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ISIS Attack in Afghanistan

Why in News?

ISKP terrorist killed Sikh worshippers in a gurdwara in Kabul, Afghanistan.

What happened?

- Identifying the attacker as Abu Khalid Al-Hindi (Mushin) from Kerala, ISIS claimed the attack as “revenge for Muslims of Kashmir”.
- Later, Afghan security forces arrested the leader of ISKP and others.
- ISKP is the Islamic State Khurasan Province, which is the ISIS branch in Afghanistan-Pakistan.
- The claim of using a single foreign fighter, the modus operandi, and weak propaganda for the gurdwara attack is not a signature of ISIS.
- However, owning up to the ISKP attacks could suggest a possible shift in post-Caliphate strategy.

What are the recent threats in the region?

- In April 2019, after the fall of the Caliphate (March 23, 2019), ISIS mounted spectacular attacks on targets in Sri Lanka.
- In March 2020, in Kabul, ISIS claimed mortar attacks on President Ashraf Ghani’s inauguration and on US troops in Bagram base twice.
- On May 4, 2020, ISKP posted a picture and a video of an Afghan officer in their custody, and pictures of his “beheading”.
- The chain of events does necessitate closer scrutiny of the ISKP threat in the region.

What is happening between ISIS and Taliban?

- In recent years, especially after the US-Taliban agreement, the Taliban have repeatedly claimed to have finished ISKP in Afghanistan.
- In its weekly, criticising the agreement, ISIS has exhorted supporters to target “enemies” as their resources are tied up with Covid-19.
- Lately, a few lone wolf attacks have been reported across Europe.

What is Wilayat Khurasan?

- The Wilayat Khurasan comprises of parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia.
- It is a concept born in January 2015, when ISIS designated Hafiz Saeed, a former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commander as “Wali”.
- In October 2014, Hafiz Saeed and TTP spokesperson Sheikh Maqbool suddenly pledged allegiance to ISIS.
- Around this time, the ISIS ideology was gaining traction in Pakistan.

How did the group recruit?

- The group went **online for propaganda and recruitment** of fighters especially from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Central Asia.
- However, this recruitment was very small, except from Pakistan.
- Accounts from the West described the group as ISKP.
- Online recruiters from Kashmir were, Aijaz Ahangar and his son-in-law, reportedly killed in Nangarhar (Afghanistan).
- In no time, local fighters of ISKP displaced the Taliban from Nangarhar.
- Across the border, the Pakistan Army had a formidable presence to control cross-border movement for its own security.
- It has taken close to 5 years for ISKP to be dislodged from a small area.

What is the geographical expanse of ISKP?

- The geographical spread of ISKP, its selective and big attacks and its “near peaceful coexistence” with Taliban cannot be misread.
- The group has never gained much traction in Afghanistan or Pakistan.
- Except claiming a few big attacks in Kabul and Quetta, ISKP has not shown any keenness to expand its areas of influence.
- Post-Caliphate, no mass movement of regional foreign fighters back to the fold of ISKP has been reported.

Are there Indians in ISKP?

- The Caliphate was gaining traction among foreign fighters globally.
- Subsequently, a group of Indians from Kerala, including women and children, had migrated to Afghanistan around 2016-17.
- Around 60-plus Indians were believed to be living in the territory controlled by ISKP in Nangarhar.
- In 2019, over 1,400 people with ISKP, including fighters and their families, surrendered before Afghan forces in Nangarhar.
- These included fighters from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.
- Some Indian women and children were in this group.

- With the surfacing of Mushin, it appears that a few more Indians may have joined ISKP.

What are the online entities?

- In recent times, online entities called the Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP) or Islamic State-Kashmir (IS-K) have surfaced.
- Their focus is on propaganda and recruitment of Indians, or of fighters from the region, for attacks on Indian interests.
- The activities of ISHP and IS-K are closely linked to ISKP.
- In March 2020, Delhi Police Special Cell arrested a Kashmiri couple being linked to ISHP/IS-K.
- This may have been an attempt to test the waters with Indians, driven by personal grievances, radicalised in the name of ISIS.

How ISIS is trying to get momentum?

- Although the source of ISKP/ISHP/IS-K is known, this does not reduce the threats posed by them.
- Since ISIS is currently **claiming all verifiable attacks**, these entities have a ready-to-use platform for propaganda for recruitment.
- Moreover, through the Covid-19 phase, ISIS is becoming quite active in **cyberspace**.
- ISIS would own up to many attacks by the likes of the ISKP network.
- ISIS may not miss the opportunity to rope in and guide such networks to attack targets in the region.
- Apart from stemming radicalisation, it is critical to closely watch threats emerging in the region, especially for India and the West.

Source: The Indian Express



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