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BRUSSELS AND BEYOND - KEEPING ISIS OUT OF INDIA

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On Mar 22, Brussels was rudely jolted by intense terrorist attacks. The first set of two explosions at the Zaventem Airport, occurred near simultaneously, at around 0750hrs local time (GMT). The second explosion targeted the busy Maelbeek Metro Station approximately an hour later. At least 31 people lost their lives besides many receiving grievous injuries. The attack need not necessarily be construed as a demonstrator of its prowess, on the contrary it is a defensive act of defiance and a response to a string of reversal against the International Coalition and the Syrian Armed Forces. The ISIS way of its status as an umbrella organization of all radical Islamic groups is probably seeking to challenge the coalition might by introducing the unconventional and asymmetric methodology to raise the sagging morale of its cadre.

While there were inputs of an impending terrorist attack in Europe, there were no clear indications that Brussels was likely to be the target. On retrospect however, one can join the dots and arrive at a conclusion that such an attack was imminent. Brussels has a large

strength of immigrant Muslim population, who initially arrived as a part of the guest worker program in the 1960s and subsequently decided to stay on and embrace the socio-economic setup of the country. Perhaps, it is the second and third generation descendants, who perceive themselves as a misfit in the European social milieu and feel discriminated against. It is this social structure which provides conducive environs for radical elements to spread their tentacles. The Paris attack on November, 13 was also perpetrated by terrorists who had mobilized from Brussels and after the attack found safe haven in Brussels to beat the heat of security forces following their trail. The Brussels terror attacks were apparently retaliatory in nature and engineered just four days after the arrest of the only remaining Paris attacker co-conspirator and ISIS logistician Salah Abdeslam on 18 March.

The Brussels attack has once again brought the spot light on the Schengen free movement and lax border controls which allows a person to move from one country to another with

impunity. It also brings to the focus the returning 'jihadis', immigrants and the asylum seekers who are likely to further polarize the feeling of disenchantment and radicalization of the society. Belgium is an active supporter of the US led military coalition and was one of the first to join in the raids against the ISIS. Brussels is also the Headquarters for the NATO Forces, European Commission and the European Union Parliament, hence symbolizing the core of the Western World. Hence, probably attracting the ire of the ISIS.

It was apparent from the outcome of the attack that neither was the administration anticipating such a terror attack, nor were the security measures in place to prevent the same. Notwithstanding the police was quick to react and effectively salvaged the situation and managed the panic ridden commuters. The Brussels terror attack has once again demonstrated that the ISIS is capable of afflicting large scale casualties amongst unsuspecting civilian targets at a time and place of its choosing. The modus operandi, target selection, timings are a matter of response to varied current factors and extraneous influences. Each act of terror are planned to be innovative, more audacious and spectacular than the previous and convey a certain message, so that it percolate fear amongst the citizens and remains in the media glare for longer duration.

That being said its time we analysed how cogent a threat does India face from the dreaded ISIS and its apocalyptic rise. According to a recruitment document, retrieved from Pakistan's lawless tribal lands, it has been revealed that the ISIS harbours 'grand ambition' to ignite a war in India, build a new terror army in Pakistan and Afghanistan and provoke an Armageddon-like 'end of the world' situation. The 32-page-document, titled 'A Brief History of the Islamic State Caliphate (ISC),' has been obtained by American Media Institute (AMI), and says that 'The Caliphate, according to the Prophet', seeks to unite various terror factions

in Afghanistan and Pakistan into a single army.

The document, describes future battle plans and urges Al Qaeda to join the group. It says that the self-styled Islamic State leader should be recognised as the sole ruler of the world's one billion-strong Muslim population under a religious empire called, 'caliphate'. It also warns that 'preparations' are on for an attack in India and predicts that an attack will provoke an 'apocalyptic confrontation' with America.

Reference to India in the document comes in the following paragraph:-

*Puri dunya se bayt, hijrat, aur al-daulat-al-khilafa-tul-islamiya ke saaye talay jihad ka silsila jari hai. Al-daulat-al-khilafa-tul-islamiya ek hi waqt main siraf Iraq aur sham main darjanon mahazon par paishqadmi kartay huay aagay barh rahi hai, isi tarhan uss kay ilawa Khorasan, Yemen, Misr, Libya, Jazeera-tul-arab, al-jazair, Qoqaz, aur Nigeria samait kayee vilayaton main bhi Allah ki nusrat ko samait rahi hai. **Aur Hind main Ghazva-i-Hind ki tayyarian jari hain, jis havalay se kuch hi arsay mein ummat khushkhabri sunay gi, inshallah.***

There is a global pledge and migration to the Islamic State Caliphate (ISC) to wage jihad. The ISC is advancing on dozens of fronts in Iraq and Syria, and in numerous regions like Khorasan, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Arabia, Algeria, the Caucasus, and Nigeria as well as numerous other territories. In Hind, preparations for Ghazva-i-Hind are in full swing and soon the *ummah* will hear tidings of victory on that front as well, Allah-willing.

The word 'Ghazva' refers to a battle in which Prophet Mohammed personally participated. According to Samdani, the phrase 'Ghazva-i-Hind' is a reference to a Prophetic quote in which a "final" battle with India is discussed. The relevant sentence, therefore, means preparations are underway for the final battle in India about which there will soon be very good news.

Reflecting upon the mosaic of information available if one were to ponder the threat ISIS could pose to India, the threat could be described in terms of three probable outcomes. Firstly, the threat could manifest into a direct confrontation, akin to the situation in Iraq and Syria. Secondly, ISIS could gain more traction amongst the youth and India could eventually be exploited to stream the requirement of fresh recruits. Thirdly, the smaller and non-descript terrorist organizations could rally on to ISIS to gain more prominence and clout.

The possibility of ISIS developing strong roots thereby mustering sufficient wherewithal to challenge the might of the Government in a direct confrontation is an abstract idea that is highly improbable. Even if we were to consider a scenario of five to ten years hence, this situation is unlikely due to the very nature of India's polity. The spectacular and meteoric rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria must be seen in light of certain intrinsic factors which contributed to its rise; both states were in turmoil and unrest when the ISIS upsurge was staged, the revenue generated from the oil fields made ISIS the richest terrorist organization, the initial success were responsible for the ISIS being heralded as the sole inheritor of the caliphate, social media and internet played a pivotal role in attracting fighters from all across the world and lastly ISIS merely provided a charismatic leadership, an inspiring narrative and filled in the power vacuum that was created. In contrast, India is a secular state, with a Muslim minority and a vibrant democracy. Hence, this option as a probability can be outrightly discarded as being unrealistic and least probable.

The second probability is a tangible and a worrisome proposition. India is marching steadfastly on the road to empowering its population. The growing reach of the internet and the percolation of smart mobile devices makes the disgruntled and disillusioned youth susceptible to being radicalised. The fact that only the poor and the unemployed are the

target audience for the ISIS has long been refuted, with well established professionals with sound background electing to join the cadres of ISIS. In spite of the fact that India has the third largest Muslim population there are only 23 confirmed cases of Indians participating in the war. This can be explained due to the fact that the Arab view the syncretic tenets of Indian Islam as heretic and a corruption from the original teachings of the Quran. Therefore, Indian volunteers are considered least preferred by the ISIS. The South Asian recruits are hardly ever given an position of command and authority, instead they are used as cannon fodder for suicide missions and lowly on mundane tasks. It is believed that the surviving ISIS volunteers are also disillusioned and are desperate to return.

The last but the most dangerous probability is the ISIS forming an umbrella organization for uniting the local terrorist setups to wage a coordinated war against the Govt. There are two dimensions to this problem, one possibility is that Pakistan's develops close bonds with the ISIS and fosters the group with leadership, finance and logistics. Though one may expect Pakistan also to be in the conundrum but experts on the subject are skeptical owing to the fact that the Pakistan Army and the ISI already have a well oiled machinery to wage proxy war against India and the ISIS does not gain any significant advantage by serving the two masters. The other possibility being smaller groups owing allegiance to ISIS to ensure their survival amongst the host of other well established groups. In actual though it would be naïve to dispel the fact there is a groundswell for the ISIS, the allegiance by various terrorist groups to ISIS is probably with an ulterior motif to gain more prominence, safeguard their survival amongst larger players and to gain more traction. Whether the ISIS hierarchy can exercise any kind of control or influence over such groups is questionable. It is also a well established fact that that in the realm of

terrorist groups affiliations are very often forged and snapped to suit their requirements. The rise of affiliates of the ISIS in Afghanistan and Bangladesh in light of the aforementioned are also a matter of concern.

The ISIS may not be threat as of today but it possesses the surreal appeal which make DIY videos of radicalization over the internet a reality. The group also reportedly released recruitment videos in Hindi, Tamil and Urdu to target Indian youth. The waving of the ISIS black flag in Kashmir and arrests of the terror modules by the NIA are just early signs of intrigue and curiosity. India, at present, is home to the third largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. India has a difficult tightrope walk ahead; the country must remain vigilant in its battle against radicalisation, but at the same time, must refrain from slipping into the trap of persecution on religious lines.

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