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The Islamic State in India's Kerala: A Primer

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ABSTRACT

With a Muslim population of over 200 million, the third largest in the world next only to Indonesia and Pakistan, India was thought of by analysts to be fertile ground for the recruitment of foreign fighters for the Islamic State (IS). The country, however, has proven such analysts wrong by having only a handful of pro-IS cases so far. Of these cases, the majority have come from the southern state of Kerala. This paper offers an explanation for the growth of IS in Kerala. It examines the historical, social and political factors that have contributed to the resonance of IS ideology within specific regions of Kerala, and analyses the implications of these events to the overall challenge of countering violent extremism in India.

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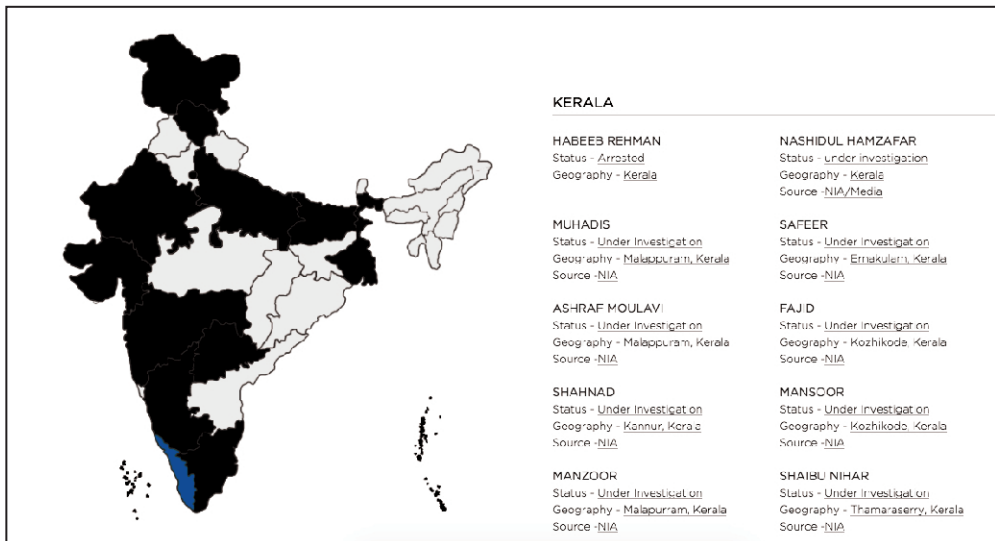
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INTRODUCTION

In June 2014, inside the Al Nuri mosque in Iraq's second largest city of Mosul, Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the creation of a "caliphate", weeks after his fighters seized control of the city. In March this year, the caliphate was officially defeated. But not before IS succeeded in becoming the most dreaded and adaptive terror group in the world, killing thousands of people, leaving cities in ruin, taking over land, implementing their own laws, and taxing citizens and doing police work.

In the caliphate's five years, thousands of recruits from various countries across the world—including Saudi Arabia, France, Australia and Tunisia—made their way to Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State and its 'caliphate', which commanded a territory nearly as large as the United Kingdom at some point in 2015, spanning the geographies of both Iraq and Syria, developed a large base of foreign fighters who travelled to the region to join the group, fight for it, and help set up the so-called "pious"

Fig. 1: Kerala has accounted for 40 out of 150+ pro-IS cases in India



Source: ORF IS Tracker

Islamic land that was the crux of the group's promise. The geography, or the 'state' in itself, became the single biggest draw for foreigners who had come in contact with the ideology propagated by IS, as the group started to operate like a government on the ground it occupied, showcasing its version of Sharia.

India, with a Muslim population of over 200 million, third largest in the world next only to Indonesia and Pakistan, was generally expected by analysts to have high numbers of pro-IS cases due to that sheer population. The country, however, has only had a handful of pro-IS cases. Despite a uniformly distributed population of Muslims across the country, it is the state of Kerala that has contributed a comparatively significant number of members to the group domestically and internationally. Data show that 60-70 pro-IS cases in India have been from Kerala.

This paper offers an explainer for the growth of IS in Kerala. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The next section outlines the reasons why IS found interest in Kerala. It is followed by a brief history of inter-faith relations in the state, an outline of the reasons behind IS' relative success there, and a comparative analysis of the different regions of Kerala and their inclinations for IS. The paper closes with a discussion of the implications of these events.

WHY IS AND KERALA?

The number of pro-IS cases reported in India from 2014 to 2018 is between 180 – 200.¹ This paper defines 'pro-IS cases' to include sharing or propagating IS propaganda online, attempting to travel to West Asia with the aim of joining the caliphate, and in fact joining the caliphate or working for its goals. The Indian Home Ministry puts the number at 155.² Measured per capita (or per million people), the numbers may be

statistically irrelevant. Politically, however, and from the viewpoint of national security, each and every one of these cases is a cause for concern. On 1 March 2019 the Indian Home Ministry announced the setting up of a research cell that would study only IS³—it is a first of its kind.

The southern state of Kerala has been found to have the highest number of pro-IS cases in all of India, with about 40 of the 180 to 200 cases. These are individuals who have either displayed an inclination to travel to West Asia to join the caliphate, or in fact did so; as well as a sizeable number who are currently being prosecuted by law enforcement agencies and the courts.

Map 1. Kerala in the south of India



In 2016, seeing an increasing number of pro-IS cases in Kerala, specifically the northern belt of the state, law enforcement agencies launched ‘Operation Pigeon’. It was a “de-radicalisation drive” aimed at timely and strategic intervention in an individual’s movement from ‘thought’ to ‘action’ of pro-IS ideology. Among others, agents use social media to monitor youths from certain identified regions of the state and

the content they shared on those platforms. According to data collected for the operation, Kerala's Kannur district had the highest number of people identified for pro-IS inclinations, at 118 (not necessarily arrested, charged or prosecuted), followed by Malappuram (89) and Kasaragod (66).⁴ In total, 350 individuals (all male) were identified and approached by police with help of local community members including religious leaders, families, friends and parents to deter them from following the IS path. This number was higher than what other states reported across India.

In April 2019, the terror attack in India's neighbouring island nation of Sri Lanka on the weekend of the Christian festival of Easter brought to light a new paradigm of pro-IS operations in South Asia. IS claimed responsibility for the attack, and Baghdadi accepted *Bay'at* (a pledge of allegiance) of those who committed the bombings, led by one Zahran Hashim of the National Tawheed Jamath (NTJ), a splinter group of the Sri Lanka Tawheed Jamath (SLTJ). Kerala was prominent in the investigations. According to Sri Lanka's investigation agencies, a native of Palakkad, Kerala, 29-year-old Riyas Aboobacker reportedly identified Zahran Hashim's online propaganda videos as one of the reasons behind his radicalisation. The case of Riyas was attached to those of 14 people from the state's Kasargod region who left India to join IS, all of whom ended up in Afghanistan, except for one.⁵ The alleged leader of this group, Rashid Abdulla, was also a native of Kasaragod in Kerala.

Travelling to the caliphate and being a member of the proto-state was an objective many radicalised youths aspired for. However, it became difficult to not only muster the finances to undertake this *hijrah* (or holy migration), but also navigate bureaucratic requirements for passports and other documents, impeding most plans to undertake the journey to join IS. Other than Syria, Afghanistan became a popular destination for those looking to join IS, as IS Khorasan Province (ISKP),

a concoction of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), local Pashtun fighters and former Afghan Taliban members wore IS branding to make their own space in the Afghan jihad theatre.

More publicly covered cases included that of Rashid Abdulla, who radicalised at least 21 people within his community and led them to Afghanistan to join pro-IS factions in 2016. Since then, reports of many of those 21 being killed in various attacks and US or Afghan airstrikes have made their way to their families in Kerala. In June 2019, reports suggested that Abdulla was killed in an air strike.⁶ It is interesting to note that despite leaving their families to answer IS' call, most of these young men kept in touch with home. Some of these families implored them to come back, advising them that what they were doing was un-Islamic.⁷

While Kerala may have been frequently thrown in the spotlight for pro-IS cases, the reasons behind most of these go beyond the linearity of their affinity towards IS ideologies and teachings. Part of the push lies in the deep historical relations between Kerala and the surrounding region, and West Asia—centuries of trade and cultural ties which brought Islam to peninsular India.

Pro-IS cases in other Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal were aimed more towards conducting attacks on local targets, and not necessarily joining the caliphate abroad, which is the common narrative in most Kerala cases. Moreover, the fact that Kerala has a generally harmonious inter-faith dynamic may have prevented Keralites from choosing targets within Kerala.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has also helped New Delhi over the past two years to crack down on one of India's most crucial security grey areas—that of having more than eight million of its citizens, many of

them from Kerala, working in the larger Gulf region. UAE is a rather new strategic partner for India in its security outreach with Gulf partners. Over the past year, both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have deported people back to India for alleged pro-IS activities; these individuals belonged to different Indian states. In July 2018, for instance, four youths were deported from Abu Dhabi, all of them from Kerala.^{8,9}

This comes on the back of cells operating in the Gulf, comprising both Indians and other nationals, working to attract Indians online towards the IS ideology and then attempting to help them to travel to Syria.¹⁰ This included online “influencers” such as Mehdi Biswas, an engineer from India’s IT hub Bengaluru, who was known as @ShamiWitness on Twitter and was one of IS’ biggest supporters and propagators online.¹¹ The online sphere has also played a significant role in bringing IS propaganda to communities in Kerala, along with opportunities of interacting with like-minded radicalised individuals, both locally and internationally via social media.

What dynamics have driven pro-IS cases in Kerala, and why have certain districts of Kerala recorded more cases than others? Some answers to these questions lie in the history of the region, going back centuries with intra-religious complexities, historical trade routes, modern politics, migration and technology all forming a complex intersection of challenges for countering violent extremism.

INTER-FAITH RELATIONS IN KERALA: A BRIEF HISTORY

Any attempt at understanding radicalisation among Muslims in Kerala requires an introduction to the history of Islam in the state. Bordering the Arabian Sea to its west, Kerala has had links with Arab traders before the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD.¹² Roughly in the late 7th and early 8th century, Muslim Arab traders entered Kerala; they proselytised

Islam, with some of the then Perumal rulers accepting the new religion and/or sanctioning lands for the building of mosques. Keralite Muslims who occupied most of Northern Kerala eventually came to adopt the title 'Mappila Muslims'.¹³

Over the next few centuries, many lower-caste and some upper-caste Hindus converted to Islam while maintaining the general inter-religious fabric of the country. Due to their business backgrounds, the Mappilas acquired wealth and power while being wholly accepted within the broader Kerala community. With the coming of the Portuguese in the 1600s, Mappila Muslim trade routes began to be blocked due to the Portuguese search for peppers and other spices.¹⁴ Eventually, the fortunes of the Mappilas diminished, leading to discord and frustration in the community. As a result, the Mappila Muslims began the first anti-colonial agitation in the 16th century against the Portuguese. This led to a vicious campaign against Mappila Muslims in subsequent decades.¹⁵

The Portuguese colonial project was soon succeeded by the arrival of the French and the British, the latter having ruled over Malabar from 1792 to 1947.¹⁶ During this time, the entry of the zealous Mysorean leaders Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan led to a decline in Hindu-Muslim relations.¹⁷ Moreover, economic policies of the British that led to the deprivation of the Muslim community resulted in frequent revolts against the colonisers. Indeed, according to some scholars, between 1821 and 1921 more than 50 violent outbreaks (primarily motivated by agrarian concerns) were conducted by the Mappila Muslims, the bloodiest of which was the 1921 Malabar rebellion which killed between 2,000 and 10,000 Mappilas.¹⁸ While it did not start as a communal incident, it did end as one, with Hindu – Muslim relations completely breaking down during this time.¹⁹

In the pre-independence years, this break in Hindu-Muslim relations was underscored by the demand for a separate Moplistan and support for Mohammed Ali Jinnah's Muslim League (and by extension for being included as a part of Pakistan). However, the geographical impossibility of such a move and, barring a few instances, the centuries-old religious harmony helped mute such sentiments.²⁰ Consequently, most analysts agree that communal violence has been largely non-existent in Kerala for the last 100 years.²¹

In the post-Independence era, the Kerala branch of the Muslim League which was initially labelled as a "Pakistani column", soon tempered its presence to make secularism its core value. It also gained a lot of credibility when it fought to increase the rights of Muslims in Kerala.²² Moreover, Muslims in Kerala began assimilating in the state to a point where they developed their own Arabic Malayalam script.²³ This was in addition to the rising wealth of the Gulf states after the 1970s which led to the large-scale migration of Keralites.²⁴ This facilitated the upward mobility of all Keralites, including Muslims. The Muslims who remained in Kerala embraced Marxist politics as well, fighting for equal economic rights in the state.²⁵

In the history of the Mappilas, it is key to note that the economic wealth provided by Arab Muslim traders have made Keralites largely accepting of outside cultures, leading to better Hindu-Muslim relations. For instance, there has been no Hindu-Muslim outbreak in Kerala since the 1921 Mappila Rebellion.²⁶ Unlike in North India, where Muslim figures from Central Asia invaded and plundered India in the last millennia, the spread of Islam in Kerala was peaceful.

Second, most of the violent outbreaks or jihad by the Muslims were conducted largely against colonial powers as a result of economic

deprivation, with ideology being only one of the contributory factors. Third, the issue of economic disparity led Muslims to embrace Marxism despite intense ideological opposition among Muslim scholars in other parts of the world; this demonstrated the innate ability of Kerala Muslims to mould their identity along localised lines.

These historical fractures and narratives have often been artfully exploited by IS recruitment strategies. According to scholars, foreign fighters such as Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder were seen as great assets for groups such as IS due to their “ideological motivation, non-parochialism, and detachment from local politics.”²⁷ These characteristics and motivations of foreign fighters aligned with the success of the group’s recruitment strategy that sold Muslims living in other countries the idea of a utopian Islamic land. This is reflected in the fact that in a majority of pro-IS cases in India, the aim to travel to the *khilafat* far outweighs the desire to act in its name at home.

SPOTLIGHT ON KERALA: MOTIVATIONS, MYTHS, IMPLICATIONS

Motivations in Joining the Islamic State

All individuals from Kerala who were attracted to the Islamic State have been members of the Mappila Muslims. A number of factors can explain why there has been a relatively larger number of Keralites who have travelled to join the caliphate, or at least have been attracted to IS propaganda. This primer also explains why most Keralites who joined IS have come from the districts of Malapuram, Calicut and Cannore, all of which lie in North Kerala where Mappila Muslims reside.

The first crucial factor is social media. Interviews conducted with family members of the Kerala cohort who have left for Afghanistan

revealed that most of them became interested in IS ideology that they found in online handles of propagandists.²⁸ Indeed, IS propaganda is extensive and disseminated in different languages, even Malayalam and Tamil, two south Indian languages which have been previously ignored by Al Qaeda in favour of Urdu, the lingua franca of Muslims in North India.²⁹ Perhaps this would also explain why Keralite Muslims have been more attracted to IS than AQ; the latter has not given importance to executing propaganda in the vernacular.

Yet, social media propaganda is usually only the last step in a long process that filters out individuals at different levels. Throughout history the world over, young men and women (generally between 18 to 35 years of age) are often influenced by revolutionary ideas—be it radical Marxism, environmental protection, or even radical Hindutva. Carrie Wickham, for instance, notes how many educated youth in Egypt were recruited into the terrorist group Gama'a Islamiya in the 1980s and 1990s due to propaganda, framing, pre-existing ties and socio-political circumstances.³⁰

In Kerala, many young people get attracted to romanticised notions of the caliphate and living during the age of the Prophet, which is highly impossible in modern times.³¹ In 2008, a Muslim scholar by the name of Zubair Mankada formed an exclusivist Islamic commune where Muslims came to live in what they believed to be the closest way possible to what was lived in 7th century A.D. Although it was a peaceful society, this was later shut down due to frustration of the members with the system, friction with neighbouring Muslims, and police scrutiny. A number of families from Kerala joined this society.³²

Indeed, the search for a life guided by “pure Islam” is often satisfied by different types of Muslim movements depending on the proclivities of Muslims in Kerala. For example, those who are inclined to engage in

welfare activities often join charity groups, many of which exist across different parts of Kerala. Those who would like to also participate in socio-political activism join the Jamaat e-Islami's Kerala chapters,³³ whereas those who may be more "political" find resonance of their views with the Muslim League. Finally, those who feel the need to undertake a purely theological journey move towards the Salafist movement in Kerala, largely represented by the Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen movement (KNM).³⁴ (Of course, these distinctions are not clear-cut and often intersect across different lines.)

What stands out in Kerala is the institutional structure of Islamic organisations and the ability to mobilise Muslims in a systematic manner. As such, due to the assimilation of Keralite Muslims who identify as a Malayalam speaker and a Muslim with equal resonance, Keralite clerics (much like their counterparts in the rest of India) eschew violent agitation in any form.

Thus, the young people who are not satisfied by the various avenues to demonstrate their zeal often turn to the internet for opinions that validate violent action. Many of them have also become disenfranchised by the various splits that have taken place within Islamic organisations such as the KNM which has splintered into a number of branches because of leadership squabbles.³⁵ These individuals often end up turning to puritanical forms of Islam that are being spread across the internet.

Accordingly, the Islamic State propaganda played the last role in radicalising Keralites. IS propaganda as propagated in posts by its Keralite supporters quoted radical pro-Hindutva, organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS) and other Hindu right-wing groups' actions against Muslims as reasons to join the Islamic State and fight these groups. Incidents like the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992

by right-wing activists are also used to fuel their propaganda. IS supporters have also advocated for the need to fight atheists and rationalists for their opposition to God.³⁶

Beyond the various groups and issues quoted by these supporters, what stands out is that IS Kerala supporters' social-media posts tend to incorporate intellectual debates that are present in the larger Keralite Muslim community. This could suggest the presence of well-educated Keralites in the group. Moreover, these individuals have expressed a longing to live in a "pure Islamic" environment. They shared this sentiment with their Afghan counterparts, for instance, who were interested less in fighting and more in living in what they thought was "a clean and pure Islamic atmosphere."³⁷ According to scholar Ashraf Kadakkal of the Kerala University, this desire to live in a utopian fantasy is one reason why IS has attracted many recruits from the state.³⁸

Indeed, there is a small number of Keralites who have in earlier periods migrated to Gulf countries for religious reasons as well. For instance, the Salafi Madrassa of Dammaj in Yemen is one such destination for some Keralite immigrants.³⁹ Moreover, Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf countries are also known destinations for Keralite Muslims looking to reside in cities where they can follow luxurious lifestyles while still protecting their religious sensibilities.

Notably, travelling abroad either for purposes of religious study, or to join the Islamic state is not done in isolation but rather with the help of family and friends. In the prominent case of Rashid Abdullah and his cohort of more than 20 people, most of them knew each other as friends or families.⁴⁰ Studies on terrorism and radicalisation focus on ties of kinship as an essential component of radicalising—or, in fact, de-radicalising individuals.⁴¹ This is especially prominent in the Indian context which have largely collectivist societies where, more than 50-

member extended family structures can be common in certain geographies. Perhaps this is why the police in Kerala often employ the help of family members while trying to dissuade recruits from joining the Islamic State.⁴²

Significantly, this characteristic disposition to travel abroad and migrate to other Islamic nations is facilitated by the international connectivity of Kerala. Due to the number of Keralites that move to the Gulf nations for work, the number of international airports in the state have gone up to four; it is the highest in any Indian state with short three- or four-hour flights to any Gulf state. Given that Gulf states are generally used as transit points to both Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria, it is likely that the upward mobility of the Keralites and the familiarity with international travel have helped them travel abroad more freely. Additionally, the Keralite passport ownership rate is more than double the national average (5.5 percent);⁴³ thus an individual who may be having thoughts of travelling to join the caliphate will likely find it easier to obtain official documentation to do so.⁴⁴

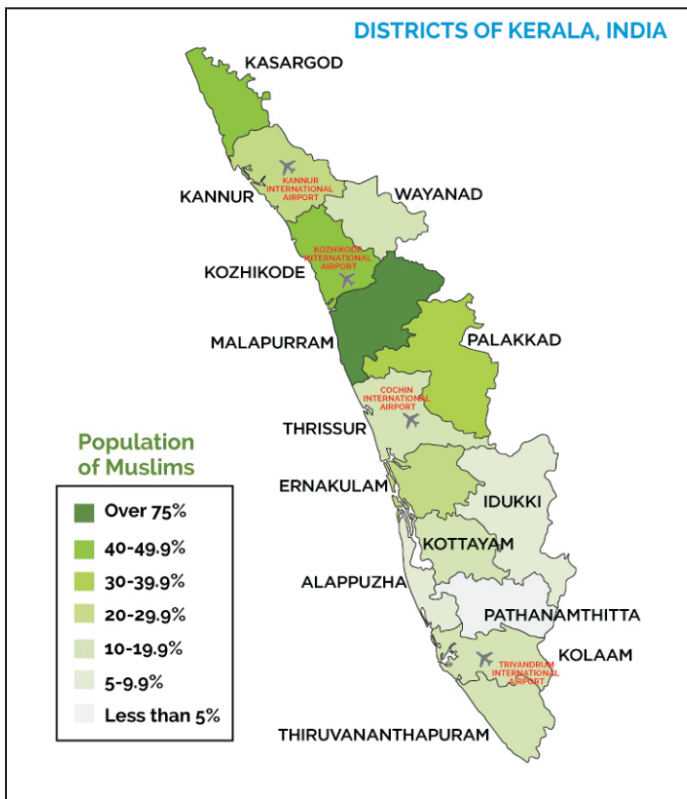
Therefore, of the key push and pull factors for Keralites to travel to West Asia for the caliphate, it is possible to isolate social media, the use of Malayalam language propaganda, and the promise of a true Islamic state. Push factors include institutionalised Keralite Islam that has historically opposed violent action, as well as the yearning to live in a purely Islamic environment; facilitating factors include the easy access of air travel, upward mobility of Keralites, and higher passport ownership rates.

Intra-Kerala Variance in IS Recruitment

Most of the Keralites who have joined the Islamic State have come from a few districts: Malapurram, Kannur and Kasargod. Most other parts of Kerala have witnessed only isolated cases.

There are manifold reasons. To begin with, Kerala is broadly divided into three regions: the northern part, the central part, and the southern part. The districts that have seen the most number of IS recruits are all in Northern Kerala, which is home to most of the Keralite Muslims. Moreover, these cities in the northern regions are also major contributors of migrants to the Gulf nations. For instance, a 2007 study noted that almost 50 percent of Keralites who have gone to the Gulf countries for work were from the Mappila Muslim community of Northern Kerala.⁴⁵ This number is responsible for large amounts of remittances that have driven up the wealth levels of Northern Keralites, in turn allowing them more resources to make the journey to West Asia upon their radicalisation.

Map 2. Kerala's Muslim population by district



(Based on data up to 2003. The map also shows the four international airports in the state connecting Kerala to the Gulf⁴⁶)

Further, the increasing number of people travelling to the Gulf nations for work has also led to the construction of two international airports in North Kerala—the Kannur international airport and the Calicut international airport.⁴⁷ The ease of travel accorded to economic migrants is what radicalised individuals from northern Kerala took advantage of while travelling to places like Sri Lanka, Kuwait and Qatar among others (which served as transit points to IS strongholds in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan).

It is important to note an essential characteristic of the individuals involved in pro-IS activities in Kerala: fundamentally, their aim is to travel to West Asia and serve the caliphate. This is in sharp contrast to individuals, for instance, belonging to the northern states such as UP or Gujarat—who have been found to be involved in plans of executing violent attacks on targets on Indian soil.⁴⁸ This could be explained by the higher incidence of communal violence and anti-Muslim hate crimes being recorded in the northern states, which foment hatred between communities and in turn increase feelings of resentment of Muslims towards the government;⁴⁹ this is almost non-existent in Kerala. Moreover, lower economic standards—and consequently, less upward mobility and lack of resources to travel internationally—were all contributing factors in directing the efforts of IS aspirants from the northern states to the Indian government instead of elsewhere.

An area-wise comparison of both inter- and intra-state patterns reveals various dynamics and nuances of radicalisation across India. It is necessary to examine these trends if any sound policy is to be shaped for countering extremism in the country. It also needs to be accompanied by a clarification on some of the narratives that often dominate national-level discussions on radicalisation and extremism.

Questioning Narratives

In analysing the IS footprint in Kerala, it is important to discuss the potency of some of the narratives on radicalism that are currently in place. First, the mainstream media tend to describe Kerala as a “highly radical” region of India, specifically referring to certain areas such as the northern district of Malapurram. However, the total number of Muslims from Malapurram who have been found involved in pro-IS activities is only 25 (out of a total population of 22 Million Muslims);⁵⁰ this is statistically minuscule. Moreover, in places like Malapurram, while one does witness an increase in the number of women wearing niqabs (or head veil, often falsely perceived as a sign of rising radicalism in an area), it has become more acceptable to see Muslims in bars; these anecdotal evidence show that the Muslim population in Kerala should not be characterised as homogenous.⁵¹

Second, it is also often said that Hindu-Muslim relations in Kerala are “damaged”; this is another overreach. While there have been reported incidents of Hindu-Muslim tensions, the relations between the two communities remain largely harmonious.⁵² Indeed, analysts have found that Kerala Muslims often develop strong bonds with people of other faiths; it is with their fellow Muslims who belong to other sects that they find more problems with.⁵³ For example, the Kerala Nadwathul Mujahideen (KNM) movement has always been at loggerheads with older Sufi organisations on account of the KNM’s perception that the latter has brought “innovation” into Islam, in effect disturbing the essence of the religion.⁵⁴

Third, many media reports often blame Salafism^a as the source of violent Islamism in India.⁵⁵ Indeed, most of the Keralites who joined IS

a Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam whose modern-day adherents claim to emulate “the pious predecessors” (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*; often equated with the first three

were found to have been part of Salafist organisations at some point in their lives. Yet, Salafism is not a monolith and has many different forms. In Kerala, institutional Salafism has been law-abiding by nature; its representative groups in the state, including the KNM (and its splinter cells), have been embedded in the polity of Kerala since the 1920s and continue to denounce terrorism.⁵⁶ Indeed, most of the arrested individuals or those recruited to IS were not part of any formal Kerala groups due to their unwillingness to support violence or migration to IS territory.

This also plays into another fear: the role of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states in fomenting radicalism by funding madrasas and other institutions across India and specifically in Kerala due to the intimate connections within the two regions. To be sure, Saudi Arabia has pumped huge amounts to religious and cultural institutions such as madrasas and foundations across the country and in Kerala.⁵⁷ However, these Saudi-supported activities have fueled more intra-religious tensions rather than inter-religious ones, since Salafist institutes often target pre-existing Sufi traditions. Moreover, in many Gulf nations, it is prohibited (especially for non-locals) to organise religious talks without official sanction— a provision made after the 9/11 attacks to prevent the expansion of radical networks.⁵⁸ Failure to do so can result in arrest and/or deportation. This reduces the chances of Indian Muslims propagating beliefs that are hateful towards other religions.

generations of Muslims) as closely and in as many spheres of life as possible. Different scholars of Islam throughout history have striven to emulate the early Muslim generations in the legal sphere, in theological matters, or in both. The ideas espoused by these scholars have more or less culminated in the Wahhabi movement that started on the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century, which in turn helped spread a Salafi message to the rest of the Arab and Muslim worlds and even beyond. As such, the trend now referred to as 'Salafism' came about, expressing itself ideologically in teachings that are meant to present the trend as exclusively and meticulously adhering to the example of the *salaf*, while rejecting all other sources of influence. (Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion)

The chances, therefore, of Gulf involvement in fueling inter-religious disharmony are spurious in nature. Indeed, Indian Islahi Center's representing Malayalee Muslims (and specifically Salafists associated with KNM) in the Gulf is recognised officially by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations and has played a strong role in fostering communal harmony both abroad and in India.⁵⁹ It is also noteworthy that despite the supposed wariness about Saudi funding and involvement in extremist activities, India has also proven to be receptive to Saudi investments, trade, and security engagements.⁶⁰

PRO-IS CASES IN KERALA: IMPLICATIONS

Intelligence and police agencies have been training their spotlight on Kerala in the past few years, since the establishment of the so-called Islamic State, the state's increasing links with the Gulf region and the bridges between migrants and local religious ecosystems in the state. As discussed earlier, the advent of social media, broadband internet and smartphones have created new challenges for law enforcement, and new opportunities for extremists to develop ecosystems for disseminating their propaganda, discussing their physical movements, and planning and executing attacks.

A year before Baghdadi's Al-Nuri declaration of the caliphate, Indian law enforcement agencies have been watching sporadic cases of pro-IS activities in the country, mostly from the southern states. The pro-IS narratives observed in southern India did not only originate from West Asia, but also from Southeast Asia: one of the first pro-IS cases recorded in 2014 involved migrants between Singapore and Tamil Nadu.⁶¹ While much of the pro-IS narrative in Indian discourse have historically been tied with the conflict in Kashmir, the cases from Kerala have offered a more nuanced perspective on both Indian counter-terror and countering violent-extremism thinking. Counter-terrorism, or a

predominantly military approach, is largely expected to be less effective in a situation such as the one observed in Kerala's cases.

Kerala's historic relations and outreach towards West Asia predates many modern Indian state narratives and issues, specifically those revolving around counter-terrorism, countering violent extremism or, more generally, national security. It is imperative to remember that policies designed to counter terrorism in an era when the weaponisation of the internet, brought to the forefront by IS as a potent tool for recruitment and radicalisation should recognise the evolutionary nature of terrorism itself. For example, IS' online propaganda strategy has artfully used mainstream media as a carrier, giving them enough content to significantly increase their own visibility.

This means that IS propaganda online has not been the only problem, but the unprecedented airtime and print-space they had access to globally also helped create the levels of euphoria around the terror group to levels never seen before. This also included distribution of IS propaganda in multiple languages, both by IS itself (although rarely), but mostly by online channels supporting it. This increases the reach of IS manifold. In other instances, youths working with organisations such as the Popular Front of India (PFI), banned by some states in India, and others have been found to be propagating pro-IS chats on Facebook in Malayalam.⁶² Other languages such as Tamil and Bengali have also been used to spread pro-IS propaganda. After the Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, the claim released by IS media wing *Amaq News* was translated in both Malayalam and Tamil and widely circulated on social media.

Moreover, Hindu extremism, a growing issue in India is also something to consider in further studies on Kerala since it has been widely established that right-wing extremism, of which Hindu and Islamist Extremism are two branches often have reciprocal effects on

magnifying the other significantly.⁶³ This concern has been highlighted in pro-IS case files by the NIA as well, where alleged pro-IS radicals have mentioned activities and events relating to right-wing Hindu groups as one of the reasons for their affinity towards IS' erstwhile caliphate and their wish to travel there.

Fig. 2: IS claim of Sri Lanka attack translated into Tamil by pro-IS groups on Telegram⁶⁴

அமாக் நிறுவனத்திற்கு பாதுகாப்பு ஆதாரம்: ஐ.எஸ்.ஐ.எஸ் போராளிகள் நேற்று நேற்று முன்னதாக இலங்கையில் கூட்டணி அரசாங்கங்களின் குடிமக்கள் மற்றும் கிறிஸ்தவர்களின் குடிமக்களை இலக்காகக் கொண்ட தாக்குதல் நடத்தினார்கள்.

ترجمة خبر التنبئ للغة التاميلية



Kerala stands at a crucial juncture in dealing with transnational jihadist groups. Whether directly or indirectly, it has not been a historically massive challenge for Indian law enforcement agencies. Previously, the likes of Al Qaeda and Taliban have had a limited impact on Indian contexts of terrorism, even as they were targeted by the West and pulled into global public and policy discourse in the aftermath of 9/11 and the following America-led 'war on terror'.

Since much of Indian thinking on counterterrorism comes from a singular context—that of Kashmir—the challenges that an entity such as IS poses from a policy perspective aimed towards transnational jihadist groups is limited in its approach and does not holistically work to counter terror from a global perspective. As mentioned earlier, the advent of IS changed the landscape on how indoctrination, recruitment and perhaps even the very approach of global jihad works. There are

gaps both in policy and thought processes, and India has failed to look at a threat such as IS from a global perspective.

The cases in Kerala have showcased, first and foremost, the ad-hoc nature of current approaches to counterterrorism which were being simultaneously formulated and applied in the state. However, a comparative study of pro-IS cases across the country, from different states and backgrounds, shows certain common characteristics. First, it is the fact that radicalisation of the concerned person was not solely due to the Islamic State, or the propaganda it distributed online. Various localised factors come into play, ranging from religious indoctrination, cultural, social and economic variables. However, the facilitating factor for Kerala at least, are the historic connections the state's Muslims have had with the Gulf, magnified by migration patterns.

Law enforcement and intelligence agencies alike have taken cognisance (albeit still limited) of the situation created by the rise of IS. Cooperation with tech companies and social media platforms to counter radicalisation has been initiated, recognising the role the internet now plays in national security thinking. This paradigm often puts radicalisation on the forefront as the problem, and not terrorism. The movement of a radicalised person from thought to action is seen as the critical time where community, family and law can converge and intervene to stop a person from committing an act of terror.

Kerala was one of the first Indian states to implement a de-radicalisation programme, which started to take shape in 2015. Other states such as Maharashtra and Telengana also joined the list, along with state-led programmes against fake news and disinformation. De-radicalisation programmes in the state, and in other parts of India began taking shape around 2015, one year after the formation of the Islamic State when Prime Minister Narendra Modi appointed former chief of

India's Intelligence Bureau, Syed Asif Ibrahim, as Special Envoy on Countering Terrorism and Extremism.⁶⁵ Ibrahim was the IB's first Muslim chief, and started working on de-radicalisation strategies in 2014.

India's initial thinking around de-radicalisation programmes was inspired by the Saudi model. While the exact designs of these Indian programmes are not known, the nodal bodies that have devised them in cases such as Maharashtra have focused on issues such as promotion of democratic ideals in Urdu schools, compulsory National Cadet Corps (NCC) training, and collaboration with independent media outlets to propagate mainstream values of peace and harmonious co-existence.⁶⁶

The main tenet of Saudi Arabia's de-radicalisation programme was mostly targeted theologically and came into play around the 2005-2006 period in the post-9/11 era, working on the view that extremist views are due to the mistaken interpretation of Islam. The programme consists of religious re-education, psychological counselling, and reintegration process with the help of local communities after release from prison.⁶⁷ These de-radicalisation programmes are aimed mostly towards peripheral radicals, meaning the supporters and sympathisers who are under the scanner. This is in tune with most pro-IS cases coming from Kerala where the levels of radicalisation vary and can mostly be put under the bracket of 'sympathisers'.⁶⁸ However, these programmes are usually designed to be flexible to also be effectively used on radicalised individuals who are on the cusp or are leaning towards either committing an act of terror or travelling abroad with the aim of joining a terror group such as IS.⁶⁹

Overall, more than 3,000 people in Kerala are known to have gone through the de-radicalisation programmes successfully, via the 21 centres established across the state for this purpose.⁷⁰ A caveat is in

order: These numbers and success rates are either provided by government, or reports quoting anonymous police sources. Indeed, the very notion of “success” of a de-radicalisation programme is contentious within the academic community mostly due to the nature of these programmes being state-funded. Information is neither freely available nor independently verifiable. Most Indian de-radicalisation programmes are only a few years old, some even just a few months, such as that in Kerala. It will take many years—and only with the aid of transparent data—to ascertain with empirical analyses how these programmes have been working in the Indian context, and their place in the future of Indian counter-terror thinking.

CONCLUSION

The fall of the IS caliphate may have ended the territorial battle against the terror network. Yet, their ideology remains, and the internet is proving to be a potent tool for both radicalisation and recruitment for what has become largely an insurgency. The group has shifted strategies significantly, looking to attack targets across the world in an attempt to downplay the narratives of its end and showcase an ever-increasing reach across the world from Europe, to the African Sahel, and now Sri Lanka.

Kerala provides a different set of challenges for Indian security policymakers. The challenges presented in the cases emerging from Kerala have answers embedded more in practices under theoretical frameworks of countering violent-extremism (CVE), using community, society, education, financial stability and other similar optics to counter radicalisation. The immediate challenges in these approaches also exist in gaps between government and civil society, as much of the approach towards challenges posed towards threats like IS comes from intelligence and military/police aspects alone. Lack of public research,

databases and transparency from government institutions only add to the challenges in the fight against radicalisation.

Kerala could be made into a viable example of how radicalisation can be countered in India by going beyond traditional approaches against terror, which have been employed, for example in Kashmir. Transnational jihadist groups have transformed the very idea of terrorism into a 'Do-It-Yourself' online manual of violence. In the case of IS, selling a story of 'God needs you' rather than 'you need God', can be countered holistically in the future by employing holistic strategies rather than largely military measures, and recognising the evolutionary nature of these terror groups themselves. [ORF](#)

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