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FROM TOI PRINT EDITION

A jihadist Halloween in New York: Islamic State may have imploded, but IS 2.0 is spreading across the world

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Sreeram Sundar Chaulia

Sreeram Sundar Chaulia is dean, Jindal School of International Affairs.

The terrorist attack in New York city on Halloween day – in which a speeding pickup truck ploughed into pedestrians and killed 8 persons – is a reminder of how the threat of Islamic State (IS) is morphing. The assailant, an Uzbek apparently inspired by the IS command to use vehicles to strike at ‘infidels’ in Western cities, has conveyed a larger

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message through his diabolical act that the nature of the terrorist problem is shifting and so must the policy response to it.

Since IS declared its Caliphate in 2014 by capturing vast territorial tracts in Iraq and Syria, the prime focus of international attention has been on liberating those lands. And in this endeavour, the two broad military coalitions led by Russia and the US have succeeded through combat operations and intense bombing campaigns. From a peak of 90,800 sq km under its control in 2015, IS is down to ruling over a mere 3% of Iraq and 5% of Syria today.

The bulk of the IS leadership and rank and file have been killed, detained and scattered. The flow of foreign fighters to defend the rump Caliphate after the fall of major cities like Mosul and Raqqa has reduced drastically. So battered is IS on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria that its fighters are negotiating with the Iraqi or Syrian governments to escape alive. In defeat, the jihadists famed for a culture of martyrdom are showing pragmatic instincts to merely survive.

Yet, in spite of progress in the military realm, the ideological virus of IS thought and philosophy has penetrated many parts of the world and is nowhere close to being vanquished. The spate of attacks by



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IS-influenced jihadists in Europe and the US continues. Typically low-tech in modus operandi, the series of truck ramming, stabbing and shooting incidents carried out by Muslim immigrants with no direct training or funding from IS but radicalised over the internet or via religious networks has challenged national security across the Western world.

IS's so-called autonomous 'provinces' or Wilayat in countries as far apart as Afghanistan, the Philippines and Egypt are also perking up and demonstrating a resilience that is confounding states and drilling fear into affected populations. The massive civilian casualties being caused by attacks on Shia minorities while praying in mosques in Afghanistan and on Christian minorities in churches of Egypt are trademark symbols of IS branches getting bolder, not feebler, and wreaking havoc.

In the Philippines, IS-affiliated jihadists took over the southern city of Marawi this year and resisted a huge army assault using daredevil tactics for a record 154 days without caving in. In Bangladesh, IS-smitten groups have increased activity levels and displaced previously established jihadist movements.

All these instances are manifestations of IS's fundamentalist beliefs which are thriving far away from its core base in the



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Middle East. Like its global predecessor Al Qaeda, IS is grafting itself on to pre-existing local conflicts and grievances in Asia and Africa and arising as a new force.

The big mistake that many governments are committing when faced with this IS 2.0 is to underestimate it or dismiss it as a smokescreen created by old, traditional terrorist groups. When IS was ascending in the Middle East in early 2014, then American president Barack Obama made light of the threat by comparing it to a 'JV team' with no main players. Late reaction instead of early preemption enabled IS to mushroom into a global menace.

Governments and societies in Asia and Africa must learn lessons from past errors of complacency and concentrate on tackling IS's intolerant ideation system. The same holds for Western countries where migrant communities are being attracted to IS propaganda as a catharsis to solve identity crises and culture clashes.

Alongside conventional counter-terrorism methods like surveillance and intelligence-gathering about suspects, a heavier investment is required in de-radicalisation programmes among disaffected communities, especially isolated youth within them.

The IS idea and premise that non-Muslims and non-Sunnis are oppressors



or sub-humans who deserve annihilation has to be overwritten with a liberal idea of the equality and shared humanity of all. Barring such a reformation in values, the Caliphate will reincarnate itself in its provincial avatar and keep draining state resources and undermining social fabrics. The war began in the mind and it will only end there.

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