains on earth, though such gains were not outside its vision. Al Qaeda pursued a strategy of catastrophic terrorist acts to propagate its ideology, unleashing a new scale of terrorism on the world, accepting no limits to its violence, and declaring its clear intent to acquire and use nuclear and chemical weapons. Moreover, within the complex of Pakistan-backed terrorist formations, a certain proportion turned ‘rogue,’ evolving their own, progressively global, *jihād* agenda and, indeed, following Al Qaeda, declaring the Pakistani state *murtad* (apostate) and a rightful target of *jihād*.<sup>4</sup>

It was into this troubled environment that the transient victories and excesses of *Daesh*, and its precursor Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), in Iraq and Syria introduced a new element of visible virulence and barbarity, with their aggressive and sophisticated projection across the world through the internet and other media. An exaggerated perception of *Daesh*’s ‘arrival’ in South Asia was fed by occasional reports of volunteers leaving countries in the region to join the *jihād* in Iraq and Syria, as well as by a handful of terrorist incidents or conspiracies in which perpetrators claimed allegiance to or linkages with *Daesh*.

The reality, however, is that there was no significant change in these countries as far as the profile of terrorism was concerned, other than the fact that fragments of groups that

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4 Khuram Iqbal, *The Making of Pakistani Human Bombs*, Lexington Books, London, 2015, p.123.

were already operating there chose to declare their allegiance to *Daesh* — as many had earlier done with regard to Al Qaeda when that group was dominating the world’s imagination. There was no quantifiable augmentation of capacities, no significant movement of resources, personnel, technologies, or structures of command and control. Indeed, in some cases, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, existing local movements split and engaged in fratricidal confrontations as a result of this shift of fealty – broad tendencies that weakened many anti-state formations in the region. These changing affiliations, by and large, reflected opportunistic posturing by weak local formations, or unravelling factions of existing formations, trying to secure prominence by declaring allegiance to or alliances with what was then perceived as the most powerful *jihadi* formation in the world.

This assessment of *Daesh* power was, itself, based on distortions and deliberate falsification. *Daesh* had consistently exaggerated both its excesses and its victories. The truth is, it rampaged across regions of disorder and its initial “conquests” were of areas under the control of other non-state armed formations.<sup>5</sup> Where it confronted state forces it found an adversary terrorised by the wide propagation of videos documenting tortures, crucifixions and mass executions, and unwilling to defend Sunni majority areas.<sup>6</sup> The most dramatic instance of this was Mosul, where a state force of two divisions, armed to the hilt with tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery, attack helicopters and a more than sufficient arsenal of small arms,

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5 Zachary Laub, “The Islamic State”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 22, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>.

6 Nussaibah Younis, “A Cross-Sectarian Vision for Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 6, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/07/06/cross-sectarian-vision-for-defeating-islamic-state-in-iraq-pub-60590>.

simply abandoned their weapons and fled in the face of a tiny ragtag bunch of possibly under 800 *Daesh* fighters, who rode into town in open pickup trucks.<sup>7</sup> However, the moment the Islamic State hit the sectarian (Shia) and ethnic (Kurdish) fault lines thereafter, its advances stopped, and the performance of *Daesh* fighters was far from exemplary wherever they met with any determined opposition.<sup>8</sup>

The myth of *Daesh* power was also augmented when an ever-expanding coalition of Western and Arab states engaged in a half-hearted and ambivalent fight against the terrorists, even as it sought to provide various armed formations operational spaces and capabilities to weaken the Assad regime in Syria, and allowed *Daesh* not only to benefit from these spaces, but also, for over a year after the fall of Mosul in June 2014, to carry out a lucrative illegal trade in oil through Turkey without impediment.<sup>9</sup> The Western air campaign against *Daesh* at this stage was accurately described by one American commentator as “a drizzle, not a thunderstorm”.<sup>10</sup>

To distant analysts, however, it appeared that *Daesh* had the capacity to resist the combined force of a global alliance of some of the most powerful nations on earth.

This myth was exploded with the unambiguous entry of Russia into the fight in Syria, and the *Daesh* legend quickly

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7 Zack Beauchamp, “11 facts that explain the escalating crisis in Iraq”, *Vox*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.vox.com/2014/6/13/5803712/11-things-iraq-crisis-isis>.

8 Aron Lund, “Why Islamic State Is Losing, and Why It Still Hopes to Win”, *The Century Foundation*, June 17, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/report/islamic-state-losing-still-hopes-win/>.

9 “ISIS, Oil & Turkey: What RT found in Syrian town liberated from jihadists by Kurds”, *RT*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/336967-isis-files-oil-turkey-exclusive/>.

10 “US Military Pilots: Hands Tied in Frustrating Fight against ISIL”, *Veterans Today*, 29 May, 2015, <http://www.veteranstoday.com/2015/05/29/us-military-pilots-hands-tied-in-frustrating-fight-against-isis/>.

disintegrated in the face of a relentless succession of reverses.<sup>11</sup> A string of *Daesh* -linked attacks in Europe, most prominently the Paris and Brussels bombings, moreover, combined with the Russian intervention to shake off Western ambivalence, and a more serious effort to contain and neutralize *Daesh* was then followed, rapidly pushing the “Caliphate” into ever-shrinking territories,<sup>12</sup> and eventual marginalization.

*Daesh* lost almost a quarter of the territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria through 2016, going from about 78,000 square kilometres in January 2016 to about 60,400 square kilometres in December 2016. This added to an earlier loss of at least 14 per cent of controlled territories in 2015. At its peak, an estimated six to 10 million people were living in territories under *Daesh* control.<sup>13</sup> The losses increased in 2017, with Mosul falling to the Iraqi state and coalition forces, and the prized ‘headquarters’ at Raqqa lost to Syria. By the end of 2017, *Daesh* controlled under 5 per cent of the territories that it had dominated at its peak. On December 19, 2018, the then US President Donald Trump had declared that *Daesh* had been defeated and signalled his intention to withdraw all 2,000 U.S. troops supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

According to US sources the strength of *Daesh* fighters in Iraq and Syria had dwindled from an estimated 60,000 at

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11 Zack Beauchamp, “How Russian bombing is changing Syria’s war, in 3 maps”, *Vox*, February 16, 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/2/16/11020140/russia-syria-bombing-maps>.

12 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Islamic State on the defensive, territory shrinking in Syria and Iraq: U.S. official”, *Reuters*, May 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN0Y60TN>.

13 *BBC News*, “Islamic State and the crisis in Iraq and Syria in maps,” March 28, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>.

14 “Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State,” *Wilson Centre*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

peak, to just 12,000 to 15,000 by the end of 2016. An estimated 50,000 *Daesh* fighters had been killed in these countries since 2014.<sup>15</sup> By December 2018, their number had fallen further to about 5,000, mostly clustered in villages along the Euphrates, south of Hajin.<sup>16</sup>

The sense of a ‘global’ crisis, however, was provoked by the rash of occasional *Daesh*-linked incidents, many of them with uncertain linkages to the terrorist formation, that afflicted prominent Western states, among others. Significantly, between the declaration of the ‘Caliphate’ in June 2014 and May 2017, at least 295 attacks in 37 countries were attributed to or claimed by *Daesh*, 3,168 persons were killed in these incidents, and thousands of others injured.<sup>17</sup> A large proportion of these attacks, however, were executed by ‘lone wolves’ or ‘wolf packs’ purportedly ‘inspired’ by *Daesh* online propaganda, but with no demonstrable operational links with the terrorist formation. Western fears were exacerbated further by the potential of radicalized *Daesh* cadres returning to their home countries after being ‘squeezed out’ of Iraq and Syria after the steady erosion of *Daesh* influence in these regions. However, a number of *Daesh* foreign fighters returned disillusioned to their home countries, seeking a ‘normal life’, while an overwhelming proportion were arrested and jailed on return, and this danger also appears to have been vastly exaggerated.

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15 Hannah al Othman, “The number of ISIS fighters has fallen from more than 60,000 to ‘between 12,000 and 15,000’ since coalition air strikes began, US officials reveal,” *Daily Mail*, December 15, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4037552/The-number-ISIS-fighters-fallen-60-000-12-000-15-000-coalition-air-strikes-began-officials-reveal.html>.

16 “Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State,” op. cit.

17 Combined figures from CNN, “ISIS goes global: 143 attacks in 29 countries have killed 2,043”, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/17/world/mapping-isis-attacks-around-the-world/>; and ESRI Storymaps, “2016 Terrorist Attacks”, <https://storymaps.esri.com/stories/terrorist-attacks/?year=2016>.

A great deal of noise was also made about the imminent *Daesh* ‘invasion’ of India.<sup>18</sup> The reality is that the total number of documented *Daesh* ‘sympathisers’ in and from India totals a meagre 340 at the time of writing (January 19, 2022), including 171 persons arrested<sup>19</sup> and 169 who have travelled to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan to join the terrorists.<sup>20</sup> Of the 169 who travelled abroad, 56 have already been confirmed killed.<sup>21</sup> These numbers can only be reassuring in a population of 1.4 billion,<sup>22</sup> including an estimated over 200 million Muslims, and after nearly eight years of *Daesh* propaganda and activity seeking recruits in India. It is useful to recall that the attention

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18 See, for instance, Ajai Sahni, “Breaking News: ISIS is not coming! ISIS is not coming!”, *Scroll.in*, February 11, 2016, <https://scroll.in/article/803373/breaking-news-isis-is-not-coming-isis-is-not-coming>.

19 “Investigation of Islamic State (IS) Related Cases by NIA”, September 17, 2021, National Investigation Agency, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, [https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1082\\_1\\_Pr.pdf](https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1082_1_Pr.pdf); “NIA Arrests An ISIS Operative in Conspiracy of ISIS/ISIL/DAESH Case (RC-33/2020/NIA/DLI)”, October 24, 2021, National Investigation Agency, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, [https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1101\\_1\\_Pr.pdf](https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1101_1_Pr.pdf); “NIA Arrests An ISIS Operative in Conspiracy of ISIS/ISIL/DAESH case (RC-33/2020/NIA/DLI)”, November 17, 2021, National Investigation Agency, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, [https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1122\\_1\\_Pr.pdf](https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1122_1_Pr.pdf); and “NIA Arrests An ISIS Operative in Karnataka in ISIS Kerala Module case (RC 05/2021/NIA/DLI)”, January 3, 2022, National Investigation Agency, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, [https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1143\\_1\\_Pr.pdf](https://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/1143_1_Pr.pdf).

20 Till January 19, 2022. Ajai Sahni, “Pakistan isn’t the threat it thinks it is”, *The Times of India*, September 9, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/pakistan-isnt-the-threat-it-thinks-it-is/articleshow/86070738.cms>.

21 Data compiled by the *Institute for Conflict Management*.

22 The total population is relevant since, both in India and in a number of other countries, *Daesh* has also recruited among recent converts from other Faiths in many countries.

of the *Daesh* leadership turned fairly quickly to India. Within days of overrunning Mosul and Tikrit in early June 2014, *Daesh* released its “world domination map”, including the whole of South Asia within its imagined *Wilayah Khorasan*. The declaration of a Caliphate by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi *aka* Khalifa Ibrahim shortly thereafter (29 June 2014) caused considerable consternation among South Asian governments, security agencies, the general population and, particularly, among well over 500 million Muslims in the region. These early portents have, however, failed to produce any sustained disturbances beyond the fitful trends of peripheral, often opportunistic, mobilisation.

Indeed, not just India but the wider South Asian region remained surprisingly insulated from *Daesh* mobilisation. In 2017, as the *Daesh* reverses gathered force, The Soufan Group put the number of fighters with *Daesh* from Pakistan at over 650; from India at 75. Bangladesh did not even feature in the Soufan Group’s listing of foreign fighters by country in 2017.<sup>23</sup> An earlier listing in 2015 had also put a number from the Maldives at an unofficial 200, and an official count that varied between 20 and 100,<sup>24</sup> but the country did not feature

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23 Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees”, *The Soufan Centre*, October 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>.

24 The Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment”, December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate\\_FINAL3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf). The Soufan Group (TSG), headquartered in New York, provides strategic security intelligence services to governments and multinational organizations. TSG released its initial Foreign Fighters in Syria report in June 2014, which identified approximately 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries. The subsequent revision released on December 8, 2015, calculated that between 27,000 and 31,000 people have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other violent extremist groups from at least 86 countries.

in the 2017 report. While a number of terrorist incidents in the AfPak region and Bangladesh have been claimed by *Daesh*, the reality remains,

the entirety of South Asia jihadists reported going to the ISIS fight is actually less than those from the UK alone, less than Germany alone, and dramatically less than the flows from North Africa or Central Asia—especially when assessed on a per-capita Muslim basis. Even Australasia has a dramatically greater per-capita jihadist-to-the-ISIS-fight participation rate than all of South Asia.<sup>25</sup>

This is not intended to suggest that the dangers of Islamist terrorism and radicalization are negligible and can easily be ignored. *Daesh* itself has been defeated in its strongholds, but the spectre of terrorism can be expected to persist, even as will its underpinnings in wider processes of religious extremism and non-violent radicalization.

Crucially, as with al Qaeda, a dying *Daesh* has left behind a tremendous ideological, strategic and tactical detritus. It is useful to recall that much of *Daesh*'s tactical successes and brutal excesses were derived from al Qaeda literature and manuals, prominently including Abu Musab al Suri *aka* Mustafa Setmariam Nasr's treatise, *The Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*,<sup>26</sup> on leaderless jihad, and Abu Bakr Naji's *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through*

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25 Thomas F. Lynch III, *The Islamic State as Icarus: A Critical Assessment of an Untenable Threat*, Wilson Center Asia Program, Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington, 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/theislamicstateasicarus.pdf>.

26 "The Call For A Global Islamic Resistance – English Translation Of Some Key Parts Abu Mus'ab As Suri", [https://archive.org/stream/TheCallForAGlobalIslamicResistance-EnglishTranslationOfSomeKeyPartsAbuMusabAsSuri/TheCallForAGlobalIslamicResistanceSomeKeyParts\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TheCallForAGlobalIslamicResistance-EnglishTranslationOfSomeKeyPartsAbuMusabAsSuri/TheCallForAGlobalIslamicResistanceSomeKeyParts_djvu.txt).

*which the Umma will Pass*. The essential idea of the former was a call to all Muslims to constitute themselves into small self-organising and loosely connected cells and to attack Western targets at will. These actions were intended to force a Western withdrawal from Arab lands, and to collapse the regimes there, creating the opportunities for the establishment of a Caliphate. This process was described as *Nizam la Tanzim* (system without organisation), and was the seed of the lone wolf phenomenon that became integral to *Daesh* strategy in areas outside Iraq and Syria, and particularly targeting the West. Naji advocated the creation or exploitation of “conditions of savagery” – the absence of effective state control and collapse of order across wide regions – within which the Islamist extremists could then establish dominance and, eventually, the desired Shariah state.<sup>27</sup> It is this collapse of order that *Daesh* sought to engineer through acts of spectacular brutality in areas of state infirmity in Iraq and Syria.

*Daesh* also married the strategy of leaderless jihad to technology to catalyse the formation of what has been called the United Cyber Caliphate, a loose conglomeration of tech-savvy sympathisers who come together over the Internet to disseminate IS propaganda and offer ‘guidance’ to would-be terrorists to join the *jihad*, including tips on training, acquisition of weaponry, tactics, the planning and execution of attacks, as well as the selection of targets from elaborate hit lists.

As *Daesh* approached defeat, its legitimacy among followers and sympathisers, as well as its attraction as a magnet for potential *jihadis* waned. Nevertheless, these ideas,

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27 See Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through which the Umma will Pass*, trans. William McCants, John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, May 23, 2006, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>.

strategies and tactics survive and will be adopted by successor organisations and surviving splinters. More ominously, the destructive potential of these various strategies and tactics will multiply exponentially if apocalyptic Islamist terrorist formations secure access to weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and particularly biological weapons that “have the capability to kill many more people than a nuclear attack.”<sup>28</sup> It has been abundantly demonstrated that millenarian Islamist terrorists would not hesitate to use these instruments of catastrophic devastation, given their commitment to provoking an end-of-world conflict between the Faithful and the Unbelievers.

Thus, whatever the prognosis for the persistence or otherwise of *Daesh* and its various ‘inheritors,’ the dangers of Islamist radicalization will extend well into the future. Studies of the dynamic of mobilisations in favour of *Daesh* are, consequently, of enduring significance, as they would expose processes and factors that underpin the emergence of violent radicalization and terrorism, and offer an understanding of the stages and opportunities for disruption of this destructive progression.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Historically, perhaps the most persistent and seductive theoretical explanation of political violence – including terrorism – has been the ‘root causes’ thesis that argues that ‘underlying’ grievances and sources ‘provoke’ such violence.<sup>29</sup> It is useful, here, to clarify basic distinctions between types of

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28 Colonel T.X. Hammes, “Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges”, *Military Review*, May-June, 2007, p. 22.

29 I largely rely here on Ajai Sahni, “National Responses to Terrorism”, National Security Paper – 2009, *United Services Institute*, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/ajaisahni/09AS-35USI-NSP.htm>.

causes. It is, without exception, the case that a causal chain can be traced out for every terrorist movement or incident of violence – there can, after all, be no ‘uncaused event’. But the assertion that ‘root causes’ underpin violence is fundamentally different: it amounts to the claim that there are certain unique and identifiable *necessary* or *sufficient* conditions that instigate every act and manifestation of terrorism or violence. The most significant among ‘root causes’ that have been opportunistically identified include poverty, real or perceived deprivation, discrimination and political oppression. This thesis, however, has no empirical basis and numerous studies have demonstrated its manifest speciousness (though these have done little to diminish its appeal). Indeed, a review of the literature on the search for ‘root causes’ of terrorism, for instance,

...provides little reason for optimism that a reduction in poverty or an increase in educational attainment would, by themselves, meaningfully reduce international terrorism. Any connection between poverty, education, and terrorism is indirect, complicated, and probably quite weak... Moreover, premising foreign aid on the threat of terrorism could create perverse incentives in which some groups are induced to engage in terrorism to increase their prospects of receiving aid.<sup>30</sup>

Some other distinctions in the notion of causation help clarify the issue further. Certain factors may, of course, constitute ‘predispositions’ to violence – but these predispositions exist in every one of us. Who has, in a moment of grievous anger, not imagined inflicting terrible retribution on an antagonist? Such impulses, however, remain unrealized in most cases, unless

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30 Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, “The Economics and the Education of Suicide Bombers: Does Poverty Cause Terrorism?” *The New Republic*, June 24, 2002, <http://www.alanalexandroff.com/nr-krueger.pdf>.

suitable ‘triggering factors’ and facilitators are not brought into play. Even where violence is initiated, in an overwhelming proportion of cases, it quickly subsides. Its protraction or perpetuation depends on a unique sustaining dynamic that is quite unrelated, both to the original predispositions and to the triggering events or circumstances. This means that, even if the original causes or triggers are ‘redressed’ such violence could continue if the sustaining dynamic – in the form of a range of newly established equations of power and flow of resources to particular and violent elites – is not neutralized. Conversely, if this latter dynamic is, in fact, neutralized, violence has been found, again and again, to end, even if the so-called ‘root’ or ‘triggering’ causes remain intact. As one study on the collapse of Khalistani terrorism in Punjab noted,

Little change was noticed in the objective conditions, and none of the adduced reasons or causes of the rise (of terrorism) appear to have been removed.... Once the movement collapsed, one was left wondering how could it disappear so suddenly and without leaving a trace of cultural sympathy for the ‘fighters’.<sup>31</sup>

The ‘root causes’ thesis is, in fact, an enormously influential but essentially doctrinaire and unverified position which has drastically circumscribed the range of policy options available to counter-terrorism policy in moments of grave crisis.

Closely intertwined to the ‘root causes’ thesis is the dominance of the ‘developmental solution’, the assertion that the challenge of terrorism cannot be addressed through security responses, but must be resolved through the implementation of a range of programmes for poverty alleviation and the

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31 Harish K. Puri, Paramjit Singh Judge and Jagrup Singh Sekhon, *Terrorism in Punjab: Understanding Grassroots Reality*, Har-Anand Publications, Delhi, 1999, p. 51.

‘empowerment’ of disadvantaged groups, to undercut the ‘recruitment pool’ of terrorist and violent political groups. This is another unexamined shibboleth, essentially based on the *a priori* reasoning that nations or regions that have attained a high measure of prosperity tend to escape the blight of terrorism. This is, in the first instance, historically inaccurate. Some of the first terrorist movements of the post-World War era (substantially fueled by the export of extreme Left Wing ideologies and material support from the Soviet Union) emerged in the affluent nations of Western Europe and in a reconstructed Japan, and Northern Ireland is certainly not located in the Third World. Some of the most affluent countries of Europe, today, find themselves susceptible to extremist Islamist mobilization and terrorism, even, indeed, as does the US, despite relatively minuscule Muslim populations.

More significantly, however, developmental strategies as a response to terrorism have not only failed in the past, they are doomed, by their very character, to failure – and this is dramatically the case in India. These are, in reality, politically correct but utterly impractical solutions, based on half-truths and a refusal to recognize the actual constraints within which states respond to the challenges of terrorism.

The ‘root causes – developmental solution’ argument is, in fact, no more than a disguised and hollow tautology. It rests, simply on the unverified claim that the lack of development (poverty, deprivation, etc.) is the ‘root cause’ of terrorism, and then prescribes the ‘elimination’ of this ‘cause’ as the ‘solution’, with no reference either to available resource configurations and administrative capacities, or to any rational assessment of the deficits that would need to be met in order to secure ‘success’.

While the root causes thesis has been repeatedly and empirically discredited, it periodically resurfaces in different forms, and retains its popularity, particularly, in political discourse. While Western perspectives continued largely to endorse the broad logic of the root causes theory as long as the violence it sought to justify was located far from Western shores, in purportedly ‘backward’ Third World countries, the idea became abruptly unsustainable after the 9/11 attacks in the US. Thus, one prominent commentator noted,

There is a long and well-established discourse about the “root causes” of terrorism and political violence that can be traced back to the early 1970s. Following the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, however, it suddenly became very difficult to talk about “the roots of terrorism,” which some commentators claimed was an effort to excuse and justify the killing of innocent civilians... It was through the notion of radicalisation that a discussion... became possible again.<sup>32</sup>

Radicalization – and with it, de-radicalization and counter-radicalization – have since produced a steady stream of literature, particularly in Western scholarship, to examine the causal dynamics underlying terrorism and political violence. These concepts, nevertheless, often smuggles ‘root cause’ reasoning through the back door, and have, perhaps, as many implicit ambiguities. Mark Sedgwick notes, for instance,

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32 Peter R. Neumann, “Introduction”, *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence*, London, January 17–18, 2008 (London: International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2008), p. 4; cited in Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 22, Number 4, p. 480, <https://counterideology2.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/the-concept-of-radicalisation-as-a-source-of-confusion.pdf>.

The earlier discourse on terrorism... focused on the circumstances, the ideology, the group, and the individual. The concept of radicalization emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and significantly de-emphasizes the wider circumstances—the “root causes” that it became so difficult to talk about after 9/11, and that are still often not brought into analyses.<sup>33</sup>

Sedgwick argues, further, that the sense in which the term ‘radical’ or ‘radicalization’ is used depends on ‘competing agendas,’ and includes, among these, the ‘security agenda,’ the ‘integration agenda,’ the ‘foreign policy agenda’ and the ‘Islamic agenda,’<sup>34</sup> and concludes,

At the policy level, all agencies involved need to be aware that the apparent common ground suggested by the use of the common terms “radical” and “radicalization” may mask fundamentally different agendas, and even mask conflicts between agendas.<sup>35</sup>

These qualifications notwithstanding, the concept of radicalization is useful to understand the processes through extremism and terrorist mobilisation take root, as long as a measure of tentativeness attends our approach. Such tentativeness is evident in one of the influential definitions of the idea of radicalization:

...an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarisation, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance

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33 Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 22, Number 4, pp. 480-81, <https://counterideology2.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/the-concept-of-radicalisation-as-a-source-of-confusion.pdf>.

34 Ibid, pp. 485-488.

35 Ibid, p. 491.

between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favour of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict waging. These can include either (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from the mainstream or *status quo*-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate.<sup>36</sup>

The Terrorism and Radicalization (TERRA) program notes that the elements emphasised by this definition include:

- Radicalization is an individual process as well as a group process (so psychological and social factors should be taken into account).
- It is characterised by the rejection of the legitimacy of the existing order.
- It can lead to non-violent tactics as well as to violent or terrorist acts.
- It comprises processes of ideological and social isolation from society, and a dichotomous world view.

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36 Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalization, De-radicalization, Counter Radicalization: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", *International Centre for Counter Terrorism*, The Hague, 2013, p. 18, <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf>.

- It is essentially a process of change, increasingly justifying commitment to intergroup conflict.<sup>37</sup>

These components have been variously emphasised in different ‘models’ of radicalization, some of which propose a ‘staged’ process, leading from one level to the next. It is not the intention, here, to provide any exhaustive assessment of these models, but some of the principal features of the more prominent of these are here highlighted.

Alex Schmid proposes three levels of analysis, and a wide range of components within each of these:

1. **Micro-level**, i.e., the individual level, involving, e.g., identity problems, failed integration, feelings of alienation, marginalisation, discrimination, relative deprivation, humiliation (direct or by proxy), stigmatisation and rejection, often combined with moral outrage and feelings of (vicarious) revenge;
2. **Meso-level**, i.e., I the wider radical milieu – the supportive or even complicit social surround – which serves as a rallying point and is the ‘missing link’ with the terrorists’ broader constituency or reference group that is aggrieved and suffering injustices which, in turn, can radicalise parts of a youth cohort and lead to the formation of terrorist organisations;
3. **Macro-level**, i.e., the role of government and society at home and abroad, the radicalisation of public opinion and party politics, tense majority – minority relationships, especially when it comes to foreign diasporas, and the role of the lack of socio-economic

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37 Holly F. Young, Jorien Holsappel, Frederike Zwenk & Magda Rooze, “A Review of Literature on Radicalization, and What it Means for TERRA”, *The TERRA Project*, 2014, [http://terratookit.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/TERRATOOLKIT\\_LITERATURE\\_REVIEW\\_01.pdf](http://terratookit.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/TERRATOOLKIT_LITERATURE_REVIEW_01.pdf).

opportunities for whole sectors of society which leads to mobilisation and radicalisation of the discontented, some of which might take the form of terrorism.<sup>38</sup>

Among early attempts at systematizing an understanding of the radicalization process was the New York Police Department's (NYPD's) study, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*,<sup>39</sup> which distinguished four unique 'phases', each with its own "specific signatures":

- Pre-radicalisation: This is the point of origin for individuals, their 'life situation' before they are exposed to and adopt jihadi-Salafi Islam as their own ideology. The majority of individuals involved in jihadi plots begin as "unremarkable" – they had 'ordinary' jobs, had lived 'ordinary' lives and had little, if any criminal history.
- Self-identification: the phase where individuals, influenced by both internal and external factors, begin to explore Salafi Islam and gradually gravitate away from their old identity and begin to associate themselves with like-minded individuals and adopt this ideology as their own. The catalyst for this 'religious seeking' is a cognitive opening, or crisis, which shakes one's certitude in previously held beliefs and opens an individual to be receptive to new worldviews. The possible 'triggers' for this cognitive opening include:
  - Economic (losing a job, blocked mobility)
  - Social (alienation, discrimination, racism – real or perceived)

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38 Alex P. Schmid, op. cit., pp. 4.

39 New York Police Department, "Radicalisation in the West: The Homegrown Threat", New York, 2007, [http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NYPD\\_Report-Radicalization\\_in\\_the\\_West.pdf](http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf).

- Political (international conflicts involving Muslims)
- Personal (death in the close family)
- Indoctrination: where an individual progressively intensifies his beliefs, wholly adopts jihadi-Salafi ideology and concludes, without question, that the conditions and circumstances exist where action is required to support and further the cause. That action is militant jihad. This phase is typically facilitated and driven by a “spiritual sanctioner.” While the initial self-identification process may be an individual act, association with like-minded people is an important factor as the process deepens. By the indoctrination phase this self-selecting group becomes increasingly important as radical views are encouraged and reinforced.
- Jihadisation: in which members of the cluster accept their individual duty to participate in jihad and self-designate themselves as holy warriors or mujahedeen. Ultimately, the group will begin operational planning for the jihad or a terrorist attack. These “acts in furtherance” will include planning, preparation and execution.

While the other phases of radicalization may take place gradually, over two to three years, the jihadization component can be a very rapid process, taking only a few months, or even weeks to run its course. Significantly, while social media was yet in its infancy at the time of this study, the NYPD report noted that the Internet was “a driver and enabler for the process of radicalization”. The NYPD study also found that radicalization was “a phenomenon that occurs because the individual is looking for an identity and a cause and unfortunately, often finds them in the extremist Islam.”

The NYPD study has come in for a great deal of criticism and was successfully judicially challenged on the grounds that it had resulted in unlawful investigations against Muslims. Though the Court found no evidence of wrongdoing, NYPD did agree to ‘purge’ the report, and it is no longer available on its own website. Nevertheless, most of the processes instituted as a result of the Report continue to be followed,<sup>40</sup> and its crucial findings continue to be reflected in many of the other models that have been independently developed to explain the radicalization process.

Marc Sageman, with a focus on international Islamist terrorism, thus elaborates ‘four factors’, clarifying that these “are not stages in a process, nor do they occur sequentially; they are simply four recurrent phases in this process.” The first of these, he identifies as “a sense of moral outrage, a reaction to perceived major moral violations, like killings, rapes, or local police actions.” The second is the interpretation of this outrage within a “deliberately vague” worldview that sees global and local moral violations as examples of a unified global strategy – a war against Islam. These perceptions are then transposed into the individual’s daily life, as he interprets the discrimination or wrongs he experiences or perceives as parts of the generalized ‘war against Islam’. The process is often accelerated by the “the thrill of participating in clandestine operations to escape the boredom of idleness”. Finally, these feelings are translated into action, and “network mobilization allows a very small number of them to become terrorists.”

The element of ‘thrill seeking’ has been emphasised by a number of other writers. Bartlett and Miller note,

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40 Brian M. Jenkins and Richard Daddario, “A Symbolic Purging of the NYPD Radicalization Report”, RAND Corporation, January 26, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/01/a-symbolic-purging-of-the-nypd-radicalization-report.html>.

...particularly in cases of ‘home-grown’ young militants... violent radicalisation is not necessarily, or wholly, a religious, intellectual, or rational decision. There is an emotional pull to radicalisation. To join the battle against the power and authority of Western states is considered risky, exciting, heroic, and taps into a counter-cultural and anti-establishment tradition exemplified by many youth subcultures, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Further, in-group peer pressure and an internal code of honour can render violence, in certain social contexts, the most obvious route to accrue status, respect, and meaning.<sup>41</sup>

Far more elaborate ‘stage models’ have been proposed by other scholars. Arjan De Wolf and Bertjan Doosje propose a ‘multiple floor’ model, with each floor characterized by escalating social and psychological factors and displaying visible signals. At the ‘ground floor’, feelings of frustration because of relative discrimination and deprivation are experienced in combination with uncertainty and an openness to ‘close others.’ At this stage, the individual becomes potentially open to ideological explanations, has a proclivity to search for positive social identity and is open to influence by others. On the ‘first floor’, the individual experiences conflicting sentiments, hope for improvement and frustration in case of failure. There is a progressive loss of faith in the justice of the ‘system’ and in the effectiveness of the ‘old group’. At the ‘second floor’, the individual seeks out face to face interactions with radicalized individuals and could make a commitment to such a group as he explores the radical ideology. The ‘third floor’ is characterized

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41 Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, “The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalisation”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 24, Number 1, 2012, p. 17.

by the individual's uncertainty regarding his status within the new group, and efforts to strengthen belief in the group through a range of devices, including reciprocity, cognitive dissonance, a justification of efforts, progressive depersonalization, polarization, learning through role models and the exercise of power, among others. At this stage, the individual begins to isolate himself from his former environment and to dress and behave like a prototypical member of the new groups; rebels against other groups, particularly those very similar to the 'own group'; and adopts a new name and elements of new identity. The 'fourth floor' involves a deepening commitment to the group through the fusion of personal and social identity; increasing power of the group; and changes in self-image as a result of the functional role ascribed to the individual by the group. The individual becomes 'less noticeable' as a result of increasing participation in the 'shadow world' of the group; participates in the preparation of an attack; dresses and behaves in a manner that conforms to the dominant (Western) society once again to be less noticeable; expresses hate against 'unbelievers'; seeks to influence new members with the 'true doctrine' and to create a 'legacy'; and to re-socialize others by instilling fear. Finally, at the 'fifth floor', there is the commission of the act of terrorism. This is made possible by suppressing the inhibitory mechanism through the moral exclusion and dehumanisation of the other, by apocalyptic thinking and a belief in a 'just world' that will supplant the existing and corrupt moral order, and a progressive diminution of own culpability by blaming a complicit state for the evils that exist. Visible signals presaging this stage are the making of a video testament; withdrawal of all money from banks; and expressions of moral exclusion of all other groups.<sup>42</sup>

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42 Holly F. Young et al, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-19.

An early stages model was proposed by Fathali M. Moghaddam as a ‘Staircase to Terrorism’<sup>43</sup> which, importantly, goes beyond Islamist radicalization to explore mobilization through a range of other ideologies as well. The ‘first floor’ of this staircase involves ‘perceived options to fight unfair treatment’, involving “individuals’ perceived possibilities for personal mobility to improve their situation and their perceptions of procedural justice. At the ‘second floor’ we encounter “displacement and aggression” transferred “onto out-groups, particularly the United States... channelled through direct and indirect support for institutions and organizations that nurture authoritarian attitudes.” The ‘Third Floor’ reflects ‘Moral Engagement’: “Terrorist organizations arise as a parallel or shadow world, with a parallel morality that justifies “the struggle” to achieve the “ideal” society by any means possible.” On the ‘fourth floor’ we encounter “Solidification of Categorical Thinking and the Perceived Legitimacy of the Terrorist Organization”, and from this stage, “there is little or no opportunity to exit alive.” The ‘fifth floor’ involves the terrorist act itself and the sidestepping of inhibitory mechanisms.

There have been numerous other efforts to conceptualize pathways to radicalization and terrorist mobilisation, but it is clear from the short sampling above that most of these are overlapping and have sought to describe – with some exclusion or inclusion in different ‘models’ – a process with broad commonalities. Crucially, the ‘stages’ posited do not reflect a clear and necessary process that must be traversed step by step in a sequential manner, but are, rather, factors that variously

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43 Fathali M. Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration”, *American Psychologist*, Volume 60, Number 2, February-March 2005, pp. 161-169, <http://fathalimoghaddam.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/1256627851.pdf>.

influence different individuals in circumstances that are unique to each case. Schmid summarizes the broad findings of the literature:

- Most terrorists are clinically normal although their acts are considered widely as extra-normal in moral terms;
- Backgrounds of terrorists are very diverse; there are many paths to terrorism and there is no single profile of a terrorist;
- Radicalisation is usually a gradual, phased process;
- Individual poverty alone does not cause radicalisation towards terrorism but un(der)employment may play a role;
- Grievances play a role but often more as a mobilisation device than as a personal experience;
- Social networks/environments are crucial in drawing vulnerable youths to a terrorist movement;
- Ideology often plays an important role in that it can provide the true believer with a ‘license to kill’;
- Disengagement from terrorism often occurs without de-radicalisation.<sup>44</sup>

Each of the models conceptualized recognize the continuity in the radicalization process, but discontinuities between the various stages also ensure that a very small proportion of those who pass through the initial processes actually graduate to the highest levels. McCauley and Moskalenko observed, much earlier,

Because terrorists are few in relation to all those who share their beliefs and feelings, the terrorists may be thought of as the apex of a pyramid. The base of the

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44 Alex P. Schmid, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

pyramid is composed of all who sympathize with the goals the terrorists say they are fighting for... From base to apex, higher levels of the pyramid are associated with decreased numbers but increased radicalization of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. CASE STUDIES: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUMBAI AND KASARGOD

In 2014, this writer sought to document the emergence and dynamics of Islamist extremism and radicalization linked to *Daesh* (Islamic State, formerly Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham) in two target regions, Mumbai in Maharashtra and the Kasargod District in Kerala. These two areas were selected because of the clusters of *Daesh* mobilization that had come to light in these locations at that time, and their associations with prominent conservative/ fundamentalist Muslim institutions, organisations and evangelists

The objective of the study was to examine the motives and processes that contributed to *Daesh* mobilization in India through case studies of these two prominent loci of such mobilization.

The principal device employed in this field study was a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a broad spectrum of opinions, including elements along the conservative-radical spectrum, as well as moderate and progressive voices in the community; community leaders and opinion makers across communal lines; political and social activists; journalists; and those who had some association with individuals who had joined or sought to join *Daesh*, or to engage in activities purportedly

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45 C. McCauley and S. Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of political radicalization: Pathways toward terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 20, Number 3, 2008, p. 417.

on behalf of *Daesh* within India. The study also accessed some local records on demography and human development indices to supplement its background profile.

A total of 41 persons were interviewed, 33 in Mumbai; and a total of 51 in Kasargod and Khozikhode, Kerala. Most of the interviews in Kerala were located in Padanna and Trikaripur, the locations from where 17 persons went ‘missing’ in June-July 2016, to join *Daesh* (out of 21 from Kerala who went at that stage, the remaining four were from Pallakad District, further south). Some journalists were also tapped in Khozikhode.

In the second phase, workshops were organised in Mumbai and Kasargod, and these were attended, respectively, by 18 and 14 selected resource persons.

As many interviewees sought anonymity at that stage, most identities have been withheld.

The resignation of all nine Muslim Parliamentarians and two provincial governors in Sri Lanka after the coordinated bombings of Churches and hotels on Easter Sunday (April 21, 2019), exposed the deepening fault lines between the majority Sinhala Buddhists and the small Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Over 250 people were killed and hundreds injured in the attacks, claimed by *Daesh* (Islamic State).

### **3. MUMBAI**

Among the earliest reports of *Daesh* ‘recruitment’ in India came from Mumbai, when a four-member ‘module’ from the Kalyan area of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region went ‘missing’, to join *Daesh* in May 2014. One of these, Areeb Majeed, returned and was arrested. Three other people — Fahad Shaikh, Shaheem Tanki and Aman Tandel, are believed

to have been killed in Syria.<sup>46</sup> Another four youth went missing from the Malwani suburb of Mumbai in late 2015, though only one, Ayaz Sultan, reached Syria, while the remaining three were arrested. Another four persons from different parts of Mumbai, including Navi Mumbai, Mazgaon and Mumbra, were arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) at this early stage.

The NIA, moreover, had reportedly drawn up a list of more than 50 terror accused and suspects, who it claimed were inspired by Mumbai-based televangelist and preacher Zakir Naik's speeches and videos. On August 2, 2016, Hansraj Ahir, the Minister of State for Home, confirmed in the Lok Sabha that there had been reports of "some known terrorists have reportedly been inspired by the preachings of Dr. Zakir Naik, President, Islamic Research Foundation."<sup>47</sup>

Areeb Majeed, who returned from Syria after a stint with *Daesh*, was reported to have disclosed to his interrogators that he was 'inspired' by Zakir Naik's speeches. Moreover, Arshi Qureshi of Navi Mumbai and Rizwan Khan of Kalyan, arrested for forcible conversion to Islam and radicalization, specifically in the case of some of the Kerala youth who went missing to join *Daesh*, were 'aides' to Zakir Naik, the former working for his Islamic Research Foundation and the latter for a 'connected' al Birr Foundation.

Mumbai also has a very long history of Islamist radicalization and terrorism. Commencing with India's worst terrorist attack, the serial blasts of March 12, 1993, which killed

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46 Sonam Saigal, "Kalyan resident who joined ISIS granted bail", *The Hindu*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/kalyan-resident-who-joined-isis-granted-bail/article31094785.ece>.

47 Ministry of Home Affairs, Lok Sabha, Unstarred Question No. 2683, August 2, 2016.

at least 257 and injured 713, the *South Asia Terrorism Portal* records 14 terrorist strikes in the country's commercial capital, including at least six complex serial attacks, culminating in the 26/11 outrage of 2008. Significantly, many of the conspirators and perpetrators arrested for involvement in this succession of attacks have come from privileged and educated backgrounds, challenging the entrenched 'root causes' thesis that identifies poverty, lack of education and denial of access to social and public goods as the principal source of terrorist mobilisation. It is useful to recall that Dr. Mohammed Abdul Maten Abdul Bashid, an MD in forensic sciences working at the JJ Hospital in Mumbai, was the main accused in the December 2002 Ghatkopar blast; Sayed Yunus Khwaja Ayub was an instrumentation engineer who had worked in Dubai, and was also charged in the Ghatkopar blast; Anwar Ali held Master of Arts, Master of Commerce and Master of Computer Management degrees, and was an accused in the CST-Karjat Train blast that occurred on March 13, 2003; and Saquib Abdul Hamid Nachen, a commerce graduate from Mumbai who was arrested by the Central Bureau of Investigation in 1992 for terrorist links and spent almost a decade in prisons, to emerge and allegedly engineer four bombings in Mumbai after 2001. However, Bashid was acquitted on June 11, 2005, by the special Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) court, which gave him the benefit of doubt.<sup>48</sup> As reported on April 7, 2016, Alwar Ali was also acquitted on terrorism charges.<sup>49</sup>

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48 "Issue passport to man cleared of 2002 terror charges: Bombay HC", *Hindustan Times*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/issue-passport-to-man-cleared-of-2002-terror-charges-bombay-hc/story-byKOUHa7hyVzvVynErDJLK.html>.

49 "2002-03 blasts in Mumbai: Ex-NDA professor gets two years in jail, walks free", *The Indian Express*, April 7, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/pune/2002-03-blasts-in-mumbai-ex-nda-professor-gets-two-years-in-jail-walks-free/>.

Yunus died in custody in 2003. A trial is currently underway against four Policemen on charges of murder and destruction of evidence for the alleged custodial death of Yunus.<sup>50</sup> Nachen walked out of Thane Central Jail on November 22, 2017. He was convicted for possession of weapons under the anti-terrorism law and sentenced to 10 years in prison. However, considering his good conduct in prison, Nachen was given a remission of five months and 13 days.<sup>51</sup>

Mumbai also has a record of communal violence – the worst of which was experienced in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition of December 1992 and the serial blasts of March 1993 – as well as of communally polarized electoral politics. It has also been an operational base for a succession of terrorist organisations and cells, and with its open metropolitan architecture, remains immensely vulnerable to terrorist attack. It is, consequently, on these considerations alone, an area of immense security concerns.

Mumbai's population was 20.7 million in 2011, of which 20.65 per cent (about 4.28 million) were Muslim. Literacy levels among Muslims across the State of Maharashtra stood at 83.6 per cent, much higher than the all-India average of 68.5 per cent, and *significantly higher than the rate for Hindus in the State*, at 81.8 per cent. However, the sex ratio among Muslims is 911, well below the national average of 951 and the ratio for Hindus in the State, at 928. This is a significant indicator, suggesting that conservatism and patriarchy continue

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50 Sadaf Modak, “Khwaja Yunus custodial death case: plea in Supreme Court, progress at trial court”, *The Indian Express*, January 12, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/khwaja-yunus-custodial-death-case-trial-explained-7719249/>.

51 “Saqib Nachan walks free”, *Mumbai Mirror*, November 23, 2017, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/saqib-nachan-walks-free/articleshow/61759331.cms>.

to dominate the community, and the higher level of literacy and education have not impacted proportionately on the gender bias within the community.

From a position of pre-eminence, Maharashtra State had fallen to the fifth position among States in terms of per capita GSDP by 2013-14, behind Goa, Delhi, Chandigarh, Puducherry and Haryana. Nevertheless, the State at large, with a per capita income of INR 114,392 remains well above Indian averages, and Mumbai accounts for a disproportionate share of the commercial activity and is the richest district in terms of per capita income within the State. Nevertheless, there are critical social and economic skews. For one thing, more than half the city's population lives in slums, and there is a high measure of communal ghettoisation. Some studies suggest a wide range of other distortions, including high unemployment rates, particularly among Muslims: 15.2 per cent in Mumbai Suburban; 13.7 per cent in Mumbai, for Muslims. The average rate of unemployment in Maharashtra stands at a low 3.8 per cent.<sup>52</sup>

Mumbai's vulnerabilities are also exacerbated by its openness and cosmopolitanism. As one interviewee expressed it, "Mumbai is the Europe of India; just as, globally, Europe has been more affected than other parts of the world (by recruitment of foreign fighters to *Daesh*), so Mumbai is more affected than other parts of India."<sup>53</sup>

#### 4. KASARGOD

Wide areas across Kerala, including Kasargod, had experienced a gradual and progressive process of communalization,

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52 CMIE, "Unemployment Rate in India", January 24, 2022, <https://unemploymentinindia.cmie.com/>.

53 All quotes without attribution are from interviews conducted under this study.

radicalization and terrorist mobilization over well over a decade preceding this study. The then Chief Minister of Kerala, E.K. Nayanar accepted, in June 1998, that a number of Islamist extremist and terrorist formations were operating in the State, including the National Development Front (NDF), the Jamiyathul Ehsaniya, the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), the Islamic Movement, and Al-Umma, whose base of operations covered Kozhikode, Malappuram and Thrissur Districts. Significant, 13 NDF activists were arrested on September 6, 2001, while undergoing arms training at a college in Palakkad, the District that accounted for four of the 21 who disappeared to join Daesh in June-July 2016. There have been persistent reports that the area had been consolidating as a haven for fundamentalist and subversive forces.

Kasargod, the northernmost District of Kerala, had a total population of 1,307,375, of which 37.2 per cent (486,913) were Muslims, according to the Census 2011. The district had a literacy rate of 89.85 per cent, lower than Kerala's average of 93.91 per cent, but significantly higher than the Indian average 74.04 per cent. The sex ratio was 1,079, far above the national average of 940, and just below the State ratio of 1,084. The district was among the State's most backward, despite the fact that it had the highest proportion of NRI households, with at least one NRI member in 50.9 per cent of the households, as against 39.7 per cent households on average for the State. Foreign remittances, mainly from the Gulf, brought a high measure of visible prosperity to the area. Traditional traders and businessmen, the people of Padanna speak of a 200-year history of migration, with people setting up businesses in Burma, Sri Lanka, Africa, Mali, China, and the Gulf countries, as well as in various metropolises within India, especially Mumbai and Bangalore. The resulting wealth is reflected in luxurious houses and burgeoning mosques. Kasargod has

also seen increasing Hindu-Muslim communal disturbances, particularly after 1992 and in the coastal regions of the district.

Like other parts of northern Kerala, Kasaragod is also known as the Land of Gods for its variety of religious rituals and festivals, both Hindu and Muslim. Religious symbols and structures abound in every part of the district, with hundreds of age-old Mosques and temples, including the Malik Deenar Juma Masjid, the first mosque on Indian soil (established c. 629 AD, during the life of the Prophet), and the Madhur Mahaganapathy Temple (believed to be between a thousand and two thousand years old). The district is also known for its unique traditional religious rituals such as Theyyam, Yakshagana, Kambala (buffalo race), Poorakkali, Kolkali (ritual dances), etc. The local Muslims have adopted several foreign and Kerala visual art forms and made them their own, with suitable changes. Muslim participation in many of the ritual Hindu festivals, including Theyyam performances, is not unknown. The Moplah Theyyam is performed by Muslims at Hindu *devasthanams* (temples).

Padanna is a Gram Panchayath (village self-administration body) comprising Padanna and Udinur villages, with a population of 21,662 in 2011, of which, unofficial estimates suggest, more than 75 per cent are orthodox Muslims.

Trikaripur is a Special Grade Panchayat and town near Padanna, in the southern extreme of Kasargod District. Trikaripur *panchayat* comprehends two areas, South Trikaripur and North Trikaripur, with a total population of 42,782, of which, unofficial estimates indicate, 50 per cent are Muslim.

The Muslim population of Padanna and Trikaripur is fragmented into different sectarian/ideological groupings, as well as opportunistic institutional divisions, many of which are hostile to each other. The principal among these are:

- A majority of the Muslim (Sunni) population identifies with either E.K. Abubacker Musaliyar (EK Group) or Kanthapuram A.P. Abubacker Musaliyar (AP Group), both fragments of the original Samastha Kerala Jamiyathul Ulema, an organization originally formed in 1926, purportedly to resist emerging trends, on the one hand, towards a puritanical Salafist reform of the Faith, and, on the other, the progressive influence of Western culture. After the split in 1989, an entrenched rivalry was established, at least occasionally manifesting in violence, particularly over the control of various mosques and *madrassahs*. The EK Group is politically identified with the Indian Union Muslim League, while the AP Group has traditionally supported the Left.
- The Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen (KNM), established in 1952, articulated a conservative reformist impulse within Islam, and encouraged adherents – *mujahids*<sup>54</sup> – to reject the intervention of clergy or other religious intermediaries, and to pursue the doctrines and directives of the Faith, and to dedicate themselves to the worship of the one true God. Significantly, the group is progressive in many of its interpretations, and allows women to pray in the Mosque. Adherents have achieved greater progress, economically and socially, than other groups. KNM has a students’/ youth wing, Ittihad us Subanul Mujahiddeen (ISM).
- The Jama’at-e-Islami (JeI) adheres to the Islamist supremacist ideology of Abu Ala Maududi, rejects nationalism and imposes a principal duty of Jihad on all Muslims, regarding the ‘five pillars of Islam’ (shahada

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54 The *mujahid*, in this interpretation, is committed to the ‘greater jihad’, the inner struggle of the believer to master himself in the practice the tenets of the Faith.

or the declaration of faith, prayer, charity, fasting during Ramazan, and hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca) as no more than a preparation for this principal duty. The JeI ideology has been adapted to widely different situations, producing terrorist movements in Pakistan, Jammu & Kashmir and Bangladesh. However, the JeI Hind (the principal Indian arm of the organisation) has sought to tread a middle path, abjuring violence and seeking protection from majoritarian extremism under India's secular Constitution. Nevertheless, JeI continues to advocate the 'establishment of the Islamic way of life in all aspects of life', and to purge Islam of 'all unhealthy accretions' through 'constructive and peaceful methods of propagation'.

- The Tablighi Jama'at (TJ) purports to be a non-political movement seeking to restore the purity of Islam through an unrelenting process of spiritual jihad. TJ formally rejects all violence as a means of evangelism, but some of its adherents and former members have been involved in acts of terrorism in India and Pakistan, as well as in some Western countries.
- A range of new Salafist mosques and *madrassahs* has also come into being, challenging the authority of traditional institutions in the region, and also catalyzing competitive extremism among various groupings.
- Communal political formations such as the Popular Front of India, Indian Union Muslim League, and the All India Majlis-e-Ittihad ul Muslimeen also have a presence in Kasargod, although their influence is peripheral within Padanna and Trikaripur.
- All major religious formations and factions have a number of institutions, mosques and *madrassahs* in

Padanna and Trikaripur, and religious activities have an overwhelming influence on the population. According to one estimate, Padanna has at least 36 mosques of different sizes, including at least five ‘Salafi’ mosques (while KNM, JeI and TJ are also ‘Salafist’ in their ideological orientation, ‘Salafi’ here refers to the new global Islamist stream, often also loosely referred to as Wahabi) just along a four-kilometer stretch of its central road. The ‘morning madrassah’ is popular, and most children will attend religious classes there, before they go to school. [There are also some 15 Hindu Temples in Padanna].

- Kasargod has seen cycles of communal tensions and violence, especially in the coastal areas, but locals insist that Padanna and Trikaripur have rarely been affected by these, though there have been several instances of ‘political’ violence, most recently involving Islamist and Hindutva formations. The record, however, indicates that several cycles of communal violence, including incidents resulting in the loss of lives, have occurred, especially after the 1992 Babri Masjid incident. As many as 469 cases of communal violence were registered in the District over a decade after 2007. 28 cases were reported in 2007, 36 in 2008, 61 in 2009, 22 in 2010, 152 in 2011, 93 in 2012, 45 in 2013, 16 in 2014, 7 in 2015 and 9 in 2016. Minor tensions in any part of the district trigger fears of wider communal troubles, as religious bigots are instantly mobilized. The increasing influence of radical Islamist organisations, prominently including the National Democratic Front (NDF), Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI)/ Popular Front of India (PFI), as well as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)

and other right-wing organisations among the Hindus, have repeatedly triggered violent communal clashes. Kasaragod borders on Mangalore in Karnataka, which has also been afflicted by communal clashes for a long time.

The influence of Gulf money and a flow of Salafi ideologies has transformed the profile of Kasargod, particularly in the 2000s, at an accelerating pace. The growing presence of purdah, hijab or burqa among women, and even among very young girls, is a visible index of this change. Earlier, locals confirm, there was little in appearance that distinguished Muslims from Hindus. All women wore a long-sleeved blouse with a kalli or kalli mundu (lungi or wrap) or long skirt, and occasionally a kattam (headscarf), while men wore a loose shirt with the kalli mundu. Most men were clean shaven. More and more Muslim men now grow their beards in the Muslim style and have taken to wearing a range of clothing that clearly confirms their religious identity, including pajamas and long kurtas, skull caps, Arab keffiyah style scarves, and even, among the Wahabi elements, Thawbs or robes in the Arab style. These are not mere aesthetic shifts. As one commentator noted, today they demand that all women wear hijab, tomorrow, they may demand that women should not move about alone, or study, or work outside the home. There have also been increasing campaigns against what are pronounced shirk (deviations) by the Wahabi extremists, and these include the participation of Muslims in various traditional Hindu rituals, such as the Moplah Theyyam. At the Kanamangalam Temple near Trikaripur, during the Perim Kaliyatam festival, Muslims donate pots of sugar. During the 2015-2016 Perim, some mujahid groups challenged the custom, organizing public meetings and denouncing the practice as shirk. Nevertheless, the local Muslims continued with the custom. Established marriage customs are also under

attack. Muslims in the area include many rituals, dances and art forms during the marriage ceremonies, but since the 1990s, some Islamist organisations have pronounced bans/prohibitions against such activities, even within the privacy of the home. One of the participants in this study, C. Shukkur, observed, “Over the last three decades, the Saudi sponsored Islamism, Wahabism, has dominated, with massive funding. Unfortunately, we are not opposing this form because of their wealth; we want their money. Ordinary believers now think this is the real Faith.” While the extremist Islamist groups are small in number, their influence is spreading. Locals speak of an ‘Arab invasion’ and an insistence on ‘pure gold Islam.’

In contrast, however, the status of women appears to have seen considerable improvement on some parameters. Till the early 2000s, most girls in Padanna were educated only up to High School, as the nearest college was some 40 kilometres away and parents were not comfortable sending their daughters far to study. The marriage of underage girls was also prevalent. With the growth of educational opportunities in the village and neighbouring areas, girls are now going in for higher education, and there are several successful women in different professions.

The problem, however, is not simply one of Wahabism. Most mainstream Muslim organisations support extreme orthodoxy, deepening the vulnerabilities to radical mobilisation. Crucially, no Muslim organisation is actively resisting these trends and, indeed, most of these have also hardened their interpretations in a competition with the Wahabi formations. Organisations and individuals who speak out against radicalization face difficulties and intimidation. Moreover, the political dispensation supports the more strident elements within the religious parties, and enforcement agencies often

fail to act against extremist elements – both Muslim and Hindu – contributing to polarization and feeding minority community insecurities.

## **5. FIELD ASSESSMENT**

### **Non-violent Radicalization**

Directly or implicitly, almost all interviewees confirmed the centrality of non-violent radicalization and the ‘closing of the Muslim mind’ as a principal factor resulting in vulnerabilities to recruitment by *Daesh*. Even among the most orthodox constituencies, while their own conservatism and Puritanism was thought to be entirely justifiable, rival groups were soundly criticized for propagating a ‘false Islam’ that had ‘misled the youth’. Complex factors are seen to have contributed to this trend.

Among the most significant of these factors is the sectarian and institutional fragmentation that has afflicted all segments of the Muslim population in the region and has, in turn, fed increasing competitive sectarianism and communalism, often culminating in violence between competing institutions. These processes have given rise to more and more rigid and puritanical interpretations of the Faith, challenges that the moderate orthodoxy within the Sunni Faith, or the Sufi tradition, have failed to effectively respond to.

Interlocutors emphasised the grave “societal consequences of sectarian rigidity”, and many reiterated the dangers of the resulting creation of what they described as ‘spiritual extremism,’ a consuming obsession with ritual purity and a seeking after a perfect religious environment and order. This Utopianism – reinforced by the projection of an ideal Islam in the teachings of most conservative mainstream institutions, as

well as of radicalizing proselytizers – itself contains elements of hatred or strong antipathies towards out-groups.

‘Arabisation’ and Wahabism played a crucial role in these processes in both the areas of study. “An environment of hate is being created. Ours is a broadly composite culture and the Arabs are not kindly disposed to this culture. They believe it needs correction, that it is an aberration. They are spending a lot of money on Wahabisation. But the (Indian Muslim) community is deeply rooted in this culture and will not identify with Wahabism. But where hate campaigns are ongoing, vulnerabilities grow. This is a contestation between the composite culture, on the one hand, and Arabisation and alienation, on the other.”

Processes of competitive communalism have also been unleashed by the political and electoral processes, and are exacerbated by the media. “Radicalization is being created in newspapers, on TV, often through fake news.” Sensational, polarizing and extremist constituencies, postures and statements get the greatest media attention; good work done by community leaders and moderate ideas articulated by Muslims finds no mention in news reports. The treatment of communal crimes, incitement and hate speech often tends to be biased, with agencies perceived as showing greater vigour in prosecuting Muslim offenders and displaying a measure of leniency towards Hindus. Crucially, the chain of violence is poorly understood, or rather, poorly accommodated in existing political and enforcement paradigms. As one commentator notes, “Physical violence comes later. Verbal violence comes first. This goes up to the material, and then to fatal violence. We need to look at this entire chain.” And another observes, “There is a poison of communalism across the country today.”

One interviewee particularly emphasised that the rigidity of the Muslim belief systems and mindset was a result of the “shutting of the doors of *Ijtihad*<sup>55</sup> since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, with the decline of the Abbasid dynasty”, and that “Ulema today do not have the training, knowledge or wisdom to do *Ijtihad*.” *Madrassahs*, where the *Ulema* learn their Islam, have had their curricula frozen for centuries, and admit to no new influences. One of the most popular texts, one of the interviewees emphasised, was Burhan ud Din al Marghinani’s *Al Hidayah*, a regressive 12<sup>th</sup> Century text that emphasises Muslim exclusivism, the inferiority of other belief systems and the importance of  *Jihad* (as religious war) in the spread of Islam. Indeed, it was emphasised that, in modern India, progressive rigidity had been introduced by Muslim elites, even those who were purportedly committed to ‘modernization’ and moderation. For instance, one interviewee narrated that, when agricultural workers went to the great reformist Sir Syed Ahmed Khan to ask for schools for their children, he responded by asking what use they would have for an education. At best, all they needed was basic literacy. The class character of the elites has been decisive in the trajectory that the community has followed. Sir Syed, this commentator noted, set up higher educational institutions only for the *Ashraf* (elite).

Many interviewees insist that mosques, *madrassahs* and religious congregations were the principal locations for radicalization and preliminary mobilisation, while peer pressure may play a crucial role in eventual recruitment and operationalization. The narrative in Mumbai emphasised the oppression of Islam – both locally and globally – and generated psychological pressure to ‘do something.’ There is a process

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55 *Ijtihad*: The application of reasoned interpretation to the resolution of questions of religion and law.

of selection thereafter, and more intensive radicalization of those who are seen as willing and promising. It is at this stage that the Internet has become crucial in recent years. In Kerala, however, the idea of the Caliphate and the aspiration to live in a ‘pure’ Islamic environment, appear to have been the principal motivators rather than any real or imagined grievances, personal or of wider injury to Muslims; it is only after the radical elements left the country that their communications with friends or family at home contain elements of the usual themes of the oppression of Islam.

Many of the interviewees, however, warned, that it is not the 2 per cent of *madrassah* students who are at risk, it is rather the 50 per cent who are out of school; “Muslim chauvinism is greatest among this 50 per cent.”

*Both perspectives are likely contrafactual*, as *Daesh* recruitment has not come from *madrassahs* or from the uneducated unemployed, but has tapped into public<sup>56</sup>/missionary school educated persons, many of them with higher educational qualifications from ‘secular’ institutions. The *madrassah* and its regressive curriculum is not, however, irrelevant even in such cases. In Kasargod, most Muslim children attend ‘morning *madrassah*’ before they go for their classes in various public or government schools. In Mumbai – as in most parts of the country – elite families call in a *madrassah* educated *maulvi* to teach their children Arabic and the Quran, and the residual influence of such instructions should not be underestimated.

In Padanna, several interlocutors spoke of the marginalization of what they called the unique traditions of “Kerala Islam” and the deepening influence of Wahabi-Salafist teachings. In mosques and *madrassas*, extremist and

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56 In India, privately funded schools are referred to as ‘public schools.’

radical religious sermons had begun to dominate. The young men who left Padanna to join *Daesh* were followers of the Kerala Sunni tradition, but are said to have joined the Kerala Nadwat ul Mujahiddeen (KNM) over the preceding four to six years. It was after this that they began to follow strict religious disciplines, adopting practices that were strange in the local environment. Yasin, the President of the Eleven Star Arts and Sports Club who knew some of the renegade youth, observed, “Many of us noticed their behavioural changes as they began to grow long beards and wear clothes that adhere to strict Salafist traditions. It seemed to me that they were not comfortable with their surroundings.” Hafizuddin’s (one of the men who joined *Daesh* and was believed to have been killed in the Nangarhar Province of Afghanistan) uncle B.C.A. Rahman confirms, “He refused to trim his beard and felt his family members were moving away from true Islam. He didn’t fight or argue with us, so when one fine morning, he decided to get rid of cable TV, we thought it was just a phase. The real trouble began when he requested that there be no celebrations at a wedding.” Hafeezuddin’s turn to the extremist ideology, Rahman disclosed, occurred in “less than two years.”

Haneef Moulavi, a teacher with KNM, who had taught some of the men from Padanna who went to Afghanistan to join *Daesh*, insists that his organisation was not responsible for their radicalization: “These youths were brainwashed by some extreme spiritual thoughts. I don’t know the exact source of this extremism. We don’t support IS, who kill even Muslims. We (KNM) have our own interpretation regarding issues such as *hijra*<sup>57</sup> and *jihad*. We never support violent *jihad*.” He claimed that the renegade youth had shifted to another Salafi organisation, the ‘Wisdom Group,’ and then to the ‘Dammaj

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57 Emigration for the cause of God and the Faith.

Salifis' who propagated radical ideas and the "pure Islamic life." Haneef also disclosed that Yahiya (earlier Bestin Vincent who converted from Christianity) was the first among this group who asked him about the duty to do *hijra*, citing *ayats* of the Quran. Haneef added, "After Yahiya raised the subject, all the other youth started to ask such questions. Though I clarified their doubts, they were not satisfied by my answers. I suspect Yahiya was the man behind the whole plot."

Prashant M.P., Chief of Bureau, *Times of India*, Khozikhode, noted that regional histories were important, arguing that this had nothing to do with Kasargod as such; it was all over Kerala. The idea of the Khilafat is very strong in local traditions. It is useful to recall that the Mallapuram region was at the forefront of the Khilafat Movement.<sup>58</sup> This was the greatest element of the appeal of *Daesh* in this area – the declaration of the Caliphate.

Sectarian conflict has contributed to a 'hardening of Islam,' and the greater influence of puritan ideologies. Thus, there have been numerous instances of Barelvi and Deobandi mosques and *madrassahs* being taken over by the Ahle Hadith over recent years. One interviewee suggested that there had been "several hundred cases in Mumbai Metropolitan area alone. Parbani has a population of about two lakh (200,000), and has three Ahle Hadith mosques." Further, he emphasised, the moment Ahle Hadith takes over, activities become secretive, clandestine meetings are held after the last Namaz, the process of indoctrination begins. Visitors are hosted secretly, and surreptitious Dars-e-Hadith (Hadith study) camps are organised. Friday *Taqirirs* become more radical as Ahle Hadith or other Salafist formations consolidate their hold on

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58 1919-1924, movement against the British for the restoration of the Ottoman Caliphate.

more mosques. “An army of strong believers is being created.” Most *masajid* have *madrasahs* attached, and the curriculum stealthily introduces exclusivist content. The Tablighi Jamaat is identified as another ‘problem’ in terms of non-violent radicalization. Extremist foreign preachers are often brought in on tourist visas and engage in proselytizing.

Sectarian divisions also deepened across the board because each faction set up its own educational institutions, including schools, colleges and universities, and an overwhelming proportion of their students were drawn from families adhering to that particular sect or ideology, creating higher and higher walls of division, and enduring pools of ideological extremism. Worse, this created an environment in which social interaction with a widening spectrum of ‘others’ was consciously minimized. This was not just the case with Muslim sectarian institutions, but also the result of the proliferation of Hindu caste-based institutions, resulting in a regressive trend of educational exclusivism. “New generation children have no opportunity to mingle with other castes and religions... The lack of mingling will make our new generation an easy target of radical religious groups... Public schools and public cultural institutions need to be strengthened to prevent people getting divided along communal lines.”

Significantly, no section of society was completely impervious to these radicalizing trends. Aberrant cases of Bareilvis and even Bohras (a Shia sect) jumping to Ahle Hadith were on record, and, of course, recent converts from other Faiths had also been susceptible to extremist interpretations of Islam, and to *Daesh* mobilisation.

The influx of petrodollars and the increasing flow of migrant workers to the Middle East (and their subsequent return) were at the source of these complex movements, most

of which sought to ‘cleanse Islam’ of Hindu practices and other *bidat* (deviations/ innovations).

It is critical to reiterate consequently, that complex processes of non-violent radicalization, which have largely been neglected out of fear of ‘interfering’ in religious matters, or as a result of the tyranny of political correctness, constitute a grave danger of transformation into extremism and violent radicalism. These are protracted processes, creating enduring influences over long periods of time, and they commence from a wide range of religious organisations, centres and schools.

### **Isolation**

No stereotypical profiles were identified among those arrested for involvement with *Daesh*, or who had left the country to join *Daesh* at the time of this study. Most of them had attended missionary/public schools, and came from relatively affluent backgrounds. Only in the case of a single lone wolf attack on a policeman in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, was the perpetrator *madrassah* educated.

Nevertheless, one of the factors repeatedly emphasized by many interviewees was that the individuals who had chosen to join with *Daesh* tended to be deeply isolated socially, with most of the people within the neighbourhoods having little or no interaction with them. The breakdown of extended and joint family systems, the nuclear family, lack of emotional support and positive family interaction, were seen as crucial to the process of mobilization. The relationships that the radicalized youth were engaged in were not seen as positive and healthy. One commentator noted, “They don’t want love, but they do want sex. Most of them have married more than once.” Negative orientations to gender equality sharpened psychological isolation.

The ‘spiritual extremism’ of these youth results in an obsession with religion and the ‘hereafter’, to the exclusion of the real world and normal interactions with friends and family. It is the ‘conspiratorial group’ alone that becomes the centre of their interactions, most of which occur within a religious setting.

The ‘spiritual extremism’ is articulated in actions reflecting a desperate seeking, as in the case the travel of Abdul Rashid, the principal motivator in the Kasargod case, as well as some of the others (Ahsanullah, Ashfaq, Rashid, Ezza and his wife, Eshia and his wife) to Sri Lanka to live in a puritan Salafist commune, and subsequently, in another such Salafist commune at Athikkad in Mallapuram, Kerala.

As the conspiratorial group and their intentions crystallize, isolation and extremist ideas intensify. In the case of Hafeezuddin, according to one of this family members, he became more and more ‘spiritual’, cut off television at home, declared that music and cinema were *haram*, and also stopped using his car because he had bought it on a loan (with interest), which was ‘un-Islamic’. This process of intensifying isolation and radicalization is a prelude to the final active mobilization or recruitment, as the case may be.

### **Cyber Mobilization**

The internet becomes crucial in the final stages of mobilization in most cases. It is “the last platform of mobilization.” The radicalization process from this stage on is extremely rapid, culminating in action, either to move to *Daesh* areas, or to engage in terrorist action locally.

Echoing the public discourse, most interviewees refer to this stage as cyber-radicalization but the subsequent description of the process indicates access by already radicalized individuals,

and it is more accurate to speak of it as cyber-mobilization or cyber-recruitment. These are already radicalized individuals engaging in a purposeful search on the internet of specific materials that will allow them to identify organizations and courses of action that allow them to take their intentions forward, and thereafter, to establish some measure of contact with such organizations or their mediators. Cyber radicalization may also play a role in early stages as a supplement to face to face radicalization within the community, but even at this stage reflects intentional seeking behavior among individuals who have undergone a sufficient measure of radicalization to create the cognitive opening within which such searching becomes a psychological need.

At peak, between 2014 and 2017, the rate, quality and intensity of *Daesh* propaganda was overwhelming. One source estimated that, over a single week of monitoring, *Daesh* put out 147 propaganda films and more than 60 short video clips, apart from ‘news reports’ and other releases on the Internet. From March 8, 2018 to June 8, 2018, 1,348 ISIS videos were uploaded to YouTube, garnering 163,391 views.<sup>59</sup> *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* were enormously sophisticated, well packaged and appealing publications that reach out to the potential recruit. And before the social media clampdown, the production quality of video films documenting some of the most horrific atrocities was professional and often exceptional.

Initial contact with *Daesh* intermediaries was often through mediators or activists in Europe, particularly including Finland and the Netherlands. Indians abroad were often brought into the recruitment loop at this stage.

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59 Center for Homeland Defense and Security, “What Does ISIS Post on YouTube?”, July 26, 2018, <https://www.hsdl.org/c/what-does-isis-post-on-youtube/>.

Once contact with *Daesh* was established, *Bayah* (oath of allegiance) was sought and given, after which the new recruits were tasked, either to move to *Daesh* areas through a given process, or to define local targets through a consultative process.

### **Communal Anxieties**

A deep sense of crisis in the Faith within the larger community and the failure of the traditional leadership, particularly in addressing the anxieties and aspirations of the youth, have created a cognitive vacuum within which radicalizing organizations, forces and media find the psychological spaces to mediate a transformation.

Muslim apprehensions deepened with the coming of the Bharatiya Janata Party Government at the Centre, with its implicit Hindutva affiliations. There was also a sense that the huge tide of anti-Islamic sentiment that was sweeping the globe, was coming to India as well. This is, no doubt, overlaid by the fragmented consciousness that groups like *Daesh* were doing the greatest harm to Muslims themselves, but this perception was muddled by complex conspiracy theories that blamed the West for many of the trends in global conflict that were enveloping the Muslim world. The average Muslim “sees the world and is afraid of what is happening.” Within India, state institutions were seen as being in bad faith – e.g., BMC Schools in Mumbai made Surya Namaskar compulsory, and this became an issue for all Muslim religious activists. Such actions promoted polarization and empowered the most regressive elements, even as they pushed some Muslims out of secular education and institutions. Moreover, extremist majoritarian speech and violence deepened these processes: “They pour salt on our wounds. Chaar beevi chaalis bacche,

Ajai Sahni

Haramzaade ya Ramzaade,<sup>60</sup> Go to Pakistan. These are all problems.”

Discrimination, particularly in enforcement and intelligence action, has a crucial impact on Muslim perceptions.

In the wake of terrorist incidents, they look for ‘terrorists’ only among the Muslims, arrests are often indiscriminate, charges are leveled against the wrong people, without evidence. The media projects baseless allegations, citing unnamed ‘sources.’ False stories are manufactured. Engineers, doctors, educated people have been arrested, kept in jail for decades. Entire families have been ruined. When they are found innocent, no compensation is given; no one will employ them. The community sees all this and is troubled.”

Another observer notes,

Terrorism investigations are terrible. They victimize the entire community. 34 per cent of the prison population is Muslim (as against about 14 per cent of the national population). The conviction rate among Muslims is 6 to 7 per cent, as against an average of 15 per cent. This feeds the sense of grievance in the community.

Nevertheless, both in Mumbai and Kasargod, participants and interviewees pointed out to specific cases where the Police, agencies and special counter-terrorism units had acted with sensitivity, sought to counsel and rehabilitate individuals and ‘saved lives’ in the process. *These examples were seen in a very positive light.*

The cumulative impact of the various adverse factors was to “lock the community with the walls of the Faith,” to

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60 “Four wives, forty children, bastard children or children of Ram,” slogans that were (and are) frequently hurled at the Muslims by majoritarian Hindutva extremists.

harden values and practices, even those that are accepted as being regressive, in order to “preserve religion and culture.” The apprehension is that, “if even one element of religious practice is allowed to change, it will be a slippery slope” and will open the doors for every aspect of the Faith to be tampered with. Individuals who are “uneducated in Islam” feel overwhelmingly pressured to seek protection under the Islamic identity.

Crucially, even regressive issues bind the community in these circumstances. Thus, the Law Commission’s intervention in the Triple Talaq issue – an issue that most Muslim religious leaders interviewed concede was legitimate – brought together the entire communal leadership, across sectarian lines. Other non-issues were being brought centre-stage (e.g., beef) for purely political reasons.

It is this environment that radical preachers such as Zakir Naik exploited. Naik tapped into insecurities and resentments, distorting Islam, and prescribed an extremely detailed ritualism that consumed all aspects of his followers’ lives. He did not allow questioning or independent thinking. His teachings indirectly legitimized Islamist violence and *jihad*, though he was very careful not to engage in what would fall into the ambit of criminal incitement. Naik essentially preaches an Islamist supremacist doctrine that is applauded by many, though very few act on these ideas. Crucially, he emphasises that, globally, Islam was under assault, and many appreciated the fact that he was able to ‘refute’ Western supremacists and cultural hegemony on an ‘equal footing’, in their language and idiom. His admirers, most of whom were not his followers, saw him as heroic in this aspect. As one interviewee expressed it, in many ways, what Naik was doing for Muslims was analogous to what Donald Trump did for marginalized Whites in America

– he threw a brick at the glass houses of a failing establishment, of hated, exploitative elites. Such an action may not serve any strategic objectives of the wider community, and is likely, in fact, to do it great harm, but it fulfils powerful atavistic needs.

Nevertheless, the position of the orthodox Muslim leadership, including those ideologically and publicly opposed to Naik, was that, while his projection of Islam was deeply perverted, he had nothing to do with terrorism : “Our institution have great *ikhtalafaat* (disagreements) with him... We listen to him closely, since he is our *mukhalif* (adversary). He does many wrong things, but there is no connection with terrorism.”

It is important to recognize, here, that there is a dominant and false narrative of both *jihad* among Muslims, and of Islam among non-Muslims, and this is feeding polarization and radicalization across the communal barrier.

The wider discourse within the Muslim community, according to most interviewees, was characterized by a high measure of confusion, frustration, anger, and a measure of self-loathing, which translated into various channels of aggression, including radicalization and extremist mobilisation. The Lebanese writer Fouad Ajami, speaking in the context of the turmoil in the Arab world, spoke of the “political tradition of belligerent self-pity,”<sup>61</sup> a phrase that applies with great accuracy to describe the mood of many Muslims across the world, and including some of those in India. Within this broad frame of mind, conspiracy theories abound, and the potential for radicalization is ever-present, lacking only the necessary provocateurs – real or virtual.

International issues play an important role in shaping Muslim consciousness, and are widely discussed, not only

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61 Fouad Ajami, “Iraq and the Arabs’ Future”, *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2003.

by religious organisations, but also by social formations and individuals. The influence of global developments, and particularly of events in the Gulf and wider Middle East, have played a critical role in reshaping ideologies in India, resulting in a dilution of traditional cultures and values and a progressive imposition of a ‘crude Wahabism.’

### **Role of Radicalizers**

Extremist radicalization and even terrorist operations are becoming progressively decentralized, so leadership from a traditional core and networks is often not apparent, and sometimes not even critical, in the process of radicalization/mobilization. With the non-violent radicalization process carried out by a wide spectrum of diverse and divergent religious formations and proselytizers operating within the framework of legal systems and with no demonstrable connections to terrorist or subversive formations, the challenge becomes opaque and difficult to dissect, leave alone address. Significantly, the influencers and networks that are significant in early radicalization are most often not the same as those that lead to recruitment or ‘operationalisation’ within a terrorist formation.

There is growing incidence in India of individuals increasingly engaging in “virtual radicalization” – particularly in the end stages of mobilisation – via the internet. This process is often influenced by blogs and jihadist internet forums promoting violent Islamist extremism. Anwar al Awlaki was found to be a larger-than-life presence in various Islamist extremist fora, and is often cited as a significant influence on many radicalized individuals, including those who joined or attempted to join, *Daesh*. While there are methods to monitor some of this activity, it is simply impossible to know the

thinking of every at-risk person. Online mobilization and recruitment of fundamentalist and radicalized elements does constitute a grave threat.

Radicalization cannot be detected by profiling likely target individuals. The radical strategy of “diversification” – mounting attacks involving a wide variety of perpetrators from different backgrounds that cannot easily be profiled – has enormously complicated the task. Further, the incidence of recruitment of youth from backgrounds other than Sunni/Salafi making a direct transition to *Daesh* perspectives and attempting enlistment makes the task of profiling immensely more difficult.

‘Lone wolves’ who are not members of a formal terrorist organization or even incipient network, and who do not fit any particular ethnic, economic, educational, or social profile, are even more difficult to detect.

Despite these increasing difficulties, there is a general consensus that radicalization and recruitment clusters around a small number of core individuals and organisations. Despite Rashid’s central role in the Kasargod/Pallakad mobilization, there was general consensus among locals that unnamed proselytizers were the more significant players in the process – including, according to some, Zakir Naik and his associates – and that these needed to be identified and acted against if future incidents of this nature were to be prevented.

### **Sources of Resistance**

The “cultural warp and weft of India is very different from other countries,” including Muslim majority states, as well as the European nations where Muslim radicalization has proliferated among second generation migrants within ghettoized subcultures of extremism. In India, centuries’ long

bonding has taken place, creating ways of accommodation, despite periodic violence and polarization, and the attempts by some elements to create differences.

Muslim apathy is related to specific conditions in the environment, and not necessarily to religion – other communities and caste groups are also affected. Hence the sense of targeted discrimination does not take permanent root, though it may vary from regime to regime, or within certain global historical phases.

Despite the dominant narrative of discrimination and majoritarianism, the Muslim sees many examples of extraordinary Muslim success in India. Although this mobility is limited, it feeds hope and positive aspirations among a majority of Muslims.

There was increasing recognition among Muslim elites, echoed by several of the interviewees, that the condition of Muslims in India is infinitely better than in any other country where Muslims are a minority. There is also significant recognition that the conditions in India are, in fact, better for Muslims than they are in most Muslim majority countries as well.

## **6. PARADIGMS OF FUTURE RESPONSE**

*Daesh* mobilization has afflicted such a tiny and varied section of the population that no coherent prophylactic effort at the level of policy can bear immediate fruit. Preventive responses will have to be narrowly targeted, specific and intelligence based. A residual risk of occasional recruitment cannot be entirely eliminated in the foreseeable future.

The complex issue of non-violent radicalization, which creates the base potential for terrorist mobilization, needs to be addressed within a strategic framework over an extended

period of time. Constitutional values must constitute the basis of this approach, which will have to be articulated through the educational system – including the *madrassah* system – as well as social and political organizations and processes. It is the last of these – the political dimension – that will be most difficult to address, as polarizing communal politics remain deeply entrenched within India's political cultures.

Engagement of Muslim leaders and public in common policy concerns, movements and protests – such as those against price rise, corruption and security – can help embed national identity and common purpose with other communities.

A range of social activities, sports, leisure and hobby clubs, to engage the youth, to develop skills, confidence, shared interests and networks, could have some impact on the potential for radicalization. Religious organizations could also be involved in developing these activities and the related infrastructure. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that, in Kasargod, every village has a number of sports, arts and cultural clubs, and these are both very popular, and also attract support from villagers. Rival village clubs play various games, most prominently football, badminton and *kabaddi*, and local tournaments attract substantial audiences and sponsorship. If these have failed to prevent radical mobilization, this is because, from childhood, many young people find the strongest validation in their religious identity. Religious activities and institutions are their principal loci of socialization, and if there is an element of radicalization in these, it is unlikely to be easily countered by the existence of any competing secular activities and formations.

While the Internet has played a crucial role in mobilization, it also offers tremendous opportunities for counter-mobilization, intelligence generation and counselling.

There is significant awareness of a deep crisis within the Muslim community and leadership, and this provides an opportunity to catalyze change. However, the approach demands sensitivity, and it is better to seek to co-opt the community leadership, rather than isolate them or push them into a rigidly defensive posture.

A national strategy – albeit covert – is required for counter-radicalization, although its implementation must be overwhelmingly local.

While there are significant overlaps between the two in terms of responses, a strict separation is needed between counter-radicalization initiatives and infrastructure and counter-terrorism enforcement.

Generating active partnerships with community organizations is crucial, but Government agencies and outreach initiatives must exercise great care in choosing community partners. The established proclivity to reward the most polarizing elements needs to be curbed.

Addressing the challenge of cognitive or non-violent radicalization is the key to long-term prevention of terrorist or violent radicalization.

Policies and interventions must target the populations most at risk, and must penetrate the most difficult environments. The ghetto cannot be left to its own devices, to create sub-cultures of violence and radicalization. The first element of such penetration is, of course, intelligence, but it must be followed up with well-resourced initiatives for appropriate capacity generation, institution-building and the creation of a structure of deterrents and rewards.

Financial concerns dominate a great deal of ‘religious’ activity, and many large and emerging religious institutions

Ajai Sahni

operate as businesses. The general hesitation to use financial tools and tax laws to ensure compliance with legal and constitutional norms is unjustifiable. These instrumentalities can be the most powerful in curbing negative trends, if they are used without discriminating against particular communities or sects.