

# Race for the Caliphate: Rise of the Islamic State

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Radical Islamic militancy mushroomed in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to enforce Communism on a purely Islamic society. This ignited the fervour of the *ummah* to congregate in the Afghan-Pakistan region to defeat the invaders and restore the prestige of Islam. The USA stepped in as the main financier for these fighters, unmindful of the turn of events the future would unfold wherein these very friends would turn foes. After 10 years of bitter fighting, the Russians, calling it a “festering wound”, withdrew from Afghanistan. Having tasted victory, politics and gun power, these fanatic outfits adopted militancy to dominate the politico-religious affairs and safeguard their own interests. The USA, because of its repeated misadventures, has engendered a whole new crop of ultra-radical Islamic revolutionaries spearheaded by the Islamic State (IS), the most deadly, monstrous terrorist organisation ever witnessed. Its military triumphs under Abu Bakr-al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed Caliph, have made substantial territorial gains in Iraq and Syria. The lethal IS attack in Paris has demonstrated their global reach and capacity to launch coordinated deadly strikes in leading metros, involving multinational extremist groups. The efforts of the regional and superpowers, working at cross purposes, have failed so far to achieve any tangible results in containing the security threat posed by the IS. Meanwhile the IS, as part of its global agenda, has started exploiting the fragility of certain Muslim states—Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt( Sinai), Nigeria—and has spread its tentacles in many other nations to stimulate a religious stir amongst Sunni Muslims and garner support for the Caliphate.

## **Sunni-Shia Divide in Historical Perspective**

The Middle East flare-up is the latest manifestation of this centuries old rivalry. This vertical split in the Muslim community dates back to the death of Prophet Muhammad, on June 8, 632 AD, that triggered the war of succession for the first Caliph, the highest spiritual and temporal seat in Islam<sup>1</sup>. Imam Ali (the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad), was overlooked for the first three successive Caliphs. This deliberate omission infuriated his followers who felt that the most capable and trusted person was denied his right to lead the community. Imam Ali had to settle to be the fourth and the last recognised Caliph in Sunni Islam. This led to the formation of the Shi Ali (Ali's party) and emergence of a new sect: Shi or Shia<sup>2</sup>. Imam Ali was assassinated by his detractors at Kufa(Iraq)<sup>3</sup>. Imam Hassan, the elder son of Ali too was allegedly poisoned by aspirants for the temporal seat. With this, the blood lineage of the Prophet was eclipsed, widening the chasm between the Shias and Sunnis, never ever to reconcile to a peaceful coexistence. Both sects follow different Islamic jurisprudence, religious beliefs and rituals. A minority community (approximately 20-25 percent of Muslims), the Shias are concentrated in Iraq, Iran, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan and Bahrain. Ultra conservative Sunnis—the Waha'bis, Ahle-Hadis, Salafi and Deobandhi—consider all others to be non-believers and their religious as activities blasphemous to pure Quranic Islam. The nomenclature Sunni is a derivative of Sunna, literally the “customs”<sup>5</sup> of the Prophet.

## **Origin, Organisation and Objectives**

In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003), Abu Musab al Zarkawi, leader of a Sunni militant group, the Jamaat al Tawhid wal Jihad, moved his followers to Iraq to engage the invaders and reestablish a Sunni Islamic state. In 2004, it merged with Al Qaida and renamed itself Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and substantially enlarged its network. Despite Zarkawi's death, the group expanded its influence and identified itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). But, because of its tyranny and narrow interpretation of the *Shariat*, many of its supporters switched sides, resulting in the elimination of many leaders and decimation of its cadres<sup>6</sup>. From 2007 to 2010, the remnants of various militant organisations were regrouped to operate in Iraq. Baghdadi formally took over the leadership of ISI in 2010. He immediately strengthened the depleted military, political and administrative infrastructure by inducting senior bureaucrats and Army officers who had served under Saddam Hussein. Through various names: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of

**IS is struggling to meet its political and military aspirations.**

Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), the outfit finally designated itself as Islamic State (IS) or Daeish (in Arabic). Since March 2015, it has captured large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and declared itself a worldwide Caliphate, with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as its Caliph.<sup>7</sup> Its popularity has grown exponentially, with volunteers from almost 80 countries and about 1,000 Islamists daily joining its ranks<sup>8</sup>. To give Al Baghdadi a halo, his followers have produced some historical documents to establish his lineage with Prophet Muhammad and lend him a sacrosanct appeal as the leader of the true believers, claiming religious, political and military authority over all Muslims.

The organisational structure of the IS is nascent, struggling to meet the fast changing political, military, religious and administrative demands to achieve its lofty aspirations. Its hierarchical edifice is pyramidal, with Baghdadi at the helm, assisted by his deputy, Abu Ala al Afri. A five member *Shura* has been authorised to run the affairs of the movement, but the final approval of Al Baghdadi is mandatory<sup>9</sup>. However, trusted veteran *jihadis*, selected bureaucrats and military commanders, who form the core of the movement, have been vested with powers at the operational level. A team of 12 administrators governs the territories captured in Iraq and Syria and councils handle finance, media and religious affairs. The IS professes restoration of the Caliphate of medieval Islam with its political, religious and theological ramifications. Its roots can be traced to the Waha'bi sect that acquired considerable political power in Arabia in the 20th century or the Muslim Brotherhood of 1920 in Egypt. The 'Black Standard'<sup>10</sup>, symbolic of Prophet Muhammad's triumphs over non-believers in the battles of Badr, Medina and Mecca, is prominently displayed in the battlefield to motivate IS soldiers. The IS does not recognise present international boundaries in the Arab world and considers them irrelevant—a political creation of the Western world. The organisation is unfavourable even to the existing dispensations in the Arab countries and holds these as antithetical to the values of true Islam.

For centuries, the people of Iraq, with their diverse ethnicity—Shia (majority), Sunni (largest minority), Kurd, Turkmen, Assyrian, Chaldean, Yazid and Mandaeans—lived in peace and harmony. The US invasion of 2003 shattered it all and plunged the nation into the vortex of anarchy. The Americans and their coalition partners left the country in 2011, in the face of mounting casualties due to mob attacks, terrorist strikes, sectarian and ethnic pogroms. US Chief Administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer's flawed vision of "deBathification"<sup>11</sup>, ie disbandment of Saddam's Army and a blanket ban on government jobs for the

Bathists, and the Noor al Maliki government's pro-Shia policies to appease the majority, added fuel to the fire. It left the minorities cheated, furious and relegated as second grade citizens. This chaotic state provided an ideal platform for the IS to flourish. The Iraqi Army afflicted with corruption, nepotism and favouritism, was outmanoeuvred by the IS, sweeping across large swathes of western Iraq.

The IS took advantage of the civil war in Syria where many Sunni rebel groups—the Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaida, Ahrar al Sham—and US sponsored moderate groups are fighting to overthrow the minority Shia (Alawi) dictatorial regime of Bashar al Assad.<sup>12</sup> The bloody civil war has already consumed 2,50,000 lives and displaced 10 million people.<sup>13</sup> The IS received overwhelming support in the Sunni dominated areas and has made substantial territorial gains. Although declared a terrorist organisation by the UN and 60 nations, its occupation of large tracts, a standing Army and an inclusive revenue generating mechanism makes it distinctly different. It controls 60 percent of Syria's oil production, seven oil units in Iraq and accounts for \$ 1 to 3 million revenue collection per day. Sale of cotton and wheat grown in Raqqa, the bread basket of Syria, further supplements its revenue.<sup>14</sup> The outfit fattens its purse by any means: sale of oil and antiques in the black market, disposal of jewellery, artifacts, machinery or any other items, seized, looted, captured or recovered through extortion. Reports indicate that individuals from 40 countries, including some from the G-20 nations, finance the movement.<sup>15</sup> Exploitation by monarchical, dictatorial and tyrannical regimes in the Muslim world is another factor for the rush to join the IS. Motivated terrorists and battle hardened Iraqi soldiers (demobilised) embracing the IS, give it an edge over other terrorist groups. For a visible stamp of power, authority and domination, the IS indulges in unabashed exploitation of the electronic and social media. Individual and collective heroism of the fighters, ruthless execution of non-believers, and destruction of ancient heritage are deliberately displayed for instant impact.

## **Geo-politics at Play**

American involvement in Iraq has led to serious repercussions on the peace and stability of the entire Middle East. The invasion of Iraq in 1991, owing to Saddam Hussein's refusal to withdraw from Kuwait may have been justified, but the subsequent events—the US sponsored UN Resolution 687<sup>17</sup> imposing 13 years of economic embargo on Iraq and the US-led invasion in 2003, were unjustified, a blatant superpower hegemony to subjugate a weaker state. Post 2003, it systematically dismantled Iraq's military/security establishments and economic infrastructure to reorganise the country with a 'US made' political

and economic system. It was a disaster as the US failed to achieve its agenda of exercising its strategic hold. In the face of mounting hatred, the Americans left Iraq reeling under poverty, chaos and instability, thereby giving rise to radical elements. Ever since the break-out of the civil war in Syria, the US-led coalition of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and some Western nations has indulged in proxy war in the country to topple Bashar al Assad. Its ill conceived plan of supporting a moderate rebel group, expecting it to decimate other rogue elements and bring down Assad too, failed to make any mark. In view of the past experience of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, the Western nations are wary of placing boots on the ground. However, the US has decided to deploy a small contingent of Special Forces in northern Syria to “train, advice and assist”<sup>18</sup> the moderate rebel groups; a major shift for Barack Obama who persistently resisted military involvement in another “messy war”.

**Support of  
Regional  
Power Centres  
is imperative  
for campaign  
against IS.**

Despite political and economic sanctions by the US and its Western allies, post the Ukraine crises, Moscow has reasserted its stakes in West Asia. Unequivocally, Russia, and its coalition partners—Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon (Shia crescent)—are backing Bashar Al Assad and are against outside intervention to topple the present regime. The dastardly downing of the Russian aircraft over Egypt, reportedly by the IS, and the subsequent attack on Mali in which six Russians died, have further strengthened its resolve to destroy the IS. Moscow has high stakes in Syria as it has invested heavily in its oil industry, tourism and other economic infrastructure and is its biggest supplier of military hardware. The naval base at Tartus and land base at Latakia provide it strategic depth against air/missile attacks from the US, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Israel.<sup>19</sup> Russia apprehends that IS resurgence will have repercussions on the peace and stability in and around its frontiers. The Chechen rebels have already extended support to the IS and have declared Chechnya (a Russian province) a ‘*Walayat*’ (Caliphate state). The Central Asian Republics are Russia’s soft underbelly and are vulnerable to IS propaganda. Russian fears are not unfounded, as 2,000 of its citizens have already joined the IS and more are expected to follow.

**What the Future Holds**

The intrepid ability of the IS to fight the war on multiple fronts—terrorist attacks, guerrilla operations, conventional warfare and use of technology for propaganda—has baffled military minds. Its rise, undoubtedly, has global ramifications and the international community and the superpowers in particular, must address this

growing menace on priority, before it attains dangerous proportions, threatening world peace. It needs a calibrated effort to tackle the IS on all fronts—political, economic, diplomatic and military. As a follow-up to Security Council Resolution 2178, the UN Secretary General, has assured to shortly unveil a comprehensive plan to fight extremism and violence<sup>20</sup>. Pledges have also been made at the recently concluded G-20 Summit, that coincided with the Paris attack, to destroy the IS, but these should not merely be rhetoric or sabre rattling and must translate into concrete, substantive actions on the ground. Most civil wars end once one side is decimated which in this case should be the IS—the bigger evil. The Vienna Summit, on October 30, 2015, suggesting a ceasefire in Syria, formation of an interim government and, subsequently, initiation of a UN-led<sup>21</sup> political process to end the civil war is a significant move. Though the deliberations remained inconclusive, the diplomatic initiatives are encouraging. For humanity at large, nations must transcend mental barriers and prejudices and deliver people from further miseries, and nations from mindless annihilation of infrastructure and cultural genocide. The drive against the IS will not be possible without the wholehearted support of regional power centres—Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, particularly the two traditional Shia-Sunni rivals (Iran and Saudi Arabia).

## **India Impacted by Paris Carnage**

India, with the second largest Muslim population in the world, is bound to be affected by the escalating violence perpetrated by the IS. India has endured this cult of violence for decades now, some of it home-grown but most, definitely, state sponsored at the behest of India's adversaries. The Paris carnage seems extensively modelled on the 26/11 attack on Mumbai. As per the Global Terrorism Index 2015, India was the sixth most affected nation by terrorism in 2014. By and large, the spirit of nationalism of Indian Muslims is beyond doubt due to India's syncretic traditions, social and cultural ties that transcend religion and ethnic norms. But there will always be a few misguided hearts and minds who will inevitably be influenced by the malicious IS religious propaganda. There are reports of about 23 Indians, including some from the diaspora, who have joined the IS. About 150 IS propaganda followers are on the radar of the intelligence agencies.<sup>22</sup> Anwar Ut Fawhid Bilad al- Hind<sup>23</sup>, an India-centric outfit affiliated with the IS, has started online propaganda, inciting Indian Muslims to participate in *jihad* and carry out terrorist activities within the country. India is also concerned with the possibility of Wilayat Khorasan, an IS ally operating in the Af-Pak

region, fomenting trouble in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and other parts of the country. Pro Caliphate flags and sloganeering have been routinely observed in J&K. The Indian Mujahideen and SIMI, though marginalised, can be rejuvenated by the IS to reignite terrorist activities.

The Indian security apparatus has over time, constantly been revamped. Yet a few observations to plug loopholes may be in order. Firstly, India must continue to vociferously raise its concern on the scourge of terrorism in all international forums and mobilise support to legalise the anti-terrorism framework. India must demand isolation of nations sponsoring terrorism for strategic gains. With more and more nations being battered by this menace, India's aggrieved stance finds wider recognition and acceptance internationally. Secondly, India needs to evolve an integrated anti-terrorist mechanism with other nations to share intelligence on the lines of one recently agreed upon between India and Bangladesh and with China. India, as a member of the Financial Action Task Force, a global inter-governmental body, has been able to freeze substantial assets on charges of terrorist financing and laundering of illicit funds. Thirdly, a close scrutiny of cyber space, social media and other channels exploited by the IS and a hawk eye on the activities of known terrorist groups, their sleeper cells and sympathisers may have to be intensified. Fourthly, the provincial police in India, unfortunately, continues to limber in lethargy and complacency, far from being an effective professional task force. The standards of policing and its intelligence network must be elevated to meet the innovative and highly modern techniques of the terrorists to execute their missions with lethal accuracy. Each state must raise anti-terrorist squads equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry and trained to carry out swift, surgical high risk operations. Regrettably, this vital force, in its present state, is the weakest link in the Indian security apparatus. Fifthly, the perverted religious ideology sermonised by the IS and influencing the youth must be countered. Creditably, India is the only nation that has served a *fatwah*<sup>24</sup> signed by 1,073 imams and clerics, denouncing the IS' activities as unIslamic and anti-humanity. However, there is a need to institutionalise a de-radicalisation process without offending the *ummah* or politicising the issue in any way. It would require the unequivocal support of the Muslim clergy, scholars, academicians and artists to educate the youth about the tenets of true Islam. The community leaders need to push people towards liberalism rather than conservatism.

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## Notes

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