THE ISIS PHENOMENON: SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND

Kabir Taneja

Foreword by

Harsh V Pant

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Cover:
An image released in 2017 by pro-ISIS group, Nida-e-Haq via Telegram showing Kashmir draped in an Islamic State flag. Accessed via Telegram by ORF.

Foreword

The rapidly evolving nature of global terrorism is a reality that has confronted scholars and policymakers for some time now, and there is no dearth of literature attempting to explicate the causes and consequences of this phenomenon. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as *Daesh* and ISIL, added another dimension to the conversation. As ISIS competed with terror networks like Al Qaeda for influence over Islamist groups operating from different parts of the world, extremism became more vicious. Faced with an ideology that challenges the very foundations of humanism, the international community seemed hugely incapable of effectively countering the threat. The impact of ISIS on South Asia, and India in particular, has also been a matter of concern for policymakers in the region. Yet it remains a severely understudied subject in India. While the country has had relatively negligible exposure to ISIS, the threat remains potent. The academia, the policymaking community, as well as the media in India have paid highly superficial attention to a phenomenon that has reshaped the debates on extremism and terrorism over the last few years.

It is to fill this vacuum that in August 2017, the Observer Research Foundation launched a long-term project to track ISIS' influence in India. This project, led by Kabir Taneja, follows the trail of activities committed by Indian actors in the name of ISIS. As part of the project, Kabir worked on three research papers over the last year; this monograph compiles those articles. These papers are seminal—they are the first serious, data-driven examination of the impact of ISIS in India and the wider South Asian region. While the first section of this monograph looks at the ideological moorings of the ISIS as well as its organisational and operational dynamics, the other sections are focused on the impact of ISIS on South Asia and India.

I would like to thank Kabir Taneja and others in his team for working on this very important project, and Vinia Datinguinoo Mukherjee for taking this volume through to publication. If India has to counter global

terrorism effectively and play a significant role in shaping the global policy discourse on managing this threat, then we in India should first understand the phenomenon in all its multiple dimensions. We bring you this monograph in the hope that this will be the beginning of a serious conversation on a far-reaching subject – one that will transcend the boundaries of academia, policy and journalism.

Prof. Harsh V Pant
Director, Studies and Head, Strategic Studies Programme
Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi
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Introduction

The emergence and rise of the so-called Islamic State, the proto-state caliphate declared by terror group ISIS, has changed the way academics, policymakers and law enforcement agencies view and understand terrorism. The complex factors that contributed to its rapid expansion, coupled with its organised program to spread jihadist ideologies, have enabled the ISIS to persist with an unshakable tenacity. There are several factors which set apart ISIS from similar terrorist organisations. From the successful establishment of a proto-state in the Middle East, to the transnational reach of its propaganda to recruit disillusioned individuals with jihadist leanings—the ascent of the ISIS, though disturbing, has been unique. Today, the group no longer holds sweeping control over parts of Iraq and Syria. Yet even as the loss of territory has reduced the magnitude of threat it posed before, the ISIS ideology continues to survive. This is supported by the emergence of "ISIS 2.0" and recent incidents of isolated "lone wolf attacks".

With the changes that ISIS brings to our understanding of terrorism and the ideologies that enable it to flourish, it becomes imperative to comprehensively study its origin, *modus operandi*, and its influence in South Asia, specifically. This monograph is divided into three parts, and examines the rise and fall of ISIS in the Middle East and its influence in South Asia and India.

The first paper in this compendium takes an in-depth look at ISIS' structure, organisation, leadership, and plan of operations. It adopts a multi-dimensional approach to examine the factors that led to ISIS' inception and rise to power, its fall, and its possible future trajectory. Beginning with the history of the creation of the ISIS, the paper traces its emergence from the shadow of Al Qaeda and charts its evolution into a worldwide "caliphate". The next section analyses the contributions of known terrorists like Abu Musab Zarqawi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who led ISIS at various points of time, and helped consolidate its ideology and singular brand of violence. The paper then discusses ISIS'

three pillars, i.e. military strategy, online and media propaganda, and financing—which provided the backbone for its extensive operations. The subsequent section looks at various factors, including religious and political turmoil, which contributed to its expansion through the quick capture of territories in Iraq and Syria. The paper concludes by reflecting on what the end of the ISIS proto-state means for the future of the Middle East, given that its jihadist ideology and propaganda activities continue to survive.

The second paper examines the influence of ISIS in South Asian countries, following the loss of its territories in 2017. ISIS continues to be ideologically stable, and has proven that it can influence and radicalise individuals in foreign countries, through its vast network of associated groups and governates. The paper explains that ISIS' influence in South Asia largely varies according to domestic factors, like politics, economy and the peculiar socio-religious structures of individual countries. Though its influence in India is limited, the ISIS has managed to make its mark in the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Various factors unique to these countries—such as Afghanistan's ongoing political turmoil—provide easy inroads for ISIS. This development could endanger the stability of the region, and constitute a grave security threat for India. The paper then theorises various models to chart ISIS' future course following its collapse as a proto-state, and discusses the implications for South Asia.

The third part of this monograph looks at ISIS' influence in India through individual case studies, and seeks to extract patterns to understand the various social, religious and political reasons that radicalise potential recruits. The case studies adopt a multi-dimensional approach in examining the background, socio-economic status, and the ideology that push Indian nationals to the jihadist cause. Apart from tracing the influence of the internet and social media in ISIS' recruitments, the paper also looks at local and political developments that help generate support for ISIS' violent propaganda. The paper uses primary research data to map pro-ISIS cases in different states across India, and analyses the effect of the Kashmir issue on jihadism and extremism. The paper concludes by charting out trends and patterns for ISIS' influence in India, and the security threat it continues to pose for the region.

We hope that this monograph, apart from providing a detailed look at ISIS' conception and operational structure, will also help in understanding

the evolving nature of terrorism and the factors that continue to strengthen and propagate jihadist ideologies. Through this study, we aim to fill the lacuna in our current understanding of ISIS' influence in India and South Asia, and hope that our research will enable decision-makers to formulate appropriate counter-terrorism strategies to help create a safe, secure and peaceful regional environment.

Understanding ISIS: From Conception to Operations

Abstract

This paper bridges the gap in Indian public discourse on the aims of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and where it stands today as the most formidable terrorist organisation of the 21ˢᵗ century. It explores ISIS from the perspective of the Middle East, rather than from an Indian foreign policy and security point of view, of which there are voluminous studies. Such an approach is crucial in understanding the terrorist organisation and dissecting its hierarchical structures, operational mettle, and territorial conquest, as well as in examining its approaches in Iraq and Syria and its unprecedented use of online media propaganda to cross geographical borders.

Introduction

The liberation of Mosul from the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could be a pivotal point in the future of not only Iraq and Syria, but the greater West Asian region. Between 2014 and 2016, ISIS managed to wrest control over large swathes of territory during its heyday; as it expanded, however, ISIS eventually began losing control of its fast-paced growth model. With the narrative now swiftly moving towards a post-ISIS Iraq and Syria, the survival of the Islamic State as a *proto-state* is uncertain. This begs the question: What does the future hold for ISIS, its proto-state structure, and its ideological brand?

This paper seeks to chronicle the rise—and the anticipated fall—of the Islamic State, to map the bloodline of the insurgency from its conception

until the final battle of Mosul. It quantifies the outcomes around the narrative of ISIS' likely demise, how it will play out regionally, and what the repercussions could look like. This is done by explaining the lineage behind the ideologies of the Islamic State, tracing the DNA of the insurgency movement and ideating the links between regional, political, theological and international factors that contributed to its birth and growth. This paper uses a variety of traditional and non-traditional (mostly social media data) sources. The author acknowledges a handicap: Most of the traditional sourcing was done through studies, reports and books written in English, owing to a lack of knowledge of Arabic or other regional languages. Other aspects in viewing ISIS—such as conceptual differences between 'jihadism', 'Islamists', 'terrorism', 'insurgencies', and 'militancy', along with a larger historical contextualisation of jihadism and regional politics—also fall beyond the scope of this paper.

The paper is divided into five sections, starting with a brief historical perspective of what ISIS is, where it came from, and what led to its brutal yet impressive uprising. The next section then delves into what is perhaps the most important part of understanding ISIS: the personalities that drove this ideology to become a territorially relevant militant movement. The third part dissects the two countries where ISIS carved its caliphate out of—Iraq and Syria—and how both Baghdad and Damascus fought their own domestic battles using the same playbook as in their fight against the Islamic State. The fourth section describes the operational aspects of ISIS, how it managed to control such a large territory in its pinnacle, their political hierarchy, military strategy, financing, media propaganda and other vital components that offered a degree of legitimacy to their assumed caliphate. The paper closes by deconstructing the territorial future and ideological debris of an Islamic State in retreat, and their implications for the region's future.

ISIS: From Al Qaeda to Islamic State

The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States (US) as a fallout of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, the largest terror strike in history against the Western world, was the starting point in the creation of the jihadist faction known today as the Islamic State of

Iraq and Syria (ISIS, ISIL, IS or its Arabic name *Daesh*). However, the perceived history of the militant organisation is entangled—like many other Islamist groups and the conflicts surrounding them—in the sectarian divisions of the Sunni and Shia Islam, in poverty, and the criminal proclivities that emanate from the region's social structures.

The roots of the so-called Islamic State (IS), the Salafist-Jihadist organisation that has managed to catapult itself to the status of the world's premiere terror group over the past three years, can be traced to the late 1990s. ISIS founder and jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi took to a life of crime and rebellion during his youth in the shanty town of Zarqa, a few miles north of Jordan's capital city, Amman. He would eventually be targeted and radicalised by the teachings of his spiritual mentor, one Sheik Abdul Rahman. During its metamorphosis from being one of many regional jihadist groups in the Middle East to what can now safely be called the biggest and most influential terrorist organisation in the world, ISIS has destroyed and recreated the narratives of Islamist terrorism previously held by the likes of Al Qaeda. While the now deceased Al Qaeda chief, Osama bin Laden, rallied funds and ideology to exclusively target the United States, the ideas that drove ISIS from its inception were more localised, targeting regional governments, and only later turning geographical and territorial in hopes of creating a caliphate.[1]

However, it was the post-9/11 invasion of Iraq by the US that shot Zarqawi to overnight fame, and it remains a matter of debate whether his naming as an "international terrorist extraordinaire" was by design or realistic intelligence. It may be assumed that 'Zarqawi' became a household name on 5 February 2003, when then US Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke at the United Nations Security Council to underscore the US' case for the invasion of Iraq. "I want to bring to your attention today the potentially much more sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network, a nexus that combines classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder. Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda lieutenants."[2]

Zarqawi's life and legacy will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper. What is relevant to mention is that his founding of the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa'al-Jihad (JTJ) in late 2001 was the seed of what is called ISIS today.[3] Under JTJ, Zarqawi started to train militants to

conduct suicide bombings across the region, and more specifically, in Iraq. The murder of USAid officer Laurence Foley in 2002 by JTJ outside his home in Amman, Jordan, placed the group in the global limelight. By that time, Zarqawi also knew that a US invasion was imminent, and wanted to prepare on the ground with other militias. This plan included gaining the support of the powerful Iraqi Shia religious leader Muqtadar al-Sadr, who had launched a military movement staffed by his supporters known as the Jaysh al-Mahdi.

Zarqawi's influence also attracted the interest of other major regional actors such as Al Qaeda. JTJ joined the Osama bin Laden-led terror outfit in 2004, changing its name to Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn Zarqawi, translated into English as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). During this period, AQI, whose top leadership was not always in tune with the thought process of bin Laden or his then deputy and now AQ chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, believed that fanning sectarian misconduct within Iraqi society was the ideal strategy to gain a strong foothold in a post-Saddam Hussein era.[4] This strategy of AQI was emboldened in May 2003, following then US President George W. Bush's announcement of an end to the US' military operations in the country, just days after the toppling of Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square, symbolising the end of his reign.

The evolution of AQI continued under the political vacuum created with the collapse of Hussein's order and the political infighting between the Shia and Sunni blocs. AQI, in the beginning, found support amongst the Sunnis, who backed the group in the hope that it would deter a takeover of a Shia-majority government in Baghdad.[5] To maintain this public support, AQI engaged in frequent attacks against Shiite targets such as mosques and localities with majority Shia residents in order to fuel tensions and create an environment of distrust in local government formations. This, initially, brought in a broad base of support for AQI in Iraq, specifically amongst the minority Sunnis who feared a majority Shia-led Baghdad.[6]

However, because of its increasingly violent streak, coupled with its more outward outlook to attack American targets, AQI began losing ground base in Iraq, including within Al Qaeda. Zarqawi ignored advice from al-Zawahiri to build better ties with the Iraqi leadership (perhaps looking to build a more formalised structure for AQI such as that of al-Sadr). On

the ground, AQI's relations with other Islamist factions deteriorated fast, and within Iraq its group of foreign fighters (from other countries like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Pakistan) were being seen as another foreign occupational force. What expedited the process of the Iraqi government trying to shut down AQI's operations were the group's bombings of three hotels in Amman, killing 60 people, and the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite Al Askari Shrine in Samarra, 125 km north of Baghdad, which resulted in dozens of retaliatory strikes on Sunni targets within a period of 24 hours.[7]

To correct its course and build a broader support base, AQI joined the Majilis Shua al-Mujahidin (MSM),[8] an umbrella jihadist organisation consisting of around six Sunni insurgent groups dedicated to fighting the occupying US forces and stopping attempts towards a US-orchestrated transitional government, including pacification of the Sunni populations away from the jihadist narrative. The groups—Jaish al-Taifa al-Mansourah, Saraye Ansar al-Tawhid, Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami Saraya al-Ghoraba, Kitaeb al-Ahwal, and Jaish Ahlul Sunna wa al-Jamma (note that the names of these groups could differ with different sources, as they changed often)—and AQI together planted the seeds of what would come to be known as a different jihadist entity all together, sans Zarqawi's leadership.[9]

During this period of Sunni insurgent reorganisation, dismantling and rearranging of leadership and organisational structures, public support for the AQI was receding, as that for the MSM—which by this time had been fractured within and acting merely as a forum for bickering amongst its members. AQI, within the al-Mujahidin, maintained control of the narrative and did not adhere to the idea of a centralised structure, continuing its practices of gruesome violence including beheadings and suicide bombings, and causing great unease amongst the Sunni communities.

These tactics employed by Zarqawi continued to bother Al Qaeda's top leadership, which had been encouraging Muslims across the world to travel to Iraq to fight the US invasion. AQI and the top Al Qaeda leadership, by around 2003, finally seemed to have found common ground on how the former needs to operate in Iraq, and to what end. The August 2003 truck bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad was a critical point for Zarqawi as well, attacking what the bin Laden-Zawahiri

leadership wanted, targets against American influence (albeit, indirectly). Following this, AQI moved to its original mandate of attacking local targets, among them, in governance and state structures, politicians, police, aid workers, NGO officials, and construction businesses.

On 7 June 2006, a US drone strike using 500-lb bombs hit a small house in the town of Baqubah, north of Baghdad, killing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi along with other jihadists. His undoing was, ironically, his spiritual guru himself, as intelligence officials tracked Rahman for weeks to pinpoint the whereabouts of Zarqawi.[10] Abu Ayub al Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Mujahir) was named as Zarqawi's successor to lead AQI, who took upon as his first job the recalibration of the organisation by making it more 'Iraqi', to gather support lost on the ground due to Zarqawi's rigidness.[11] Masri's takeover of the AQI was also a small victory for Al Qaeda who, as mentioned previously, had challenges in managing their own views over AQI than to those of Zarqawi. However, Masri, a close confidant of Zawahiri, had little effect on the tempo of AQI—brutal killings continued and became more brazen, as did the pacification of foreign fighters into the Sunni insurgencies.

Taking over the command, Masri negotiated a new council of sorts, incorporating other regional insurgent groups under his ambit and declaring this new coalition as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)[12] while keeping the AQI brand alive in an all-encompassing mentor role. Masri decided to place ISI's operations under a stoic man, a football fan born in the Iraqi city of Samarra, named Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, known today as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This would be the beginning of what is today known as the Islamic State.

The Personalities Cult: From Zarqawi to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

Owing to the Islamic State's upbringing in the spotlight of the media, and much more importantly the new and social media, its hierarchy has not only developed an effective cult-like phenomenon around it, like in a thriller film, but has also managed to become like the mythological chimera. The journey from Zarqawi to Baghdadi is critical to understanding ISIS from the perspective of both

radical Islam and that of a highly organised and orchestrated insurgency movement.

This paper describes four main personalities to better illustrate the characters that led to what is commonly now known as one of the deadliest, and until a point the richest, Islamist terror group that has ever existed,[13] even bigger and more influential than Al Qaeda due to its threat to the stability of sovereign states in the region. (Scholars, though, debate whether such a comparison is even worthy or not.)[14] Understanding the lineage of ISI led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayub al-Masri, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and finally, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, showcases not only a consistency in both ideology and the interpretation of Islam, but also the continuation of the brand of violence that has attracted thousands of foreign fighters from across the world. From Zarqawi to al-Baghdadi, the initial mandate of AQI shifted drastically, and these four jihadists were the architects of the newest and fiercest branch of jihad.

1: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: Ahmad Fadil al-Khalayleh, later known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was born in October 1966 in Zarqa, a poverty-stricken city not far north from Jordan's comparatively more secular, liberal and prosperous capital, Amman. Belonging to the Bani Hassan tribe that is closely related to Jordan's Heshemite royal family, Zarqawi had no royalty in his background and lived a challenging childhood.[15] During his formative years, his country was going through a phase of great change, as conservatism, tradition and theology collided with largely US-led westernisation of the Jordanian society. As it is in many such cases, Zarqa did not gain a lot from this. Zarqawi lost his father in 1984 when he was 18 years old. Not long after, he was arrested and imprisoned on charges of drug possession and sexual assault. Zarqawi was radicalised in prison, and after his release carried his indoctrination with him with a sense of purpose. After becoming a familiar face at the al-Hussein Ben Ali mosque near Zarqa, known to be popular with Islamist radicals, Zarqawi learned about the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan and was soon hired by the Afghan-Arab Bureau, an organisation tasked with providing jihadists to the Islamist forces battling Moscow.[16]

Despite his enthusiasm, Zarqawi did not see battle in Afghanistan as the Soviets soon retreated. He arrived with his mother, Omm Sayel, in Peshawar, Pakistan, where the young son of Jordanian-Palestinian mujahid Sheikh Abdullah Azzam joyfully welcomed him. Here he started showing

his networking skills despite his reportedly coy nature. In Afghanistan, he also met Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (real name: Isam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi), a known Salafist cleric and fighter, and with his guidance understood both the political and military aspects of jihad against the Soviets.[17] Not seeing any military action, Zarqawi along with Maqdisi returned to Jordan, where Zarqawi started to build a terror network based on the spiritual guidance of Maqdisi. As a result of their initial ploys, which were mostly abject failures, both Zarqawi and Maqdisi were sent to 15 years in prison for holding grenades in their possession and being part of a banned organisation. Asked about the weapons during trial, Zarqawi replied that he found them by the roadside; the judge was far from amused. However, getting imprisoned turned out to be a blessing for Zarqawi, as the seeds of radical Islam that he was already carrying were to be emboldened even further. Zarqawi and Maqdisi set up a new organisation called al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad.[18]

In prison, Zarqawi started to hone himself as an alpha-jihadist. He spent entire days memorising the Quran, he gained weight and built himself up to physically look more authoritative, and he succeeded in building his repertoire and recruiting members. Soon, Zarqawi surpassed Maqdisi and started to challenge the latter's spiritual authority, relying more on his own instincts than his adviser's pontifications. After leaving prison, Zarqawi started his gradual ascent to become one of the most wanted men in Iraq; soon he would have a bounty of US$25 million on his head.

It was in prison where Zarqawi made the decision to go to Afghanistan again to build a militia that could export his brand of jihad across the globe. In Herat, southern Afghanistan, he founded the Jund al-Sham group.[19] His camp managed to recruit a healthy number of jihadis, numbering between 2,000 and 3,000 prior to the American invasion in October 2001. During this period of buildup in the year 2000, Zarqawi had also caught the attention of Osama bin Laden, who later met him in Kandahar;[20] by the few accounts available, he was received coldly. According to one account, Zarqawi told bin Laden that his jihad was not fierce enough. While Zarqawi seemed to have an ego problem, his naming by then US Secretary of State Colin Powell as the top drawer in America's invasion of Iraq—whether a strategy or a mistake—had propelled him to sky-high fame. From being a relative unknown, Zarqawi became a household name in many parts of the world in 2003.

Bin Laden later invited Zarqawi to join Al Qaeda, in the hope of seeing through their differences and his own apprehensions in order to build a respectable presence in Iraq. However, Zarqawi was determined to concentrate more on regional operations, taking on corrupt Arab governments and foremost, bringing down the Jordanian monarchy and installing an Islamist state. This viewpoint clashed with bin Laden's larger view of concentrating on targeting the US and Israel. Bin Laden's military commander, Saif Al-Adel, brokered a deal between them, making Zarqawi the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Despite the impasse being broken, Zarqawi, true to his defiant nature, refused to pay *bayat* (oath of allegiance) to bin Laden; it did not help in making their relationship warmer. Zarqawi would only agree to the bayat in 2004 after months of negotiations and as he realised that he needed to increase his legitimacy in Iraq. The bayat provided him with his new title, 'Emir of Al Qaeda's Operations in the Land of Mesopotamia'.[21]

Throughout this period beginning 2004, Al Qaeda made multiple interventions to control Zarqawi and his extremely violent ways, fearing a loss of base support. For Zarqawi, who anyway thought that the likes of Al Qaeda and Taliban were not serious enough about jihad, such advice was not worth heeding, as he continued to defy any attempts of instructions by either bin Laden or his deputy al-Zawahiri and orchestrated gruesome violence across Iraq while propagating the same across much of the Islamic world.

Zarqawi was killed by a US air strike in 2006, just north of Baghdad; he was 39. The transformation of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the reaping of the ideological seeds Zarqawi had sown, however, was just beginning.[22]

2: Abu Ayyub al-Mansri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi: The successor to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was chosen in fairly short time, an indication of both the well-organised structure of Al Qaeda, and that bin Laden and Zawahiri were happy to see Zarqawi go. The new leader named for AQI was Aby Ayyub al-Mansri, whose real name, the US believed, was Abu Hamza al-Mujahir.[23] Mansri, known to have been born in Egypt in 1968, was a close confidant of al-Zawahiri since the early 1980s. Under Zarqawi, Mansri moved to Iraq in 2001 via Afghanistan and joined Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish-Sunni militia. Eventually joining AQI, Mansri developed a good relationship with Zarqawi, and became AQI's point man for a variety of

roles including intelligence gathering and honing new recruits. After Zarqawi's death, Mansri reorganised and set up Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

The American-led coalition, over a period of time, strafed on the idea of whether Mansri was really in control of AQI, as he and one Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, as per reports, led the ISI. A controversy had erupted in 2007 when US military spokesperson Brigadier General Kevin Bergner claimed that according to intelligence reports, al-Baghdadi in fact did not exist.[24] The information was traced to the capture of an operative named Khalid al-Mashadani, who claimed to be an intermediator for bin Laden.

Both Mansri and Baghdadi were killed in a ground military operation by the Iraqi Army and American forces in April 2010.

3: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri, now the most globally recognised terrorist known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was born in 1971 in the city of Samarra, north of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Baghdadi was raised in a largely Sunni area by a family that claimed to be descendants of Prophet Mohammad.[25]

Similar to many others like him, Baghdadi was diligently religious from the beginning. Committed to Islam and with a penchant for football, Baghdadi was also a product of the political use of religion orchestrated by then Iraq's allegedly secular dictator Saddam Hussein, and his Ba'athist party, in what was known as the 'Faith Campaign' which began in 1993. The campaign was a move to pacify and perhaps even mainstream the Islamist factions then gaining steam in the country, and to raise the Islamic credentials of Iraq.

As part of this move by Saddam, Iraq also created the Saddam University for Islamic Studies, where Baghdadi was to read for his Master's in Quranic recitation. It was here, seeing his inclination towards Islam, that Baghdadi's family member persuaded him to join the Muslim Brotherhood, and much like Zarqawi, he found such an organisation slow and redundant in its approach towards an Islamic reprisal.

Baghdadi founded his first group, Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamaah (JSJ) to fight the US invasion in 2003.[26] Soon after, he was arrested, mostly as collateral damage, while he visited a friend who was on the US' Wanted list. Baghdadi was detained at the Camp Bucca facility in the region of

Umm Qasr, the same one where, at around the same time, one Zarqawi was also imprisoned (there are no references to confirm that Baghdadi and Zarqawi met at Bucca, though it is more than likely that their paths crossed in prison).

Camp Bucca was the main agora for jihadists, housed together as the US forces toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein and created a political vacuum that Iraq still struggles to deal with today. The policy of the US to gather jihadists together in Bucca, under one roof, was something that worked hugely in favor of the insurgents. The already radicalised inmates, within the confines of the camp, realised that this was the perfect place to make contacts and create contingency plans for the future, right under the noses of their American jailers.[27]

Baghdadi at Bucca made strong inroads, creating contacts and riling up support. He was released on 8 December 2004, being classified as a civil detainee and not a jihadist. Within days, he started to build contacts with Al Qaeda and his own group, JSJ, became one of the first to join the anti-US coalition of jihadists under Al Qaeda's guidance. As Baghdadi made inroads within the jihadist circles, and even successfully defending his PhD in Islamic Studies at the same time, his credentials as a devout scholar of Islam with a direct lineage to the Prophet and a battle-hardened past gave him precedence over many of his peers.[28]

After the death of Zarqawi, the new AQI chief Masri forged ahead with the idea of Islamic State, and Baghdadi bagged a role managing religious affairs for this new group and spread their ideology and propaganda across the Iraqi provinces to gather support, a task in which Baghdadi excelled. He later became the supervisor of IS' Sharia Committee, responsible for enforcing the group's ideologies practically.

Masri and Abu Umar, two main figureheads of IS at that time, blew themselves up in April 2010 after their hideout in Tikrit was compromised and surrounded by a joint US-Iraqi operation. This left the field wide open on who would take over the reins, and internal council members and Al Qaeda's leadership entered into a tussle. Eventually, through internal politics mostly played by Islamic State's then military council chief Hajji Bakr, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was chosen to be the new emir.

By the time Baghdadi settled in, political uncertainty had erupted in Syria in 2011. The new emir capitalised on this opportunity to expand. Baghdadi entered Syria via the creation of the Nusra Front (currently known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS). Over a period of some months Baghdadi gained ground in Iraq, and by 2014 large cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul fell to the Islamic State, giving him more access to expand operations into Syria.

Baghdadi, until now an emir, then moved to consolidate his power further, controlling and commanding a legion of fighters as the "caliph". Once he had Mosul, Baghdadi appeared at the al-Nuri mosque to preside over the Friday sermons, cementing his new title. This was, until date, his one and only public appearance, as he remains the most elusive figure in the complex and competitive hierarchy of the Islamic State. In what is still the only seminal work on Baghdadi, the author of the article, 'The Believer: How Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became leader of the Islamic State', Will McCants, says deciphering the enigma-like status around Baghdadi depends on what happens when he dies while as caliph. "The answer depends on what one makes of his life. For some Baghdadi is just a cipher, manipulated by non-religious ex-Ba'athists or thugs who are using the Islamic State to attain power. For others he is a cog in a machine, an impression of an impersonal institution or historical forces. These views at least agree that Baghdadi is not his own man; his sins are the sins of others, perhaps Saddam Hussein, perhaps George W. Bush, perhaps a cabal of former regime loyalists."[29]

Ultimately, the rationale for studying these personalities is to decipher their effects on the mass movements behind them, specifically in this case where operationally the Islamic State has mimicked institutional structures of a nation-state setup, with taxation, military, and local councils, among others being activated, giving it operational legitimacy—ambitious attempts that have seen pockets of success.

The Operations: Iraq and Syria

One of the greatest questions around the rise of the Islamic State is how such a non-state insurgency group managed to become a militarily calibrated unit. During the period 2014-

2015, IS captured millions of square miles in both Iraq and Syria, serving a blow to both the Iraqi government of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who continues to hold power.

There are many theories on the factors that not only gave birth to a terror group such as ISIS[30] but allowed it to thrive in resources and territory. This paper finds evidence in the hypothesis that the failures in Iraq revolving around the disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the subsequent sectarian and authoritarian government of al-Maliki, offered a fertile environment for Sunni insurgents to recognise, organise and direct their agenda with ease both in the divided Iraqi-minority Sunni population and the thousands of fighters, officers and trained for battle Ba'athis regime generals who were now available, without a purpose.[31]

The 'Sunni disenfranchisement' in Iraq after the American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein's sectarian Iraq, a by-the-stick implemented Ba'athist policy, gathered pace quickly. Being the minority, Sunnis in Iraq were worried over their own future in the country and the formulation of the new governance structures, and their own representation. The victory of al-Maliki in 2006, much to the delight of the home of Shiite Islam, Iran, and his eight-year long rule would provide the perfect canvas for AQI and other Sunni insurgencies to spread sectarian discord.

The starting point—or more aptly, the tipping point—was Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the American war against Iraq to dismantle the regime of Saddam who, according to the US, was supporting and promoting terrorist activities and was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. As part of OIF, a critical phase called ECLIPSE II (alternately known as PHASE IV, and named after ECPLISE I, which dealt with de-Nazification of post-World War II Germany) was going to go down in history as the biggest factor for the ease of militarisation of not just AQI, but of various other intra-sectarian insurgencies as well.[32]

The decision to disband the Iraqi Army, and make 400,000 troops and nearly 50,000 Ba'athist officials jobless overnight, had trouble written all over it.[33] The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was tasked with driving Iraq from the post-Saddam era to the progressive, democratic and inclusive vision of Washington DC and President George W. Bush. The CPA was led by American diplomat Paul Bremer, who held solid

credentials with his work previously in Afghanistan, and came under the supervision of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. With CPA, the US orchestrated one of the most poorly judged political vacuums in the country, the aftermath of which the world continue to witness today. The US, with just a "hand wave gesture", disbanded the Iraqi Army.[34]
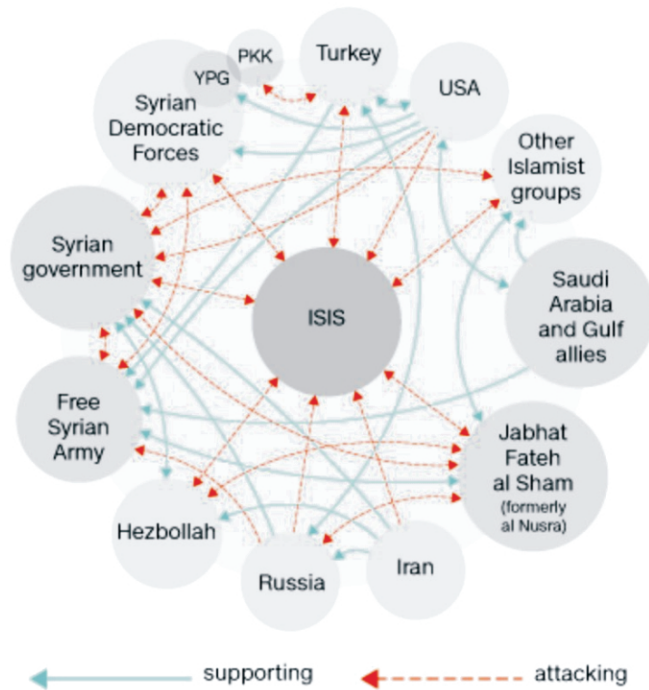

Figure 1: Who is fighting whom in Syria?[35]

During the period from 2003 to 2006, the US held sole responsibility for the security of Iraq, and American troops were in every possible way seen as an occupying colonialist force, something Iraq historically is familiar with. Such optics were to gravely damage the American Iraqi project, far beyond the fallacy of the occupation to begin with, on the back of Zarqawi being perceived as a mere proxy.

This vacuum split the now unemployed army veterans and Ba'athist officials amongst various insurgencies. With their trade being handling weapons, and killing, and no post-disbanding vocations or alternatives offered, the personnel found themselves more useful to the insurgencies against the Americans than sitting idly. AQI, and later ISIS, were to gain the most from this fallacy by Bremer.

The swift fall of Mosul in June 2014 and of Tikrit later the same month were treated as declarations by ISIS of both their capabilities, and seriousness in acquiring a territorial governate for the so-called caliphate. ISIS takeover of these regions of Iraq faced little resistance from Sunni minorities, despite their apprehensions as discussed earlier in this paper. Aided by an onslaught of media propaganda that showcased theatric beheadings of ISIS' opponents, the terror group faced subdued challenge from Iraqi military and police forces. Both Mosul and Tikrit, under ISIS, got new governors, both former Ba'athists in the Saddam regime. Abd al-Rashid, a former senior Ba'athist official took over Tikrit, and Azhar al-Obeidi, a former Iraqi Army general, took charge of Mosul.[36]

In the lead-up to this period, al-Maliki's policies in Iraq only inflamed the situation further. The militias fighting the likes of AQI began to come under heat, as Maliki moved to pacify the Sunni population. He cornered Shia cleric al-Sadr in Basra and forced him to give up to the government, while disarming a host of groups. However, Maliki's schizophrenic approach to play the Iraqi sectarian field not only continued to cower down his own power in Iraq, but also cornered the US on how to deal with the escalating situation.[37] The prime minister started to replace Sunni and Kurdish leaders and officers in Iraqi governance with Shia ones while moving politically closer to Tehran, a foe of the US, knowing well that the Bush administration had little option but to support him.[38]

By 2014, the last year of Maliki's rule, the Sunnis were already in revolt against his government in Baghdad. As ISIS moved into Sunni-held areas of the country, they found themselves facing less resistance, starting with almost a welcome ceremony in Fallujah, as they took over the town in January of that year.

By this time, the seeds of ISIS ideology planted in Syria by Zarqawi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were growing. The idea of the caliphate was a territorial conquest of Iraq and Syria, and perhaps even beyond, if propaganda was to be believed. The 2011 revolt against Assad gave ISIS, dominant in Iraq, an opportunity to spread its wings and cement its presence. To punctuate its dominance and seriousness over territory, ISIS declared Raqqa, a city on the banks of the Euphrates River in Syria as its capital—a significant symbolic move considering that the insurgency originated from Iraq.
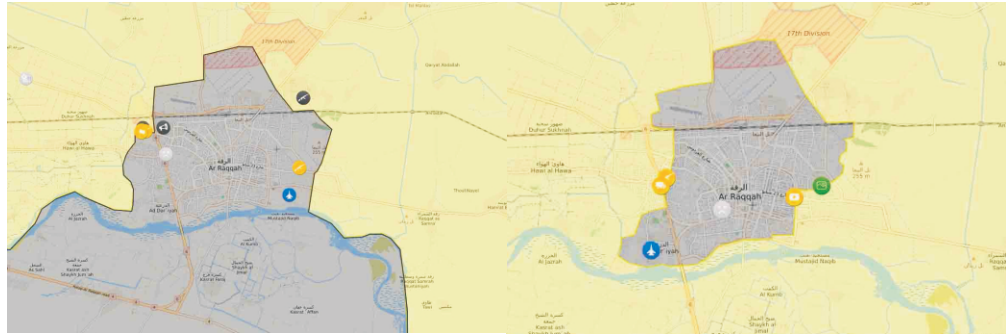
Fig. 2(a): Raqqa under ISIS (June 2017)   **Fig. 2(b): Raqqa under ISIS (July 2017)[39]**

Syria, another sectarian theatre where the majority (Shias) were ruled by the minority Alawite government of the Assad family, almost simply landed on ISIS' lap. The uprising against the Assad family was an extension of the so-called 'Arab Spring', a string of protests that had enamored the global community over the ideas of justice and democracy in the smorgasbord of sectarian Middle East politics. Like Iraq, Syria was also a sectarian experiment in the Middle East, with majority of the population being Sunni, but having little representation in governance as the Assad family ruled the country for decades.

The Syrian theatre, like Iraq, gave many opportunities for various insurgencies to build on, including the Assad regime's opportunistic tactics to pitch these groups against each other and offer the narrative that Islamists launched the Arab Spring protests against his government. However, in Syria, it proved to be more complicated for ISIS as Al-Qaeda and its now former affiliate, the Nusra Front, along with a host of groups, some backed by the US, created a complicated web of antagonists. The interventions of Russia and Iran to make sure the Assad government does not fall and ISIS does not control the Syrian borders with Central Asia caused further complications beyond the region.

Bashar al-Assad took over the reins of Syria from his father, Hafez al-Assad, chief of Syria's Ba'ath Party who launched a coup d'etat in 1970, backed by the Soviet Union. This historical leeway made by Moscow in the 1970s still remains as its main access point to the region, and is seen as part of Russia's sphere of influence. The protection provided by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Assad over the past few years is Moscow looking after its only influence point in a region where Western powers

largely dominate the narrative, specifically with the Arab Gulf states. In a sense, the current situation in Syria over the triangulation between Damascus, Washington, and Moscow is a continuation of the rhetoric from the Cold War period. ISIS provided a solid reason for Russia to enter the battle on two main fronts—first, as mentioned earlier, to protect its only political and military entry point in the region and second, to genuinely make sure that ISIS does not try to either influence or relocate in Central Asia. As of 2016, reports suggested that nearly 2,500 Russians were fighting in the ranks of ISIS. Unofficial numbers state above the count of 8,000 fighters.[40]

Today, ISIS' brutality exhibited in Syria over the past three years is only part of the problem in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian Army is fighting ISIS, America-backed militias including the Kurds, and a cocktail of jihadist groups primarily fighting against the government but also amongst themselves. ISIS, arguably, had a strenuous time in Syria trying to establish the caliphate than in Iraq, with groups such as the Nusra Front driving their own agenda, later even separately from Al-Qaeda, for an Islamist state, which by their design, did not include either the Assad government or ISIS.

To put things further in perspective from Syria's point of view, in the battle for the so-called caliphate's capital in Raqqa, US-backed militias aided by American Special Forces and air support have made significant headway in pushing back against ISIS from the eastern regions of the country. However, like in many other parts of the conflict, as territory recedes from ISIS hands, it does not represent an overall victory over ISIS.

With territorial losses, ISIS is leaving behind a huge political vacuum, similar to the one it had itself taken over during the period of 2014-15. However, the major difference on this occasion is that the vacuum has left behind even larger caches of weapons than ever before, and there is no one entity, including the Syrian government, that is ready to control these areas as a unit. Raqqa may yet become the first post-ISIS challenge for the US-led coalition, with a complex web of Shiite and Sunni militias, religious leaders, and legitimate regional actors such as the Kurds vying for territorial supremacy. However, the bigger threat will remain that a 'Band-Aid' solution may be applied in a post-ISIS Syria, bartering the critical aspect of stability with short-term gains of military withdrawal and

setting up puppet systems of governance. This, after all, is characteristic of the West's interventionist history in the region.[41] Often, this tradeoff between short-term objectives and enduring goals of economic and political prosperity gives rebirth to insurgencies, and ends up restarting the vicious cycle of violence, extremism and sectarianism.

While Iraq is a comparatively more straightforward war against ISIS, the involvement of Iran and Russia makes Syria a much more complicated theatre. While Iran-backed militias actively confront ISIS in Syria, they are also systematically creating space for their own armed factions as well as Hezbollah, coming in direct conflict with not only anti-Assad forces, but Al Qaeda, the Kurds, US-backed militias, and various smaller Islamist groups vying for space vacated by ISIS.

Raqqa, at the time of this writing, was entering a phase where the eighth-century walls around the city had been breached by the Syrian Democratic Forces, an Arab coalition, and Kurdish fighters. Despite repeated marketing of the narrative of the loss of territory by ISIS as a "victory" against the terrorist group, the battle for Raqqa has been, and is going to remain, a long-drawn one. While more than 50,000 civilians remain inside the city, acting as a shield between the warring parties, this jihadist status quo will perhaps continue for years to come. However, declaring victories and the "liberation" of cities is also part of the war against ISIS narratives, specifically those raging around territorial conquests.

The battles waged in Iraq and Syria against ISIS are not going to be decided in the near future, as military achievements in containment differ from establishing a workable system to make sure ISIS or even other Islamist groups do not regain lost ground. In fact, scholars such as Charlie Winter, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) in London, have raised questions whether ISIS losing cities such as Mosul have been, in fact, false-flag operations by the group.[42] Winter argues that the ways of ISIS operations inciting gruesome violence, committing grave atrocities against local populations such as rape and murder, would challenge an insurgency's prominence within a given territory. Highlighting that the aim of ISIS to establish statehood had been a catastrophic failure, Winter puts forward a pertinent question: "What if, more than anything else including territory, the group (ISIS) just wants to be the ideological hegemon of global jihadism? In this pursuit, the realization of ideological aspirations is

far more important than the permanent administration of any piece of land, even if it comes at great material cost." [43]

In all probability, ISIS will look into re-establishing itself as more of a guerilla movement than a statehood. The outcomes of such a downgrade towards ISIS' mandate as a group and perhaps more importantly, as a caliphate, are not yet quantifiable and existing research on this aspect of the insurgency is mostly grounded on conjecture, at best. To understand the survivability prospects of ISIS, it is important to understand the group's operations as a state.

Operations of ISIS

The following sections will discuss three main aspects relating to the operations of ISIS. While the intricacies of running a quasi-state are fairly complex, ISIS has managed to develop systems to govern its *wilayats* (provinces). Upon setting up of the *wilayats*, a first course of action is to set up an intelligence state and persecute enemies in a bid to make sure no uprising will take place. Beyond the 'statehood', IS tries to establish an 'official-looking' structure including erecting *dawa* billboards, media points where ISIS fighters can come and submit propaganda material, cleaning of public spaces, and 'purification' which includes destruction of shrines, desecration of graves, persecution and mass execution of gays, and punishment (such as public crucifixions and floggings) for stealing, smoking cigarettes, or consuming alcohol. [44]

Military, online and media propaganda, and financing are the three pillars of ISIS' success. As discussed earlier in this paper, many spaces where the group was able to create its territorial power in fact welcomed ISIS as it came in, specifically in Iraq, leaving little resistance to begin with.

Military

In May 2017, the war minister of ISIS, Abu Musab al-Masri, was reportedly killed in the Syrian city of Aleppo. The war minister is perhaps the second most important person in ISIS hierarchy after the caliph, al-Baghdadi, especially after the death of ISIS official spokesperson and chief propagandist Mohammad al-Adnani in Aleppo, Syria, in August last

year. Al-Adnani was touted to be Baghdadi's replacement if the caliph is killed.[45]

ISIS runs its own version of a defence ministry called the 'war office', which reports directly to the caliph, bypassing the command structure of the cabinet. Like a territorial force, the war minister is responsible for directing and managing all combat operations and attacks. However, hierarchically, it is not necessary that the war minister is an automatic second-in-command to Baghdadi.

ISIS' main military strategy as a territorial force was to take control of people's daily sources of income, specifically taxation, and holding public events to propagate their version of Sharia which was to be installed in the regions under their control. The war minister was responsible for devising strategies for military protection and governance of the wilayats, and the said control varied across regions depending on the type of resistance ISIS faced.

There are no specific outputs by ISIS relating to the operations of its military strategies. Understanding ISIS' military identity can be done primarily by dividing the organisation's operations in the pre-caliphate and post-caliphate timelines. AQI largely operated as a guerrilla militant front, using Improvised Explosive Device (IEDs), homemade improvised attack vehicles,[46] ambush tactics and hiding among the local populations to conduct their operations. ISIS in the post-2014 period had devised its military tactics around territorial conquest. This did not only allow for the group to ramp up further support for itself, but also, as strategy, made it easier for the variety of armies and militias to target ISIS in a more conventional form of warfare, one which forces such as the Kurds and even the Syrian Army had more experience with. The territorial loss experienced by ISIS in 2017 has in fact forced the group back into the urban guerilla warfare front, which could lengthen the existence of ISIS itself. While the territorial losses may change the trajectory of ISIS' military strategies, they do not translate to the end of ISIS as an idea itself.

Online/Media Propaganda

"To every media operative brother in the Islamic State, you should know and be convinced of the following fact, that the media is a jihad in the way of Allah and that you, with your

media work, are therefore mujahid in the way of Allah.'[47]

- *'Media Operative, You Are A Mujahid, Too'*

Perhaps more than the military aspect of its operations, which is of course directed towards a territorial approach within the geographies of Iraq and Syria masquerading as the Islamic State, it is ISIS' dedicated and knowledgeable use of the media that has added the most towards its jihadist brand value across the globe. Other than using existing, Western-developed social media platforms for clinical use in spreading propaganda and fear across the world, ISIS in fact has a more methodical approach towards distribution of information.

The media is considered as a sacrosanct feature of ISIS' operations, giving it the same importance as its militias fighting the physical battles in the real world. ISIS has used Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram and various other services to great effect in both spreading its ideology, and perhaps more importantly, recruiting people from around the world to be part of its caliphate.

To understand the success of ISIS' outreach using new-media platforms, it is first important to answer how it props up its online armies to execute so-called 'media jihad', offering its intended audience well stage-managed, executed and produced content glorifying the caliphate, its conquests, and the representation of Sharia that the group has installed, among others. As a spawn of AQI, ISIS' inherent understanding of the power of media is strong, and goes beyond social media to forums, old-school chat rooms and even cassettes, in the late 1990s.[48] Osama bin Laden was himself well-versed with the power of television, seeing its effects in action during the first Gulf War when the conflict became the first one to be broadcast live in American living rooms. 9/11 was a 'television spectacle' for Al-Qaeda, knowing that such an event would not only be broadcast across all of America, but to the whole world. After bin Laden's killing in May 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, by an American SEAL team, host of materials were recovered from the compound including videos and audio recordings.[49] One of the most telling video recordings from this cache was of bin Laden, clutching a TV remote, watching coverage of himself on a cable news channel.[50] For Al-Qaeda and others, the transformation from 'traditional' media to digital did not happen overnight, as most kept to the traditional ways of burning content onto cassettes, and later CDs and

DVDs, for distribution. However, bin Laden eventually had an epiphany that he should no longer ignore these new media 'gatekeepers' behind cable television; that laid the foundations for jihadist outreach to use mainstream media outlets against their own game.[51] There are other Islamists who have wielded the media as a jihad tool—such as Abu Musab al-Suri, a suspected-Al-Qaeda member and jihadi writer born in Syria but of Spanish citizenship currently known to be in a Syrian prison after his deportation from Pakistan in 2005. In his seminal work published in 2004, titled, 'A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance', al-Suri highlighted the critical role of the internet for jihadists, so much so that he prophesised that due to technological advancements in media tools, physical hierarchical structures were no longer needed for conducting jihad, and new media would be sufficient. He ideated that every Muslim's home can become a training camp or forward base, rather than relying on large bases that could be easily targeted by their enemies.[52]

In understanding ISIS' media strategy, a key document is '*Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too*'—a guide to the group's ideas, thoughts, requirements and propagations. This text, derived from a shorter version on media ethics for ISIS published by the Al-Himma Library, a media outlet tasked with publishing mostly religious pamphlets and manifestos for ISIS.[53] Released in April 2016 in Arabic on Telegram (the chat platform preferred by ISIS and pro-ISIS accounts due to its data encryption offerings)—the document was written by an anonymous author and addresses ISIS online support base. It called the individual supporters of the group and the caliphate online, around the world, as the "media mujahidin". The document's job is seemingly to make sure that the online support base does not feel any less important than the ground troops constituting the physical caliphate; this highlights the importance of the media narrative for ISIS.

One of the more pertinent sections of this document states: "We are in a battle and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."[54] While the messaging here seems to highlight the importance of the media wars for ISIS, the background of this particular take on the importance of information warfare is clouded and based on false information itself—in other words, propaganda within propaganda. According to scholar Charlie Winter, the above messaging was in fact first delivered by Al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri in a letter to Zarqawi, highlighting AQI's brutal approach to jihad and explaining that such

"ultraviolent" approach was a bad way to promote their ideology—it displayed them in poor light in the media to local populations of the region. However, ISIS, already at odds with Al-Qaeda's leadership, turned this approach on its head and formalised their approach via propaganda for their media mujahids.

After 2014, ISIS' media drive became more well-calculated and executed. From beheading videos, featuring ISIS fighters in black overalls and their prisoners in orange jumpsuits—not unlike those worn by prisoners in the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison where the US holds terror suspects for years, often without charges[55]—to tactical use of social media such as Twitter to spread pictures and videos of shocking violence. ISIS realised early on that such an approach to its media policies was effective in spreading fear amongst the people of the territories it held. Moreover, ISIS knows that the Western media will only willingly accept its narratives and disseminate them to a much wider audience across the world.[56]

To spread its media wars effectively and to legitimise its caliphate, ISIS has four main outlets that it directly or indirectly feeds with information. There is, for one, *Amaq*, a website that regularly releases ISIS statements, operational details including infographics, and runs media outputs on platforms such as Telegram using official groups. There is also *Rumiyah*, a glossy magazine brought out under the 'Himmah Publications' badge, that may be called "the Newsweek" of the Islamic State—it covers pro-ISIS activities from around the world. For example, *Rumiyah*'s issue number 10's cover story, 'Jihad in East Asia', describes the Philippines' war against the Abu Sayyaf group (unofficially known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant – Philippines Province) after the Islamist group announced its allegiance to Baghdadi in 2016.[57] [58]

The third outlet, *Dabiq*, is now defunct and the former avatar of Rumiyah. It was Dabiq that initially brought to mainstream discussion ISIS' capabilities for formalising information delivery. It had a glossy look and well-produced layouts, and seemed like a professional, state-run media enterprise.[59] According to analysts such as Harleen K Gambhir, *Dabiq* was a representation of an "outward-looking interpretation" of ISIS, working towards becoming influential beyond the borders of territorial gains in Iraq and Syria.[60] The magazine was discontinued and replaced with *Rumiyah*, after the prophesised town of Dabiq near Aleppo was lost by ISIS to Syrian rebels in October 2016 (*Al Naba*, a newsletter, was also

launched following *Dabiq*'s end). The final media outlet officially linked to ISIS is the most elusive, and perhaps the most important one: the Nashir Media Foundation (NMF) is known as ISIS' direct official channel, and is used less to announce information and more for directives. For example, in December last year, the NMF released a statement calling for attacks during Christmas events, specifically addressing the "IS wolves" in Europe.[61]

While the official and semi-official nature of these outlets are not well-documented, the target audience for these releases are in the social media. The ease of accessibility of ISIS propaganda online is a problem that has no immediate solutions with the open nature of the world wide web itself being the worst enemy in fighting such content. The micro-blogging site Twitter was one of the first major platforms where ISIS and pro-ISIS propaganda appeared in significant numbers. Indeed, it was not only ISIS that used Twitter to their advantage, but also other militant groups such as Al Shabaab during the 2013 siege of the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, where the terror group 'live-tweeted' the entire operation as its fighters killed 66 civilians.[62]

ISIS' approach to social media has not been a learn-as-you-go exercise; it employed technically educated jihadis, most probably foreigners who had travelled to fight for the caliphate, to create a robust online sphere of influence. According to a seminal study on ISIS and its use of Twitter conducted by researchers J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan for the Brookings Institution, during the timeframe between 4 October and 27 November 2014, there were more than 46,000 active pro-ISIS accounts on Twitter alone. Berger and Morgan's study highlighted the location of the Twitter users as well, with Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, the US, and Egypt claiming the top five spots.[63] Twitter arrived late to the battle against the pro-ISIS accounts on its site, after deliberations within the digital communities of issues ranging from policing online to whether suspensions of accounts celebrating a terror strike (and not committing one) goes against the freedoms of speech and of expression. However, with increased examples of online radicalisation and attacks in Europe being largely instigated by ISIS using the internet, the approach by services such as Twitter was forcibly changed. By the second half of 2016, Twitter had suspended more than 376,000 accounts, a starkly larger number compared to Berger and Morgan's estimates from 2014.

Twitter's crackdown against ISIS led the terror group's supporters to look for alternatives. ISIS created its own Twitter-like app for Arabic users, called 'The Dawn of Glad Tidings' (or just 'Dawn'), which was launched for Android systems in 2014. Dawn, based on the platform of a popular American app called Thunderclap, which was used by the likes of former US President Barack Obama's campaign to gather online support for his candidacy in 2010.[64] Users joined Dawn as a primary platform to post content on Twitter, with ISIS operatives directly controlling the content themselves, and individual users having little to no control over what was published out of their accounts via this homemade app.[65] After Dawn was pulled offline from download portals such as Google Play, ISIS moved to already established systems, and Telegram was the favoured one.

In 2015, ISIS' proto-official channels such as Nashir and Amaq moved to Telegram (Nashir, meanwhile, also launched its own app).[66] The then newly launched 'channel' feature in the service offered users a broadcast option, which did not have any user limitations. This allowed ISIS channels to broadcast propaganda to an unlimited number of users, and with Telegram's encryption offerings, intelligence agencies countering ISIS online were held back due to non-conformity of the owners of Telegram to offer a backdoor access to security agencies. Despite various reports of countries such as Iran having cracked Telegram's encryption, ISIS continues to use it as its premiere information distribution platform, predominantly choosing to use it for announcements and staking claims to attacks around the world.[67]

According to a new research on ISIS' use of Telegram, more than just a safe source for distributing information, the nature of the platform and the way it offers options to users gives a near-perfect system for a group such as ISIS, and its 'media mujahids', to spread its online propaganda. The links shared on Telegram channels with the users usually have an expiry time of between 30 minutes and two hours (although 30 minutes seems to be the more preferred activation time). This strategy, cunningly, makes sure those ISIS propagandists online stay online for long durations of time in attempts not to miss any of the said content.[68]

The creation of propaganda by ISIS was also in many ways groundbreaking. The terror group pulled out all stops in offering

theatrical takes of their violence—using the latest 4K high-definition cameras and drones, and employing high-quality editing skills. This uptake in production of media propaganda has rubbed off even on other jihadist groups currently involved in the fight against ISIS, masquerading as 'rebels' or 'opposition', specifically the likes of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. HTS, an Islamist group formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, who also started to produce Hollywood-like productions of its operations against the various factions it was in battle with, including ISIS and the Syrian Army.[69] As a counter, anti-Assad forces such as the Free Syrian Army, a group of Western-backed former Syrian Army soldiers who defected during the Arab Spring period in order to bring down the Assad government, have also now started to produce counter-propaganda of the same scale, with cinematic production, boisterous music scores, and arresting imagery.[70]

All these operations have proven to be highly effective, for ISIS, more on a global level as part of their narrative, and for others, including the opposition, for reaching out to local populations to join the fight against the Islamic State. However, all this is possible also because ISIS has successfully managed to create a self-sustained financial state. While its financial capabilities have since been diminished, ISIS at its peak conquests in 2014-15 was possibly the richest terror organisation in the world.

Finances

With territorial conquest came the economic spoils. ISIS' efficient conquest of territory meant it needed money to sustain its new proto-state and the citizens, its fighters and other such quasi-state units as well. The Islamic State's estimated value at the end of 2015, which could be determined as its peak period, was estimated to be a little over US$2 billion. As highlighted throughout this paper, ISIS' base of operations and strategic eloquence for a successful insurgency was solidified well before the phase of 2014-15. As American intelligence had found years earlier, during the reign of AQI, Iraqi insurgency had already attained financial independence, raising anywhere between US$70 million to US$200 million from a range of largely criminal activities and territorial taxation, with donations only accounting for a small percentage in 2005-06.[71]

According to a study conducted by the Center for the Analysis of Terrorism in 2015,[72] the following were the main streams of revenue for ISIS (excluding the taxes):

- Extortion

- Oil

- Donations

- Antiques

- K&R

- Natural gas

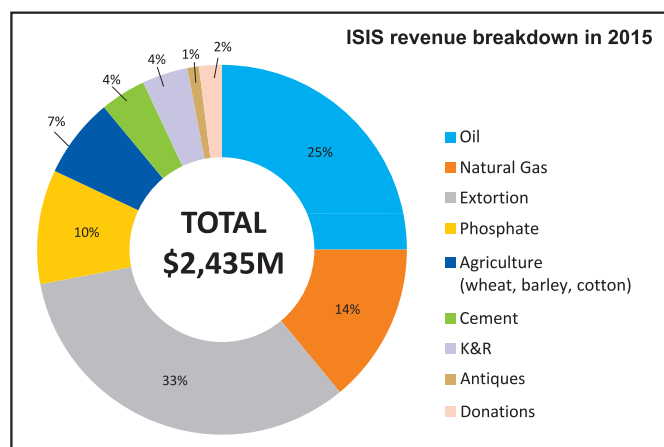- Phosphate

- Agriculture

- Cement

Figure 3: Source: CAT 2015[73]

Like a sound business, ISIS did not rely on only one financial stream, and instead spread out its portfolio. In 2015, oil constituted 25 percent of its revenues. This dropped drastically by 2016, as both Russian and American coalition airstrikes targeted oil wells, ISIS' makeshift oil refineries and oil trucks, giving a severe blow to the group's oil smuggling business.

ISIS' oil business in fact offered a great insight on how natural resources, despite the differences between the warring parties, have been used by

these groups for making money. ISIS's biggest market for selling oil was domestic, as well as, often, other warring parties and even, according to some reports, the Syrian government. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the Assad regime's purchase of oil from ISIS is helping the group sustain itself amidst the relentless attacks from multiple corners in Iraq and Syria.[74] Money from the regime for oil is now ISIS' largest financial contributor,[75] even higher than revenues earned from extortions. Between 2014-15, ISIS lost—from 82 percent revenues earned from natural resources in 2014 down to 60 percent in 2015; revenues from criminal activities, meanwhile, went up from 16 percent in 2014 to 38 percent in 2015.[76] ISIS has a cabinet-rank finance minister, and although his primary job is to control taxation, along with military commanders the said person manages other revenue streams as well, including financial dealings beyond ISIS territories (which includes finding donations). In March 2016, Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, known to be ISIS' finance minister, was killed in a US-led airstrike. His death was announced by then US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter as part of a larger US narrative to take out ISIS' hierarchy.[77] ISIS' overall revenue, according to a study by EY's Investigation and Disputes Services team and King's College London, has fallen from an estimated US$2 billion in 2014 to less than US$800 million in 2015.[78]

Table 1: Islamic State Income, 2014-2016

	2014 (in $m)	2015 (in $m)	2016 (in $m)
Taxes and Fees	300-400	400-800	200-400
Oil	150-450	435-550	200-250
Kidnapping	20-40	Not known	10-30
Antiquities	Not known	Not known	Not known
Foreign Donations	Insignificant	Insignificant	Insignificant
Looting, Confiscations, Fines	500-1,000	200-350	110-190
TOTAL	**970-1,890**	**1,035-1,700**	**520-870**

Source: ICSR[79]

ISIS also attempted to go beyond oil, which comparatively is easier to handle (and sell) than other natural commodities, such as natural gas or

precious metal. However, it faced roadblocks in gathering the required expertise to operate in these industries and resorted to releasing advertisements for jihadis with skills in manning oil and gas assets and offering up to US$180,000 in salary.[80]

As the campaign against ISIS intensified, the group's income from natural resources started to dry up, and as previously highlighted, taxation and criminal activities became the cottage industries that fueled the Islamic State. ISIS imposes taxes on almost all economic activities from the eight million people living within the territories under its control—a population higher than that of countries like Denmark. ISIS also charges religious minorities a *jizia*, or protection tax. Beyond taxation, it also levies a fee on services such as water and electricity. For example in Raqqa, Syria, ISIS' departments such as Diwan al-Khadamat (Services Department) devoted their time and effort to extorting funds from local residents.

Territorial losses since 2016, however, also mean loss of population that ISIS controls, and can tax, or extort from. This has added immense pressure on its resources, forcing it to employ other riskier methods to gain access to funding, such as the *hawala* system. The employment of jizia also grew in importance, with ISIS increasing its targeting of Yezidi and Assyrian Christians. Over a period of time, the United Nations has acknowledged paying ISIS nearly US$1 million in ransom for securing the release of nearly 200 religious minorities in Syria.

Regional Implications and Scenarios

The victory of the Iraqi Army in Mosul over ISIS was a significant event, although one that could ignite more questions than answers over the future of the region. Iraq's current Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, visited the newly 'liberated' city to announce the end of ISIS after days long stretch of military operations that saw the destruction of the historic Al-Nuri mosque, ISIS' last known bailiwick in the city and a significant symbol of the Islamic State itself.

However, attaining political stability and security for both Syria and Iraq is going to remain a complex challenge even after the territorial defeat of

ISIS. Comparatively, Iraq could be seen as a more stable case, with no Russian involvement and the Iraqi government along with the US remaining as the two major influence points in directing the precarious reconstruction and political recalibration process in the post-ISIS period. While Iran, as the Shiite power center, remains an omnipresent political power in Iraqi society, economy, and politics, Tehran's role in post-ISIS Iraq is contestable, despite both parties earlier finding common ground both on Prime Minister al-Maliki and on now chief al-Abadi.[81]

The fall of Mosul is a milestone in the fight against ISIS and has spurred the narrative of the end of the Islamic State. Whilst this may be true towards the proto-state structures of the so-called caliphate, it is widely accepted that the ideology and nature of ISIS is going to remain active in the region for the near future. Researcher Cole Bunzel, in his work, 'From Paper State to Islamic State: The ideology of the Islamic State', argues that despite the success of the US-led Western coalition, a military campaign can in fact strengthen the ISIS ideology on three fronts. The first of course being the international intervention by the US, Russia and Iran; second, the Shiite order trying to undermine the Sunnis (an argument bolstered by American opening with Iran with the nuclear deal); and third, the secular Arab order (predominantly targeting the minority Alawite Assad government) itself being a threat to the jihadist ideology.[82]

However, the disintegration of ISIS is not the only worry for the region. Until date, most groups in the region fought the Islamic State despite their ulterior agendas towards either the Syrian government or each other. For example, the Kurds and the Kurdish Peshmerga in the northern parts of Iraq and Syria, who constitute the largest ethnic group in the world without a state, and various Kurdish movements, have fought for independence in Iraq, Syria and most notably, Turkey,[83] sacrificing soldiers and resources fighting ISIS, which was critical for their own survival. With its anti-ISIS operations coming down significantly, the Kurds have already started extended talks with the Iraqi government over a fully independent Kurdistan (beyond the autonomous status it currently holds), carved out of northern Iraqi territory. The Kurds, who hold territory as 'war spoils' taken away from ISIS are now offering it back to Iraq as leverage in exchange for independence status.[84]
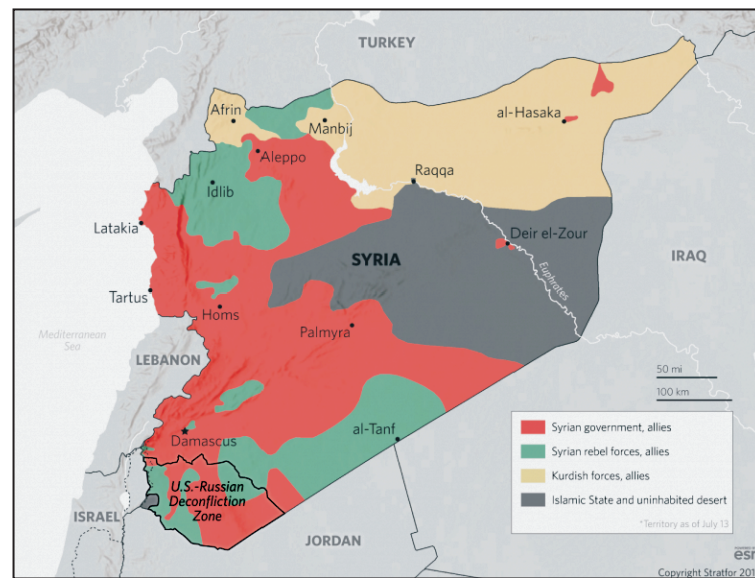
Figure 4: Source: Stratfor[85]

The problem with this impending fragmentation of interest groups in Syria is something not to be ignored. As shown in Figure 4, the geographical overlapping at the territories once held by ISIS has already begun, with different stakeholders claiming territory following the eviction of ISIS: the Syrian government, rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces, jihadist groups such as the HST, Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, and other smaller jihadist outfits that now litter the region.

Further, post-ISIS, other major Salafist-Jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham are thought to have already started planning their own islands of governance in the vacuums left behind. Al-Sham, at the time of this writing, was expected to announce its own "unified administration", or in other words, territorial control covering "military, political, civil and judiciary".[86] In other towns such as Idlib in northwestern Syria, smaller-jihadist factions including those aligned with Al-Qaeda have started warring amongst themselves for territorial and political control. According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Idlib is currently witnessing clashes between al-Sham and HTS, with the two jihadist factions vying for supremacy in the absence of both ISIS and the Syrian state.[87] Research conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint has found as of June 2017, there have been 1,468 attacks in 16 cities in Iraq and Syria, since being liberated from ISIS rule.[88]

Table 2: Attacks in Cities Post-Liberation

City	Country	Number of days Post-Liberation	Number of Attacks	Average Monthly Attacks	Reported Killed
Al-Sa`diyyah	Iraq	888	47	1.6	45
Baiji	Iraq	557	387	20.8	429
Falluja	Iraq	307	12	1.2	49
Hit	Iraq	381	37	2.9	80
Jalawla	Iraq	888	23	0.8	40
Jurf al-Sakhar	Iraq	917	1	0.0	0
Mosul's Left Side	Iraq	96	417	100.3	52
Ramadi	Iraq	449	163	10.9	335
Rutba	Iraq	345	38	3.3	212
Sinjar	Iraq	533	140	7.9	158
Tikrit	Iraq	761	63	2.5	115
`Azaz	Syria	1156	5	0.1	26
Jarabulus	Syria	249	2	0.2	0
Manbij	Syria	260	41	4.7	268
Palmyra	Syria	317	37	3.5	334
Shadabi	Syria	436	55	3.8	431

Source: CTC Westpoint[89]

The Idlib's current ideological and political struggle—where the people of the town have little say, if at all, in deciding their post-ISIS future—is not going to be a one-off example. The results of a post-ISIS cocktail of political vacuum, ideological infighting and historic sectarian divisions amongst the local populations and regional dynamics are already visible. In the absence of a state structure backed by the international order in both Syria and Iraq, the spread of Islamist groups beyond ISIS is, under current circumstances, inevitable. Other towns such as northern Hama and western Aleppo are witnessing a similar fate, with the underlying multiple-war fronts now taking mainstream precedence. For the people living in these regions, there is little change to expect in the post-ISIS era.

Even if ISIS' hierarchy and territorial victories come to an end, it has given birth to enough branches to make sure that at least Syria, more than Iraq, remains systematically in an Islamist quagmire in the future, with little to no chance of consensus building between groups. In its potential demise, ISIS is leaving enough political and societal chaos in Syria and Iraq for it to have a more than a fair chance to reemerge in a second attempt towards building its caliphate.

The above exercise, to draw out the Islamic State's history in order to understand its future, has highlighted that like many insurgency

movements around the world, the Islamic State as an *idea* will persist. While this paper finds, with confidence, that territory was the defining factor that allowed ISIS ideology to flourish with such viciousness, the group's managerial tactics and ability to mobilise fighters and keeping them motivated was also a defining characteristic. Without these motivational strategies, as discussed in the sections on media propaganda, it would have been difficult for ISIS to hold on to their territory upto the extent it had managed to do so. Following the battle of Mosul, the expected trajectory of the Islamic State would perhaps witness a draw-down in Iraq while resuscitating guerilla warfare tactics in the future and expanding base even further in Syria despite the looming loss of Raqqa. However, ISIS' prospects are not going to be easy, as it could find itself battling multiple enemies—a resurgent Al-Qaeda, a vicious circle where the protégé will face-off with the master in what is expected to remain the most complex conflict in the world for the foreseeable future. What is next for the Iraqi and Syrian neighbourhoods becomes perilous as well.

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The Fall of ISIS and Its Implications for South Asia

Abstract

With the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, analysts are pondering the kind of organisational form the group would take next. The influence of the so-called Islamic State in South Asia may be minimal—but India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan, have all had the shadow of ISIS' global footprint land on their doorstep. This brief sheds light on how the influence of ISIS spread across South Asia, specifically after 2014, when pro-ISIS social-media platforms circulated the 'ISIS Khorasan' maps that showed the region as part of the caliphate's global ambitions of conquest.

Introduction

Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi landed in the besieged city of Mosul on the eve of 10 July 2017 to announce the defeat of the so-called Islamic State. "I announce from here the end and the failure and the collapse of the terrorist state of falsehood and the terrorism which the terrorist Daesh announced from Mosul,"[1] he said in a speech picked up by the international media.
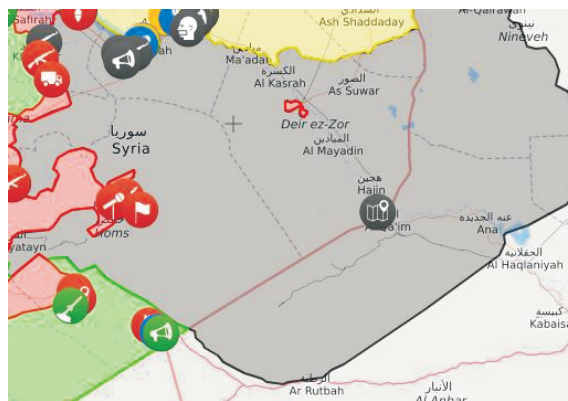
The narrative of the demise of ISIS, and in effect, that of the so-called Islamic State had started to appear in primarily Western discourse months before Abadi's trip to Mosul. In 2014, ISIS had taken over Iraq's second largest city with relative ease, and their leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi took to the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri in the city centre to announce the institutionalisation of their proto-state. Between 2014 and 2016, ISIS conquered territory at a perilous pace in both Iraq and Syria, setting up governates (*wilayat*) to install its rules and laws according to the organisation's interpretations of Islam. This brief attempts to analyse and contextualise the influence and impending effects of a territorially down,

but ideologically stable 'post-geography' Islamic State in South Asia. It utilises comparative works and primary research to understand a dynamic war that has gone beyond the concepts of land and borders.

Diminished Territory, Weakened Narrative

The rapid decline of the ISIS caliphate has raised many questions over the structure that the group would take after their loss of territory. Researchers have studied available data and examined scenarios looking at the fate of other global insurgency movements in the past, along with local sectarian dynamics in Syria and Iraq. These methodologies, in some ways, have re-designed the scholarly debate around the topic of terrorism itself. They have, however, their own limitations when used to study IS. The grey areas under which the proto-state operated offered no compelling and targeted arguments on the future form of the organisation, both political and strategic.

The fall of Mosul was a pivotal point in the war against ISIS, with the recapture of the city that ended with ISIS destroying the Al-Nuri mosque. Moving forward from July 2017, ISIS has lost its territorial controls at a rapid pace, as the Iraqi military, backed by a collective of anti-ISIS militias and US-led Western coalition under the program 'Inherent Resolve' liberated one city after the other (See Figures 1 and 2). In Syria, while the optics were politically different—with Russia and Iran backing Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad's regime—territorial loss for ISIS, including the recent loss of its de-facto capital Raqqa, diminished its influence. Perhaps, more importantly, its global narrative has also weakened.[2]

(Fig 1: ISIS territorial control (grey) in May 2017)[3]   (Fig 2: ISIS territorial control (grey) in December 2017)[4]

However, the narrative of the "end" of ISIS is based on a false equation that defines a long-term military victory over the group as a strategic win. It is imperative to remember that ISIS started as an insurgency, born out of Al Qaeda's attempts to set up a strong presence in Iraq under Al Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) first leader and ideologue, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[5] Relinquishing territory back to the Iraqi and Syrian governments has been a significant moral setback for ISIS. This can be measured by its constant and often increasing media output, trying to maintain the morale of not only its fighters on the ground, but the important online support base the organisation has skilfully cultivated over the past four years.

These said losses over the past year, which includes critical cities and towns such as Mosul, Kirkuk, Tikrit Fallujah, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Deir ez-Zor, Albu Kamal and now Raqqa, are in themselves a significant study of local politics and socio-cultural and ethnic realities. They hold clues to what the future of ISIS might be. The loss of Raqqa means ISIS will largely be concentrated only in Syria, and predominantly the country's desert regions in Deir ez-Zor. Facing this situation, ISIS is expected to transform itself from its current proto-state structure back to its original organisational form, which was of an insurgency movement. Even as the Iraqi military has made progress against ISIS, there are signs that the political vacuum in the country that initially led ISIS to succeed in capturing territory is re-emerging.[6] Members of Sunni tribal militias, in the aftermath of ISIS, have blamed the Iraqi military for labelling them as the Islamic State as well.[7][8] This sort of political vacuum, and the lack of political capital to bridge sectarian divides between the Shias and Sunnis in the country was the reason behind Mosul, a largely Sunni city, in large pockets, welcoming ISIS into its streets in 2014. The government of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had suspended Sunnis from the Iraqi military and replaced them with often inept and junior Shias, even for high-ranking roles.[9]

The situation is more complicated in Syria. While ISIS is on the downturn, the landscape is riddled with smaller insurgencies and terror groups. Some are fighting for the overthrow of the Assad regime, and others are looking to set up their own proto-states that are not too dissimilar to that of the caliphate. Foreign powers such as Russia, US, Iran and Turkey are backing their own militias, creating an extremely complicated web of violence and political interests that makes it increasingly difficult to offer a hypothesis on a plausible permanent

outcome. These issues in both Iraq and Syria also leave the door open for ISIS or another similar, mass-moved and well-orchestrated entity, to seep into the power vacuums being left behind.

On 18 September 2017, ISIS released an audio clip allegedly of its elusive leader, al-Baghdadi. The 46-minute clip[10] was divided into two parts. The first addressed an ideological gap in ISIS on the issue of *takfir* (or accusing another person of Islamic faith of apostasy),[11] which had garnered a lot of debate within the organisation. The second was on geo-politics and ISIS, which was important amidst ISIS' losses and the prolonged silence from al-Baghdadi. The supposed caliph not only addressed internal ideological issues, but gave a morale boost to ISIS fighters saying territorial loss should not be linked to the "truth" (which can be translated to the ideological goals of the organisation). Baghdadi blamed the exhaustion of American foreign policy in the Middle East for its failures to counter Russia's presence in the region, and ended his speech with a Hollywoodesque statement, "The show must go on."[12]

Despite the losses incurred by ISIS, and the various complexities of the ground situation in both Iraq and Syria, one aspect of ISIS' influence and ability to mobilise supporters that gets lost in the narrative is the organisation's reach beyond the region, and its abilities and strategies to influence individuals or groups to act in its name in foreign lands. ISIS has governates in places such as Libya and the Philippines, among others; the Philippines is home to the Abu Sayyaf group, which is engaged in fierce fighting with the military in the besieged southern city of Marawi.[13] India has even donated a token amount to the Philippines in its battle against ISIS and its affiliates in South East Asia.[14]

Despite the initial euphoria, ISIS has not been able to create much of an influence in India. However, the story is not the same for other South Asian states. Afghanistan, where ISIS Khorasan Province (ISKP) has made significant inroads into the country's complex tribal districts, is now facing a new challenge of its own. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the ISIS-inspired attack in July 2016 in the capital Dhaka, and the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis have raised serious concerns on the prospects of concentrated attempts to radicalisation, specifically in the refugee camps, not only by ISIS, but also by Al Qaeda and a multitude of local jihadist factions. Despite the relative absence of pro-ISIS incidents in countries such as India, the threat remains active; it simply is currently muted due

to local dynamics and the fact that ISIS itself has concentrated more on Europe. South Asia's complex socio-political and socio-cultural narratives remain an open door to ISIS's marketable fantasy, more than an ideology.

ISIS in South Asia

So far, India has had some 82 active cases of investigations on individuals suspected of engaging in pro-ISIS activities. These include a small group of cases that involved people travelling to or attempting to travel to Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya with the intention to join ISIS, or those who have shown intentions online to do so. A handful of cases have also involved citizens' intentions to finance pro-ISIS related activities, either in Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. The fact that India, with the second largest population of Muslims in the world, has only 80-odd cases of pro-ISIS activities may be regarded as extraordinary, and can be offered as a collection of hypothesis on why Indian Muslims have not taken to the idea of the caliphate's version of jihad.[15] The most significant ISIS-related case as far as Indian discourse goes was neither an attack, a bombing nor assassination, but an anonymous account on Twitter, which allegedly became one of the most vocal proponents of ISIS on the internet. The Twitter account known as ShamiWitness (@ShamiWitness) was being run by one Mehdi Biswas, an engineer in a multinational corporation in India's IT capital, Bengaluru.[16] Even during the height of his popularity as ShamiWitness, the Twitter account which even this author followed, was not flagged by Indian authorities. The owner was eventually identified in an investigation by British media organisation Channel 4, which initially thought the account was owned by someone in Sheffield, a city in England with a sizeable South Asian population. This was widely seen as a failure of Indian agencies such as the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), India's premiere technical intelligence agency. The other aspect highlighted from an Indian discourse, but one that was prevalent in Syria and Iraq via the demographics of many of its foreign fighters, was the fact that Biswas was a well-educated and financially stable middle-class individual whose radicalisation could not be traced to traditionally accepted explanations such as poverty and lack of opportunity.

In Afghanistan and Bangladesh, the influence of ISIS has been more prominent and endangers the stability of the wider region. The July 2016 attack in an upscale restaurant in Dhaka, the Holey Artisan Bakery, where 22 people were killed, most of them foreigners, brought the global spotlight of terrorism to Bangladesh. The country had previously been in the news for the killings by Islamists of secular bloggers, minorities, and atheists. The 2016 attack, orchestrated by middle-class, educated Bangladeshi youth, had the signs of ISIS-inspired violence—such as using machetes to hack people to death. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, with its media outlets highlighting Bangladesh as its 'Bengal' governate.[17] In a video released later, Abu issa al-Bengali, a Bangladeshi fighter allegedly with ISIS in Syria said, "What you witnessed in Bangladesh was a glimpse. This will repeat, repeat and repeat until you lose and we win and the sharia is established throughout the world."[18] ISIS claiming the attack showed that local jihadist factions in the country were in touch with the Islamic State, keen to join their vision of the 'caliphate' and act upon it. The attraction towards ISIS in Bangladesh has seen a lot of access to the country's middle class. There have been examples of Bangladeshi and Indian pro-ISIS individuals attempting to work together online to form a larger base of like-minded individuals to create an organised entity that, as other such groups have shown, would build up to an organisation capable of directly coopting with ISIS.[19] In fact, a former senior military official of Bangladesh has told this author that one of his own family members had gone to Syria to join the Islamic State. This underscores the challenges in attempting to understand a person's attraction towards IS purely from a demographical, societal or cultural point of view.[20]

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, the situation has been more complicated. The Islamic State in Khorasan (ISKP), the Afghan avatar of ISIS, has more territorial presence in the vast ungoverned borderlands between Pakistan and Afghanistan along the disputed Durand Line. Most of the fighters in the ISKP brand are former Pakistan Taliban (TTP) members, who had been fleeing military operations conducted by the Pakistani armed forces in the country's tribal areas such as FATA and Waziristan. These jihadists arrived in the Achin district in the Nangarhar province and its surrounding areas under the cover of being refugees, and were initially aided by local villagers who sympathised with them for being Pashtuns.[21] These "refugees" used the situation to look for new avenues to return to

their career path of terrorism, and started to develop an environment and infrastructure for the same, possibly with backing from Pakistani military-supported actors. The United States has taken a more hands-on approach against the ISKP in Afghanistan, with the launch of a GBU-43/B (also known as the 'Mother of All Bombs') airstrike against the group in the country's restive Achin district.[22] Media reports say that in US airstrikes and drone strikes against ISKP, some of the fighters who have been killed were Indians from the southern state of Kerala who had travelled to Afghanistan to join ISIS.[23]

Afghanistan's political vacuum and divisional socio-religious landscape could, however, become a new ground for ISIS, or the debris left behind by the so-called demise of the organisation. An illustration of this is the emergence of reports on foreign ISIS fighters, including those of French and Algerian nationalities, recently arriving in Afghan districts such as Darzab in northern Jowzjan.[24] Analysts have long flagged Afghanistan as a country ripe to host the fall of the Islamic State as fighters flee Iraq and Syria, fueled by the fact that thousands of foreign fighters in ISIS ranks were from Central Asian states that border Afghanistan in the north. For example, Jowzjan, near the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, lies only few hundred miles from a tri-intersection of Afghanistan's borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. According to the Soufan Center, 8,717 foreign fighters in ISIS emerged from the erstwhile Soviet Bloc, with Turkmenistan having more than 400 fighters, Uzbekistan more than 1,500 and Tajikistan 1,300.[25] The hypothesis of increased terror activities in Afghanistan by the ISKP has strong empirical and historical connotations of jihadist activities in the country, for whom ISKP is only a new, globally popular brand to operate under.

The influence of ISIS in South Asia is divided according to the local politics, economics and socio-cultural complexities of each state. There is no observable pattern of convergence between various ISIS-affiliated groups or those who have claimed ownership of an attack in the name of the caliphate and only later, on an act of opportunism, has ISIS claimed their deeds. With further losses of manpower, territory and clout, ISIS has also shown signs of claiming failed attacks and rebranding them as a "success". As terrorism researchers Charlie Winter and Haroro J. Ingram note, singular attacks, irrespective of their size or strength, will become increasingly important for the organisation as it restructures from a proto-

state to a terror group, and it will take opportunities of even the miniscule of attacks and play it up to keep the ISIS brand afloat.[26] Winter takes the example of the 'fire-bomb' attack in London's metro train systems in September 2017 targeting a carriage at the Parsons Greens station. The attack was crude, and poorly planned and executed. The Improvised Explosive Device (IED) used was almost unbecoming of what is usually expected from ISIS attacks in Europe. The ingredients were a bucket, some wires and a failed concoction of easily available domestic chemicals. Nonetheless, ISIS claimed ownership of the attack, branded it a success, and eventually gained what it is seeking more of nowadays – a wide-reaching global narrative to counter its losses of the supposed caliphate. In more recent events, ISIS, via its news agency Amaq, claimed the killing of a police officer in Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, making it its first "official" operation in the state.[27][28] However, two days later, the *al-Naba* newsletter, which comes up with infographics on operational statistics for the group, did not mention India as part of the 19 countries it boasted of ISIS conducting attacks in 2017.

Winter and Ingram further note: "We have to recognize that ISIS's claims of responsibility are never "just" claims of responsibility. Rather, they are central parts of the terrorist deed, psychological addendums geared toward rigging popular perceptions that are, at times, more impactful than the operation itself. Understanding how these claims—which ISIS itself describes as "media projectiles"—impact a given attack is critical if we are to weather this storm."[29] This hypothesis sketches a picture of what ISIS' brand and influence can be translated to, in regions far away from the caliphate, including in South Asia.

Other analysts have used previously existing South Asian insurgency models to understand the future course of the Islamic State. In a recent study, Paul Staniland, associate professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, used the final consequences of insurgencies in South Asia as a comparative to construct a hypothesis on the demise, or the final construct of Islamic State as a proto-state.[30] Staniland compares the possible future scenarios for ISIS by studying the likes of the CPI (Maoist) and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in India, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and Kachin Independence Organization in Burma, amongst others. He has devised three plausible scenarios for the future of the Islamic State, the first of

which is "fighting to the death", where a comparative with the LTTE between 2006 and 2009 "Eelam War IV" was achieved.[31] The second is "containment and possible collapse", where Staniland envisions a "less dramatic" end to the insurgency, with "sustained pressure" diluting the insurgency into guerilla/terror operations, an outcome which has the highest probability. Lastly, there is ISIS returning to its insurgency roots, stepping back, regrouping and reorganising for a comeback during a more politically opportune time.[32] This is seen today particularly with the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which during the peak of the American-led war and the relentless air-campaign in the Tora Bora mountains against Al Qaeda saw the insurgency go underground, detaching Osama Bin Laden's capabilities to command Al Qaeda's various insurgencies across the Middle East.[33] The latest quarterly report released by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) highlights the deteriorating territorial control of the Afghan government to the Taliban. According to the report, Taliban increased its territorial influence to a total of 13.5 percent of Afghan territory, fully controlling 13 districts and influencing 42.[34]

One anomaly that currently stands tall in ISIS' influence in South Asia is that of Pakistan. While few significant cases have come up in Pakistan, ISIS claimed responsibility for two attacks in 2017. The first was in February, when an attack on a Sufi shrine in Baluchistan killed 88 people,[35] and the second was in August, when 15 people were killed in Quetta.[36] Both attacks were in the restive Baluchistan area where Taliban's spiritual leadership—known as the Quetta Shura—also resides. Pakistan offers an intertwined military-jihadist-civilian complex to accurately place ISIS' presence or influence. However, in Kashmir, for both India and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), the influence of ISIS has some quasi-official narrative. According to one of the ISIS cases being investigated in India, the accused pontificates on Kashmir. "In my view, Kashmir was deliberately not chosen by Islamic State to launch their 'Quest for Caliphate' in al-Hind. Had it been chosen, there would have been two-front battles. First, with Indian Kuffar Army and second, with Pakistani nationalists, so-called jihadi groups Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) etc. Wallahi, these factions would never accept merger with Islamic State as their foundation is based on 'nationalism' or 'patriotism'."[37] In simpler terms, the quagmire of India and Pakistan's overtures in Kashmir may actually help in keeping ISIS out.

The post-ISIS Era

Over the next few months, ISIS is expected to operate more as a terror organisation, closer to the operational models of Al Qaeda and its peers, as opposed to a 'caliphate'. According to some media reports, ISIS leaders have already started to move money out of Syria and Iraq in the form of secret financial transfers and business investments.[38] These resources, which to this day include ISIS earnings of over US\$1 million from oil smuggling, will be critical for its future operations both in Syria, Iraq and beyond. The internet is going to remain a steadfast access point for command and control for ISIS. Despite scholars around the world remaining divided on the magnitude of the actual threat posed online by ISIS, there is no reason to doubt that communications by the organisation via Twitter, Facebook and encrypted applications such as Telegram and Wickr, aided by its well-accustomed communications strategy using its own media ecosystem, offer continuous legitimacy to ISIS. Its online presence provides ease of access to its sympathisers and global media alike, a direct connection with its 'media jihadists', and perhaps most importantly, a continuous stream of legitimacy. To try and maintain the same level of discourse that ISIS created using media, violence and fear during the period of 2014-15[39] would remain a critical part of its survival strategy.

The deterrence towards ISIS is going to be a combination of on-ground engagement between communities and governance, along with a robust online anti-terror apparatus to keep tabs on pro-ISIS movements on social media, banking, travel, and other arenas. Many cases, for example in India, of authorities alerted towards pro-ISIS activities on Facebook came from foreign intelligence agencies and not domestic ones. While India has showcased a steadfast and robust human intelligence record against deterring terror activities, the Achilles heel remains the online world. A well-operated online intelligence network in India will not only have a domestic benefit, but will give gains to the neighbourhood as well with intelligence sharing, joint online operations and database convergence to keep a check on ISIS's influence on the internet. However, an intra-South Asian combined effort on issues such as cyber-intelligence faces a massive obstacle in the form of Pakistan, which as a known state-sponsor of terror would not only be a significant loose-end in such an envisioned cyber-intelligence concert, but will look to undermine such an idea to protect its own interests.

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Uncovering the Influence of ISIS in India

3

Abstract

This paper examines the influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in India, chronicling its rise beginning in the early 2000s to its supposed demise in 2017. It seeks to understand the effects of ISIS' ideology and brand via India's neighbouring countries and the people who joined the group (or came close to doing so). The author studied more than 80 cases to cull trends unique to the landscape of terrorism in India, and ponder the peculiar societal and cultural factors that fuel the process of an individual gravitating towards the so-called "caliphate".

ISIS influence in a post-geography terror threat

The ISIS' conception in the post-Iraq war of 2003, its growth in the succeeding many years and, finally, its supposed 'demise' a couple of years ago—resulting in the geographical end of the so-called Islamic State—is a narrative that has been repeated both by governments and independent analysts alike over the past few months. This author has himself written a paper, 'The Fall of ISIS and its Implications for South Asia', that studied the future trajectory of ISIS and the form in which it will now strive.[1] As the year 2018 opened, the fight against ISIS—both military and in the realm of narratives—had taken the backseat in mainstream and regional media. However, questions remain on not only the finality of the so-called 'defeat' of the Islamic State but the fate of the ideology itself. After all, such ideology was successfully disseminated not only in Iraq and Syria but also to a global audience via the group's impressively organised internet outreach.[2]

Despite the prevailing narrative, there is no consensus amongst those who study ISIS and the Syrian civil war on what the future holds, and whether this celebrated defeat means only a geographical suppression or a larger, ideological breakthrough to break the backbone of the movement. "Beneath this mask, there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask, there is an idea, and ideas are bulletproof," so says the lead in the American fiction film, 'V for Vendetta', based loosely on British anti-establishment revolutionary Guy Fawkes who tried to blow up the British parliament in 1605. The ethos behind this quote, generously provided by American pop-culture, resonates with the basic question over the future of ISIS. Theology plays a critical role within ISIS despite being underappreciated in public discourse as a pivotal reasoning behind the group's success.

The life of the Islamic State in its post-geography phase will likely be the subject of many case studies, as the group evolves and trains its sights on regions beyond Iraq and Syria. Indeed, it has already garnered some degree of success in this sphere—with 'lone-wolf' attacks attributed to IS in Europe, US and other regions—and the coming of 'ISIS 2.0' has become an accepted fact amongst scholars and analysts who follow the organisation.[3] While it is imperative to remember that ISIS works strongly on a psychological level, and is expected to intensify its approach of radicalising potential recruits online, the post-geography era of the group offers a bigger challenge than that which can be defeated by military operations against a semi-defined proto-state. The relapse of the Islamic State into its original form, that of an insurgency, is inevitable. Current responses by regional powers, non-state militias and external powers are proving to be nothing more than a Band-Aid over a scrape; what is required, however, is major surgery and rehabilitation.

While Iraq has arguably witnessed a more successful approach to plugging political vacuums in the wake of defeating ISIS in prominent cities such as Mosul and Tikrit, the prevailing situation in Syria was always going to have a polar-opposite outcome. However, the effects of ISIS on global debate, the war on terrorism and how states approach tactical outcomes of both military and political insurgencies and terror groups alike is expected to drastically change based on the strategies employed—and now institutionalised—by ISIS.

India is often highlighted as an 'anomaly' as far as the influence of ISIS is concerned. As a country with the world's third largest Muslim population

(after Indonesia and Pakistan), the number of ISIS cases that have been, or are currently being probed by investigative agencies remains just above 100, with liberal estimates hovering around the 200 to 300 range. Even with the higher estimates, the numbers are lower than most European countries that have seen foreign fighters move towards Iraq and Syria in sizeable numbers. The number of Indians who managed to travel to either West Asia or Afghanistan to answer ISIS' call between 2014 and 2016 is around 10 to 15.[4]

These trends often raise the question of whether ISIS failed in India. How deep were its organised attempts to develop a presence in India, and what threat perceptions persist from a geographically depleted organisation? This paper dissects the Indian cases and picks out patterns about what have led individuals to join the so-called Islamic State's 'caliphate'. The research relies predominantly on data provided by government and state investigation agencies, due to a lack of other, independently verifiable sources.

The Initial Pro-ISIS Cases in India

During the period of 2012-2013, New Delhi under the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was proactive in the international multilateral efforts to develop a global consensus in ending the hostilities in an increasingly ravaging Syrian civil war. In 2014, then Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid addressed the Geneva-II meeting, reiterating India's stance on a peacefully negotiated end to the war and New Delhi's commitment to humanitarian efforts in Syria. "India believes that societies cannot be re-ordered from outside and that people in all countries have the right to choose their own destiny and decide their own future," the minister said.[5] "In line with this, India supports an all-inclusive Syrian led process to chart out the future of Syria, its political structures and leadership. There can be no military solution to the crisis. India's stand on various resolutions in the Security Council and General Assembly has been in support of efforts to bring about an end to violence by all parties. India has important stakes in the Syrian conflict. It shares deep historical and civilizational bonds with the wider West Asia and the Gulf region. We have substantial interests in the fields of trade and investment, diaspora, remittances, energy and security.

Any spillover from the Syrian conflict has the potential of impacting negatively on our larger interests." Since then, the Geneva talks have served as a monument to the utter failure of the United Nations and the international community to bring an end to the civil strife.[6]

During the same year of India's participation in Geneva, the first few cases of Indians getting involved in pro-ISIS activities started to come to light. From 2011 till 2013—the timeframe during which the erstwhile Al Qaeda hierarchy in Iraq re-branded as 'ISIS'—Indian approach towards the crisis was largely based around the paradigm that it was contained within the Middle East region. This gave Indian security agencies a false sense of security on the precise nature of the group and how it planned to expedite its own strategies, which from the beginning included establishing a geographic foothold in Iraq and Syria followed by global outreach methods. To be fair, however, New Delhi's blind-spot to the development of the so-called Islamic State was not unique; the group's rapid advances both geographically and using the internet as its second battlefront took the entire world by surprise.

The first two prominent cases of Indians being involved in pro-ISIS activities occurred in Singapore and the town of Kalyan in Maharashtra. Two childhood friends, Haja Fakkurudeen Usman Ali, a manager at a grocery store in Singapore and Gul Muhamed Maracachi Maraicar, a software engineer in a multinational firm became part of a plot to join ISIS and travel to Syria. Both Ali and Maraicar, born and brought up in Cuddalor, Tamil Nadu, witnessed the Syrian crisis unfold from 7,600 km away and were moved by the plight of the Muslims suffering in the conflict. This being the earliest in the timeline of the rise of ISIS as a global phenomenon, Maraicar and Haja's radicalisation seems to have been rooted in witnessing images and consuming news via mainstream media before attempting on their own to access ISIS propaganda online. The plan was built by the two between 2011 and 2014, with trips to India in the middle to consult family members and plan their move to Syria. In this duo, it was Gul with a steady job and the financial resources, who prodded Haja to carry out the travel. In 2013, Haja visited Cuddalor to seek blessings from his parents and prepare his family to travel with him. Despite his parents' attempts to dissuade him, Haja left for Syria along with his family. (There is little clarity on the route they had taken, but it was likely via Turkey which was the preferred transit for most foreign fighters.)[7] Haja would later be featured in ISIS propaganda videos in 2016.[8]

Meanwhile, Singapore authorities arrested Maraicar and deported him back to India. During investigations, Maraicar had revealed that both him and Haja had planned to expand recruitment for ISIS and had looked into tapping into educational institutions in Chennai. The fallout of Maraicar and Haja's plans were visible even in 2017, four years after the latter left Indian borders. In September 2017, at least five individuals were arrested in Tamil Nadu, with one of them, Ansar Meeran, being found as the financier behind Haja travelling to Syria with his family.[9] Meeran and associates worked towards furthering the agenda, arguably failing to do so in the four years they remained at large.

The other, popular pro-ISIS case to emanate from India was of the four young men who left their homes in Kalyan, Maharashtra in 2014 and successfully made it to Syria. Amongst the four was Areeb Majid, son of an *unani* doctor, whose radicalisation story predated the formulation of ISIS in all its forms. The others who fled with Majid were Fahad Tanveer Shaikh, Aman Naeem Tandel and Shaheem Tanki. All four of the Kalyan men faced different fates as members of the so-called Islamic State. Majid was the only one of the four who eventually surrendered and was brought back to India from Turkey, tried and jailed; Tandel, Shaikh and Tanki were reported killed over the period 2014 – 2017.

ISIS in South Asia: Ideology vs Ground Reality

On 27 February 2018, the US State Department announced a host of ISIS 'affiliates' to be designated as terror organisations.[10] From South Asia, Bangladesh for the first time appeared in an official communique of this kind. The group is called 'ISIS-Bangladesh', which by accounts will represent an umbrella to include all factions of the Neo-Jamaat-Ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (NJMB) and smaller groups if further terror acts are committed in allegiance to ISIS.[11]

The neo-JMB in Bangladesh would not have had much difficulty as far as recruitment goes, with there being enough interest in Bangladesh to market the Islamic State's ideology. In 2016, one Mohammed Mosiuddin (alias Abu Musa), a 26-year-old grocer from West Bengal's Burdwan region was arrested for allegedly planning lone-wolf attacks in the name of ISIS, including those against Western targets.

Mosiuddin took to online platforms in 2014 to get in touch with more like-minded people, and scope out the activities of pro-ISIS supporters in the region. During this search, he came in contact with many such individuals, including Shafi Armar (alias Yusuf al-Hindi, founder and self-appointed Emir of Junud-Al Khalifa-e-Hind), also known to be a resident of West Bengal and a known former Indian Mujahideen operative seen as the Islamic State's predominant 'recruiter' for India. However, during this period, Mosiuddin also came in contact with Abu Sulaiman, a former member of the Jamaat-Ul-Mujahideen (JMB). Initial communications took place via Facebook and then switched to various other platforms such as Nimbuzz, Surespot and Trillian. The communications between Mosiuddin, Sulaiman and others took form fast, albeit in an unorganised and ad-hoc manner. In 2015, the JMB joined these conversations while Mosiuddin attempted to get financing and help in obtaining a passport from Armar in order to plan his travel to Syria. Meanwhile, Sulaiman paid Mosiuddin a visit from Bangladesh to decide the course of action they wanted to initiate for setting up ISIS' presence in the region. It is unclear how Sulaiman arrived in India (though taking conventional modes of transport such as air or road would have been most likely).

People like Armar are guided by ISIS to become effective recruiters, giving them access and information on how to convince probable candidates into joining their brand. While the differences between the likes of Al Qaeda and ISIS are mostly glaring, some strategies are common between the two, including the weaponisation of the internet via selective militarisation of the Quran. Jesse Morton, who was a former online recruiter for Al Qaeda and went by the name Yonus Abdullah Mohamed, has explained the three-point agenda that is used (at least by him and the radicals he was in contact with) to pull potential recruits towards their ideology. The entry point, as explained by Morton and one that occurs repeatedly in examples of radicalisation of individuals across the board—is personal grievance, a dent in a person's psyche that can be nurtured in a negative manner and used to contribute to a broader cause.[12]

This strategy is divided into three silos. The first is *Tawheed al-Haakimiyyah*, or the promotion of undisputed idea that Allah and his judgement and legislation (Sharia law) is supreme. Second, *Kufr bin Takhud* or the complete rejection of 'false gods', which includes idols, elected democracy, parents if they stop you from joining the greater cause, and so

on. Lastly, *Al-wallah-al-Burrah*, complete loyalty to Muslims and only Muslims. These tenets to radicalisation, mixed with global events such as the Syrian civil war—images of which are livestreamed on television and even more easily available online—offer a potent concoction for recruiters. The flip side of the coin is that the targeted individual also needs to have more than just the sense of social, cultural or political disillusionment. The sense of 'purpose' and, perhaps surprisingly, boredom and the lack of achievements and purposelessness are also highlighted as personal traits that jihadist recruiters pry on.

Between Mosiuddin and Sulaiman, the former also tried to recruit two others—Saddam Hossein, a 25-year-old unemployed youth and Shaikh Abbasuddin, a 22-year-old daily wage plumber. Mosiuddin demanded complete loyalty to him of both the men, and set out to build an agenda. This included, in consultations with Sulaiman, recce trips to New Delhi and Srinagar in 2015 via train, where failed attempts were made to rile up protests with ISIS flags, video clips on YouTube and trying to make space for the Islamic State's ideology in the valley. Mosiuddin's JMB-sponsored trips pushed him to pursue his initial ideas further, to fight in Syrian soil. It never came to fruition due to financial problems and Armar's inability to provide them with monetary support, even via JMB, who described Sulaiman as an ISIS cadre.[13]

On the other geographic side is Afghanistan: while posing much less of a threat to India directly, it has become a battleground as far as ISIS goes and is home to the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Both the JMB and ISKP's relations with ISIS are distinctive enough for the mandate for them to have a separate dedicated study. However, Afghanistan already has the second largest pro-ISIS presence outside of Syria and Iraq. This presence has more to do with Afghanistan's local jihadist ecosystem and domestic and regional political dynamics than a devout allegiance towards the caliphate. Here, many jihadists know of no other way to make a living other than waging a war, and ISKP has taken advantage of this talent pool, as have others. For example, Iran hired hundreds of fighters from the Liwa Fatemiyoun, an Afghan Shiite militia largely funded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), and deployed them on the frontlines in Syria. Meanwhile, ISKP largely comprises of former Pashtun fighters of the Taliban displaced by Pakistan's military operations along its borders with Afghanistan.

Mosiuddin's example highlights not just an Indian case, but one of the many South Asian and South East Asian examples of pro-ISIS people looking to undertake *hizrat*, or the holy trip to Syria to fight in ISIS in the name of God. While the men from Kalyan in Maharashtra were economically more stable, Mosiuddin, a small grocery store owner, had to repeatedly ask Armar for monetary help, not just for his intended travels but to procure small locally manufactured weapons as well, including knives, swords and machetes (tools often seen being used for grotesque violence in ISIS propaganda videos). The important aspect in this case, however, was the seemingly easy way that Mosiuddin and Sulaiman were able to collaborate across the border. These recent worries of Islamist radicalisation in Bangladesh on the back of the Rohingya crisis in neighbouring Myanmar also provoked a barrage of reports—mostly unsubstantiated and uncorroborated—detailing the supposedly rising influence of ISIS amongst the refugees, in refugee camps and in the general Rohingya population. The more direct threat of radicalisation remains with the tapping of local organisations such as the N-JMB by larger global jihadist factions such as Al Qaeda, empowering them economically, ideologically and militarily to use the Islamic State brand and orchestrate jihad. (A comparative case is militant group Abu Sayyaf's allegiance to ISIS and the impending battle with the state in Marawi, Philippines). The trend of multiple parties claiming attacks to both hijack and confuse narratives is commonly observable in examples from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and even in India's Jammu & Kashmir.

Mosiuddin's case highlights an important factor—that a person's ability to understand and tackle day-to-day life issues also plays a role in their planning abilities to either commit an act of jihad or attempt to travel abroad to join a terror group. Dealing with the system for simple tasks such as obtaining a passport was a failed exercise for Mosiuddin. It remains unclear to what extent Armar was willing to help Mosiuddin. However, it can be safely presumed that the distance and the limited worldliness of Mosiuddin made sure Armar either failed in equipping him or eventually gave up.[14]

Despite the number of pro-ISIS cases being relatively negligible, the Indian political and social environment remains conducive for Islamist activities with multiple social and political pressure points. However, there remains a distinction between the Indian cases who bought into the caliphate's marketable jihad and the historic connotations of what has fueled Indian jihad—which largely has been the issue of Kashmir.

Mapping Pro-ISIS cases in India

According to research conducted as part of this paper and the ones preceding this, the number of pro-ISIS cases attributed to both the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and the media stand at 112. The process of collecting the data was challenging despite some of it being made publicly available by the NIA. It was difficult to formulate a clear hypothesis on both the outcome of a concentrated effort by either ISIS or pro-ISIS individuals to set up an exclusive India entity, which in turn made it harder to adhere to systematic (or traditional) use of research methodologies.

Figures a, b, c, d: Snapshots from ORF's ISIS 'Influence Tracker' project

a. Kerala

b. Maharashtra

TELANGANA

SALMAN MOHIUDDIN
Geography - hyderabad
Source -Media

MOHD ATAULLAH RAHMAN
Geography - Hyderabad
Source -NIA

MUZAFFAR HUSSAIN RIZWAN
Source -NIA

HABEEB MOHAMMED
Geography - Hyderabad
Source -NIA

ABDULLAH BIN AHMED AL
AMOODI
Geography - Hyderabad 500 002
Source -NIA

ABDUL RAOOF
Status - not arrested
Geography - Hyderabad
Source NIA

YASIR NAIMATHULLAH
Geography - Hyderabad
Source -NIA

MOHAMMED ILYAS YAZDANI
Status - arrested
Source -NIA

MOHAMMED IBRAHIM YAZDANI
Geography -Hyderabad
Source -NIA

c. Telangana

WEST BENGAL

ABU SULAIMAN
Source -NIA

SHAIK ABBASUDDIN
Source -NIA

MD MOHSIUDDIN
Source -NIA

SHAFI ARMAR
Source -NIA

SADDAM HOSSAIN @
Source -NIA

d. West Bengal

The mapping of the 112 cases in India threw both interesting data and expected trends. Kerala, the most literate state in India, led the number of pro-ISIS cases with 37 out of 112. The numbers are expected to be higher, however, as per corroboration done for this research, the count that includes cases that could not be fact-checked does not exceed 150. These cases are of those in India, or that began in India. The number of Indians who have or may have joined ISIS or travelled to Syria or Iraq from within West Asia or other foreign points remains a grey area with little to no data available. More than seven million Indians reside in the larger West Asia region, and this lack of data is problematic both for mapping trends and in the overall attempt to study ISIS' influence and alleged footprints in India and its neighbourhood.

It is hardly surprising that Kerala leads the number of cases of radicalisation towards the Islamic State. Despite its literacy rates, as a state,

Kerala depends on remittances from the Gulf region for much of its economic well-being, which in turn translates into the Gulf's political influence as well. Other states such as Maharashtra, Telangana and West Bengal have also witnessed comparatively higher incidence of radicalisation. The seriousness of each case, however, varies—from being a concentrated effort to simply wishful thinking.

There are few commonalities between the cases but they do help construct some patterns that may be of significance in studying counter-terrorism from an Indian perspective. As it is known, radicalisation online promoted by the Islamic State's well-orchestrated media propaganda arms became the easiest platform to access both for jihadists and potential jihadists. Almost 95 percent of all cases in India started from the online sphere, and not necessarily ended in contact with either ISIS or pro-ISIS recruiters, but with access to the hordes of general propaganda that includes text documents, videos of executions, speeches by prominent clerics, well-produced glossy magazines such as *Dabiq* (later renamed *Rumiya* after the town of Dabiq fell away from the caliphate's control), and other such paraphernalia.[15]

The most common apparatus for contact and outreach between most cases has been Facebook, which is an anomaly given global trends. The uses of Facebook range from direct messaging, to creating new profiles specifically for pro-ISIS activities using dedicated mobile phones and numbers, to having a relatively free access to both like-minded folks and materials shared by them as the platform itself struggles to curb misuse of its services. One commonality that can be sketched out from the available data is the fact that potential pro-ISIS individuals seem unwilling to work alone. Like any 'fan club' that works online for celebrities, the method to rally support for pro-ISIS ideology does not involve specialised tactics as far as most Indian cases go. Other chat programs such as Telegram has become popular as official ISIS channels and pro-ISIS activities started to use the Russia-based software more often due to its higher encryption levels that make it harder for governments to break into it and orchestrate surveillance against its users. Initially, non-encryption of the popular messaging app WhatsApp (owned by Facebook as of 2014) was one of the reasons pro-ISIS figures did not use the service. Absent empirical studies, an argument can be made that this allowed India's nearly 200 million WhatsApp users a deterrent via the lack of a privacy option that was fast becoming common amongst other providers.[16]

The need to work in a group rather than alone in trying to plan attacks locally or attempting to travel to Syria has both commonalities and anomalies to how potential ISIS recruits behave. Europe has seen what has come to be known as 'lone-wolf' attacks, where a radicalised individual commits an act of terror in the name of the Islamic State, using daily items such as knives for stabbings or a vehicle to mow down pedestrians on busy city streets.

The concept of lone-wolf attacks was discussed by people such as Mosiuddin. However, it did not materialise in any of the cases studied for this paper. Before delving further into this aspect of Islamic State's effect on people being radicalised towards jihad, it is imperative to clarify what a lone-wolf attack is and how it is identified. Clark McCauley and Sofia Moskalenko in their research have theorised two schools of thought, illustrated via the top-down pyramid approach—one to decipher Radicalization of Opinion (Figure 1) and the other, Radicalization of Action (Figure 2).[17]
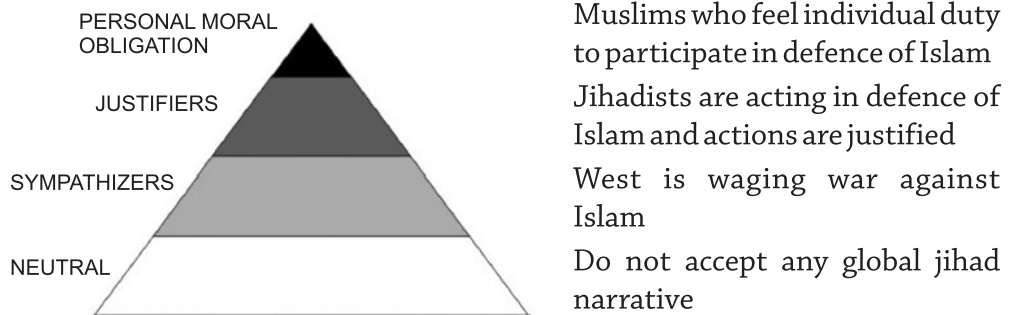
PERSONAL MORAL OBLIGATION — Muslims who feel individual duty to participate in defence of Islam

JUSTIFIERS — Jihadists are acting in defence of Islam and actions are justified

SYMPATHIZERS — West is waging war against Islam

NEUTRAL — Do not accept any global jihad narrative

Figure 1. Opinion radicalization pyramid

TERRORISTS — Radicals who target lethal violence at civilians

RADICALS — Engaged in illegal political action that may include violence

ACTIVISTS — Engaged in illegal and non-violent political action

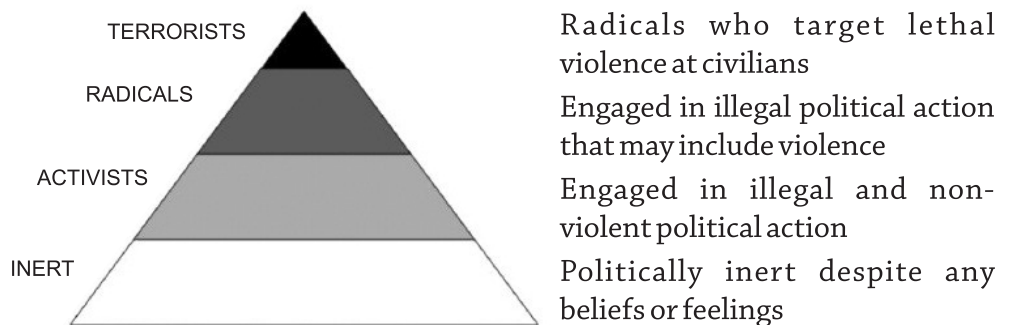INERT — Politically inert despite any beliefs or feelings

Figure 2. Action radicalization pyramid

Researcher Lewis W Dickson recognises the fact that the process of understanding terrorism conducted by solitary persons—and how they moved from harbouring opinions on a matter to conducting an act of violence—is a transition that may not have any systemic variables.[18] Often, definitions of lone-wolf attacks, such as one formulated by Ramon Spaaji, highlight the fact that the attackers do not belong to organised terror networks and the person operates only on the behalf of themselves.[19]

Despite the fact that most researchers have been unable to come to any concrete framework on how to define a 'lone-wolf' attacker, the lack of such incidents in the name of the Islamic State in India can indeed be seen as an anomaly. While not many detailed sociological or cultural research exists to quantify this from an Indian point of view, the fact is that most cases in India mostly involve groups of people.

At the beginning of this research it seemed that the 'only-groups' argument could either be common to Indian cases due to socio-cultural factors or other unknown reasons. Yet, similar trends were observed in a Canadian study released by the country's Security Intelligence Service (CSIS).[20] The output analysed Canadian cases over a three-year period to outline select findings, specifically looking into what pushed the people who travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIS from "talkers" to "walkers", and what the factors were that bridged the process between thought and action.

The CSIS study found that the tendency for younger people to work in groups and not alone is one that was commonly observed. This hews to observations made in most Indian cases as well. The following section from the CSIS puts things in perspective from a common experience point of view between India and Canada. "The Service's analysis found that young adults (under the age of 21) and minors mobilize more quickly than adults. The mobilization process for youth, especially young travelers, is a relatively minimalistic endeavor. In extreme cases, it requires nothing but a passport, plane ticket and cover story for the travel. Young adults and minors have fewer obstacles to overcome in their process of mobilization and they also tend to mobilize to violence in groups, which can also help them overcome any existing obstacles by pooling resources and expertise."

Further, the analysis highlights that group mobilisation is faster, and offers better cover to hide violence indicators. The research also showed that

socio-cultural factors such as marriage, relationships, and others play an important role in mobilisation patterns, specifically for women, who rarely move about on their own, given cultural norms.[21]

The pattern of moving in groups from an Indian perspective also has similar points of experience as those seen by Canada. The age demography studied by CSIS and the median age in the Indian cases are comparable, other than the fact that there were hardly any cases in India of minors either travelling or showing signs of pro-ISIS activities. Both the Indian and Canadian experiences are distinct from those of European nations. For example, the Paris attack in November 2015 was a concerted effort between a group of young men residing in Brussels, Belgium, led by 26-year-old Salah Abdeslam, who is a Belgium-born French national of Moroccan descent.[22] While the attack was effective, it was also one of the less common types of violence committed in the name of ISIS in that country. The terror strike claimed 130 lives, and symptomatically, was much different than the debated fear of lone-wolf attacks in European capitals, specifically as the number of Syrian refugees looking to enter the continent grew significantly during that period. All the attackers knew each other and belonged to the same locality in the Belgian capital's impoverished and mostly Muslim-populated Molenbeek area. Some of them were childhood friends.

A comparative to the Canadian and European examples is the Indian case of a short-lived, 12-hour-long siege in March 2017 between the Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terror Squad (ATS) and terror suspect Saifullah, who was alleged to have links with ISIS and was killed in the operation in UP's capital Lucknow's Thakurganj area. This particular case had other political and sociological commonalities as well when compared to other pro-ISIS cases in Western countries.

The Case Studies: Comparatives and Trends

On 7 March 2017, a crude, home-made low-intensity pipe bomb was used to orchestrate a terror strike on a passenger train operating between Bhopal and Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh. More than ten people were injured. Some of the accused were arrested over the next few hours, and investigation agencies uncovered an alleged

connection to the Islamic State. The men behind the bombing chargesheeted by law enforcement were Atif Muzaffar, Mohd Danish (alias Jaafar), Syed Mir Hussain (alias Hamja Abu Bakkas) and Ghous Mohammad Khan. Subsequent investigations pointed to Muzaffar as the ring-leader, with the other three and another man, named Saifullah, as collaborators.[23]

Following the attacks, media reports were quick to point out that this was considered to be the first ever "full-scale Islamic State operation in India."[24] The men involved were in contact with each other via social media platforms, and were reportedly being monitored by a web of central and state intelligence and police agencies. In cases prior to this one, foreign intelligence agencies monitoring pro-ISIS radicalism worldwide in more than one instance had alerted Indian authorities about such chatter. It not only highlighted cyber-security blind spots from an Indian intelligence point of view but also proved just how easy it had become for potential jihadists to use popular social media platforms for initial connections with like-minded people, before attempting to take the conversations to mobile messenger services or offline.

In Lucknow, recovered in the house where Saifullah was killed were weapons, a flag of ISIS, cartridges and videos of pro-ISIS materials. All the men arrested in this case had unconfirmed common threads with not just each other, but a ring that Shafi Armar may have been trying to build across the sprinkled sections of the rapidly growing Indian penetration of the internet and mobile services. All the accused in the Lucknow case also came from modest backgrounds, and did not have the financial resources to travel to Syria or Iraq despite showing inclination to do so via Dhaka in Bangladesh.[25]

It is known via investigations that Saifullah and the others as well during questioning raised the issue of the rise of the Hindu far-right and groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) being threats to Muslims in India. This point is not exclusive to the Lucknow case, but is brought up in nearly 45 percent of all cases studied as part of this research.[26] The news cycles in the Indian media of the mob-lynching of Muslims in the recent past and attacks on Muslims due to events related to consumption or sale of beef are also common trends flagged throughout this exercise. While these issues are contentious, there is no empirical evidence available or no such conclusions achievable whether these were at the forefront of

radicalisation, or just one of the many factors that lead a person to taking a resolve to join the Islamic State.

One of the most interesting aspects visible throughout has been the fact that the fascination of joining the geographical entity of the "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria by far trumped any will of these people to represent ISIS domestically instead. While the above particular case can be registered as an anomaly, the foremost attempt has been to try and travel to the Middle East. Out of the majority of the cases studied here, very few had ever stepped outside India, and most of them did not even have valid passports. The biggest obstacle for these cases looking to fly out of India was, for better or worse, the Indian bureaucracy itself. Many of these cases had rejected passport applications due to lack of address proof or an actual permanent address, inconsistent documentation, and lack of understanding of the application processes. Those who reached the part of the process that required police verification as well had little success beyond that.

The fact that most cases came from people who had never left India before may have added to the increased arrest rates. Online visibility and collaboration remained the primary method for accessing ISIS' robust, effective and well-produced media propaganda; even in ISIS' downturn stages, such propaganda was available easily enough for both recruiters and consumers to distribute and access. For example, websites such as *Jihadology.net*, an academic repository of jihadist propaganda maintained by researcher Aaron Y. Zelin of the Washington Institute in the US, is banned in India by the Department of Telecommunications after interrogations revealed some of the cases had accessed the database for propaganda materials including speeches and videos.[27]

The cyber sphere has been cultivated and used by ISIS not only to disseminate its propaganda, but to shape thought and play up the narrative of Muslims around the world needing their own land under the ISIS' interpretation of Sharia. The design of ISIS messaging for its intended consumers, according to researcher Haroro J Ingram, works on two main factors. The first is the pragmatic side of the propaganda, which perhaps is the most important as it highlights the aspects of "security, stability and livelihood". The second factor is largely based on the self, tapping into a person's identity, highlighting the narrative—"we are champions and protectors of Sunni Muslims"— and offering protection of integrity.[28]

However, a pattern, once again, cannot be determined on what exactly within the available ISIS propaganda materials convinced the Indian cases to take the step of joining the Islamic State. The anomalies, more than anything else, highlight the innate complexities in attempting to conduct scholarly studies of terrorism and radicalisation, especially narrowing the syllabus down to a few particular trends beyond theology and geo-politics. One hypothesis that can be constructed, yet not corroborated with empirical evidence within the bounds of this particular study, is that in most cases pre-existing disillusionment (or standing right on the cusp of the 'line of radicalisation') is key in nudging the person over the edge. While many reports highlight that friends and family tend to not notice any signs of abnormal behaviour in the person, discontent in the person's mind had indeed been brewing either on domestic, international or personal issues. In the cases examined for this study, the reasons for crossing the line and looking to join ISIS range from fear of the rise of the Hindu right, the plight of Muslims in the post-9/11 world, and the suffering of Muslims in the Middle East in the hands of foreign powers. The latter is in itself vague, since most people who have died in the hands of the Islamic State have been Muslims themselves. The advent of the ISIS media machinery was a valid and safe stepping stone towards further radicalisation. In certain cases, the Indians involved were already members of groups such as Indian Mujahedeen, Ansar ut-Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind (AuT), Popular Front of India (PFI), and other more marginal prior to the existence of ISIS. They used the opportunity to brand themselves with this latest global jihadist offering, and became part of a small but existing pool that ISIS unknowingly tapped into.

Kashmir and the Influence of ISIS

Despite the various theories and arguments being offered in an attempt to understand pro-ISIS radicalisation, the issue of Jammu & Kashmir remains a perplexing question. According to discussions with Indian cases by investigative agencies, there seems to be no single narrative within ISIS on the issue of Kashmir. Even as ISIS flags have sporadically been waved at protests in the Kashmir valley, in some instances the imagery itself has been wrong[29] and the effects of it on the ground have been minimal. The failure of attempts to construct a narrative around ISIS influence in the valley, despite various news reports

suggesting the same, is grounded in the fact that jihad in the region is completely different ideologically and militarily than what the Islamic State looks to achieve.

The illustration of different narratives within the jihadist paradigm of Kashmir seen here highlights three main points on why the Islamic State will have difficulty to set up an official *wilayat* in India. First, the reasons for jihad are polar-opposite to the ones propagated by ISIS. Second, both the Indian state and Pakistani state are too heavily ingrained in the Kashmir issue, specifically institutionally, to allow space for any other organised narrative to take root. Third, the narrative of *azaad* Kashmir which also holds significant space is directly at odds with ISIS strategy and theology itself.

The predominant jihadist narrative in Kashmir is two-fold. The first are the pro-separatists who fight for '*azaadi*', or freedom from the rule of both India and Pakistan. The second group consists of organisations supported by Pakistan, who hold in their nationalist discourse that Kashmir is part of Pakistan beyond just the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). These two discourses leave little space for any other agendas by international groups such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and others. However, this does not mean attempts have not been made, or are not being made, to install the principles of the caliphate in the valley.

"In my view, Kashmir was deliberately not chosen by Islamic State to launch their 'Quest for Caliphate' in al-Hind. Had it been chosen, there would have been two-front battles. First, with Indian Kuffar Army and second, with Pakistani nationalists, so-called jihadi groups Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Hizbul Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) etc. Wallahi, these factions would never accept merger with Islamic State as their foundation is based on 'nationalism' or 'patriotism'[30]," pontificated Mohammed Sirajuddin, a resident of Jaipur, Rajasthan, in a text message to a fellow radical. Sirajuddin was booked for promoting ISIS, inciting others to become part of the Islamic State and spreading pro-ISIS propaganda online.[31]

Sirajuddin's radicalisation was rapid, and he confided in his wife that he did not want to stay in India and that Kashmir was to become an Islamic State. He collected ISIS propaganda such as issues of *Dabiq*, had largely uncontested online reach in order to lure potential recruits and had built

an online discussion group that included people from countries such as Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Indonesia, and even as far as Argentina. He often wrote "ISIS Welcome in Kashmir" on Indian currency notes and circulated pictures across social media. Like many in India, Sirajuddin was also obsessed with TIME magazine's annual listing of 'Person of the Year', and advocated in his social media outreach that people hack TIME magazine's website to declare al-Baghdadi winner of the said title. His affinity for ISIS had nothing to do with Kashmir, and was purely based on his outlook of Islam and where the religion stood in the global narrative. He also looked into travelling to Ramadi, Iraq, an oddly specific aim for a place from where ISIS was driven away in January 2016.

More than any success of an orchestrated effort to create pro-ISIS entities, what is noteworthy is the sporadic incidence of militant groups pledging allegiance to ISIS. For example, Nida-e-Haq, which was nothing but a pro-ISIS channel on Telegram which came into being, as per open-source intelligence (OSINT), after certain other channels dedicated to translating ISIS propaganda into Urdu were deleted from social media.

As part of a video released by the group, a man identified as Abu-ul-Braa al-Kashmiri called on the people of Kashmir not to support either India or Pakistan, and also criticised the Pakistani government and its intelligence agency ISI for events such as the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) siege of 2007 in Islamabad and the Pakistani military's operations against militants in its restive Waziristan, FATA and other such regions. Ul-Braa made clear in his statement that his mandate is to dissociate Nida-e-Haq, which in effect was seen as ISIS in Jammu & Kashmir (ISJK) from all states, the United Nations and all other governmental factions and the international order. Nida-e-Haq is considered closer to ISKP's hierarchies in Afghanistan and comments on what could be seen as a broader narrative not just for Kashmir but Pakistan as well. Its sister-entity, Al Qaraar, again on Telegram was known to purely focus on Kashmir and acted more as a hyper-local distributor of pro-ISIS propaganda instead of just another broad-stroke announcer of ISIS political and religious noise. (It is not known whether or not it is still functioning.) Some of the writings released by Al Qaraar were titled 'Realities of Jihad in Kashmir and Role of Pakistani Agencies' and 'Apostasy of Sayed Ali Shah Gilani and others'—content that targets jihadist nomenclature in the valley.

With its new outreach, Unl-Braa also called on fighters from Ansar Ghazwat al-Hind, the group led by Zakir Musa, a Kashmiri militant, who announced the formation of the organisation via pro-Al Qaeda channels and propelled him to become one of the most recognisable names in the valley overnight. However, the elevation of Musa as one of the top five most wanted jihadists in Kashmir[32] also initiated a peculiar intra-jihadist battle between the likes of Al Qaeda and ISIS (via its Amaq News agency) attempting to lay claim while Pakistan sponsored groups such as Hizbul Mujahideen, which had expelled Musa from its ranks earlier attempted to reign him back to curb his growing prominence with the big-brands of global jihad.

The above example, along with that of Sirajuddin, present the two distinct narratives of how Kashmir is either viewed, or could be viewed by the jihadist norm culture in what is a restive and socially delicate state. The fact that Musa's overnight fame was a direct result of being linked with global jihad's two biggest brands in fact quantifies the phenomenon on what the brands themselves, or being associated with, are capable of without anyone actually either confirming, denying or acting in their name. To further pencil this argument in, the case of Eisa Fazili, a freelance jihadist thought to be a former Ghazwat al-Hind member in the valley who killed a policeman in Srinagar allegedly took it upon himself to sell his crime to *Amaq News*, which then pushed it as the first ISIS attack perpetrated in India. Fazili was killed in an encounter with Indian security forces along with two other militants, Syed Owais Shafi and Mohammed Taufiq. The latter, Taufiq, from Telangana, became the first non-Kashmiri militant to be killed in the valley in over a decade.

Trendlines

Despite having more than 100 cases to study, one of the most difficult tasks for this research is to highlight trends, in concrete terms, in order to develop actionable policy recommendations. The fact that the Islamic State's approach towards ideological, territorial and propaganda expansion is backed by dividing its operations into what can be examined as a two-sphere approach. The first is the theologically backed hierarchical structure of the Islamic State, where the Sharia interpretations reign supreme and a member's movement within the

hierarchy depends on both their religious and organisational skills. The second is propaganda approaching those who may not have completely religious reasons, but the said paraphernalia appeals as much to a person's religious beliefs as to irrational whims, from boredom to the need to do something with life.

The patterns observed in the Indian cases had a few peculiar features that other geographies around the world, particularly Europe, did not have in common. First, all cases are those of Indian citizens. Europe, for its part, has seen a mix of two types of radicals who have committed attacks: those fighters that travelled to Iraq or Syria to fight for ISIS and made their way back; and Iraqis, Syrians or others who were ISIS but made it into Europe as part of the refugee influx (a strategy advertised by ISIS propaganda machines). While Indians suspected of joining ISIS have previously been arrested at Indian airports, none of the cases studied highlight individuals committing terror attacks in the name of the Islamic State after travelling back into India from the Middle East.

The internet has been the predominant driver of the radicalisation process, and this has been a global trend barring the Middle East region. The people who made the choice of subscribing to the Islamic State's call can be seen as individuals who were in two frameworks—they were either already radicalised whether due to international or domestic events, or they were on the cusp of radicalisation and were convinced by the pro-ISIS online propaganda machinery that this was the correct step to make as a Muslim.

While the very idea of the 'caliphate' is the crowd puller, so to speak, for foreign fighters, the ambition for most is to be frontline fighters in the caliphate. Including Indian cases, not many examples of foreigners travelling to Iraq or Syria to be part of ideological nurturing of the group have come to light, with enforcing the military aspect seemingly being the major draw. For example, cases such as that of Areeb Majid from Maharashtra as discussed earlier shines the light on the difference between expectation and reality. Majid's experience was contrary to what others were getting, and while it is difficult to establish empirical support for this hypothesis, the fact that he did not get to experience the war front as a representative and fighter of the Islamic State may have led him to feel humiliated by not just ISIS but his peers as well. ISIS fighters were kept

together in groups of 20 each, while they trained for acts such as assassinations, beheadings, and executions. Majid was clearly not part of this group, and such an outcome may have led to his surrender on the Turkish border and eventual deportation to India where he faced trial. However, the other three young men who travelled with Majid and were killed in Syria over the past years of war, seemingly did manage to take their place within the ranks of ISIS.

The use of internet as well has had changing and diverse reactions, however, more than consumption of propaganda materials, it is in fact the ease of use of the World Wide Web as a communications tool that poses a bigger challenge for authorities. In most Indian cases, social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have provided the initial platform for the commonality of radicalisation to find people with similar intentions, or at least inclinations towards ideological or practical advances. Some of the most common discussions pro-ISIS people in India had not just with people from India or South Asia, but all over the world, was in fact to inquire about how to plan the final move to the caliphate.

These plans had neither geographical strategy nor leadership. While the likes of Shafi Armar tried to bring some order into the interest emitting from Indians on joining ISIS, little success was achieved. This ad-hoc approach observed is common to almost all the cases studied for this exercise. The traction of social media for potential Indian recruits also ran into roadblocks with the people themselves, with little to no institutional practical approach given by ISIS recruiters online beyond pedestrian advice on purchasing weapons, moving money, and others. In some cases, individuals took it upon themselves to form small groups and train themselves *a la* guerilla outfit. In one particular case in the state of Telangana, one Naser Mohamed from Tamil Nadu attempted to form a pro-ISIS module using a collaboration of social media and mobile phones (with various numbers) which caught the eye of Armar as well. Naser formed a group called Junood-ul-Khilafa-Fil-Hind which held intra-state meetings between five people from states such as Telangana, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh. The first meeting took place in the forests of Tumkur, Karnataka. Forests were chosen due to their obscurity and the availability of space to build training areas where the recruits could stimulate attacking targets handpicked for them by Armar. This cell was broken only a few months after its formation in 2015.

The approach by ISIS' online mujahids towards Indian recruits has the uncharacteristic stamp of disorganisation and poor planning and approach. Two thoughts can be drawn here—one being that India was simply a much more difficult environment to break through, with majority of Muslims shunning the ISIS ideology and methods of its approach towards Sharia, and second that most radical Islamist thinking within India has connotations to regional issues and conflicts. This analogy can be argued and sustained despite the fact that the states and cases studied here were predominantly from southern Indian states, with Kerala leading the way. The cases within Kerala, barring one or two, had a connection with the Middle East one way or the other, such as locals coming into contact with returning Indians and getting informed about the Islamic State. This availability of information was not necessarily in support of ISIS, and could well have been simply an explanation of what is going on in the region or plainly against the narrative of supporting ISIS that said person may have come across during his or her time there. As per analysis of these cases, a person's understanding of their own personal status of thought, or where they stood between thinking and action, played a significant role on their eventual perception, or clarity, of the Islamic State.[33]

Decoding the Future Threat

Today, analysing the threat posed by ISIS comes from the fact that it is next to impossible to quantify it. While the so-called caliphate has lost next to almost all territory it once held, the terror group has now institutionalised itself not only in the Middle East, but in regions of Africa, the Philippines and most importantly, Afghanistan.

The fall of ISIS is a misnomer, rushing into a conclusion backed by the fact that Western coalition and Russian air campaigns in Syria have indeed managed to disband much of the caliphate. Yet that does not translate into the "end of ISIS". While Iraq has handled its post-ISIS situation well for now, Syria, on the other hand is in complete chaos. While fighting and dismantling ISIS from territory had become the singular task of many rebel groups partaking in the civil war, the geographical destruction of the caliphate out of ISIS hands meant these groups have now turned to serve their own self-interests.

One of the main questions raised during this period was what happens with the remaining ISIS fighters, specifically the foreigners who travelled from across the world to help govern the new proto-state during 2014-15. This has been the most prominent argument from Moscow on explaining its involvement in the Syrian war. "Terrorists should be eliminated where they are. One of the major reasons why Russia is in Syria, there are many questions why Russia is in Syria. The major reason why is because those terrorists who are in Syria have intentions to go to Russia, to Trans-Caucasus, to Central Asia. We better eliminate them there, not in places where they want to go. So, don't let them go, eliminate them where they are," a top Russian leader said, highlighting the justification offered on intervening in the conflict.[34]

However, there are two main fronts of ISIS that are going to be critical for both ISIS and the effects it will have as a terror group. First, the fact that the Syrian conflict has now moved away from fighting ISIS to other intra-regional, intra-jihadist and long existing sectarian fractures. The destruction of the caliphate acted as the nucleus towards which most actors of the Syrian conflict gravitated, now, having pushed ISIS away from a proto-state to a guerilla outfit, the Syrian war has become a host of miniature wars being fought in a broader framework. This, however, also gives the likes of ISIS an opportunity to regather their strategies and orchestrate a rebound. The probability of this happening is not farfetched; political vacuum offers a good environment for terror movements to bounce back on. This has been witnessed before in Afghanistan, as post-9/11 American bombings pushed Al Qaeda and Taliban into the Tora Bora mountains, and the Afghan landscape is today once again less in control of the civilian government in Kabul and more in favour of the Taliban and other local warlords.[35]

For India, the rise and success of ISKP in Afghanistan, and in some instances Pakistan as well, is a worrying sign. After the destruction of the caliphate's self-declared capital Raqqa, the most powerful, well organised and increasingly operationally successful clone seems to have been set up in Afghanistan. To understand ISKP and its potential influence on jihad in India, the divisions within the organisation from the context of Afghanistan's domestic politics and its relations with Islamabad need to be contextualised. While the research on ISKP is so far limited, some critical work published by the likes of Antonio Giustozzi at the Centre for

Research and Policy Analysis in Kabul highlight the levels of division within the ISKP framework.

ISKP has regularly claimed major terror attacks killing dozens of people in the Afghan capital. This has raised questions on how a relatively new group is capable of making such large advances in a short period of time, specifically when the likes of the Taliban and Al Qaeda claim much of the political and military space.

The ISKP feeds off as an entity from various regional sources and in all likelihood has the support of certain state actors at least, without which it could not have succeeded in penetrating Kabul and Taliban and Al Qaeda strongholds. Giustozzi, in his paper titled 'Taliban & Islamic State: Enemies or Brothers in Jihad?', highlights the politics of ISKP that played out in the summer of 2017 when the organisation went through a split between former Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) commander Aslam Farooqi and former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) commander Moawiya battled over the position of governor of Khorasan. The Central Asian outfit, after a vote that went in favour of Farooqi, seemingly built a narrative that the former LeT commander still held on to links with the Pakistani state, including getting funding from the ISI.[36]

LeT, of course, is a prominent tool of Pakistani policy on Kashmir and has largely been deployed on the country's restive borders with India. While no empirical evidence was made available for this paper, trends of ISI along with a well-funded ISKP can try to infiltrate the second-strain of jihad in the valley, which is largely religious and not political. The 'second strain', while dormant in much of the history of extremism in Kashmir, is finding its feet amidst all the chaos. The notion of 'fighting for Islam' and not 'Pakistan' or 'Kashmir' has appeared in various narratives, including nationalist militant groups from Pakistan. While these views do not have much space within existing jihadist groups in Kashmir, they do hew well with narratives peddled by the likes of ISIS. For example, the case of Eisa Fazili as mentioned earlier, had seeds of this particular narrative. After his funeral in Srinagar, one of Fazili's friends on social media highlighted that he used to get angry whenever someone criticised ISIS continuing to blame the Wahabi preachers that misled him, the Tehreeki leaders that encouraged him and the "careless" friends and relatives that let him become what he was.[37]

The alignment towards fighting for Islam and not for Pakistan or *azaadi* in the valley will, in fact, give more leverage and space to the likes of Al Qaeda and ISIS. Despite the global marketing appeal that ISIS wields, it is in fact Al Qaeda that may benefit more, in Kashmir, than its new global counterpart. While ISIS currently has the global narrative on its side, Al Qaeda with its history and more institutionalised and targeted agendas could be poised to become a larger threat in a bid to outpace ISIS. According to a new report by the Council on Foreign Relations, Al Qaeda has been restructuring and reorganising itself in the wake of the rise and fall of ISIS. Of course, ISIS itself came out of the ashes of Al Qaeda in Iraq, however the post-Bin Laden era saw Zawahiri push for a stronger foothold in Syria and sent an experienced Syrian jihadist named Abu Muhammed al-Julani to establish Jabhat al-Nusra. The resurgence of Al Qaeda is seen as a byproduct of the Arab Spring, with the terror group being labelled as one of the big winners emerging from the failed popular movement.

According to the same report, India, Afghanistan and Pakistan account for more than 800 Al Qaeda operatives while, perhaps more consequentially as an area that gets sidelined on both analysis and data front, Bangladesh accounts for more than 300 operatives. Al Qaeda's footprint—despite the Dhaka attacks in July 2016 claimed by ISIS, which killed 29 people including 18 foreigners—is deeper with a stronger sense of longevity and institution. The organisation has survived and strengthened its core despite decades-long military interventions by Western forces in the terror group's traditional bastions and new ones as well such as in Libya.[38] The battle of influence, wits and narrative between Al Qaeda and ISIS is one that is being fought in-between blurred lines, and claims and counter-claims by both may become a common irritant in tracking Islamist attacks around the world.

Conclusion

A question often asked by scholars studying West Asia and Islamist terrorism is how India, with 14.2 percent of its population being Muslim, have such few cases of pro-ISIS activities, and how that narrates to threat perceptions and counter-terrorism strategies of the Indian state.

Understanding the influence of ISIS on Indian jihadist discourse and on general variables by studying the few cases we have seen brings up two main streams for future discourse. First, a deep-dive into individual cases, their histories, community connections and habits as single entities, which is a traditional approach to counter-terror theories still remains the most effective way to decode a threat as dynamic as ISIS. Even though, as this paper discussed, there is a pattern of group work between potential ISIS recruits mostly due to the ease of access to communication technologies and the internet, most answers within the said group dynamic tend to lie with the ability to identify the leader or the individual most vibrant and active in propagating ideology or travel to the caliphate and nip the bud from there.

The cases studied in this exercise offered both interesting information and access into the intent and mindset of the people willing to join ISIS from India. They also showed the challenges to build counter-narratives to such ad-hoc radicalisation which is less relatable and different from previous organisations such as Indian Mujahideen, which were inherently local, or insurgencies in Kashmir that had localised political aims as well.

Such outcomes make it difficult to put the influence of ISIS on Indian society and polity under any specific brackets, and do not allow forming specific conclusions out of the exercise. This, in turn, both highlights the problematic areas and challenges that policy-makers have faced globally in the fight against ISIS. While some European countries were able to better equip themselves at a faster pace due to the refugee rush towards their borders, countries farther away from exposure to ISIS had the luxury of slow observations and regional threat-based assessments, often only on a case-to-case basis. This also led to losing sight of just how important ISIS' weaponisation of the internet was. In India's case, policies, capacity and technologies are still catching up to get ahead of these threats.

Policy practitioners need to approach, not just the threat of ISIS, but new terror and insurgency threats alike, on two main fronts. First is technology. While in most cases it is the state that is almost always far ahead in technological superiority, it is the selective use of said technologies and their narrative-led intent that often is enough to cause public scare and gain global media attention for a said violent outfit. The threat perceptions are much beyond the physical aspects of counter-terrorism, human intelligence, and military force. Open-source intelligence

(OSNIT), cyber security, battle of perceptions, narratives, fake news and even emotions, all have the potential of manipulation using digital information and access. These challenges are today common between policy-makers, law enforcement agencies and scholars alike.

The threat ISIS poses to India, and South Asia in general, is as real as it is for any other major region or state. This does not come from an organisational pattern from the so-called caliphate or al-Baghdadi himself, but the ecosystem that has been created that allows open-source access to ISIS as a brand which is a powerful enough tool to make global headlines at the smallest of an incident, committed even by a petty criminal. The internet remains the main propagator of pro-ISIS activities, and will continue to be one even after a complete "defeat" of the so-called Islamic State. Building capacity to tackle this is the biggest challenge facing India, South Asia and the rest of the world collectively. It is no longer only about ISIS, but new trends in terrorism that will be replicated by others in the future.

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Kabir Taneja

Kabir Taneja is an Associate Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies programme. His primary research interest is India's relations with West Asia. He studies domestic political dynamics, terrorism, non-state militant actors, and the general security paradigm of the region. Kabir has previously held positions as a Researcher and Fellow with the Robert Bosch Stiftung (Germany), Fridtjof Nansen Institute (Norway), and Takshashila Institution (India). He holds a Bachelor's degree from La Trobe University, Melbourne, and a Master's degree from Cardiff University, United Kingdom. Kabir has written for various publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Hindu*, *Suddeutsche Zeitung*, *The Huffington Post*, *Politico*, *Quartz*, and *The Wire*.

A pioneering, data-driven examination of the Islamic State, its rise and fall, and its post-geography threat to India, South Asia, and beyond. This monograph aims to fill the void in the current understanding of not only ISIS' conception and operational structure, but the evolving nature of terrorism and the factors that strengthen jihadist ideologies. It offers decision-makers fresh insights for formulating appropriate counter-terrorism strategies towards creating a safe, secure and peaceful regional environment.