



Islamic State Returnees: India's Counter-radicalization vs Deradicalisation Approach

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July 2019

Abstract

Punitive measures have been integral to the Indian approach towards people who have joined the Islamic State. The security establishment, however, adopts a much softer approach towards potential sympathizers and even towards those who have been prevented from leaving for Iraq and Syria. Counter-radicalization dominates government action. In view of the recent developments including the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka, should this policy be broadened in scope to embrace the benefits of de-radicalization? Should there be a scope for the de-radicalized individuals to be successfully reintegrated into the society? More importantly, can the de-radicalized individuals be a part of official counter-messaging strategy? This analysis makes a case for an innovative and comprehensive approach.

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Analysis

Home Coming?

Sometime in May 2019, a 25-year-old man from Kerala, Firoz Khan, who had left his home in Kerala state in June 2016 to join the Islamic State, called up his mother to express his desire to return. He reportedly spoke about his miserable condition in Syria where the Caliphate is now in ruins and also, his every day struggle for food and other basic necessities.¹ He also inquired whether he will be charged with crime upon return. Firoz's desperation to return, however, has met with a lukewarm response from the police. It is almost certain that he will be arrested upon return and put behind bars. This remains a part of the policy India has adopted to send a strong message to the rather small number of men and women who embraced the Islamic State after it established its caliphate in 2015. Is such a policy adequate to prevent the vulnerable from joining violent radical Islamist groups remains a key question.

Influence of Islamic State

Not many Indians have joined the Islamic State. The official count is a little over 100. *Mantraya's* own assessment, informed by a variety of sources including a careful monitoring of reported incidents, is over 200. Nevertheless, instead of being a country-wide phenomenon, people from few states, mostly concentrated in pockets in southern India, have travelled or attempted to travel to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State. A large group of men and women from Kerala, of which Firoz was a part, had even travelled to Afghanistan to be a part of the *Wilayat Khorasan* that the Islamic State set up in 2015. Reports indicate that some have died either fighting on behalf of the outfit. Few others have perished in bombings carried out by the coalition forces.

Countries like Indonesia, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia have experimented with deradicalizing the Islamic State returnees or the outfit's sympathizers with varying degrees of success. India's response has been rather straight forward. The Islamic State is a proscribed organization in the country since 2015 and anybody who have joined it are liable for punitive action.

The following instances are instructive in this regard.

Dealing with Returnees

In July 2018, a 32-year-old man Shajahan Valluvakandy of Koodali in Kerala's Kannur district was deported from Turkey while trying to enter Syria. Shajahan was an activist of the Kerala-based radical Muslim outfit Popular Front of India (PFI)². He used a fake passport under a false name to travel to Turkey along with his wife. The Turkish authorities were alerted by their Indian counterparts. Shajahan was arrested upon return and continues to be in prison.³ Similar has been case of three other persons- KC Mithilaj, Abdul Razzak and AV Rashid- all from Kerala, who were reportedly trained by Islamic State in Istanbul. They were stopped by Turkish

¹ Shaju Philip, "Islamic State man from Kerala tells family he wants to return", *Indian Express*, 8 June 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/islamic-state-man-kerala-family-want-to-return-5770387/>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

² PFI not a proscribed organization in India. It has been banned only in the state of Jharkhand.

³ Shashank Shekhar, "Meet Shahjahan Velluva Kandy: PFI activist, suspected ISIS sympathizer", *India Today*, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/kerala-nia-shahjahan-velluva-kandy-1077415-2017-11-02>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.



police while trying to enter Syria. In March 2018, they were deported to India⁴ and have been imprisoned since then.

While the above four persons had been forcefully deported, the case of Areeb Majeed, the 23-year-old is different. Majeed was among the four youths from Kalyan in Maharashtra's Thane district who joined the Islamic State in May 2014. He, along with Aman Tandel, Fahad Shaikh, and Faheem Tanki boarded an Etihad Airways flight for Abu Dhabi and travelled to Baghdad for a pilgrimage and thereafter separated from the travel group to join the Islamic State. While three of his compatriots are believed to have died while fighting on behalf of the Islamic State, Majeed got in touch with the Indian authorities expressing his willingness to return. According to him, he was provided with travel documents, with assurances that he would not be arrested. However, as soon as he landed in India on 28 November 2014, he was picked up by the National Investigation Agency (NIA).

At that time, an official of the Home Ministry told the media that the ministry wishes to take a 'lenient view' and 'make sure that he is booked for slightly softer charges'. "We don't want to put sections that attract only life imprisonment and death sentence" he said. He added that "A soft approach needs to be taken in this case to ensure that others don't hesitate to come back. On their return, they should be rehabilitated."⁵ However, things took a different turn as the NIA charged him with being a member of a terrorist outfit and returning with a purpose of 'spreading jihad in India'⁶. In February 2017, a trial court dropped the charge against Areeb of being a member of a terrorist organization⁷, while directing that he should face trial under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and Section 125 of the Indian Penal Code for 'waging war against any Asiatic power in alliance with the government of India'.⁸ Majeed continues to fight the legal battle as the NIA has produced evidence quoting the Iraqi authorities that he was indeed a member of the Islamic State and had fought in the war waged by the outfit.⁹

Hard vs Soft approach

The government's preference for locking up the Islamic State returnees has its rationale and is based upon the premise that there is little evidence of remorse or repentance behind the decision of these individuals to return. For instance, Firoz Khan would not have expressed his desire to return had the Caliphate not disintegrated. Police records show that even after leaving India, he continued to exhort his relatives and friends to join the Islamic State. Similarly, KC Mithilaj, Abdul Razzak and AV Rashid would not have voluntarily returned to India. And Areeb Majeed's aversion to violence, the NIA believes, came after a stint as a fighter of the

⁴ "Kerala ISIS links: Police arrests two persons, including recruiter, from Kannur", *Asianet*, 31 March 2018, <https://newsable.asianetnews.com/kerala/police-arrests-two-persons-including-isis-recruiter-from-kannur>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁵ Abhishek Bhalla, "Thane youth with ISIS links arrested, grilled by NIA", *India Today*, 29 November 2014, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/kalyan-youth-arif-majeed-with-isis-links-arrested-grilled-by-nia-229067-2014-11-29>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁶ Devesh K Pandey, "Kalyan recruits became IS fidayeen, says NIA", *The Hindu*, 21 May 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kalyan-recruits-became-is-fidayeen-says-nia/article7228486.ece>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁷ The Islamic State hadn't been declared as a terrorist outfit by the Indian government when the case against Majeed was registered in February 2015. "HC relief for Kalyan youth accused of joining ISIS", *Business Standard*, 9 August 2017, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/hc-relief-for-kalyan-youth-accused-of-joining-isis-117080901688_1.html. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁸ Sadaf Modak, "Kalyan youth: Areeb never spoke of jihad or joining ISIS, says witness", *Indian Express*, 27 September 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/kalyan-youth-areeb-never-spoke-of-jihad-or-joining-isis-says-witness-5376214/>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

⁹ Rashmi Rajput, "In a first, NIA submits Iraqi evidence against IS 'recruit' Majeed", *Economic Times*, 1 March 2019.



Islamic State. The fact that these men have neither renounced terrorism nor have repented their decision of attempting to join the Islamic State, makes them active terrorists with a proclivity to indulge in violence in future. Moreover, punishment to them would deter others who may make a similar decision to be a part of global jihad.

The government, however, adopts a softer approach towards those who have merely aspired to join and have been 'brainwashed' to become a part of the terror outfit, especially those who were prevented from leaving the country to go to Syria. It is unclear, however, how such distinctions between someone who has been 'radicalized' and another who has been 'misled' is arrived at. Few states of the country such as Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh are reported to have experimented with de-radicalization as well as counter-radicalization programmes. In Kerala, senior police officials claimed in June 2019, 3000 people have been deradicalized in 21 government centres and are being monitored.¹⁰ According to a report in 2017, "about 15-20 youths are being deradicalized by the UP anti-terror squad (ATS)"¹¹. In September 2017, the Maharashtra police too claimed to have deradicalized 70 people "who were trapped in extremist literature online and were on the verge on being recruited"¹². Some of these deradicalized men were provided with vocational training¹³ in order to give them a secure future and wean them away from the path of radicalization. This is based on the conventional belief that poverty and unemployment are among the reasons for radicalization.

In other states, police officials visit educational institutions to lecture students about the negative aspects of terrorism. In some cases, religious leaders, family members, and community elders have been involved to keep a tab on people on the police' watch list. Police departments in some states have also made short movies and showed them in theatres to create awareness. However, amid prevailing perceptions that Indian Muslims have largely remained immune to the attractions to of global jihadists, these efforts, which are mostly focused on counter-radicalization, have remained uncoordinated and dissipated.

Revisiting the Policy

So far, Indian state claims success in warding off the threat posed by the Islamic State. Odd terror plots have been busted and a number of sympathizers of the Islamic State have been arrested. In spite of attempts by both the Islamic State and al Qaeda, their little-known franchises in Kashmir have remained far from potent.

However, this could potentially change, in view of some of the recent developments. These include announcement of a new India-specific province by the Islamic State; installation of a new chief of the Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind (AGH), al Qaeda's affiliate; and the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka. While the first two can be downplayed as rhetoric and of little operational value, the continued discovery of complex networks of

¹⁰ "Sri Lanka, India targeted as IS shifts strategy away from Middle East: Report", *Economy Next*, 20 June 2019, <https://economynext.com/Sri-Lanka-India-targeted-as-IS-shifts-strategy-away-from-Middle-East-Report-3-14875.html>. Accessed on 25 June 2019.

¹¹ Shashank Shekhar & Arvind Ojha, "ISIS eyes up UP as its new terror lab: Youth is under surveillance by cops as ISIS headhunters flood the internet with romantic videos of life inside the caliphate and brutal execution clips", *Daily Mail*, 11 March 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-4302620/Uttar-Pradesh-breeding-ground-ISIS-recruits.html>.

¹² Mustafa Shaikh, "Maharashtra ATS deradicalised 70 people in 2 years, blocked over 450 propaganda websites", *India Today*, 26 September 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/maharashtra-ats-isis-online-radicalisation-cyber-threat-propaganda-websites-1052717-2017-09-26>. Accessed on 13 June 2019.

¹³ Vinay Dalvi, "War on terror, through livelihood", *Mumbai Mirror*, 13 October 2017, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/war-on-terror-through-livelihood/articleshow/61061255.cms>. Accessed on 13 June 2019.



Islamic State activists and sympathizers across India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, need to be taken seriously.

While threat posed by the Islamic State returnees to India's national security can be dismissed, the gravest of threat, as Sri Lanka discovered, could emerge from people who did not travel to Iraq and Syria to be a part of the Islamic State. It is such silent and subtle mobilization spanning across the region which could constitute the next source of security challenge for the country. Busting of terror cells and arrests, while being useful, may not be sufficient to keep the danger at bay. Similarly, the process and reasons behind radicalization is too complex to be solved by alleviating poverty and providing employment. In most cases, educated men from well-to-do families with jobs rather than unemployed and uneducated men from poor families have become foot soldiers of global jihadism. The fact that radicalization is some sort of a calling that fulfils the inner desires of a person shaped by an array of factors needs to be factored into official policy. It is not a disease to be cured by punishment, but a malaise that requires a professional and sympathetic handling. The difference in state's approach after terror attacks in New Zealand where the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was comforting the victims and their relatives and that of the Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena who indulged in alarmist predictions about Muslims and their supposed proclivity to violence is instructive in this regard.

The gap in India's preparedness can possibly be filled by a robust national counter-radicalization policy that may factor in the need to use the services of those who once were part of terror movements and have renounced the same for a variety of reasons including a successful de-radicalization process. Can the country use the services of someone like Areeb Majeed or even Firoz Khan (if he can be brought back) as part of its counter-messaging to the potential fence sitters? Can their experience narrated in their own words be used to deter people who have false notion of Islam and romantic ideas about global jihad? Can that supplement the efforts of the religious leaders who preach against violence? These are some of the important questions which need to be probed and envisioned in the making of new counter-radicalization and de radicalization strategies. The emphasis needs to be on prevention rather than dealing with the threat. This would require not only a whole-of-government approach but also a whole-of-society approach.

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

This analysis first appeared in Mantraya, Analysis#37, 26 June 2019 and is published as part of Mantraya's ongoing "Islamic State in South Asia" and "Mapping Terror and Insurgent Network" projects. All Mantraya publications are peer reviewed.

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