

The Fall of ISIS and its Implications for South Asia

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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

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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

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.³ Relinquishing territory back to the Iraqi and Syrian governments has been a significant moral setback for ISIS. This can be measured by

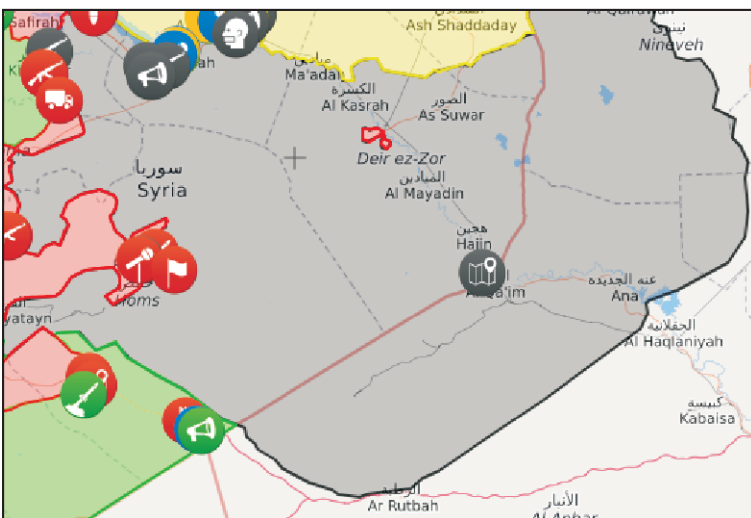


Fig 1: ISIS territorial control (grey) in May 2017⁴

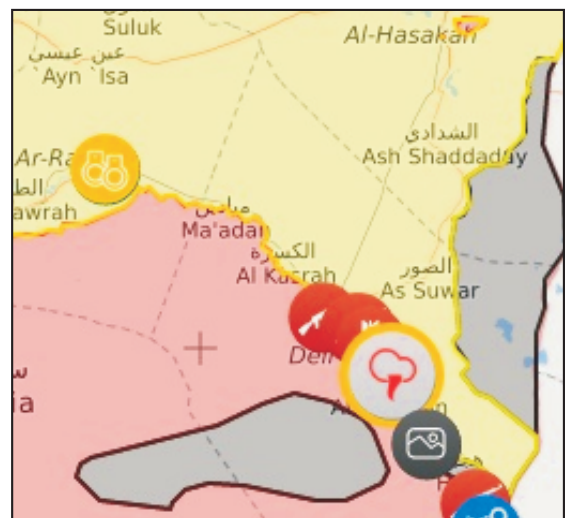


Fig 2: ISIS territorial control (grey) in December 2017⁵

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, Abu 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 clip¹⁰ 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 significantly 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 2014-15³⁹ 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. [ORF](#)

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