Can Communal Violence Fuel an ISIS Threat in India? An Analysis of 'Voice of Hind'

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Following its defeat in territories it previously held, ISIS is seeking other demographies like India. Photo: Getty Images/Sandipa Malakar.

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ABSTRACT

In early 2020 the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) published an India-centric propaganda material called *Voice of Hind*. This special report examines the first issue of the publication, which openly recruits Indian Muslims by manipulating their fears and grievances that have emerged in the wake of certain political developments in the country. The analysis uses theories of social psychology, inter-group conflict discourse, and communications theory to provide a conceptual framework in understanding how ISIS leverages the sense of alienation amongst the Indian Muslim community to radicalise them. Even as ISIS has so far failed to make significant inroads into India, the State must protect India's secular cohesion, especially in times when digital communication has created echo chambers and have the power to propagate and amplify dangerous and violent actions in the real world.

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) meteoric rise as a protostate in the past decade has generated great interest amongst policymakers and academics alike. Although the network may have already lost the magnitude of the territorial control it had at its zenith in 2014, its ideology and organisational appeal cannot be disputed. With a desire to re-establish a caliphate governed by a puritanical version of Islam, the terrorist organisation's ability to draw disenchanted youth from varied socio-demographic backgrounds has only underlined the threat they pose to international security.[1] In India, however, ISIS has failed to make any meaningful inroads into recruiting fighters despite its persuasive influence in many parts of the globe.[2]

Following its defeat in territories it previously held in Iraq and Syria, ISIS has increasingly sought other demographies like India—where it is attempting to leverage communal tensions and perceptions of supposedly "irreconcilable differences" between Hindus and Muslims for recruitment. On 24 February 2020, the ISIS online media outlet, Al Qitaal Media Center, launched the inaugural edition of the magazine, *Sawt-al-Hind* or Voice of Hind, in English, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali.[a,3] The opening piece of the publication was titled, "So where are you going? A Call to Muslims of India". Three days later, as riots[4]

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a   At the time of this report's publication, The "Voice of Hind" publication is not available on the public domain and is accessible on "Jihadology.net" which is a platform only open to select researchers in the field.

erupted in Delhi over the Citizenship Amendment Act,[b] the magazine called on Indian Muslims to join its *Jihad*.[5] Since then, every new issue that these authors have accessed have suggested ways for ISIS supporters to carry out attacks in the country while national security and law enforcement agencies are occupied with the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.[6]

This special report takes the case of the English language translation of the first issue of *Voice of Hind* to examine the ISIS threat to India. Using principles of inter-group conflict discourse, communications theory, and social psychology, the report analyses the first edition of the publication to understand its influence in India, if any. The authors examine the role of identity, perceived discrimination, and "Us vs them" divides as drivers of radicalisation, and the way they are employed to contextualise ISIS propaganda. The analysis describes layered psychological manipulation techniques underscoring the propaganda targeting the Indian Muslim community. It highlights the need for the State to address the spread of majoritarian violence[c] in both real and virtual worlds to tackle the threat of growing *jihadi* radicalisation.

This report does not claim that leveraging communal disharmony to fulfill the violent ends of a transnational terrorist outfit is a unique strategy. Terrorist organisations have shown an affinity to leveraging violence against minorities to legitimise their organisational goals.[7] Subsequent sections of this report situate the inferences gauged from the *Voice of Hind* with ISIS's prior propaganda efforts and other instances of transnational and regional terror outfits repurposing communal violence. Such a comparative analysis can help shed light on how the ISIS model differs from, or otherwise conforms to previously observed propaganda strategies.

REPURPOSING THE DELHI RIOTS FOR ISIS PROPAGANDA

Days after the Delhi riots in February, ISIS released an online poster justifying "retaliatory action" in the Wilayat e Hind, or the "Indian Province" of its

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b   The Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) was passed by the Indian Parliament on 11 December 2019 and granted citizenship to non-Muslim migrants who have been victims of religious persecution and who entered India before 31st December 2014. The bill was considered by some sectors as contrary to the secular fabric of India. Protests over the discriminatory nature of the bill erupted in the aftermath of its passing into law.

c   *Majoritarian violence* is the violence caused by majoritarianism. *Majoritarianism* refers to the assertion that the majority (categorised by religion, language or some other identity marker) is entitled to a certain primacy in society owing to their majority status (Przeworski et. Al, 2003)

supposed caliphate. The poster bore the image of a man, identified as Muslim, on his knees and being beaten by a mob, which had earlier been used in Indian media.[8] Seventy-two hours after the poster surfaced, a pro-ISIS group launched an India-focused publication titled the *Voice of Hind*, seemingly to be used as a tool to radicalise and recruit young Indian Muslims into its fold.[9]

ISIS propaganda has shown the ability to tap into the "pull factors" of radicalisation, including the innate desire in human beings to find a sense of purpose.[10] The group targets Indian Muslims by appealing to such desires and invoking a sense of obligation amongst them towards the values of the 'ummah' (community). Here, "obligation" refers to the normative construct of what a member of a group ought to do to demonstrate their allegiance to the group's values; this sense of obligation to the faith can get heightened when an individual at risk of radicalisation perceives the in-group to be a minority experiencing discrimination.[11] For instance, in these words carried in the pro-ISIS *Voice of Hind* publication—

> *"The paradise whose width is the extent of heavens and the earth. He is calling you to the ark before the destructive flood of Allah's wrath descends. Hasten to the caller and hearken to the message before it is too late."*—

there is an attempt to trigger a sense of duty and obligation by invoking Allah while framing its own ulterior motives as god's command.

In another excerpt—

> *"Fight in the way of Allah and realise that no amount of cowardice can increase your pre-ordained life span on this earth, and neither can any amount of courage shown in the epic battles ever shorten your pre-ordained time on this earth. The pen has been lifted and the scrolls have dried."*

— what is being framed is the obligation of a devout Muslim to be obedient towards an uncontested will of God, even in the face of fear or cowardice.

To be sure, notions of divinity have also been used in the past by the Al-Qaeda to lure fighters towards terrorist violence by making promises in the name of God.[12] In an interview, a recruit is told "whoever gives his life in the way of Allah lives forever and earns a place in heaven for seventy members of his family, to be selected by the martyr."[13] The inextricable link between violence and sacrifice, and duty towards Allah is constantly underscored and

used as a persuasion tool by transnational jihadist outfits. In India's case, this report argues, a heightened sense of marginalisation and/or religious discrimination amongst Indian Muslims could potentially embolden such attempts at persuasion.

Research on inter-group conflict also indicates that a sense of perceived injustice can lead to an emboldening of that aspect of one's identity understood to be the cause for such injustice.[14] Framed in an understanding of a deepening religious divide, rising instances of communal violence against Muslims in India can be skillfully leveraged by recruiters by framing it as a marker of increased group alienation, thereby heightening in-group identity.[15] In such circumstances, a sense of group identity can supersede individual identity—a phenomenon termed as "de-personalisation", by which allegiance to the collective whole (in this case the Muslim community) is made more salient.[16]

Recruiters can manipulate this salience by redefining the standards of what makes a "true Muslim" and attempt to reconstruct a Muslim identity in alignment with the puritanical version of the ISIS belief system. For instance, suggesting that conforming to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is the only legitimate route to be a "true Muslim" in the face of perceived injustice is a powerful propaganda tool.[17] Michael Younnes Delefortrie, a Belgian national who travelled to Syria in 2013 to join ISIS, embodied this depersonalisation and consequent acceptance of the terror outfit's notion of what a true Muslim ought to be.[18] He considered the caliphate to be a "promise from Allah which every Muslim has to believe in."[19]

As dangerous, and perhaps even more insidious in its call to Indian Muslims, is ISIS questioning Indian Muslims who subscribe to an integrated, secular democratic system rather than displaying loyalty to a caliphate or to the ummah. *Voice of Hind* writes:

> *"Here you have before yourselves the bitter fruits reaped by the evil seed of democracy. Here you have seen the complete breakdown of the system of secularism which, to be frank, existed only in the hearts of naive and gullible Muslims."*

Such language seeks to shame Muslims who repudiate the goals of jihadi groups. ISIS insists that allegiance to faith is paramount, and demands that all Muslims make sacrifices if they wish to be considered part of an exclusive group of Muslims that ISIS seeks to legitimise.

Haroro Ingram—a researcher on extremism at the George Washington University—defines this aspect of ISIS propaganda as "crisis reinforcing messages" (through which deviant in-group members are considered culpable for in-group crises).[20] ISIS refers to the "evil seed of democracy" and allegiance to secularism by "gullible Muslims", and seeks to separate democratic processes from the life of a "true Muslim"—treat them as 'Other', allegiance to which makes one an apostate or *kafir*. Criticism directed at the moderate Muslim is intended to induce guilt about their lack of commitment to the ummah. *Voice of Hind* asks:

> "O Muslims of Hind! Has the time not come for you to wake up from the deep slumber, which has overtaken all of you to the point of an intoxicated stupor? Haven't you yet realised that the idolatrous Hindus would never ever be pleased with you until you renounce the Deen of Islam in its entirety?"

Here, ISIS questions a Muslim's allegiance to Islam, and frames "moderation" as unacceptable given the Hindu majority's "unwillingness" to accept anything less than a renunciation of their faith in order to integrate them with the democratic system. The publication's use of the word "idolatrous" to refer to Hindus seeks to drive deeper the 'Us vs. Them' divide.[21] It is for this reason that Mahmud of Ghazni—known as the "idol breaker"— finds a special place in ISIS propaganda.[22] The group considers Ghazni as someone who devoted himself to "waging jihad against the *mushrikin* [polytheists] of India, destroying their idols, and spreading Islam in their lands."[23]

Warning readers that the Hindus will not rest until Muslims renounce "the *deen* of Islam in its entirety", *Voice of Hind* seeks to underline what it projects as an unbridgeable gap between Islam and Hinduism. Ingram notes that a central component of ISIS propaganda is messaging that reinforces a dichotomy that will in turn create psychological and socio-political anxieties: the message is that the out-group is the reason for the crisis, and the in-group as defined by the ISIS is the saviour.[24] Thus, Indian Muslims who wish to abide by both their national identity as Indian and their religious identity are placed in a precarious position, especially when incidents of communal violence like the Delhi riots are used by ISIS to trigger an existential crisis in their minds.[25]

VOICE OF HIND: WHAT SETS IT APART

As a jihadist propaganda publication, *Voice of Hind* is not unique in its attempt to leverage communal grievances. Transnational and regional terrorist

organisations have legitimised their actions and goals doing exactly this. How does *Voice of Hind* compare with other propaganda instruments?

Al-Qaeda Propaganda

ISIS and Al-Qaeda have similarities and differences in their recruitment tactics. For example, criticism of fellow Muslims is more common in ISIS propaganda than with the Al-Qaeda, and the latter's recruitment strategies are more in line with anti-imperialist movements.[26] ISIS legitimises violent means by framing them as necessary religious duty required for group membership; this ensures that recruits will display a commitment to violence against the out-group, and not suffer any psychological costs in the process. The moral foundations of the group shift from fairness to loyalty, which is facilitated through increased group exclusivity for the ISIS.[27]

The inferences drawn from excerpts in the first issue of the *Voice of Hind* underscore this tendency of ISIS to frame terrorism in terms of morality and loyalty to the faith, targeting moderate Muslims—this is distinct from Al-Qaeda's tactics. Even so, they both have an affinity to manipulating communal disharmony in India for their own gain. Much before the ISIS rose to prominence, the Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) was quick to adopt the "saffron terror" tag coined by the Indian media in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat riots to demonise and legitimise retaliatory violence against Hindutva groups.[28] Proving that leveraging communal disharmony is a longstanding strategy, AQIS also used videos of Muslim men being assaulted by right-wing groups in the name of cow-vigilantism to highlight the Hindu-Muslim divide and position the Hindutva establishment as an enemy of the faith.[29] Thus, much like the perceived intentions of ISIS through the *Voice of Hind*, AQIS too has sought to exploit religious divides in India.

Other ISIS publications (*Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*)

Although the *Voice of Hind* is the first India-focused ISIS publication, the underlying recruitment tactics observed in this report corresponds to previous efforts by ISIS in other contexts. Previous ISIS publications have also celebrated victories as steps closer to God's rule, and have framed their protagonists as heroes in the cause, as God's chosen soldiers. This extends to honoring dead fighters and publishing elaborate eulogies in magazines like *Dabiq*.[30] The glorification of the dead ties in well with ISIS's need to provide recruits with a sense of purpose. Glorifying the sacrifices of martyrs reassures potential recruits of a legacy if they die in the cause for Jihad.

Tyler Welch et al. present an analytical framework that lays out five common themes in ISIS propaganda magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* which resemble those in the *Voice of Hind*. The themes are: (1) Islamic teaching and justification; (2) instances of progress and heroism; (3) establishment of common enemy; (4) appeals to community, a sense of belonging, and meaning; and (5) instructional articles that empower readers to participate in jihad.[31] The themes of establishing a common enemy, leveraging disaffection, and lack of belonging to give potential recruits a sense of meaning and purpose, are common with the *Voice of Hind* as well. ISIS propaganda over the years has stressed on the primacy of group affiliation and in-group exclusivity as underscoring the radicalisation process. Additionally, as indicated in this analysis, a puritanical version of Islam is a key legitimiser of ISIS self-interest. Thus, while the socio-political context of India and the Muslim community's disenchantment with the state might render the publication to be contextually unique, the core themes of ISIS propaganda have remained consistent.

However, given the peculiarities of the Indian context, the *Voice of Hind* deviates from other ISIS publications in certain ways. A major part of ISIS propaganda has focused on the depiction of an idyllic community in the caliphate. *Dabiq* has shown a penchant for discussing the humanitarian side of the caliphate, the advances in medicine, community-led sanitation initiatives and facilities for caring for the elderly, thereby encouraging entire families to join the caliphate.[32] Such propaganda has not been found extensively in the first issue of the *Voice of Hind*. A reason for this could be that ISIS is more focused on a 'Wilayat al-Hind', and inciting violence locally rather than inviting recruits to the physical caliphate is one step in that direction. This is especially important given the recent erosion of ISIS control over the physical 'caliphate' it claimed to have established in Syria and Iraq. Thus, while core tenets of ISIS propaganda found in other publications are echoed by the *Voice of Hind*, there are modifications based on India's social cultural context and ISIS emphasis on remote attacks.

Pakistan-backed regional terrorist groups

India's terrorism challenge largely emanates from regional terrorist groups, primarily organisations like the Pakistan-sponsored Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish e Mohammed that create havoc in the Kashmir Valley. Communal disharmony in the rest of India galvanises such groups and propels more local groups like the Indian Mujahideen (IM) to pose significant security threats. While there are similarities in their leveraging of violence against Indian Muslims,

differences remain in the way global jihadist groups use the same pretexts. Examining these differences can help understand why the *Voice of Hind* and ISIS's interest in India may present unexplored challenges.

The 2002 Gujarat riots led to heightened communal tensions[33] and increased activity among regional terror groups like the LeT. According to the National Investigation Agency, the riots also propelled the formation of the Indian Mujahedeen.[34] Recruitment efforts in India in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots saw a steady rise, indicating the utility of communal disaffection for the terrorist cause. Even in 2010, 18 years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the IM claimed that its bombing of Varanasi was a way to make others feel their pain and gain retribution for the Muslim lives lost in the demolition.[35]

However, groups like the IM lack the same social cohesion of the ISIS, which emphasises collective identity. For instance, the IM was a highly divided group in 2008.[36] As noted by Stephen Tinkel in his research on the jihadist terror landscape in India, senior intelligence officials noted that "these boys had joined Atif Amin to do jihad and that's all they knew."[37] Unlike ISIS, groups like the IM are fueled more by domestic political considerations—evident in their links to Pakistan's cross-border agenda—and localised grievances.

These authors have argued in a previous paper that regional terror groups have failed to persuade large section of Indians to join their cause because of known links between such groups and the Pakistani government.[38] In comparison to a global and "pan-Islamic" identity transcending geographical boundaries propagated by ISIS, Pakistan-sponsored terrorist groups like LeT appear to work primarily on Pakistan's behest.[39] This alleged proximity with Pakistan positions such groups as vastly different from ISIS—a group seeking a borderless caliphate that plays by its own rules rather than being a mere pawn for another nation's agenda. This theme of waging a culture war between loyal believers and non-believers that underscores ISIS propaganda in the *Voice of Hind* utilises Huntington's post-Cold War Clash of Civilizations[40] paradigm to its own advantage. ISIS is seeking to establish this "clash" by framing Islamophobia around the world as an embodiment of deep-seated enmity against Islam; it leverages the sense of deepening marginalisation to provide disenchanted Muslims with alternate value systems that align with ISIS interest.[41]

Even as this report pays attention to the digital release of ISIS propaganda specifically for India, the caveat is that the provenance of such publications is yet to be determined. The apparent publisher of *Voice of Hind* – Al Qitaal—is yet

to be identified. It is also important to emphasise—without making any alarmist or exaggerated claims about the efficacy of this propaganda material on radicalisation or recruitment in India—that Islam in this country has historically been practiced in a multicultural manner.

Despite repeated concerns about the radicalisation of Indian Muslims and the threat of them joining global, transnational jihadi groups like ISIS, India is widely considered an anomaly when it comes to the percentage of Indian citizens involved in ISIS-related activities.[42] Despite India being home to the third largest Muslim population in the world, global terror groups have been unable to make inroads into the country. ISIS seems to be no different so far. Liberal estimates of pro-ISIS cases in India peg the count at around 200, indicating a lack of widespread support amongst Indian Muslims for both their cause and their means.[43] Indeed, most researchers agree with the truism that cultural practices in the subcontinent vary every few hundred kilometers, thereby contradicting the assumption of unity among faith-based communities bound together by their religion.

ISIS INFLUENCE IN INDIA: CHALLENGING A MULTICULTURAL ETHOS

Concerns over the possible spread of ISIS influence in India in recent years can be traced to two distinct sets of events. One, the worrying radicalisation of educated, well-to-do youth from states like Kerala, Telangana and Maharashtra who have even gone overseas to fight for ISIS; and two, the waving of ISIS flags during pro-independence protests against India in the Kashmir Valley.[44] Theories that underscore the importance of real or perceived injustice as a major driver of radicalisation may often lead to the assumption that the Kashmir Valley—with its disenchanted civilian population demanding independence from India—may be especially vulnerable to the call for jihad. But the contradictions between ISIS's demand for a 'caliphate' for all Muslims, and Kashmir's fight for political and territorial sovereignty cannot be ignored. While the *Voice of Hind* has used old propaganda messages from dead Kashmiri terrorists, denounced India's actions in Kashmir, and criticised political leaders whether in government or the opposition as simply not being effective, the inability of ISIS to leverage Kashmir also means that the group is attempting to broaden its efforts, as seen with the repurposed images from Delhi.[45]

ISIS ideology is centred around a branch of Wahhabi Salafism that fundamentally refers to a "return to the traditions of the ancestors" and

demands that Muslims around the world resist the lure of modernity and ensure the sanctity of a puritanical form of Islam closely aligned with the teachings of Prophet Mohammed.[46] In the aftermath of the news of 50 Indian Muslims travelling to Syria in 2016 to join ISIS, Indian media was quick to establish causal links between Salafism and extremism.[47] But Salafism is not homogenous, and most Indian Salafi groups are nationalist, and multicultural, steeped in a practice of their faith that is combined with a rich history of peaceful co-existence with democracy—principles that are incompatible with ISIS's interpretation.[48] The oldest Indian Salafi Movement in India is the Jamiat Ahle Hadith that was founded in 1906 and is practiced in 20 states across central and north India.[49] The Ahl-e-Hadith regularly advocates that Indian Muslims exercise their democratic right to vote. The same goes for the Kerala Navdhatul Mujahideen and the South Karnataka Salafi movement in South India.

Mustafa Tanveer, an Indian Salafist ideologue, says that resisting democracy is both anti-national and anti-Islamic, given India's constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religious practice.[50] It is this brand of Salafism, infused with a multicultural, multi-linguistic subcontinental ethos that has, thus far, insulated large sections of the Indian Muslim community from the lure of transnational jihadi groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Instances like the Delhi riots threaten this. Exacerbating such a threat is also the increasingly decentralised organisational structure of ISIS, as the group seeks to outsource its ideology and find that it can establish 'virtual caliphates' after a steady erosion of territory under its control.

The imperative for India is to preserve its historical, multicultural ethos. Analysts have argued that ideological convergences between right-wing violent actors and the ruling BJP's Hindutva ideology have been a crucial element in the perceived approval of violence against the Muslim minority.[51] Although the government may not openly endorse such statements or acts, it also has refused to acknowledge the link between violent extremism, on one hand, and on the other, violence committed by self-proclaimed Hindutva supporters such as those against the CAA protesters. The NIA, for instance, categorises all attacks by Islamist groups or individuals as 'jihadi', while those involving Hindu right-wing groups are simply labelled as 'Other', without requiring the use of their ideological or religious motives to categorise their acts of violence.[52]

Even amidst the nationwide lockdown imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19, anti-Muslim rhetoric peaked as reports came out that a

proselytising sect of Muslims, the Tablighi Jamaat, had gathered in Delhi despite restrictions. Many who had travelled from abroad were infected, and others from elsewhere in the country contracted the infection and took it back to their home villages. The hashtag, #Coronajihad, spread quickly on social media, and further fueled the sense of alienation amongst the larger Indian Muslim community.[53] The State levelled charges against the head of the sect but did little else to change the narrative. Many pundits swiftly related the Tablighi congregations to terrorist organisations despite little evidence linking the two, and fed into the popular perception that Muslims were spreading the virus.

CONCLUSION

As human interactions have increasingly moved to the digital sphere, social media platforms have acquired greater power to amplify previously obscure or limited online portals.[54] If the Delhi riots were both a combination and a culmination of the way communal conflicts have begun to play out in the real and virtual worlds, transnational terrorist groups have the same tools as anyone else to propagate and spread their own hostile ideologies and agendas.[55] In Delhi's case, as prominent local politicians held real rallies and shared their videos and statements widely online, ISIS reared its head in an attempt to once again challenge a subcontinental multicultural ethos, which in spite of the periodic flare-up of communal tensions, has prevented such groups from making any real gains in recruitment.

Data on the effectiveness of propaganda spread by the *Voice of Hind* and its ability to radicalise and recruit may be hard to come by, but what is easier to gauge is the repeated underscoring of a sense of growing 'otherness' amongst Indian Muslims. Research on the implications of systemic discrimination of Muslims on popular media—analysing the tone, content and tenor of reportage—found linkages between Islam and backwardness, violence and ignorance.[56] Such reportage has a spillover effect on normalising communal disharmony and can have a devastating impact on minority sentiments in India as they further the "Us vs them" divide. As *Voice of Hind* shows, such divide is a crucial vulnerability that groups like ISIS are attempting to leverage.

Whether the State believes this deepening marginalisation is real or perceived is now seemingly moot in the face of such attempts. Practitioners and researchers working to devise effective strategies to prevent or counter Violent Extremism (P/CVE) in India have repeatedly urged the government to

allay the fears and sense of marginalisation of Indian Muslims in order to effectively tackle the threat of radicalisation.

Majoritarian violence against Indian Muslims is not only a different stream of ideological extremist violence in itself, but also alienates a community from the rest of society, and has the power to radicalise the youth towards terrorism or extremism, thereby exacerbating the threat of jihadi violence in the country. After all, perceived injustice is a powerful mobiliser and a tool utilised by terrorist groups to galvanise recruits and build consensus for their cause. Even realist security calculations must now advocate for the State to urgently address such violence within India to mitigate the risks of radicalisation. ORF

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