

Counter-Radicalisation Strategy for Uttar Pradesh

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About the Author

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List of Abbreviations

AIMIM	-	All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen
ATS	-	Anti-Terrorist Squad
BIPSS	-	Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies
GBN	-	Gautam Buddha Nagar
IED	-	Improvised Explosive Device
IS	-	Islamic State
ISI	-	Inter-Services Intelligence
JeM	-	Jaish-e-Mohammad
KLF	-	Khalistan Liberation Force
LeT	-	Jamaat-ud-Dawa/Lashkar-e-Tayyaba
PFI	-	Popular Front India
SIMI	-	Students' Islamic Movement of India
SKN	-	Sant Kabir Nagar
UP	-	Uttar Pradesh

Counter-Radicalisation Strategy for Uttar Pradesh

Introduction

Uttar Pradesh is the most populated state in India and the fourth-largest in terms of land area. The state shares a border with Nepal and is in close proximity to both Bangladesh and Pakistan. Considering the population matrix of the state, vulnerability to radicalisation and subversion attempts from external forces is moderately high. According to a report from Niti Ayog, multidimensional poverty in Uttar Pradesh, which was 22.95% in 2019-21, has now come down to 17.40% in 2022-23¹. This represents, in terms of numbers, approximately 4 crore, or 40 million people, who are facing the impact of multi-dimensional poverty. The literacy rate in the state stands at 67.68% (77.28% for males and 57.18% for females), which is below the country's total literacy rate of 77.70%. The state is home to one of the highest percentages of the youth population in India.

The Muslim population, which makes up 19.26% of the state's population, is among the most vulnerable to radicalisation, due to several factors such as low literacy rates compared to other religious groups and a particularly high poverty headcount ratio². More importantly, the historical background of the ideologies currently present among sections of the Muslim population play a key role as catalysts for radicalisation³. One of the most well-known factors is the presence of the Deobandi sect of Islam in Uttar Pradesh, originating from Deoband in Saharanpur District of Western Uttar Pradesh, a version of which serves as the ideological framework for the Taliban.

Another factor that may play a role originates from the after effects of the events that led to partition in 1947 in the form of echoes of a sentiment that may have

unintentionally been passed down generations via social, familial, and environmental factors. These sentiments can be understood via three quotes from the late 19th and early 20th centuries (pre-partition period):

1. **Syed Ahmed:** He was the founder of Aligarh Muslim University, also known for his contributions in the field of modern education for Muslims. In his 1888 speech, he said, *“Suppose that the English community and the army were to leave India, taking with them all their cannons, their splendid weapons, and all else, who then would be the rulers of India? Is it possible that under these circumstances, two nations—the Mohammedans and the Hindus—could sit on the same throne and remain equal in power? Most certainly not. It is necessary that one of them conquer the other. To hope that both could remain equal is to desire the impossible and the inconceivable. But until one nation has conquered the other and made it obedient, peace cannot reign in the land.”*⁴
2. **Mohammad Iqbal:** He is known as one of the architects of Pakistan. In an article published in the Hindustan Review in 1909, he said, *“The expression Indian Muhammadan, however convenient it may be, is a contradiction in terms, since Islam in its essence is above all conditions of time and space. Nationality with us is a pure idea; it has no geographical basis. But in as much as the average man demands a material centre of nationality, the Muslim looks for it in the holy town of Mecca.”*⁵
3. **Mohammad Ali:** Born in Rampur state of British India (now Rampur district of Uttar Pradesh), he was a close associate of Gandhi and was the president of the Muslim League from 1878-1931. In his letter written to Gokhale in 1908, at the time of Congress' opposition to Bengal's partition, he wrote, *“I know how territorialism appeals to the Hindu mind. But it is unfair to demand the same intensity and fervour from Musalmans, who are and have been for 13 centuries 'a nation without a country'. We should be pardoned if we refuse to believe in the honesty of the declaration of unity, of men like Mr. Tilak, Mr. Dutt, and Mr. Madan Mohan Malaviya.”*⁶

While hardline separatist ideology is not prevalent in Uttar Pradesh within any specific community, it's undeniable that these ideas would be familiar to the youth of Uttar Pradesh even today, especially within certain Muslim communities.

Methodology

Using online resources such as Google Archives and records from South Asia Terrorism Portal⁷, a compiled list was formulated. This list consisted of all publicly accessible news reports involving arrests in Uttar Pradesh related to terror activities between 2019 and 2023. These records were then categorised based on the district, the terrorist organisation involved, and the nature of the arrests. An additional record of other Indian states involved in the arrest (e.g., the offender belonged to or resided in another state, the offender was collaborating with handlers from another state, the law enforcement of a state other than Uttar Pradesh was among the arresting agencies, etc.) was also made.

A separate category was created consisting of arrests for offences specifically involving radicalisation of others, possession or distribution of extremist content, and social fundraising for terror networks. Additionally, a record of the terror group or ideology in play during these offences was also maintained.

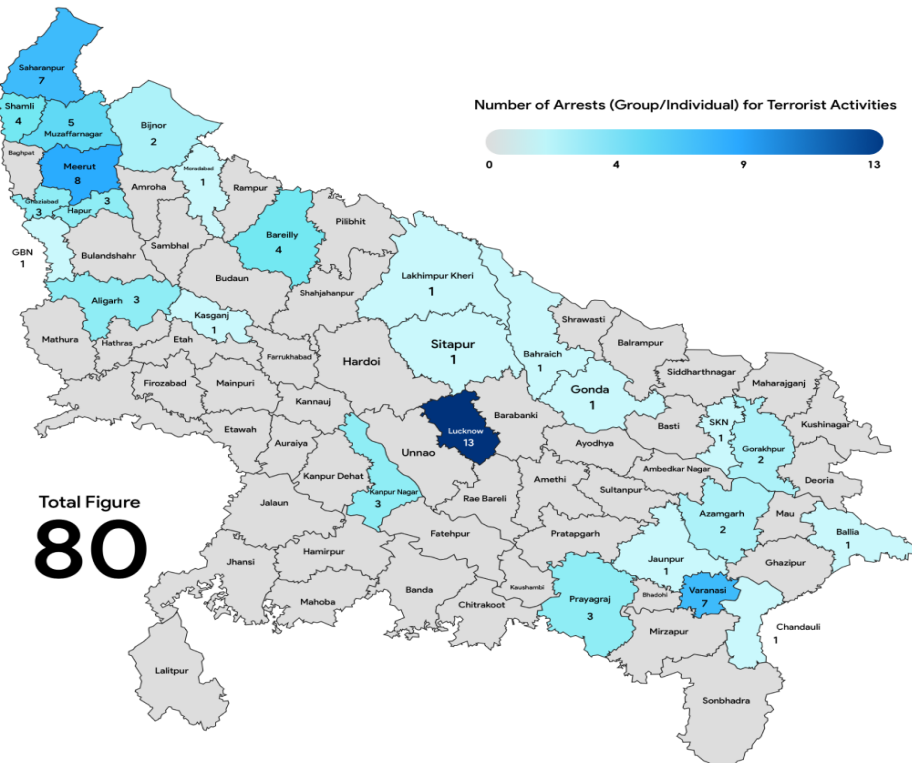
Analysis of Data

Looking at all terror related activities that took place in UP between 2019 and 2023, the presence of the following organisations in the form of representation or influence was found in UP:

1. Harkat-ul-Harb-e-Islam
2. Jamaat-ud-Dawa/Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT)
3. Students' Islamic Movement of India (SIMI)
4. Khalistan Supporters (General Khalistan Network)
5. Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF)
6. Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)
7. Popular Front India (PFI)

8. Islamic State (IS)
9. Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)
10. Al-Qaeda
11. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
12. Hib-ul-Mujahideen (HuM)

The organisations with the most significant footprints were PFI, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, Khalistan Extremists (including KLF), ISI, SIMI, and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen, Bangladesh. These organisations had on-ground operatives and sympathisers actively engaging in or planning terror-related activities. Al-Qaeda and Islamic State had more of a digital footprint. Both of these terrorist organisations have successfully gained sympathisers via social media and digital propaganda and seem to be sources of extremist content consumed by radicalised individuals, irrespective of the terrorist or extremist groups they are affiliated with.



Map 1: UP Districts that witnessed Arrests for Terrorist Activities between 2019-23

S. No.	District	Number of Arrests (Group/Individual) for Terrorist Activities	Region
1	Lucknow	13	Central Uttar Pradesh
2	Meerut	8	Western Uttar Pradesh
3	Saharanpur	7	Western Uttar Pradesh
4	Varanasi	7	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
5	Muzaffarnagar	5	Western Uttar Pradesh
6	Shamli	4	Western Uttar Pradesh
7	Bareilly	4	Western Uttar Pradesh
8	Hapur	3	Western Uttar Pradesh
9	Ghaziabad	3	Western Uttar Pradesh
10	Aligarh	3	Western Uttar Pradesh
11	Kanpur Nagar	3	Central Uttar Pradesh
12	Prayagraj	3	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
13	Bijnor	2	Western Uttar Pradesh
14	Gorakhpur	2	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
15	Azamgarh	2	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
16	Moradabad	1	Western Uttar Pradesh
17	Gautam Buddha Nagar	1	Western Uttar Pradesh
18	Kasganj	1	Western Uttar Pradesh
19	Lakhimpur Kheri	1	Central Uttar Pradesh
20	Sitapur	1	Central Uttar Pradesh
21	Bahraich	1	Central Uttar Pradesh
22	Gonda	1	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
23	Sant Kabir Nagar	1	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
24	Jaunpur	1	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
25	Chandauli	1	Eastern Uttar Pradesh
26	Ballia	1	Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Table 1: District Wise Number of Arrests (Group/Individual) for Terrorist Activities

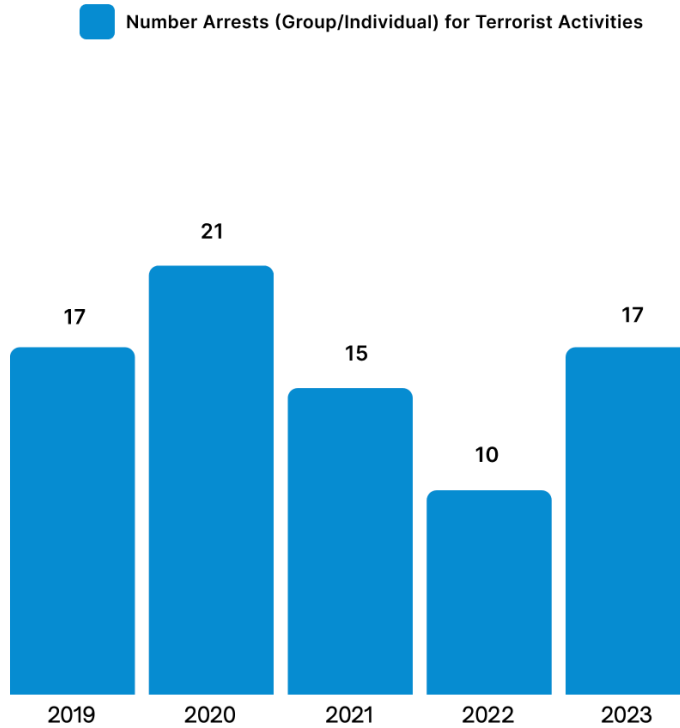
The north-western region of Uttar Pradesh witnessed a higher density of terror activity, which may be partly due to locally developed extremist ideologies, the history of crime and violence in the region, and partly because of inflow of extremists from Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab.

The area bordering Nepal and the southern region of Uttar Pradesh also witnessed terror activities. This is likely because UP witnesses an influx of fake currency routed from neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Nepal via West Bengal, as inferred from the frequency of reports and expert analysis (interestingly, arrest reports mentioned that the fake currency seized was often meant to reach Punjab and/or Haryana) and illegal trade of weapons with other neighbouring states. As the state witnessed terrorists illegally entering its territory via the Nepal border at least twice between 2019 and 2023, the region appears to be more vulnerable due to the high potential for radical elements to gain untraceable funds and resources.

Table 1 provides a breakdown for the number of arrests (in sets, which means if 3 people were arrested together at the same time for the same crime, that arrest will be counted as arrest set 1 from the particular district) from each district between 2019 and 2023.

It's important to note that just because a district has witnessed a single arrest (or a set of arrests), does not mean that the district is more stable. For instance, the arrest (this was an arrest set of 2 individuals) in Ballia was a result of the ATS busting an operation where illegal Rohingya immigrants with forged Indian identities were brought in via the Indo-Bangladesh border with the specific intent of impersonating Indians. Similarly, the Chandauli arrest was a set of four terror suspects who were linked to terror modules that had been neutralised by the Crime Branch Police of Delhi. The Jaunpur arrest was linked to an operation where 108 Popular Front of India (PFI) members were arrested for inciting violence during the anti-Citizen Amendment Act protest in UP. Other causes of arrest include running funding networks for terrorist activities, planning terror attacks, radicalising and recruiting locals, providing shelter or support to terrorists and so on.

Overall, districts in west UP witnessed more arrests (42) than central UP (19 of which Lucknow accounted for 13 arrests) and eastern UP (19).



Graph 1: Number of Arrests (Group/Individual) for Terrorist Activities between 2019-2023

What is Working?

The Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) seems to be quite active. Based on the news reports thus far:

- The ATS has been keeping a close eye on underground networks supporting illegal immigrants.
- The ATS has substantial intelligence on the existing terror networks within Uttar Pradesh and has limited their strength and functioning to a monitorable and controllable level.

- The ATS has made good connections with legal authorities in neighbouring regions, such as Punjab Police and Delhi Police.
- The ATS has taken a hardline approach towards countering terrorism in the form of immediate arrest based on substantial proof. Which acts as a good deterrent.
- The ATS is quick to identify and disrupt terror funding networks.
- Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's policy of ceasing illegally obtained assets of those found to be involved in disruption of peace within the state, at an expedited rate acts as a good deterrent, along with the improved law and order situation.

What is Missing?

If we look at an effective counter-radicalisation strategy as a whole, Uttar Pradesh has shown that it has a good foundation to build on. However, the state lacks the ability to recognise local support for terror organisations in the form of sympathisers. Looking at the number of terror funding networks discovered in UP each year and the fake Indian currency networks busted by the ATS, there does seem to be a hospitable environment in parts of UP for terror organisations to gain a stable foothold. These are a result of factors such as location, economic situation, as well as location-specific law and order scenarios. This is where a preventative counter-radicalisation policy is needed, along with the deterrent approach already in place.

This is also where the UP ATS network can take some inspiration from the Maharashtra model. For instance, as far back as 2015, instances of youths being bombarded online with radical ideologies drove the Maharashtra ATS to begin an intervention programme in educational institutes⁸. UP ATS implemented a similar programme in 2017⁹, but as it was named Ghar Wapsi and had other meanings attached to it, there was a large amount of misinformation surrounding the programme.

Another aspect of counter-radicalisation method in Maharashtra that UP could benefit from is the targeted approach of the ATS. In coordination with their own patrols as well as those of Maharashtra police forces, the ATS gains information about potential sets of radicalised individuals from the local areas, who are then monitored temporarily to confirm the information. Once identified, the families of the individual are consulted and included in the intervention. Post intervention follow-ups are conducted at random intervals. Over all, the programme is built on four prongs: the “candidate” and his family; psychologists; clergy; and the police¹⁰.

For such a system, the ATS will have to coordinate with the rest of the police force and invest in a local network to establish an informal societal watch where a group of local constables and local civilians are trained and tasked with identifying signs of radical extremism, reporting them to the counter-radicalisation team, and administering soft deradicalisation interventions to the target group whenever and wherever possible, until the ATS makes a decision on whether to intervene further or not.

Who is at high risk of radicalisation and why? Case Reports from Across Uttar Pradesh

The best way to understand the radicalisation process is to understand both the source and the agent of radicalisation. This can be done by studying the case reports related to the subject.

The following districts in Uttar Pradesh had arrests for direct involvement in radicalisation activities:

Saharanpur:

- 2019: Two suspected operatives of Jaish-e-Mohamman (JeM) revealed during interrogation that while at Deoband, as students, they were entrusted with radicalising potential recruits and convincing them to join JeM.

- 2022:
 - A 20-year-old man, identified as Inamul Haq, was arrested in Uttar Pradesh by the Maharashtra ATS in connection with the recruitment of operatives for LeT. The suspect had earlier in the year been arrested by the UP ATS for his suspected links with LeT and radicalisation operations targeting youth.
 - A madrasa student of Darul Uloom Deoband, identified as Farukh, who belongs to Karnataka, was arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA). He knew numerous languages and was allegedly in touch with the Pakistan Intelligence Unit, ISI, via social media.

Muzaffarnagar and Meerut:

- 2019: Members of PFI were arrested from various districts of UP. According to SP Vineet Jaiswal, “a prominent Muslim cleric who is associated with the outfit propagated anti-Indian thoughts in Muzaffarnagar and Meerut. He has also been arrested.” Explaining the modus operandi of PFI, Sitapur SSP noted that the members go from village to village, distributing inflammatory pamphlets and books while talking about the suffering of Muslims in India.

Meerut and Hapur:

- 2019
 - The NIA raided at least six locations in four districts of western UP and detained four men in connection with Harkat-ul-Harb-e-Islam. Among the arrested was Absar from Jasora village in Meerut. Absar was working as a teacher in Jamia Hanania Abul Hasan Madrasa in Piperala village, Hapur. According to officials, Absar visited three places in Jammu and

Kashmir between May and August 2018 along with Iftekahar Saqib in connection with a terror operation.

- Two PFI members were arrested from Meerut. Placards containing slogans against CAA and NRC, party flags, pamphlets with objectionable content and controversial literature, as well as four mobile phones, among other objectionable materials, were recovered from the arrestees.
- 2022:
 - 4 Members of PFI were arrested in Meerut by UPATS and objectionable literature was seized.
 - More PFI members were arrested in Hapur for inciting violence during CAA protests.

Aligarh

- 2023:
 - UPATS arrested two suspected terrorists associated with IS, identified as Abdullah Arslan and Maaz bin Tariq. A pen drive filled with literature and propaganda material related to IS was recovered from them. Both members were also members of the Students of the Muslim University of Aligarh (SAMU) and were radicalised to work for the Islamic State (IS).
 - UP ATS arrested 4 people suspectedly linked to Aligarh Module of Islamic State. The arrested individuals were, Rakib Imam Ansari (29 year old with B.Tech and M.Tech from Aligarh Muslim University or AMU). Later they arrested Navid Siddqui (23 year old pursuing BSs from AMU), Mohammad Noman (27 year old with a BA (Honours) from

AMU) and Mohammad Nazim (23 year old graduate from the neighbouring Sambhal district). The ATS seized banned IS literature, mobile phones and pen drives from the arrested accused. The four came in contact with each other during meetings of Students of Aligarh Muslim University, a student's union and were trying to connect new people with IS.

Bareilly

- 2020: A man identified as Muhammad Inamul was arrested in Bareilly District for trying to convince youths to join terrorist organisations in the name of Jihad. This was backed by scrutiny of his Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram accounts and his confession to the ATS. Some files saved on his phone also allegedly contained literature on al Qaeda, as per an ATS spokesperson.

Lucknow

- 2020: Three PFI members were arrested in Lucknow for inciting violence during CAA protests.
- 2021:
 - A joint team of Punjab and UP Police arrested an accomplice, identified as Jagdev Singh alias Jagga, of two pro-Khalistan terrorists, Paramjit Singh Pammah (currently in the UK), and Maltani Singh (currently in Germany), both accused of carrying out anti-national activities in Punjab, trying to promote terror and harm peace and religious tolerance.
 - UP ATS arrested two men, identified as Mufti Qazi Jahangir Alam Qasmi and Mohammad Umar Gautam, for running a racket involved in converting deaf students and other poor people to Islam in UP with funding from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Prayagraj

- 2019: UP ATS arrested a person, identified as Saurabh Shukla, who had been assisting the Pakistan-based terror outfits to raise funds in India for Lashkar-e-Taiba from Prayagraj in Allahabad District.

Varanasi

- 2019: Reports by intelligence agencies mention that a terrorist named Umar-Madni, along with another Nepal-based terrorist, stayed in Varanasi for 4 days in the month of May, 2019. Umar Madni functions as a recruiter for the LeT, and over the past few months, he has incessantly been trying to radicalise several youths to join the outfit.
- 2022:
 - UP ATS arrested 2 members of PFI from Varanasi and recovered objectionable literature among other materials from them.
 - The NIA arrested a suspected “highly radicalised” Islamic State terrorist from Varanasi as part of its investigation into a case related to the terror group's “Voice of Hind” module. Basit Kalam was working for the terror group and was actively involved in the radicalisation and recruitment of youth from India for IS.
- 2023: UP ATS arrested two wanted cadres of PFI, identified as Parvez Ahmad and Raees Ahmed, and detained 70 others from 20 districts in a statewide crackdown on cadres of PFI. The accused were propagating PFI's ideology and expanding its base across the country.

Azamgarh

- 2019: Shahid Badr, the former 'chief' of SIMI, was arrested in Azamgarh for a hate speech case registered against him in the Kutch district of Gujarat.
- 2022: UP ATS arrested a terrorist identified as Sabuddin Azmi, alias Dilawar Khan, alias Bairam Khan, alias Azar, with IS links from Mubarakpur in Azamgarh district, who was planning an IED blast on Independence Day. He was a member of AIMIM and used to lure people to join it. He also propagated IS ideology on social media platforms.

From the above cases, it is evident that young people are the primary targets of radicalisation by terrorist organisations. Shafqat Munir, Head of the Bangladesh Centre for Terrorism Research at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS), in a 2020 article¹¹ explained that younger individuals tend to lack any criminal records, are much more active, and are easier to indoctrinate due to their age as well as their lack of experience. Unemployment and a lack of job opportunities are additional passive factors that encourage an environment where young people are easier to radicalise.

In some cases, entire families can be radicalised via the foot in the door psychological technique, where they are first exposed to seemingly reasonable requests (sometimes under peer pressure) for things like donations for a “social cause” or “upliftment of the community” and then slowly exposed to extremist contents while radical views are normalised in their environment. These operations are very systematic and require a base of terror sympathisers within the target communities. The benefit of radicalising families lies in the fact that families are a more stable source for terror funding and passive support than individuals.

Considering a Customised Approach for Uttar Pradesh: Countering Radicalisation and Subversion

Till now, we have discussed the basics of counter-radicalisation interventions, which can be applied to any Indian state. However, each state in India has its own unique cultural, political, and societal footprint, which means that the kind and/or degree of radicalisation that has taken a foothold in each state is different. For example, the scenario in Uttar Pradesh cannot be compared to what is experienced in Kerala, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, or Assam. Even though the terror organisations in play might be the same, their methods of radicalisation would vary in each state and even in the districts within them.

For instance, in the time period of 2019-2023, there was only one reported arrest in Moradabad district. The person arrested was allegedly planning to undergo military training in Afghanistan via Pakistan and carry out terror activities in India in return. He was also in regular contact with a Pakistan-based handler and Hizb-ul Mujahideen (HuM) operatives in Jammu and Kashmir. The arrest in Chandauli was of four suspected Bangladeshi nationals, on their way to Sealdah, West Bengal, who had links to terror modules that had been neutralised by the Crime Branch of Delhi Police and the UPATS during the same time period.

On the other hand, Lucknow witnessed 13 arrests related to terror activities related to 5 different terror organisations, ranging from Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh and Al-Qaeda to a network of Khalistan sympathisers and supporters. Radicalisation methods included the conversion of deaf children and poor people to Islam (racket funded by ISI), the circulation of extremist content and propaganda via pen drives amongst primed groups, etc. One of the arrests in Azamgarh was of a man planning an IED blast on Independence Day in 2022. A member of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (AIMIM), he used to lure people to join the terror outfit and propagate IS ideology on social media platforms.

While some cases in UP were a result of radicalisation, other cases were a result of the lucrative monetary opportunities that the terrorist organisations were willing to provide, and the targets were often people who already had relatively stable economic backgrounds. For instance, in Kasganj, the person arrested was a Hindu man who had previously worked as a contractual employee with the Army in Arunachal Pradesh and had a sibling in the Army. He was arrested for knowingly leaking sensitive information to ISI operatives. He appears to have been convinced by an ISI operative over Facebook and then put in touch with another operative, who later revealed her links with ISI and provided large sums of money for intelligence. Similar cases were found in Hapur and Varanasi.

This indicates that there still remains a huge underground criminal network within Uttar Pradesh due to various factors, including heavy investment from terror groups and external forces, which provided enough sense of anonymity to those engaging in terror activity.

Conclusion

Over the past five years, Uttar Pradesh has witnessed one terror attack in the form of a low-intensity blast on a train near Kanpur-Nagar District, at least four failed terrorist attacks (as evidenced by a confession and seizure explosives), three sets of border infiltrations (in 2019) via the UP-Nepal border, high-alerts in at least nine different districts, and at least one alert for the state as a whole.

The stability of Uttar Pradesh directly impacts the stability of the rest of the country. This state has the largest chunk of the Indian population, reflecting the diversity and potential of India. The potential, size, location, and status of Uttar Pradesh make it a prime target for terror organisations in terms of establishing communication and funding networks within India. While the current policies of the government and the work of the ATS have been effective in anticipating and preventing a significant number of overt terror operations, there are gaps in the scope of the security apparatus that must be addressed.

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