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## Youth and Radicalisation: The Threat to India

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### Introduction

There is a notion that extremist movements in various parts of the world recruit their followers from only amongst the poor and uneducated. Recently, however, anecdotal evidence offers a contrary view: Radicalisation is not the monopoly of the unschooled and economically deprived. The number of young professionals joining or pledging allegiance to extremist and jihadist movements and organisations is on the rise.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), one of the main jihadist groups fighting government forces in Syria and Iraq, has a number of members who are young professionals managing the group's refineries, banking, communication and other infrastructure requirements. ISIS was formed in April 2013 with the merger of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's forces in Iraq and Syria; it was first named the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Growing out of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), it has since been disavowed by the militant organisation.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda chief and one of the masterminds of the 9/11 US terror attacks along with Osama bin Laden, may yet be the best illustration of how a highly educated person—who would, presumably, have a flourishing professional career and the whole world before them—can choose to take a path of terror. Al-Zawahiri is a trained surgeon.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is estimated that some 35 percent of al-Qaeda members are college educated and 45 percent were engaged in skilled

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professions before being recruited.<sup>2</sup> The Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, a global terrorist group based in Pakistan, has professionals on its rolls: engineers, doctors and technicians, among them. Most of them are either alumni of colleges and institutes run by the group or employed in the hospitals and engineering colleges operated by their affiliates.

In India, the Indian Mujahideen (IM) has drawn its recruits from urban and educated backgrounds. So has the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), another organisation linked by authorities to terrorist activities in the country.

Recent reports about a group of Indians joining the ISIS have raised concerns about the possibility of an increasing number of young professionals joining global jihadist groups. Such presence of Indians among the ISIS cadres is a significant departure from the past: Although Indian nationals have been involved in terrorist attacks within the country, there has been no case of any one joining al-Qaeda or any other global terrorist group. Some argue that in India, the jihadist movement is not an outcome of a particular interpretation of sacred Islamic texts and does not concern itself entirely with the religion. Rather, it is the outcome of dissatisfaction over political and social issues, and it appeals the most to certain classes of youth. These issues, combined with religious conservatism, may lead to jihadist tendencies.<sup>3</sup> This is a subject that calls for closer examination.

This paper raises the following questions:

- Is there a marked trend among young Indian Muslim professionals to be drawn towards terrorism?
- Is there a noticeable tendency towards joining global jihadi causes?
- What will be the nature and extent of threats that these tendencies, if present, pose to India?

## **Motivations for terror**

At the outset, it will be useful to examine, albeit cursorily, the validity of any possible link between terrorism and education, or lack thereof. Two of the most common arguments made to explain radicalisation are economic deprivation and a lack of education. Yet several recent studies are offering evidence to the contrary. In February 2004, for example, the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project conducted public opinion surveys on about 1,000 respondents each in Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey. One of the questions concerned suicide bombings carried out against Americans and other Westerners in Iraq and whether or not these were 'justifiable'. The results of the survey showed that people with a higher level of education were more likely to justify suicide attacks against Westerners in Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

The argument of terrorists emerging from low education opportunity backgrounds is often justified using the assumption that those who have less to lose are more likely to resort to violence to achieve their goals. However, the counter-argument in terms of terrorism, especially religious extremism, is that it requires great levels of commitment to the goals of the terror organisation which are usually deeply political. The understanding of the issues involved when committing to these principles is easier for those who are better educated.<sup>5</sup>

For sure, arguments can be made that those who decide to join terrorist organisations may be influenced by a complex set of factors including, but not limited to, economic frustration, personal grievance, religious beliefs, or a desire for revolutionary change. Membership of an organisation that pursues these goals through extremist means and violence is a commitment that goes beyond a person's chosen profession or educational background.<sup>6</sup> This is evident in the fact that such membership requires absolute loyalty to a cause that is external to one's own personal context within which both one's professional and educational background are located. After all, human nature dictates that the rule of self-preservation reigns supreme: placing oneself in dangerous situations and taking lives, including one's own if necessary, in the name of a political cause, goes against this basic principle.

This argument also proposes some explanations for the high preponderance of educated professionals in extremist organisations. One of these is that for terrorists to survive in a world as globalised and technology-intensive as today's, they need to be educated and possess enough technical competence to be able to circumvent governmental controls and surveillance systems.<sup>7</sup>

In a 2006 study, Peter Bergen and Swati Pandey examined the educational backgrounds of 79 terrorists and found that the most popular subjects amongst terrorists who attended university were engineering, and medicine.<sup>8</sup> They found that 54 percent of the sample had either attended university or obtained a university degree. Also, two-thirds of the 25 terrorists involved in the planning and aircraft-hijacking in the 9/11 terror attacks in the US had attended university, and two of the total 79 had PhD degrees; two others were enrolled in doctoral programmes at the time of the events.

In the early 1980s, Saadedin Ibrahim interviewed 34 members of two violent groups in Egypt: the Military Academy Group and al-Takfir—who were imprisoned in the late 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Of these, 29 were either graduates or university students. He also found, amongst them, nine engineers, six doctors, five agronomists, two pharmacists; two were studying technical military science and one, literature.

Another explanation proposed for the high preponderance of professionals amongst militant organisations is that it could be a simple accident of history. If the initial actors who established the network were from a particular professional background, it is possible that their networks expanded

within the same occupational circles and among like-minded people with whom they interacted on a regular basis.<sup>10</sup>

## India case study

One of the earliest examples of a highly educated individual taking up arms for an Islamist cause in India is former surgeon Jalees Ansari of the Tanzim Islahul Muslimeen (TIM) which was established in 1985.<sup>11</sup> Ansari is known to have organised a series of bombings in different cities across the country in response to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1991.<sup>12</sup>

Most major Islamist terror cells in India have drawn their cadre mostly from the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and can trace their roots back to the founders of TIM. The SIMI emerged as the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami-e-Hind (JIH) in April 1977.<sup>13</sup> While one narrative is that the organisation was aimed at revitalising the JIH's older student wing, the Student's Islamic Organisation (SIO) set up in 1956, another says that it emerged as a rival to SIO. Relations between SIMI and JIH were strained because of SIMI's extreme leanings and reports vary about how close the two organisations' links remain.<sup>14</sup> From the onset, SIMI clearly stated that the practice of Islam was 'a political project'. The organisation was sure that in the long term, the caliphate would have to be re-established as without it the practice of Islam would remain incomplete.<sup>15</sup>

SIMI's propaganda found appeal amongst a growing number of lower-middle and middle-class urban men who felt deprived of their share of the growing economic opportunities in India. This radicalisation among students who then chose to adopt SIMI's ideology and goals, highlights the manner in which Islamist terror groups in India have educated cadres as many of these groups gained members from SIMI.

An organisation that has recruited many of its members from SIMI is the Indian Mujahideen, which is more a loose coalition of jihadists rather than a structured organisation. These jihadists are connected through ideological similarities and personal linkages and have been found to be mostly under the age of 40. They are often trained in Pakistan by the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and many of them have been highly educated professionals before being recruited.<sup>16</sup> The IM recruits tend to be lower- and middle-class Muslims who find themselves dissatisfied with Hindu nationalism or are opposed to Western values and polytheism. Many high-profile SIMI and IM members are computer-literate and in certain cases have an impressive background with private-sector employment.<sup>17</sup>

Mumbai-based Abdul Subhan Qureshi, aka, 'Tauqeer',<sup>18</sup> an IM leader, is an example of those who do not fit the stereotype of a *madrassa*-educated religious extremist. He graduated from Antonio DeSouza High School in 1988. The church-run school offers education to children from all major

religious communities. He also has a diploma in industrial electronics and earned a specialised software maintenance qualification. His parents granted educational opportunities to all their children regardless of gender, a characteristic not common amongst religiously conservative people. Qureshi's sisters have Masters of Arts degrees. His three brothers are also well-educated and do not seem to have been drawn to any Islamist groups. At the independent computer firm where he worked, co-workers said, Qureshi was 'exceptional'. Three years into his professional life, Qureshi managed to quadruple his pay and handled major independent projects like an intranet implementation for Bharat Petro-Chemicals carried out by Wipro in 1999.<sup>19</sup> This background seems out of place, considering that Qureshi was among the primary suspects for masterminding the Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Delhi blasts of 2008.

The IM has several key figures from similar backgrounds. Riyaz Shahbandri aka Riyaz Bhatkal, one of the co-founders of the group, holds a degree in engineering from the Sabu Siddique College in Mumbai.<sup>20</sup> Yasin Bhatkal, who co-founded the IM, and was involved in terror attacks in Ahmedabad, Surat, Bangalore, Pune, Delhi and Hyderabad, was an engineering graduate from Karnataka.<sup>21</sup>

Atif Amin, the IM commander killed in a September 2008 shootout with the Delhi Police, was from a middle-class background with an English-medium education and a college degree. Qayamuddin Kapadia, tried for his alleged role in organising IM attacks in Gujarat, is a graphics designer.<sup>22</sup> Mohammad Abrar Qasim was a dentist before he joined SIMI in 1993. He used his earnings as a dentist to serve as SIMI's Bihar chief. SIMI/IM leaders also set up a Bangalore cell where at least six IT workers were recruited through a front organisation called 'Sarani'.<sup>23</sup>

Mansoor Peerbhoy, who is said to have produced and electronically sent the IM's manifestos after the 2005 serial blasts in Delhi and elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> was a computer engineer<sup>25</sup> working at Yahoo's Indian office<sup>26</sup> and the son of one of the largest wholesale grocery suppliers to the Indian Army's southern command.<sup>27</sup> According to investigators, Peerbhoy, 31, was the head of a 'media terror cell' comprising of "highly qualified, computer savvy people belonging to good and educated families". One of his brothers is a doctor in the UK and the other is an architect.<sup>28</sup>

In 2014, there were several incidents concerning young radicalised men, several of whom happened to be engineers or engineering students from middle-class backgrounds, taking to terrorism. In March 2014, two engineering college students from Jaipur were arrested with a huge cache of explosives. The accused were affiliated with the IM and this was the first instance of locals being involved in terror activities in Rajasthan.<sup>29</sup>

The recruitment of young professionals therefore is not a new phenomenon.

## Changing scenario

Events of 2014, however, point to significant shifts in recent recruitments to terrorist groups from India. Two of these developments are noteworthy. One was the fact that Indian men were beginning to join global terrorist groups like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The number may be small, as of now, but it showed an emerging inclination among some Indians to seek global jihadi causes. Earlier, the distance between the Indian Muslim population and the global jihad was evident in the lack of SIMI cadres in the al-Qaeda despite its consistent attempts at recruitment from India. The IM also concerned itself primarily with domestic issues and not the global jihad.

The second departure is the manner in which the Internet is being used by these new set of terrorists. While the IM used the internet as a tool, it restricted itself to sending messages to the media, communicating amongst members and spreading propaganda. The Internet was not the only mode of communication and indoctrination as personal meetings would happen amongst the leaders as well as the recruits. However, in the case of men joining the ISIS, indoctrination and planning was conducted online exclusively. The internet is today's principal tool of recruitment and indoctrination.

Of these men who joined ISIS, barring one, who was a school dropout, the rest are well-schooled. Arif Majeed, a 23-year old from Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra who fought in Iraq and Syria for the Islamic State in 2014, was a civil engineering student. His father is a doctor with a clinic in Mumbai. His elder sister is also a doctor at a well-known hospital in the city. Three other young men left the country with him to fight for ISIS: Fahad Shaikh was a mechanical engineering graduate whose father was a doctor; Aman Tandel was an engineering student and his father was an engineer with the railways.<sup>30</sup> Mehdi Mansoor Biswas, arrested from Bangalore for running a pro-Islamic State Twitter account in December 2014, was a 24-year old computer engineer. Biswas did not seem to have any direct links to the militant group, although his Twitter handle, '@ShamiWitness' was one of the extremist group's most influential publicity tools,<sup>31</sup> with some 17,700 followers.<sup>32</sup>

One of the common threads in the radicalisation stories of many such young men has been the polarisation of communities in India after the Babri Masjid demolition and Gujarat riots of 2002. Many of the accused mentioned in this report were radicalised through the Internet, at religious meetings or through the influence of family and friends. Since the rise of the ISIS, many have also been influenced by the idea of a global jihadist campaign.



## Counter-narrative

While there seems to be a steady narrative of young educated Indian Muslim men who turn to radical means and extremist groups, there is a counter-narrative that questions the basis of such an inference.

Details that have emerged about the perpetrators of several bombing cases like those in Malegaon, Samjhauta Express, Mecca Masjid and Nagpur, have highlighted the fact that terrorism is not restricted to one single religious group. However, arrests made before the eventual discovery of the actual culprits shows a bias against the Muslim community.<sup>33</sup>

Some cases illustrate this point further. On 29 August 2012, 11 persons were arrested in Karnataka for an alleged conspiracy to assassinate MPs and MLAs, a businessman and two journalists from the state. They allegedly had links with global terror networks like Lashkar-e-Tayyeba and Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami or HuJI. The arrests garnered extra attention as most of the accused were young and highly educated professionals like journalists, doctors, scientists and IT professionals. Three of these 11 were released soon after. While charge-sheets could not be filed against two for lack of evidence, a special National Investigation Agency court ordered the release of the third accused on bail. As a report by the Jamia Teachers' Solidarity Association (JTSA), which investigated a sample of such cases, points out, while the arrests gain the complete attention of the media, actual trials of terror suspects and, in some cases, the reporting of their acquittals for lack of evidence often goes unnoticed.<sup>34</sup>

The knowledge that these incidents do take place along with the striking similarities in the media stories of the recently arrested terror accused individuals has led to the belief that there could be a danger of a false or inaccurate narrative on the basis of arbitrary arrest reports.

With a subject as sensitive as terrorism, there is always the fear of falling into the trap of stereotyping or clubbing an entire group—be it religious, ethnic, or professional—into simplistic categories. There have been several complaints of profiling on the basis of religion in the country especially in the immediate aftermath of every terror attack.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while the correlation between young educated professionals and radicalisation might exist, one must be careful not to fall into the trap of creating a fear psychosis that paints an entire religious grouping as capable of becoming radicalised with young tech-savvy men replacing the familiar traditional image of bearded or veiled jihadis.

## Possible threats

The Indian Muslim community is 170-million strong,<sup>36</sup> the second largest in the world,<sup>37</sup> and therefore should have been a natural recruitment ground for terrorist groups like al-Qaeda or LeT.

But the fact that these groups have had little success so far underlines a noticeable aversion in the community towards the so-called global jihadi causes. This apathy is also reflected in the recent ISIS cases. It was the family members of some of these men who reported the matter to the security agencies. The family members and community elders were then roped in by the police and other agencies to keep a tab on those who went to Syria and to dissuade other likely members of the community to follow them. This civil society-police initiative has had considerable success.

The figures show the picture clearly: Over 15,000 men and women have reportedly joined the ISIS ranks from over 80 countries, 11 of which are non-majority-Muslim. These include 3,000 people from South Africa; 2,755 from Russia; 1,258 from France; 350 from Netherlands; 400 from Belgium; 700 from United Kingdom; 500 from Germany; 250 from China; 100 from USA; 100 from Canada; and 330 from Australia. In comparison, only 18 from India have reportedly joined or tried to join the ISIS.<sup>38</sup> There could be many more who might have or likely to join the terrorist group but even then the numbers would remain comparatively smaller.

### **Possible threats to India**

While figures may be low at present, they should not mislead. There are two reasons why concern must be raised. First is the Internet emerging as a highly powerful instrument for recruitment and training. Increasing numbers of youths are indoctrinated through propaganda that is freely streaming on the internet. India has a fast-growing number of Internet and smartphone users. It is the second largest smartphone market in the world and is expected to have a smartphone-user base of over 650 million by 2019.<sup>39</sup> It has the third-highest number of Internet users in the world.<sup>40</sup> The possibility of online radicalisation gaining wider and deeper ground in the future therefore cannot be dismissed. This phenomenon is already visible in a limited way. The Islamic State does not have on-ground reach in the Indian subcontinent and its propaganda mainly reaches India through social media and the Internet. Access to the Internet is, at present, still restricted to higher socio-economic strata to whom the ISIS's message is easily available.

Second is the recent trend in India's domestic politics where radical groups and ideologies are being propagated, causing greater polarisation among communities and marginalisation of the Muslim community in particular. This could act as a catalyst for radicalisation.

Educated terrorists pose different threats from terrorists who have fewer educational qualifications and, in turn, technical skills. A militant organisation that has cadres from the fields of engineering, medicine and computer science will be a far more formidable force to deal with. Engineering can help terrorist groups build more sophisticated weapons and systems wreaking more havoc than less skilled groups. Know-how across fields like mechanics, electronics and chemicals can prove



invaluable to such an organisation. In addition, medical aid from within the group reduces chances of detection of cadres in need of medical attention by state security forces.

Proficiency with computers and the digital world is one of the biggest assets that a terror group can possess today. Militant organisations are increasingly using the Internet to radicalise young people by spreading propaganda. The internet's widespread reach, anonymity and difficulty to trace make it an ideal tool in the hands of terror groups. In fact, the internet no longer remains just a tool; it is also often the target of attack itself. Governments across the world are increasingly facing threats from the cyberworld as terror organisations now use hacking and sophisticated computer viruses to attack state infrastructure. This changing nature of the threat posed by terrorists warrants closer attention.

While there has been a recent increase in the number of reported incidents of young, educated professionals joining terrorist outfits, to term it as a 'trend' would be highly premature. Several of these reports concern recruits to the ISIS which has failed to gain any ground in India and is highly unlikely to do so in the near future. Thus, access to the ISIS's propaganda would be restricted to the strata of individuals who have immediate access to social-media networks and the internet. This could be one of the reasons why the recruits have been mainly middle-class and educated. Overall, there is not enough evidence to prove in one way or the other if there is a growing trend of young professionals turning to jihad. However, this is not to say that the possibility of a trend should be dismissed outright.

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