

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Why Fewer Indians Have Joined ISIS

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Summary

Indian security experts often struggle to explain the causes for the very low number of Indian Muslims on the rolls of global jihadist groups like ISIS and al Qaeda, in spite of the country being home to the third-largest Muslim population in the world, a history of communal riots since Partition, a spate of terror attacks conducted by Pakistan-based and backed groups, and an intractable insurgency in the country's only Muslim-dominated region of Kashmir. This issue brief not only collects and collates propositions attempting to answer this conundrum but also presents a few ideas of its own.

Beyond the 'Kumbaya'¹

The mystery behind the very few Indian names appearing in the long list of foreign fighters in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has puzzled strategic thinkers for some time now. This pleasant yet inexplicable surprise finds a historical precedent² in the conspicuous absence of Indians from the legions of foreign 'mujahideen' fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan in the 1980s and from the Taliban and al Qaeda's 'Islamic Emirate' of the 1990s.³ One of the reasons for the non-existent mujahideen from India could be that unlike some West Asian states then, India never had disposable radicals at home, nor would it ever pursue a policy of conveniently banishing them to foreign war theatres.

Thus, the apparent apathy of the Indian Muslims towards the ISIS' impassioned exhortations for global jihad is not a recent and isolated instance. It can also be viewed as the community's continuing rejection of the so-called global jihad, since the time it rose to prominence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region four decades ago.

Yet, barring a handful of perceptive articles and a few 'kumbaya' panegyrics that sing the praises of 'the peace-loving' Indian Muslim and a 'cohesive Indian socio-political milieu', strategic experts have not presented even a modicum of seriously researched or insightfully argued propositions (some of which will be discussed ahead) to explain this conundrum. This issue brief surveys some of the propositions and ideas published in journals or magazines or being aired in various seminars and conferences held on the subject of terrorism or radicalisation in India.

How can a country with the third-largest Muslim population in the world, which was partitioned over the issue of Islamism; has had a history of communal violence since independence; suffered a spate of terror attacks by homegrown and Pakistan-backed terrorists in recent decades; witnesses a continuing insurgency in the Muslim-majority Kashmir; and whose polity is still deeply divided over the Muslim question produce fewer adherents of ISIS and al Qaeda than many Western states having a much smaller Muslim population? The inability to find any clear answer or a set of answers to this question has led to the subject being dismissed as an

¹ 'Kumbaya' refers to an American folk song sung in scouting and summer camps in the 1930s, which was associated with professions of spiritual closeness and compassion. In recent usage, it is associated with holding naively optimistic views of the world and human nature. In the context of this paper, it refers to the seemingly ingenuous proposition that the Indian Muslim is essentially peaceful, has strong and friendly relations with other communities in the country, and is therefore immune to the radicalisation of al Qaeda and ISIS.

² In the period spanning 1980-1992, up to 20,000 foreign fighters are reported to have joined 'mujahideen' forces that fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. These fighters came from most Arab countries, Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh, Indonesia, The Philippines, the US and some European states. Not a single of them was Indian.

³ Thomas Hegghammer, **"The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad"**, *International Security*, 35 (3), Winter 2010/11, pp. 53-94.

irrelevant ‘non-issue’ or an academic red herring of little consequence. Some would argue that the Indian strategic community should consider even the relatively ‘few’ al Qaeda and ISIS cases as ‘too many’, given the danger a handful of terrorists can pose to national security.

However, such questioning in this instance is significant because it calls for the identification of those mysterious elements that promote immunity within the Indian society that hinder the spread of the global jihadist contagion. Counter-terrorism and security experts need to be aware of inhibiting factors that protect the Indian society from the menace of transnational terrorism which has spread to different parts of the world.

Many of the prevailing propositions and explanations are mostly speculative (albeit backed by some historical and statistical evidence) because the premise of the subject makes it difficult to be verified through empirical research. Even the most plausible of them only partially explain some of the reasons behind this phenomenon.

The Few Bad Eggs

It is interesting to note that out of India’s population of over 172.2 million Muslims (constituting 14.23 per cent of the Indian population),⁴ less than a 100 migrants (in several batches) are thought to have left for the ISIS territories in Syria and Afghanistan⁵, while 155 were arrested until last year for having ISIS links.⁶

These numbers constitute less than one per cent of the over 30,000 fighters from at least 85 countries who joined the so-called ISIS Caliphate by December 2015⁷, a count that reportedly swelled to around 40,000 in the following years. The number of recruits from India was much less than that of the European Union (EU), from where between 3,922 and 4,294 foreign fighters joined the ranks of the ISIS Caliphate by 2016.⁸ A breakdown of foreign fighters from the EU shows that over 1,700 of them came from France, 760 from Germany, an almost equal number from the United Kingdom (UK), and around 470 from Belgium.⁹ The numbers from Russia stood at above 2,500, while the tally from the former Soviet Republics

⁴ S. Rukmini and Vijaita Singh, **“Muslim population growth slows”**, *The Hindu*, March 19, 2015.

⁵ Mohammed Sinan Siyech, **“Understanding the Indian foreign fighter lacuna”**, *Observer Research Foundation*, January 31, 2020.

⁶ **“155 ISIS Operatives, Sympathisers Arrested So Far In India: Home Ministry”**, *NDTV*, June 25, 2019.

⁷ Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, **“What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?”**, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2018.

⁸ Bérénice Boutin, Grégory Chauzal et al., **“The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union: Profiles, Threats & Policies”**, *International Center for Counter Terrorism – The Hague*, April 2016, p. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.* Also see Hakim Khatib, **“How Many Foreign Fighters in Syria”**, *Middle East Online*, October 15, 2016.

exceeded 7,000 as early as 2015.¹⁰ In fact, Indian migrants to ISIS are even fewer than that of the Maldives (173),¹¹ a country having a population of less than 400,000 people.

The ‘Peaceful Indian Muslim’

Many well-meaning Indian politicians and Muslim leaders often vociferously state that Indian Muslims are peaceful citizens, who, unlike their co-religionists in other parts of the world, have embraced the pluralistic ethos and culture of India and have moderated the radical zeal and ardour of their faith to live peacefully and harmoniously with other communities in the country.

According to former diplomat Talmiz Ahmad: “The rejection of extremist doctrine and action by Indian Muslims results from India’s unique syncretic traditions that have fostered an extraordinarily pluralistic culture.”¹² Similarly, Manu Joseph, in his insightful article published in March 2019, states: “At the first sign of suspicious outsiders or activities, the local Muslims alert the police. India has faced very few terror attacks, not in spite of its Muslims but because of them.”¹³

To David Heyman, former United States Assistant Secretary for Homeland Security, the moderation of the Indian Muslim is reflective of the great Indian identity cherished by all its citizens. He states: “India was born a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-denominational society that embraces that diversity.”¹⁴

These laudable claims are difficult to contest for any Indian, who lives and breathes in the common and composite cultural air of the country every day. However, this is not a rigorous explanation; moreover, it makes convenient and sweeping generalisations about the Indian Muslim community. It does not anticipate a response to any obvious questions that might be raised against the proposition.

For one, the explanation could have acknowledged and addressed the fact that the Indian Muslim community is not entirely peaceful and has always had its fair share of radical elements that have been involved in communal riots and terrorist attacks. Though not many, homegrown terror groups such as the Indian Mujahideen, Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), the Base Movement (not to mention several Kashmiri secessionist groups) have posed a security threat. The community is also known for having its share of firebrand leaders, some of whom

¹⁰ Sounak Mukhopadhyaya, “[Security Service at Moscow Airport Detains Siberian Man Suspected to Join ISIS in Syria](#)”, *International Business Times*, September 24, 2015.

¹¹ “[The Maldives’ Foreign Fighter Phenomenon - Theories and Perspectives](#)”, *European Foundation for South Asian Studies*, Amsterdam, April 2020.

¹² Talmiz Ahmad, “[Why Indian Muslims Reject Extremist Doctrine](#)”, *The Wire*, November 13, 2019.

¹³ Manu Joseph, “[India’s Devout Muslims Show our Assumptions are Wrong](#)”, *Livemint*, March 04, 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

have even been jailed for making incendiary hate speeches. Many Pakistan-based terrorist groups have exploited vulnerable members of the community to carry out major terrorist attacks such as the Bombay blasts of 1993, Parliament attack of 2001, Mumbai terror attacks of 2008, etc.

Therefore, the idea that the Indian Muslim community is peaceful and has thus rejected al Qaeda and ISIS does not appear entirely convincing. The real issue is that despite the existence of several fundamentalist and radical elements, the Indian Muslim community has so far avoided joining global jihadist groups in large numbers, which remains an unanswered question.

Myth of Sufi Islam vs Militant Salafism

A similar, but slightly different explanation posits that the Indian Muslims mainly follow Sufism, a peaceful strain of Islam, which inhibits them from joining its more fundamentalist and militant antithesis, namely Salafi-Wahhabism. It is argued that Sunni terrorism in the world is mainly led by Salafi jihadist organisations like al Qaeda and ISIS, barring a few Hanafi-Deobandi groups like the Taliban and Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In this regard, noted historian Romila Thapar states that “Sufi teachers played a central role in the interaction with Bhakti sects and gave Indians a unique belief-system. This consisted of teachers who, brought up either as Hindus or Muslims, gave up the formal tenets and rituals of their faith and propounded devotion to a personal god, while emphasizing social ethics, social equality and tolerance. This was faith of most Indians, Hindus and Muslims, for 500 years.”¹⁵

There is no doubt that Sufism has helped cultivate a syncretic ethos in the Indian society, but the claim that Indian Hindus or Muslims have given up their formal religious tenets, dogma or rituals for the sake of a collective faith is untrue. It is also not correct to assert that Muslims in India exclusively follow the Sufi school of Islam, nor is there any merit in the idea of viewing the Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadeeth or even Salafi beliefs as problematic vis-à-vis a supposedly benign Sufism. It is important to note that even the founding ideologues of Salafism such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ahmad Shah Sirhindi were practitioners of Sufism, although they criticised the scholasticism of some Sufi orders.

Besides, many adherents of Sufism have been known to indulge in acts of violent extremism over the ages. For instance, the Sufi group named Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Order (JRTN) led by former Saddam Hussain loyalist Izzat Al

¹⁵ Talmiz Ahmad, n. 12.

Dourri colluded with ISIS in fighting the current Iraqi dispensation.¹⁶ Similarly, it is mainly the Sufi Barelvi adherents who persecute and even kill Pakistani Christians on the charge of making blasphemous remarks.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, Sufism teaches peace and universalism but the existence of Christian and Buddhist militant groups goes a long way to prove that extremist violence can be perpetrated even by followers of largely non-violent religions or ideologies.

As for Salafism, the movement is too broad and means different things to different people. Many Salafis of northern Africa follow the teachings of the founder (Jamaluddin Afghani) to embrace Western rationalism and enlightenment. The overwhelmingly large majority of Salafi-Wahhabis in West Asia are known as 'Quietists' because of their belief in eschewing politics and violence which they view as 'spiritually corrupting influence'. The predominantly Salafi-Wahhabi states of the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, are home to millions of Indian and foreign expatriates of various religious denominations, which shows the moderate face of Salafi-Wahhabism.

When it comes to non-Muslim places of worship, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are not better or worse than Shiite Iran or Sunni Hanafi Turkey. Still, Ibadism-dominated Oman (a school of Islam having strong theological affinities with Wahhabism) has several Hindu temples, most notably the over hundred-year-old Shiva temple in Muscat. In the UAE, the grand BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir is being built in Abu Dhabi, which will be the second Hindu temple in that country after the Shiva-Krishna Mandir in Dubai. Thus, the fact that al Qaeda and ISIS have come from a virulent offshoot of Salafism does not make Salafi-Wahhabi a problematic community in and of itself. Thus, the false binary of 'peaceable Sufi versus militant Salafi' does not make for an informed discussion, nor does it help answer the apparent Indian Muslim revulsion to global jihadism.¹⁸

Poverty and Fear Factor

Some counter-terrorism scholars, namely Kabir Taneja of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and Mohammed Sinan Siyech of the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), have presented a more thought-provoking explanation over why Indian Muslims have refrained from joining global jihadist groups such as al Qaeda and ISIS.

¹⁶ Thomas Gibbons Neff, **"ISIS Not Alone in their Conquest of Iraq"**, *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2014.

¹⁷ Kriti M. Shah, **"Pakistan's Ugly Truth: The Rise of radical Barelvi Islam"**, *Observer Research Foundation*, November 13, 2018.

¹⁸ Mohammad Alyahya, **"Don't Blame Wahhabism for Terrorism"**, *The New York Times*, October 19, 2016.

They make the case that Indian migration to the former ISIS-held territories in Syria and Iraq did not happen in large numbers due to logistical problems. They claim that Western migrants to the ISIS Caliphate could fly to Turkey with a passport and easily obtain an air ticket. However, the less well-to-do Indian ISIS enthusiast found the trip too expensive and the journey to the ISIS dystopia too treacherous. Thus, Siyech states: “The passport ownership rate in India stood at 5% in 2017, with Muslims (of whom more than 67% live in poverty) plausibly comprising an even smaller group. For those few who undertook the long process of obtaining a passport, the visa requirements to enter Turkey for Indians were quite strenuous...Adding to this, the idea of travelling to a foreign conflict-ridden land where Arabic (a non-India Muslim language) is spoken without any combat training made it even easier for Muslims to stay back.”¹⁹

On the face of it, this explanation appears plausible in that it presents a more realistic reason for the fewer number of Indian fighters in the ISIS ranks and avoids the speculative theorising of other propositions. However, it has its own shortcomings. A large number of Indians work in Gulf countries and have become quite adept at migrating to countries of West Asia. In fact, over 25,000 Indians currently live and work in Iraq²⁰, mainly in Erbil, the capital of the northern region of Kurdistan, which was close to the territories held by ISIS earlier.

In addition, fighters from other South Asian countries would have also faced somewhat similar economic and logistical hardships, yet migrants from Maldives (which sent 173 migrants to ISIS)²¹, Bangladesh (40)²², Philippines (100), etc., turned up in much larger numbers at the gates of the ISIS proto-state.

Turf War with Pakistan-Backed Groups

There is also the argument that the Indian subcontinent has a plethora of old, well-entrenched radical groups (such as Jamaat-e-Islami, Lashkar-i-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahideen, etc.) which new terror conglomerates like ISIS are finding difficult to dislodge.²³

However, this argument fails to explain the success of ISIS and al Qaeda in other parts of the Muslim world, such as in Africa and Southeast Asia, which have also

¹⁹ Mohammed Sinan Siyech, n. 5.

²⁰ D.P. Satish, **“About 25,000 Indians Safe in Iraq Amid US-Iran Face-off; Embassy Advised to Not Allow New Workers”**, *News18 World*, January 08, 2020.

²¹ European Foundation for South Asian Studies, n. 11.

²² Prapti Rahman, Rina Chadijah, Muzliza Mustafa and Jason Gutierrez, **“Bangladesh, Other Countries Brace for Possible Return of IS Fighters”**, *Benar News*, March 26, 2019.

²³ Vicky Nanjappa, **“In a crowded terror market, ISIS looks to set Global Islamic Council in Kashmir”**, *OneIndia*, June 23, 2018.

seen homegrown terrorism for a long time. Even when al Qaeda and the Taliban were ruling the roost in Afghanistan in the 1990s, they could hardly intervene in India. It is also noteworthy that while ISIS has found a strong base in Afghanistan, in spite of its arch-rival Taliban's pre-existing presence, it struggles to find any organisational footing in India.

Here, the superlative performance of Indian security agencies cannot be praised enough for maintaining constant vigil, for always being ahead of the curve in foiling attacks of global jihadist groups against the country. However, highly effective surveillance and prevention measures alone cannot explain the limited resonance and traction for their call among Indian Muslims.

Traditional Indian social and family values have also been viewed as an inhibiting factor, yet similar societies in the subcontinent—like in Maldives and Bangladesh—did not show equal resilience to the ISIS message.

Idea of Islamic State Not New to Indian Muslim

This issue brief presents a few explanations of its own to advance the ongoing debate, without making any claims of having found the proverbial “silver bullet” as a solution. The first proposition is that the West Asian Islamism does not appear as revolutionary a phenomenon to the Indian Muslim mind as it might to other Islamic communities around the world. For example, the idea of creating an Islamic state is something Indian Muslims have already dealt with and suffered the consequences of, with many families splitting up due to the creation of the now failing Islamic state of Pakistan. Therefore, any proposal for a new experiment in Islamism, whether by the brutally repressive Taliban or the terrorist proto-state of ISIS, fails to enthuse the Indian Muslim's imagination.

The call for restituting the Caliphate also does not appeal to most Indian Muslims. This is because Indian Muslim rulers never paid allegiance to any West Asian caliph, nor did they send their forces to foreign lands to fight for the glory of Islam. The replacement of Persian and Arabic languages in Indian courts with English and Indian vernacular languages as well as the flowering of Urdu literature has further reduced India's social and cultural links with West Asia.

Therefore, Indian Muslims developed their own distinctive theological schools like Deobandi and Barelvi and their own fundamentalist movements like the Tablighi Jamaat and Jamaat-e-Islami. Unlike other parts of the Muslim world, spanning North Africa to Southeast Asia, that have remained under the theological and cultural influence of Arabia, India has been able to develop its own versions of Islam and holds its own against West Asian influences.

Even radical and extremist Islamic movements such as Abul Ala Maududi's Jamaat-e-Islami were not subsumed by Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, Hasan Al Banna and Sayyid Qutb—the early ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood—acknowledged the formative impact of Maududi's political Islam on their intellect and in support of Jamaat-e-Islami, and yet the organisation has no branch in the Indian subcontinent till date.²⁴

In sum, Indian Muslims, both of the extremist and moderate kind, are comfortable in their own skins and barring a few exceptions in Kashmir and Kerala do not feel the need for any foreign interference in their religious, political and social affairs.

Muslim Clerics Declare India 'Dar al Aman'

For a long time, India did not figure prominently in the grand schemes of al Qaeda and ISIS because radical Salafi-jihadist ideologues consider India Muslims weak of will and bereft of religious ardour. For several centuries, radical leaders of West Asia have looked down upon Indian Muslims for having failed to fully Islamise the Indian subcontinent. In fact, the Mongol marauder Timur invaded India on the excuse of punishing Indian Muslim sultans for showing excessive tolerance toward their Hindu subjects²⁵, a sentiment shared by many religious extremists in West Asia to this day. Thus, even among the list of non-Arab Muslims (pejoratively called *Ajami* or 'mute') Indians feature below Turks and Iranians. Areeb Majeed, a young Indian Muslim who returned after joining ISIS in Syria, speaks of how ISIS made him and his other Indian compatriots do menial jobs like cleaning the toilet and providing water to soldiers and never trained them to go to war.²⁶

It is noteworthy that the Salafi-Wahhabi movement is said to have risen in opposition to the independent reasoning and analogous interpretations (*ijtihad* and *qiyas*) of the Hanafi and Shafai schools of Sunni jurisprudence, to which an overwhelmingly large majority of Indian Muslims subscribe. Many fundamentalist Salafi-Wahhabi ideologues even consider the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam (which include both the Indian Deobandi and Bareilvi schools) to be heretical because of their 'strict adherence' (*taqleed*) of Imam Abu Haneefa's jurisprudence. This Salafi-Hanafi divide was the main reason for al Qaeda hard-liners like Abu Qatada and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi²⁷ to oppose the Hanafi-Deobandi Taliban's emirate as

²⁴ **"Al-Qaeda's Egyptian Prophet: Sayyid Qutb and the War on Jahiliya"**, *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor*, 1 (3), May 05, 2005.

²⁵ **"Timur: Turkic Conqueror"**, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, July 20, 1998.

²⁶ **"I cleaned toilets while in ISIS, Kalyan youth Areeb Majeed tells NIA"**, *The Times of India*, November 30, 2014.

²⁷ Brynjar Lia, **"Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's Critique of Hard Line Salafists in the Jihadist Current"**, *CTC Sentinel*, 1 (1), December 2007.

'Islamic' in the 1990s, and this doctrinal divide remains the principal reason for Salafi ISIS to oppose Taliban to this day.

In addition to doctrinal issues, Salafi jihadists dislike Indian Muslims for having embraced citizenship of a secular nation and to have refused Shariah-based governance since medieval times. For this reason, ISIS equates Indian Muslims with their favourite hate term 'Murjiah', an extinct Muslim sect that refused to detest people on the basis of their faith.

This brings us to this issue brief's second explanation that the Indian clerical movements led by Darul Uloom Deoband, the Sufi as well as Barelvi schools hold strong sway over the behaviour of Indian Muslims. In March 2009, Darul Uloom Deoband issued a fatwa declaring India as 'dar al aman' (land of peace), where militant jihad is prohibited.²⁸ Similarly, a joint fatwa was issued by 70,000 Indian Muslim scholars against ISIS, Taliban, al Qaeda and other terrorist groups in 2015, which has helped in refraining a large number of Indian Muslims from joining the ranks of global jihadist terror groups.²⁹

Indian Inclusiveness an Antidote to ISIS

It should also be noted here that violent extremism and terrorism fester in an environment of repression and exclusion. West Asian polities, where dissent is often quashed, find expression only in violent outbursts and so the region suffers most from jihadist violence than any other part of the world.

The third explanation is that violent extremism does not thrive on the Indian soil for long. Here, the bearded Indian Muslim man and burqa-clad women freely walk the bazaars of Indian towns and villages, just as the naked Digambar Jain or the turbaned Sikh feel equally at home and remain proud of their religious and national identities.

Thus, Muslims find their identity and place in India, which even the liberal West does not openly accord to its increasingly diverse population in that it expects all communities to assimilate and imbibe Western values and ways of life. India's democratic polity and eclectic demographic allows even homegrown fundamentalist groups to live and express themselves, which inhibits the rise of exclusivist and violently extreme groups like ISIS and al Qaeda to fester. The cost-benefit analyses

²⁸ Zia Haq and Saumyajit Pattnaik, **"Fatwa declares India as being Islam-friendly"**, *Hindustan Times*, March 02, 2009; and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, **"Fatwa issued despite scorn from Muslim leaders"**, *The National*, March 06, 2009.

²⁹ Priyangi Agarwal, **"70,000 clerics issue fatwa against terrorism, 15 lakh Muslims support it"**, *The Times of India*, December 09, 2015; and Caroline Mortimer, **"70,000 Indian Muslim clerics issue fatwa against Isis, the Taliban, al Qaeda and other terror groups"**, *The Independent*, December 10, 2015.

of such terror mercenaries do not add up here and even a few misadventures fail to give the big returns that these groups find elsewhere.

Thus, the non-dualist (*Advaita*) celebration of opposites rolls on and even the absolutist elements are swept up in the cosmic sweep of the great Indian juggernaut.

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