

Ideological Convergence in the Extreme Right

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IS' Visual Propaganda: Amplifying Narratives and Affecting Radicalisation

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IS' Reinvigorated and Evolved Propaganda Campaign in India

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IS and Kin Terrorism in the Post COVID-19 South Asia: Exploring the Possibilities and Implications

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Synopsis

Since territorial and organisational setbacks in Iraq and Syria, coupled with improvements in financial and border controls, the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group is employing unconventional strategies to attract recruits, such as the use of kinship and family networks. This paper discusses the potential of kinship and family ties in IS' terror recruitment in South Asia. This study underscores that kin terrorism remains understudied in South Asia and requires systematic investigation for a better understanding in relation to terrorist recruitment. The paper concludes with the recommendation that future CT and PCVE strategies in South Asia should factor in kin terrorism and the role of familial networks in recruitment and radicalisation to effectively counter the twin threats of extremism and terrorism.

Introduction

Kin terrorism, both in counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) approaches, has recently gained traction with the involvement of multiple, often blocs of, family members in terrorist attacks.¹ With growing physical limitations, owing to COVID-19 lockdowns, especially when it comes to recruitment, terrorist groups will look beyond traditional

means of radicalisation and recruitment.² One such non-traditional technique involves the exploitation of kinship and extended family networks for terrorist recruitment.

Kinship is likely to play a key role in radicalisation and terrorist activities in the post-COVID-19 world.³ Furthermore, limited response capacities of governments and law-enforcement agencies in South Asia make it an attractive target for transnational terror groups to use kinship and family ties to expand their reach and recruitment. IS has already exploited family networks in the Middle East, with Iraq reporting a spike in family-related attacks.⁴ These family-based IS networks have carried out attacks in South and South-East Asia as well. In this context, this paper uses open-source data to discuss the nature of kin terrorism and its impact on security in South Asia. In its second section, the paper briefly defines and discusses the characteristics of kin terrorism. The third section explores the potential of IS to manipulate kin terrorism in South Asia. In conclusion, the study discusses security implications for South Asia related to kin terrorism.

What is Kin Terrorism?

Even though not a novel phenomenon having roots found in the Italian Red Brigades in the 1970s and 1980s,⁵ kin terrorism has gained

¹ Abdul Basit, "Kin terrorism: A new weapon for the Islamic State," *Today Online*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/kin-terrorism-new-weapon-islamic-state>.

² Shemin Joy, "Fear of irrelevance amidst COVID-19 may prompt terrorist groups to launch attacks: UN report," *Deccan Herald*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/fear-of-irrelevance-amidst-covid-19-may-prompt-terrorist-groups-to-launch-attacks-un-report-865928.html>.

³ Eric Tlozek and Fouad Abu Gosh, "Islamic State never needed a caliphate to keep menacing the

world. Now it's regrouping," *ABC News*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-11/islamic-state-is-back-and-the-west-is-partly-to-blame/12429296>.

⁴ Husham Al-Hashimi, "ISIS in Iraq: The Challenge of Reintegrating 'ISIS Families,'" *Center for Global Policy*, July 7, 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-iraq-the-challenge-of-reintegrating-isis-families/>.

⁵ Mohammed M Hafez, "The ties that bind: How terrorists exploit family bonds," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2016), pp. 15-17, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-ties-that-bind-how-terrorists-exploit-family-bonds/>.

traction in recent years. This is because, with tighter security, monitoring and territorial controls, terrorist groups have turned to expanding their networks via the families of their recruits, resulting in major terrorist attacks involving some or all members of the family unit.⁶ Dean Alexander defines kin terrorism as “two or more members of the same clan supporting the threat or use of terrorism.”⁷

Family is an institution that transmits fundamental values of acceptable behaviour, identity, commitment and loyalty to its members.⁸ Therefore, the radicalisation process that takes place through the family and results in greater trust and group loyalty is also different from conventional radicalisation.

In conventional radicalisation, the subject requires ideological mediation and a series of commitments towards a radical ideology, whereas in family radicalisation pre-existing tight-knit kin bonds ‘offer opportunities for radical socialisation that simultaneously satisfy psychological needs; such as avoidance of cognitive dissonance, the need for maintaining meaningful relationships and validation from valued peers.’⁹ Unlike conventional radicalisation and recruitment, members of the same family unit join a terrorist group and/or support a radical ideology out of love, respect, compassion and peer pressure from other family members.¹⁰ Also, members of the same family operating in a radical and/or terrorist group forge strong bonds and create a deep sense of belonging, which cannot be normally achieved through other forms of social organisation. This also helps in keeping illegal activities, partaken by trusted family members, clandestine.¹¹

⁶ Basit, “Kin terrorism: A new weapon for the Islamic State.”

⁷ Dean Alexander, “What Are Family Terrorism Networks?” *Psychology Today*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/let-their-words-do-the-talking/201902/what-are-family-terrorism-networks>.

⁸ Wilson Muna, “Family-Based Networks: Soft Policy Tools in Countering Radicalisation to Violent Extremism,” *IntechOpen*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.intechopen.com/books/terrorism-and-developing-countries/family-based-networks-soft-policy-tools-in-countering-radicalisation-to-violent-extremism>.

⁹ Hafez, “The ties that bind: How terrorists exploit family bonds,” p. 15.

¹⁰ Ibid.

A 2015 study of the New America think-tank found that nearly one-third of the western fighters in Iraq and Syria had familial links to jihadism either through relatives who were already fighting in the region or through marriages.¹² Likewise, Magouirk, Atran and Sageman (2008) found strong kinship bonds that extended both within and between terrorist organisations in East Asia.¹³ Sageman (2004), in his study of 172 jihadist terrorists, also found that in 75 per cent of the cases, strong kinship and friendship bonds played a key part in the radicalisation process of the jihadists.¹⁴ However, kinship with regards to IS in South Asia and the role of family members and their persuasion to their “kin” to join terrorist groups has received little attention.

Kin Terrorism in South Asia

Various factors, such as limited response capacities of law-enforcement agencies, social inequality and underdevelopment and often the problematic role of the state, in terms of its support for proxy terrorist outfits, have made South Asia an attractive location for radicalisation and terrorist activities. Even with limited operational capacity in countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, IS has also proved its efficacy by forming alliances with local terror factions; for example the al-Alami faction of Lashkar e Jhagvi in Pakistan.¹⁵ Other terrorist groups in South Asia, especially Al Qaeda (in Afghanistan and Pakistan) and Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan have exploited “fictive” (e.g. *ummah*) and lineage-

¹¹ Sulastris Osman, “Jemaah Islamiyah: of kin and kind,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2010), pp. 157-175.

¹² Bergen, Peter, Courtney Schuster, and David Sterman, “ISIS in the West: The new faces of extremism,” *New America*, November 16, 2015, p.3, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/future-war/policy-papers/isis-in-the-west/>.

¹³ Justin Magouirk, Scott Atran and Marc Sageman, “Connecting terrorist networks,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008), pp.1-16.

¹⁴ Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*, pp. 111-113.

¹⁵ Kunwar Khuldune Shahid, “Islamic State Comes for South Asia,” *The Diplomat*, June 18, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/islamic-state-comes-for-south-asia/>.

based kinship and 'tribal' association to attract recruits belonging to different ethnic tribes.¹⁶

Various studies have investigated the role of families, including that of women, in terrorist recruitment and radicalisation, involving terrorist groups other than IS, in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Indian-Kashmir. For instance, Asal, Fair and Shellman (2008) have examined Pakistani families whose male members joined jihadist groups in Kashmir and Afghanistan. They found that seeking permission from a family member was important for a would-be jihadist and at least one member in over 60 percent of the surveyed families gave permission for jihadism when the male member sought their permission.¹⁷ Moreover, Fair (2018) has examined how Lashkar-e-Taiba (now Jamaat-ud-Dawa) has exploited family values by using parents to encourage their sons to partake in militancy in Indian-Kashmir.¹⁸ Similarly, Bloom and de Leede have studied the intentional targeting of madrasa girls by Pakistani extremist groups with a hope that these girls will educate and radicalise the next generations at home.¹⁹ Yet, the role of family networks in terrorist recruitment and radicalisation in South Asia has not discussed IS.

Notwithstanding its understudied nature, IS has exploited familial networks to carry out attacks across South Asia. For instance, in Sri Lanka, two of the bombers involved in the

2019 Easter bombings, Mohamed Ibrahim Ilham Ahamed and Mohamed Ibrahim Inshaf Ahamed, were brothers and sons of a well-known businessman in the country. Ilham Ahmed's pregnant wife, Fathima Ilham, also detonated herself when the police raided their house, killing herself, her two children and three police officers.²⁰ Additionally, relatives of the Easter attacks' mastermind Mohamed Cassim Mohamed Zaharan detonated themselves following a police raid on April 26, 2019.²¹

Similarly, in Bangladesh, Asmaul Husna, an IS-inspired girl, stabbed a Dhaka police officer in February 2018, after the police officials visited her home for information about her sister Momena Shoma.²² Momena was previously charged with a terrorism offence for stabbing her landlord in the neck in Melbourne, Australia, in the same month and was sentenced to 42 years.²³ Bangladeshi security agencies also note that IS has focused on forming squads of female terrorists in the country, where most women join the group under the influence of family members.²⁴

Likewise, India has also reported several cases of kin and family terrorism related to IS. For instance, in January 2020, the Afghan security officials reported that ten Indian widows of IS fighters were detained in Kabul's Badam Bagh prison.²⁵ One of the widows from South India named Maryam, a convert to

¹⁶ Akbar S. Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror became a Global War on Tribal Islam*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Victor Asal, C. Christine Fair, and Stephen Shellman, "Consenting to a child's decision to join a jihad: Insights from a survey of militant families in Pakistan," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, VI. 31, No. 11 (2008), pp. 973-994.

¹⁸ C. Christine Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (London: Hurst and Co., 2018), pp.130-147.

¹⁹ Mia Bloom, "Bombshells: Women and terror," *Gender Issues*, Vol. 28, No. 1-2 (2011): pp. 1-21; de Leede, Seran, "Afghan Women and the Taliban: An Exploratory Assessment," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, April 2014, <https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Leede-Afghan-Women-and-the-Taliban-April-2014.pdf>.

²⁰ Siobhan Heanue and Eric Tlozek, "Pregnant wife of Sri Lanka bomber detonates suicide vest, killing children and police," *ABC News*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-25/pregnant-wife-of-sri-lanka-bomber-detonates-suicide-vest/11045306>.

²¹ "Sri Lanka attacks: Suspect Zahran Hashim's relatives die in raid," *BBC News*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48085525>.

²² Lindsay Murdoch, "Alleged Melbourne attacker's sister knifed policeman: Dhaka police," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/alleged-melbourne-attacker-s-sister-knifed-policeman-dhaka-police-20180214-p4z0ae.html>.

²³ James Oaten, "Bangladeshi student Momena Shoma sentenced to 42 years for terror attack on homestay landlord," *ABC News*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-05/bangladeshi-homestay-guest-sentenced-for-engaging-in-terror-act/11180560>.

²⁴ Kamran Reza Chowdhury, "Indian Woman Recruited Neo-JMB Militants, Bangladesh Police Allege," *Benar News*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/wo-man-arrested-07172020174848.html>.

²⁵ Praveen Swami and Neethu Reghukumar, "Fate of 10 Indian widows of Islamic State terrorists, imprisoned in Afghanistan, casts new light on movement that led dozens from Kashmir to Kerala into Nangarhar," *First Post*, January 7, 2020,

Islam from Catholicism, revealed that she had moved to Afghanistan with her husband Yahiya, who was also a convert.²⁶ In this migration were also her other convert friends, accompanying their husbands.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, several cases of kin terrorism have come to the fore in recent years. In December 2015, Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Department revealed that a major female network was busted in Karachi. According to officials, the network of affluent women was spreading IS literature through digital means and brainwashing other women. The network also consisted of the wife and mother-in-law of Saad Aziz, the main accused of the Safoora Goth attack.²⁷

Similarly, Naureen Laghari, a medical student, was arrested in 2017 before becoming an IS suicide bomber. Laghari abandoned her home and education to join IS and was later arrested by the security agencies. Laghari also revealed that after her training and instructions from IS, she married Ali Tariq, an IS militant who was killed in the police raid and shootout. Tariq persuaded by her to target Easter services in Lahore.²⁸

These instances, involving families, especially women, suggest that in South Asia, family dynamics and composition provides a conducive radicalisation and recruitment environment for groups like IS.

In terms of its family dynamics, South Asia is predominantly based on traditional and conservative patriarchal family structures. These mediating structures, if utilised and exploited by terrorist groups for radicalisation, can aid in bringing family members quickly into a group. This is because unlike social media recruitment, the new recruits already

share some sense of identity with their kin. Secondly, unlike Western societies, male members in the family – both father and brother – are treated with respect and command authority over junior and female members.²⁹ Culturally, such “collectivist” social structures, therefore, provide more conducive terror recruitment conditions as compared to western individualistic societies. Hafez believes that in such conditions, terrorist groups can succeed in bloc recruitment, allowing for family group commitment to the militant groups, as those members who are not part of the organisation cannot stay behind due to peer (or family) pressures.³⁰ Noor's findings are identical to that of Hafez, that is, fathers and brothers influence female members of the family in becoming suicide bombers.³¹

Conclusion

Though it is still early to predict the impact of IS' exploitation of kin terrorism in South Asia, this paper aims to generate a discussion on the importance of kinship in terrorist recruitment and radicalisation in the region. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in tighter border controls and travel restrictions, will play a major part in whether, and how, terrorist groups such as the IS modify their recruitment strategies and extensively use “family networks” to recruit. This is because families, now mostly confined within the boundaries of their homes, can be more vulnerable to radicalisation due to kinship pressure or influence. Additionally, unlike social media exposure, families possess the element of trust between its members which can expedite the radicalisation process.

<https://www.firstpost.com/india/fate-of-10-indian-widows-of-islamic-state-terrorists-imprisoned-in-afghanistan-casts-new-light-on-movement-that-led-dozens-from-kashmir-to-kerala-into-nangarhar-7871811.html>.

²⁶ Ruchi Kumar, “From Kerala to Kabul prison: widow of Indian ISIS fighter tells her tale,” *The National*, May 24, 2020,

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/from-kerala-to-kabul-prison-widow-of-indian-isis-fighter-tells-her-tale-1.1023096>.

²⁷ Imtiaz Ali, “CTD arrests suspected financier of Safoora Goth massacre,” *Dawn*, December 19, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1227213>.

²⁸ Talha, “What You Need To Know About Noreen Laghari, The Girl Who Joined ISIS,” *Parhlo*, April 17,

2017, <https://www.parhlo.com/security-forces-catch-noreen-laghari/>.

²⁹ Roger Ballard, “South Asian Families: In Rapoport, Fogarty and Rapoport (eds.), *Families in Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 174-204.

³⁰ Hafez, “The ties that bind: How terrorists exploit family bonds.”

³¹ Saba Noor, “Women Suicide Bombers: An Emerging Security Challenge for Pakistan,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 3, No. 11 (2011), pp.1-3,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26351018?seq=3#meta-data-info-tab-contents>.

At any rate, as outlined, there remains a gap in South Asian security infrastructure in dealing with, and understanding, the detrimental role of kinship and family relations in terrorist recruitment and operations. To mitigate this threat, PCVE experts need to develop models that can predict the formation of family terror networks and formulate interventions before a member of the family can radicalise other members. Such models should also focus on the “family” as a major unit of analysis and a determinant of radicalisation within South Asian families. However, because “family units” in South Asia carry community pride and dignity, invasive interventions, therefore, present social and cultural challenges. Such challenges can be moderated through community-based interventions involving positive engagement of the offenders with their families, among other initiatives.

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