

# INTERVIEW: “Recent ISIS arrests are just a needle in South India’s jihadi haystack”

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By Vicky Nanjappa, Bengaluru/ January 23, 2020



While our attention was diverted toward terrorism in Kashmir and away from homegrown terrorism down south, intelligence agencies have now turned their heads towards the region which needs a lot of effort to counter the radicalisation that has spread. Counter-terrorism expert **Animesh Roul** explains how one should go about it?

There have been a series of raids in the past couple of months in South India. The raids are largely focused on the Islamic State and the deep infestation of radicalisation in South India.

The National Investigation Agency has learnt that the ISIS has been teaming up smaller radical groups in South India to expand its base. To discuss this issue further, we caught

up with counter-terrorism expert, ANIMESH ROUL from the New Delhi based policy research group [Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict](#).

Roul, an expert on Islamic radicalisation and South Asian counterterrorism issues, in this interview with **MyNation** says that there was not enough discourse on Islamist radicalisation in India, especially in the Southern part of the country.

### **What are your views on the high number of ISIS related cases being reported from South India?**

Despite several arrests and seizures of Jihadi propaganda materials in South India especially Kerala and to a major extent Tamil Nadu, since 2016, we are still not able to fathom the length and breadth of Islamic State's influence in these states. I have been a keen observer of these developments and thanks to the NIA and local intelligence agencies, they have at least managed to break through the major nodes of ISIS inspired networks such as Md Azarudeen/Sheikh Hidayatullah of the Khilafah GFX, Coimbatore or Riyas Abu Bakr from Kochi or Rashid Abdulla from Kottayam and Kasaragod. However, these arrests and revelations are in fact the tip of the South India's jihadi iceberg.

### **Why do you think the problem of radicalisation was ignored for so long?**

Very recently the issue of radicalisation surfaced in public domain or came under the purview of Government policy in India. We had a different understanding of Islamic radicalisation previously, even though India's problems with groups like SIMI or Indian Mujahideen has been persistent for decades. Before 2015, most Indians and the government policy making bodies (Intelligence included) were fixated with Pakistan/Kashmir based terrorism and more complacent with homegrown Islamist issues. So, it's natural for the ignorant to ignore the real grass root Islamist radicalisation issues that are now poses a long-term threat and stands like a monster spreading its tentacles covertly.

Arguably, respective state governments and their agencies have ignored, or I should say simply are unaware about, the mushrooming growth of informal local Islamist groups inspired with imported Salafi and Wahabi ideals. Not only Islamic State, Al Qaeda's jihadi ideologies are also prevalent in South India. We need to focus on that group as well. The bottom line is our intelligence agencies have failed to read or decipher, (leave alone penetrate), extremist grass root movements (the radical monotheism or anti-polytheist groups) and their various activities whether it is physical and virtual 'Dawa' or circulation of literature on social media.

Basically, our (media, intelligence agencies and governments) lack of understanding of various Islamist ideals, meanings of Islamic concepts and theological issues (mostly in Arabic language and some in vernacular too) over the years, helped immensely, the movements which follow Islamic monotheism/ Tawheedism, for example, the All India Thowheed Jamaat (AITJ) or Tamil Nadu Thowheed Jamaat or its Kerala counterparts. There are few other Islamist over ground movements like Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen which propagates and encourages its followers to follow a path of puritanical forms of Islam. What Deoband or Tablighi Jamaat movements contributed to Islamic radicalisation in Northern India (or for that matter most of the Subcontinent), Thowheed Jamaat

movements have contributed to extremist radicalisation in Southern India, similar to what we have seen in Sri Lanka, of late.

### **Why do Kerala and TN witness so many cases of radicalisation?**

The Middle Eastern influence (both money and education that promotes strict adherence of Islam) played an important role. Also, history of Islam, imported Salafism and existing anti-Hindu sentiment in these two states, were especially vital for this latest wave of radicalisation.

### **Is there enough discourse around the issue of radicalisation, especially in South?**

I would say, there was not enough conversation or discourse on Islamist radicalisation before. The political dispensations and the so-called moderate face/voice of Islam is to be blamed for this situation. However, the emergence of transnational jihadi groups like Islamic State or Al Qaeda and their outreach/ influence over a section of South India's Muslim populations bring the much-needed discourse now to the forefront. It is also imperative for moderate and progressive Muslims to challenge the jihadi narratives openly and constructively.

### **What are areas that require concern while dealing with this problem?**

Briefly, Islamic NGO's with focus on Islam and religion only, private dawa groups, unregulated madrasas and clerics (uneducated or with radical world views).

Law enforcement and intelligence agencies should be trained to track, monitor and penetrate virtual and physical Islamist groups with jihadist inclinations. And those with anti-Indian sentiment or promoting global Muslim Ummah concept poses a long-term threat.

Progressive Islamic scholars and cultural icons should be promoted to counter the radical or Jihadi narratives (those that romanticise jihad and influence Muslim youths clamouring for God's rule or Caliphate etc.)

"Geographically speaking, IS linked or influenced Jihadi spill overs from neighbouring countries (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Maldives) should be monitored and any collaborations with South India's groups could be dangerous.

### **What kind of influence have the Wahhabis had on radicalisation in India?**

Salafi-Wahhabis have spurred the purification movements of Islam in India with ideals such as oneness of Islam, strict adherence of Quran and the Sharia etc. These teachings and concepts are in fact contributing factors and acts as a primary step to intolerance and hatred towards other religions and people, developing a deadly sectarian worldview.

### **Is it time to regulate madrasas? Should children be allowed to complete higher education before joining madrasas?**

Definitely, yes! Not only madrasas, but also, informal and unregulated Islamic NGOs imparting education and training, like Peace Foundation, in India.

A reformed and regulated madrasa with mainstream educational curriculum can be beneficial for Muslims in India. This can benefit impoverished Muslim students and youths to get basic education and life skills before they enter higher studies and the mainstream educational system. There is nothing wrong in studying religion especially its syncretic nature. However, strict ban should be on the sectarian concepts like apostate, shirks and Sharia law etc. Rather, madrasas should be encouraged to teach golden age of Islamic Science and discoveries of the past, not the glories of Islamic invasions and plunders.

**What kind of an impact does a Colombo attack have on India? Do you think ISIS will tie up with local groups in India and carry out a Colombo styled attack?**

Easter Day attacks in Sri Lanka, in fact gave impetus and played a vital role for Indian agencies to initiate crackdown on National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ) or Zaharan Hashim's network in India. In other words, the unprecedented violence there alerted the ever-complacent Indian security agencies to be on guard to thwart any copy-cat strikes on Indian soil. It suddenly realised the dangers of Islamic Towheedism and concepts of Caliphate.

Very unlikely. The IS influenced groups may not be able to stage or carry out concerted attacks like in Sri Lanka. However, lone wolf strikes, or small scale IS inspired attacks can't be ruled out especially in South India.

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