

# IDSA

## *Policy Brief*

# Lone Wolf Attacks: An Assessment in the Indian Context

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## *Summary*

If the IS has been able to successfully recruit Indians for the war in Syria and provide technical support for their travel, it is a matter of time before they find recruits willing to employ violence in India itself. In view of past examples, the most likely methodology that the IS will adopt would be the exploitation of real or perceived religious grievances. The resultant radicalisation is likely to be employed to encourage lone wolf attacks. Lone wolves willing and attempting to undertake terrorist attacks in India face both challenges and opportunities.

There have been a series of lone wolf terrorist strikes across the world. The 2014 Sydney hostage crisis and Boston Marathon bombing are among the prominent incidents. A lone wolf attack is

undertaken by a very small group or an individual in support of a larger cause, but without the overall supervision or support of a terrorist organisation. The potential for such attacks in various parts of the world is evident from the call given by the Islamic State (IS) encouraging its supporters and sympathisers, who are not formally enlisted cadres, to undertake lone wolf strikes. India has remained free of the phenomenon until now. This situation could, however, change as is indicated by some distinct shifts in the nature of the terrorist challenge confronting the country.

Lone wolf attacks in the United States, Europe, Africa and Asia have been carried out either by an individual or by a couple of terrorists with access to explosives, light weapons and ammunition. Lone wolves tend to strike at a place associated with their personal frustration, like a school, college, or a mall. Attacks may also result from their larger disillusionment or anger with society, which is fuelled by a radical ideology that encourages the use of violence to rid the world of its ills or seek revenge for the perceived injustice towards people of a certain religion. A look at past cases suggests that these were either related to psychological problems of individuals or the influence of closed sects, as in the case Frazier Glenn Miller in the US in 2014 for instance.<sup>1</sup>

The Al Qaeda, and more recently the Islamic State have attempted to extend the reach of terrorism for furthering their extremist agenda. The threat emanating from the IS in particular is all the more potent as a result of the methods employed for propagating its message. The sophisticated use of social media, YouTube and Skype amongst others, has enabled the IS to undertake electronic outreach the extent of which remains unparalleled in the history of terrorist groups.<sup>2</sup> This is accompanied by simple yet hard hitting messages that target the youth. The IS has been able to exploit the inherent frustrations and pent up fury which has always characterised a segment amongst the youth in any society and channel it towards radical ideas and utopian salvation. The resulting

terrorism challenge has been reinforced by the open encouragement of the IS to undertake lone wolf attacks across the world, especially against countries like the US, UK and France, which are seen as a direct threat to the spread of its brand of Islam.<sup>3</sup> This list of countries to be targeted by lone wolf terrorist attacks also includes India.<sup>4</sup> The IS's radical ideology has succeeded in providing the means, the way and targets, all as part of an overall strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> "White supremacist convicted of Jewish site killings," *CBS News*, August 31, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/frazier-glenn-miller-white-supremacist-convicted-of-jewish-site-killings/>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Johnson, "How the ISIS is waging a 'war of ideas' through social media," *The Daily Signal*, June 8, 2015, <http://dailysignal.com/2015/06/08/how-isis-is-waging-a-war-of-ideas-through-social-media/>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "ISIS calls for 'lone wolf' US supporters to show up at the homes of soldiers and 'slaughter them'," *Daily Mail*, September 17, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2759922/Top-US-security-threats-lone-wolves-Syria-fighters-officials.html>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "ISIS may carry out 'lone wolf' terror attacks in India, warns Minister Kiren Rijiju," *The Times of India*, November 26, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ISIS-may-carry-out-lone->

### Indian Experience

The IS has attempted to exploit the chasms in society as a result of perceived religious persecution. This is accompanied by articulate, strong, reasoned and clear messages which draw the youth away from the chaos and inherent fragility of modern societies. While India has not

experienced a lone wolf terrorist strike, there have been cases of recruitment for propagating the IS ideology and participating in the ongoing conflict in Syria.

Mehdi Masroor Biswas, a techie based in Bangalore, has been identified as the most

influential IS tweeter.<sup>5</sup> His indoctrination in cyber space is only one example. There have also been a number of other cases of Indian volunteers recruited by the IS. The case of Areeb Majeed is an example of an individual whose extremism was fuelled by radical views expressed on social media.<sup>6</sup> He was contacted through the social media and given specific instructions through Skype on how to reach Syria.

The case of Salman Mohiuddin of Hyderabad is not very different.<sup>7</sup> He had extremist views on Islam and over a period of time the impact of IS cyber propaganda convinced him to attempt to join the group. While Mohiuddin's premature arrest did stall this move, his intent to return to India from Syria to wage a war is reflective of the potential of IS cyber radicalisation.

If the IS has been able to successfully recruit Indians for the war in Syria and provide technical support for their travel, it is a matter of time before they find recruits willing to employ violence in India itself. In view of past examples, the most likely methodology that the IS will adopt would be the exploitation of real or perceived religious grievances. The resultant radicalisation is likely to be employed to encourage lone wolf attacks. Lone wolves willing and attempting to undertake terrorist attacks in India face both challenges and opportunities.

### Challenges to Undertaking Lone Wolf Attacks

- Unlike in the US where sophisticated weapons can be easily bought by ordinary citizens, gaining access to such weaponry in India is difficult as is the ability to obtain licenses. Automatic weapons, which are capable of delivering a heavy volume of fire in short periods, are easily available in the US. In contrast, only country-made weapons are available in India and these are not ideally suited for lone wolf attacks.

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wolf-terror-attacks-in-India-warns-minister-Kiren-Rijju/articleshow/49939251.cms, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson T.A., "Pro-IS Twitter handle: Mehdi Masroor Biswas booked under UAPA," *The Indian Express*, June 02, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/pro-is-twitter-handle-mehdi-masroor-biswas-booked-under-uapa/>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Sagnik Chowdhury, "Jr. Owaisi, e-books had impact on Indian ISIS recruit Adeb Majeed, files show," *The Indian Express*, November 19, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/i-was-content-i-did-all-i-could/>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Sagnik Chowdhury, "Wanted to join IS, return to wage war against India: Hyderabad engineer Salman Mohiuddin," *The Indian Express*, November 19, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/i-would-join-is-return-to-wage-war-against-india-salman-mohiuddin/>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

- Indians have not displayed the psychological willingness to undertake high risk attacks. There have not been any *fidayeen* attacks undertaken by Indians in the country. Such attacks in the past have either been undertaken by Tamil guerrillas from Sri Lanka or by Pakistan-sponsored foreign terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir.
- The only major indigenous terrorist group which has operated on a pan-Indian scale is the Indian Mujahideen (IM). There is a possibility that radicals associated with this group might attempt lone wolf strikes especially given that one of IM's breakaway factions has joined the IS.<sup>8</sup> However, recent arrests of its senior hierarchy has proved to be a setback not only for this group but also other radical elements who might have been motivated to indulge in violence either as organised cadres or as lone wolves.
- Over a period of time, the deployment of private security at high value targets like malls, hotels and schools has been upgraded, which acts as a deterrent to an individual aiming to target them. Even if such measures continue to remain inadequate in the face of a determined attacker armed with sophisticated weapons, the fact remains that they are likely to instil a degree of caution in the minds of lone wolves.
- The absence of past examples of lone wolf attacks in India inculcates the fear of the unknown in the minds of potential volunteers.
- The areas most affected by communal tensions and differences between religious groups can best be identified on the basis of the history of riots. States that have witnessed the maximum number of cases of communal riots include Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka. However, while Maharashtra and Karnataka have witnessed some recruitment into radical ideological groups like the IS, there is no indication so far that this has happened in the other affected states. Surprisingly, recruitment to IS has been reported from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, states that have barely witnessed riots in the last two years. This problematises the purported linkage between domestic communal tensions and the resultant appeal of radical ideology in pursuit of a Caliphate as propounded by the IS.

### India's Vulnerabilities

- Past cases of terrorist attacks suggest that the reactions of the local police remain inadequate. While this was clearly apparent during 26/11, which was a well-orchestrated attack sponsored by Pakistan, responses to subsequent terror attacks do not indicate police capacities that are necessary for undertaking clinical operations to limit potential damage.
- Heavy concentration of people in public areas offers a large number of potential targets. While some installations have utilised the limited protection offered by

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<sup>8</sup> "ISIS in India: Around 17 "missing" set to join the terror outfit," *Deccan Chronicle*, August 26, 2015, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/150826/nation-current-affairs/article/isis-india-over-17-missing-set-out-join-terror-outfit>, accessed on December 09, 2015.

private security measures, a large number of public places continue to remain vulnerable.

- A fast growing population, especially youth with access to mass media and social media, opens limitless avenues of unrestrained radical propaganda. This increases the possibility of subversion, given the unverified yet powerful platforms of messaging that promise liberation from everyday frustrations of the youth at their places of work, in society and across borders in conflict zones.
- While the popular discourse seems to suggest an increasing level of intolerance, the reality is quite different. For instance, the number of incidents of communal violence increased only marginally from 644 in 2014 to 650 in 2015 (based on data till October, 2015).<sup>9</sup> However, despite this reality, unrestrained propaganda tends to raise alarm especially amongst vulnerable sections and minorities, who could become victims of fear mongering.

The above assessment of the challenges and opportunities for undertaking lone wolf attacks suggests that India is not as vulnerable as some of the countries that have faced this threat in the recent past. However, concerted attempts at radicalisation by the IS have indeed achieved a degree of success. This can be accentuated further to encourage lone wolf attacks, even if volunteers do not formally join the group. It is therefore important to focus attention on potential targets for radicalisation in order to undertake suitable proactive measures.

Based on the likely affiliation of such attacks with the IS and past patterns, the segment of population that emerges as a potential recruiting base is likely to have certain distinct characteristics. *First*, lone wolf attacks are more likely to be carried out by individuals who are influenced by either perceptions of injustice and persecution, as in the case of IM or others who are misled by the appeal of groups like the IS. *Second*, past instances of subversion, especially in relation to IS volunteers from India, indicates a pattern that is a useful starting point. Most are young and more likely within the age group of 18 to 30 years. *Third*, volunteers are likely to come from the middle class and educated families, in contrast the deprived, landless and exploited segments who tend to join insurgent groups. *Fourth*, most individuals have been influenced by content on the social media. This indicates easy access to internet, including the exploitation of voice over internet protocol (VOIP) communications. *Fifth*, the regional profile of volunteers suggests a bias towards states like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. *Sixth*, in certain cases, there is an external element to the process of recruitment, wherein, individuals located outside India have been subverted and recruited. *Last*, in most cases, family members are not likely to be aware of the radicalisation of the individual concerned. So unlike the past, they will not be able to facilitate reporting and stalling of the recruitment of volunteers through the intervention of government agencies.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Lok Sabha Starred Question No. 21, of December 01, 2015, <https://164.100.47.190/loksabhaquestions/qhindi/6/AS21.pdf>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "Ex-army officer reports daughter, gets NIA to stop her from joining Islamic State," *firstpost.com*, September 22, 2015, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/ex-army-officer-reports-daughter-gets-nia-to-stop-her-from-joining-islamic-state-2441062.html>, accessed on December 09, 2015.

### Policy Options

India remains relatively immune from hostile action. The seemingly obvious contradictions of a multitude of religions, languages, castes, beliefs may still not have become the perfect picture of unity in diversity, but the level of integration is worthy of emulation, especially in light of the evidence produced by the number of recruits joining the IS from Europe.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that measures that need to be undertaken should not give in to calamitous pronouncements and instead focus on proactive measures against the potential threat.

The root of an individual's decision to undertake a possibly suicidal lone wolf attack, especially motivated by radical ideologies, is linked to a deeply held belief of injustice along with a loss of faith in the societal fabric. Rather than viewing this as a threat that needs to be eliminated, there is a need to see it as an ailment that requires professional care and support. With this as the basis for approaching potential and exiting recruits, the following measures are recommended:

- 1) The approach must follow the sequence of *awareness of the contagion, detection of potential and existing recruits* and finally *remedial action*.
  - The recent attacks in France and the large scale recruitment to IS has contributed to raising awareness regarding radicalisation the world over. However, there is a need to focus attention on potential target groups through monitoring and infiltration of social media sites that are the principle source of radical propaganda.
  - Big data analytics must be used to discern the level of radicalisation of potential recruits, their networks and sources of information, funding and leadership in order to help unravel the roots of radicalisation.
  - The police and intelligence services are neither trained nor equipped to handle the vital aspect of rolling back radicalisation in society. Helplines should be created and manned by professional counsellors and psychologists who can help reverse the process as part of the efforts of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) supported by the state.
  - While the above is a suitable course of action for potential and raw recruits, the hardened ideologues must be prosecuted under the counter terrorism laws of the state.
  - The example of the IS suggests that their legal advisors carefully exploited existing loopholes and gaps in legal mechanisms to continue with propagation of radical ideologies in Europe. This raises the need for regular revision and tightening of laws to ensure that the same cannot be attempted in India.
- 2) The formation of National Security Guard regional hubs in the aftermath of 26/11 is a welcome step to neutralise future terrorist strikes. However, recent attacks indicate that the reaction time to a terror strike is likely to be of the utmost essence in minimising casualties. There is, therefore, a need for

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<sup>11</sup> Kukil Bora, "ISIS recruiting 'increasingly young' Europeans; About 4000 joined Islamist State in Syria: EU," *International Business Times*, June 18, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-recruiting-increasingly-young-europeans-about-4000-joined-islamic-state-syria-eu-1972462>, accessed on December 04, 2015.

specialised police teams to be trained and organised in every state to act as first-responders.

- 3) The nature of threat that groups like the IS represent is transnational in nature. Therefore, the momentum created in the aftermath of the Paris attacks must be carried forward to strengthen the “coalition of willing” to improve intelligence sharing mechanisms, reduce time for processing information requests, strengthen countering the finance of terrorism measures, and facilitate the extradition of hate mongers from their chosen place of immigration. The example of Sikh and Kashmiri groups in Europe and Canada is a case in point.

Attacks by home grown terrorists is a threat that has proved its nefariousness in the recent past. This is likely to be expanded through volunteers encouraged to undertake lone wolf attacks. India remains an important target for groups like the IS, which visualise the country’s democratic, secular and open social fabric as a threat to their concept of an Islamic Caliphate. It is therefore important to undertake suitable proactive measures to limit the potential damage that can be caused by such attacks.

## About the Author



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