



Online Radicalisation and the Specter of Extremist Violence in India

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March 2015

Abstract

The Islamic State (IS) has demonstrated its capacity to efficiently use the internet for a variety of purposes including radicalisation. Instances of youths being bombarded online with radical ideologies is gaining ground not only in the West but also in India. While officials in India put a figure of 80-100 of its citizens affiliated with IS, the number of those getting influenced and indoctrinated through online content remains a blind spot and could be much higher. As the incidences of online radicalisation are on the rise, it requires a sustained, systematic and innovative approach to meet the challenge. In developing collaborative and comprehensive counter radicalisation measures on a regional and global level, the government needs to look beyond its own known levels of competence to involve professionals and experts in the non-governmental sectors.

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Analysis

The arrest of Mehdi Masroor Biswas is indeed a curious case. For several months, the 24-year-old engineer working as a manufacturing executive with a multinational firm in Bengaluru was handling the pro-jihad tweeter account "@ShamiWitness" that supposedly had become a source of incitement and information for the new recruits of the Islamic State (IS). Biswas, who had never been to Syria, shrouded his identity as a Libyan living in the United Kingdom to his followers and IS members following him on Twitter, retweeted many Arabic posts translated into English, with an intent of being a 'strategist' for the IS. The Twitter handle, now closed, had 17,700 followers. The story was broken first by London's Channel 4, leading to Mehdi's arrest in December 2014.

In May 2014, four young men identified as Aarif Majid, Fahad Shaikh, Amaan Tandel and Saheem Tanki hailing from Maharashtra's Kalyan district went missing and were believed to have joined the IS. All in their twenties, these youths left for pilgrimage to Haj before disappearing. Majeed, who returned to the country after several months, was arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA). He reportedly told the investigators that he and his friends were indoctrinated through internet chat rooms. It was through an intermediary on Facebook that Arif was first introduced to a contact in Mosul in Iraq who served as a local point person for guiding these youths to join the IS camps.

While Arif and his friends sought to travel to Iraq, the case of Anees Ansari, a resident of Kurla in Central Mumbai is an account of a radicalized youth who decided to wage a war at home. Ansari, a software engineer, was arrested by the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) in Maharashtra for allegedly planning to bomb the American School at Bandra-Kurla Complex. He reportedly was also indoctrinating an American youth Omar Elhadj to carry out a lone wolf attack in the US.

While these are seen as isolated cases in India, the trend is on the rise. On a global platform, the number of foreigners that have joined the IS continues to rise exponentially. According to London based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)'s latest estimate, the total now exceeds 20,000 – of which nearly a fifth were residents or nationals of Western European countries. According to the Munich Security Report, around 1200 fighters from France and 500-600 from Germany have found their way to Syria and Iraq. The number of fighter from Central Asia, has also risen significantly. The conflict in Syria and Iraq has emerged as a theatre attracting the largest mobilisation of foreigner fighters in Muslim majority countries since 1945, surpassing the numbers of Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s, which is estimated to have attracted up to 20,000 foreigners.

In an age of greater connectivity, extremist groups use the Internet for myriad reasons- to disseminate propaganda to a large geographically dispersed audience; solicit funding; collect data from open sources; plan and coordinate attacks; emulate and communicate with members and other similar groups; provide lessons on manufacturing explosives; indoctrinate, recruit, train and showcase their acts of violence to attract attention. Information campaigns are crucial to radicalisation, and extremists groups use the internet as a tool of social dissemination to achieve this goal. The IS has demonstrated its capacity to efficiently use the cyberspace for a variety of purposes including radicalisation. In addition to its own cadres, a large number of sympathisers continue to proliferate on the web and act as volunteers for a systematic programme of accentuating the existing levels of alienation among the Muslim youth in different countries.



Instances of youths being bombarded online with radical ideologies, including that of IS, is gaining ground not only in the West but also in India. While officials in India put a figure of 80-100 of its citizens affiliated with IS, the number of those getting influenced and indoctrinated through online content remains a blind spot and could be much higher. In January 2015, a family of seven from Chennai along with two other persons, were deported from Turkey after they were caught attempting to enter Syria. Jihad in Syria is attracting loners as well as whole families into that conflict theatre. The ISIS is indeed becoming a melting pot of sorts for diverse motivations – people who simply want to live in that “ideal” land for Muslims as well those who wish to attain martyrdom fighting for the religion.

Diversity, however, has not been a method for authorities attempting to deal with this sudden trend of Indians joining jihad, both at home and abroad. In the absence of clear legal framework, Biswas, the Twitter account handler, with no established direct connection with the ISIS, has been charged under the Indian Penal Code Section 125, which deals with waging war against a country or alliance friendly to India. He has also been charged with conspiracy and cyber-terrorism. Initially authorities appeared to take a lenient view of Majid's escapades in Syria and labeled him a misguided youth. Eventually, he too was charged under IPC section 125. Ansari, who was acting as a source of indoctrination for another youth and himself was planning an attack too has been charged under the Information Technology Act and sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 302 (murder) and 115 (abetment of offence punishable with death or imprisonment for life) of the IPC. There is little evidence that a uniform method of arrest, with an intention of subjecting these identified individuals for long periods of incarceration would help addressing the issues of radicalisation or would prevent others from taking recourse to the same path in future.

Another counter-radicalization approach being employed by security conscious countries is to prevent the people who have joined the IS from returning home. Australia has banned its nationals from going to Raqqa, the headquarters of the IS. Malaysia is proposing to invalidate the passports of its citizens to join the IS. However, history is witness to the fact that these short term measures do not eventually protect individual countries from the scourge of terrorism. Following the end of jihad in the 1980s with the declaration of victory against Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Arab-Afghan fighters were restrained from returning their home countries and even threatened with long prison sentences. Instead, they regrouped in Sudan from which al-Qaeda emerged.

Mehdi's episode threw some light on how quickly the web can replace a fallen soldier. Not only that the police officials in Bangalore received online threats of retribution, a number of similarly structured handles emerged within no time to continue Mehdi's work. In the past, steps taken by countries either to shut down web sites or blocking access to them have proved to be futile. In this networked world, censorship cannot be an effective tool of stopping the spread of ideologies, violent or otherwise.

It needs to be acknowledged that radicalisation is a systematic process shaped by the happenings domestically as well as on soils of other countries. Coercive or repressive actions by the state accentuate the existing alienation and provide a fillip to mindsets that see violence as the only answer to correct the anomaly. Thus, blanket imprisonment to deal with the indoctrinated returnees will never be a sufficient remedy. On the other hand, it can lead to hardening of mindsets and elevate those arrested as role models for the fence sitters.

De-radicalisation, in spite of its decade long existence in countries like Saudi Arabia has a suspect history of success. Similar programmes in Denmark, Holland, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Yemen has attained only marginal results. Since radicalization is a complex process involving religious motivation, individual psychology



as well as enabling contexts, a free-size fit-all approach can never be enough to address the issue. However, with all the challenges, one approach that has the potential of having a positive impact is to combine community-based outreach programmes with educational and counselling services to the youth.

India has been a slow starter in this regard. Recently, Maharashtra's ATS initiated programmes in schools and colleges to explain the negative impact of radicalisation. However, mostly consisting of routine condemnations of violence, which has no religious sanction, such methods are limited in their utility and are no match for the online radicalisation tutorial available on the Internet. British government has been following the strategy of prevention by approaching schools since 2008. In the UK's Channel Project, more than 1000 people deemed to be at risk of violent extremism have been engaged through this programme. And yet, estimated 400 British Muslims have joined the ISIS.

As the incidences of online radicalisation are on the rise, it requires a sustained, systematic and innovative approach to meet the challenge. There is a need for greater global information sharing and effective legal framework to deal with the nature of transnational issue. On a national level, there is a need for greater inter agency coordination and targeted approach to intelligence-gathering rather than reliance on mass surveillance techniques, imprisonment or blocking of online content. Steps to trace the jihadis online footprint and penetrating the complex jihadist networks would call for setting up cells that regularly monitor the online content, particularly of the social media. In providing credible counter narratives and alternative dialogue forums, web sites, blogs, chat rooms, online forums, need to be developed. In this regard, government needs to look beyond its own known levels of competence to involve professionals and experts in the non-governmental sectors.

In developing collaborative and preventive measures on a regional and global level, the government's programmes must involve psychologists, religious and community leaders, civil society groups and development planners. There is a critical need for judicial sector reforms to speed up long-pending terror cases and release of suspects against whom no charges have been filed even after years. And in a country like India, a comprehensive project of this nature must take cognisance of the pluralistic and democratic ethos, to prevent alienation and marginalisation, which would otherwise feed into the extremist narrative and expand the web of recruitment.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

Excerpts of this article were first published in *The Asian Age*, February 17, 2015.



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