Easter Attacks in Sri Lanka - Expansion of IS in South Asia

What is the issue?

- A series of bomb blasts took place in Sri Lanka, killing close to 300 people and injuring many more.
- The bombings confirm the Islamic State's potent reach in South Asia.

What happened?

- Powerful explosions struck in quick succession at three hotels in the capital Colombo on Easter Sunday.
- Three churches were also targeted in that wave of blasts -
    i. Colombo's historic St. Anthony's Shrine
    ii. the St. Sebastian's church in the town of Negombo on the western coast, north of the capital
    iii. the Zion Church in the east coast town of Batticaloa
- Early reports suggest that two suspects involved in the attacks are Islamic State (IS) returnees from Syria and Iraq.

What does it suggest of IS?

- The 'Caliphate' that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi established across the Iraq-Syria border has been destroyed. Click here to know more.
- So IS, which controlled huge swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria, is now trying to establish itself in other new territories.
- The Sri Lanka bombings too confirm that the destruction of the physical Caliphate doesn't end the threat the group poses.
- It has raised concerns about the Islamic State's expansion into the South Asian region.
- The targets chosen as well as the occasion suggest that the bombings were aimed at gaining maximum global attention.

How is IS expanding?

- From early 2015, when it started losing territories, the IS started shifting its strategy from expanding territorially to expanding insurgency and terror.

- Significantly, South Asia has been one of its key targets.
- In Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan, the IS set up a wilayat (province).
- From here, it controls its South Asia operations, mainly recruitment of young men from the region.
- Over the last few years, the IS has carried out dozens of attacks in Afghanistan, mostly targeting the Shia-Hazara minority.
- In Pakistan, the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a splinter group of the Pakistan Taliban with IS links, carried out several terror attacks.
- It includes the 2016 Easter Sunday bombing in Lahore, targeting Christians.
- In Bangladesh, the IS claimed the July 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack.
- In India, it has not carried out any attack but has found dozens of recruits.

What are the emerging challenges for the States?

- **Young recruits** - The IS had recruited thousands of youth from South Asian nations such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka.
- Some of them joined the wilayat in Nangarhar and others travelled to Iraq and Syria.
- **New havens** - Now that the Caliphate has been destroyed, thousands of trained militants are left without a place to hide.
- Many of the recruits have retreated to pockets on the Iraq-Syria border or to the deserts in Syria, Iraq and Jordan.
- Several others returned to their own home countries, as in the case in Sri Lanka.
- Another challenge is that the IS still controls some territory in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. had not made much progress on its declared goal two years ago of defeating the IS in Afghanistan.
- **Ideology** - An equally difficult challenge is to counter the ideological narrative of the IS.
- The old conception that lack of education and poverty breed terrorism does not hold good in the case of the IS.
- Among the Sri Lankan bombers were some from one of the country's wealthiest families.
- Most of those who travelled to Afghanistan's IS territories from Kerala were also from upper middle class families.
- So it is the ideology of puritanical Salafi-jihadism that continues to attract the young, disaffected people.
- Thus, any counter-terror strategy, for it to be effective, should have a counter-narrative to the IS worldview, besides the security measures.

Source: The Hindu



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