

Global Threat: A Comparative Analysis of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS)

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Abstract

The transformation of terrorism from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State (IS) has created new security challenges. This article examines the threats posed by these two groups by discussing their ideologies, structures and capabilities. Unlike local terrorist groups like the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda pose a global threat. While assessing the prospects of the IS in Afghanistan, the article also briefly looks at the Afghan Taliban. The IS which was initially fighting the 'near enemy' - the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, has now changed its strategy by equally focusing on the 'far enemy' as well, manifested in its high profile attacks in Europe and other places beyond the Middle East. The authors recommend that a comprehensive global strategy is required to eradicate this growing menace of organised terrorism.

Key words: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State, Global threat, Terrorism.

Introduction

The War on Terror (WoT) has fundamentally changed the security environment having splintered alliances with the emergence of new terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS).¹ Terrorist groups can, in fact, be divided into three categories based on their capability and approach: First-level terrorist organisations have restricted activities within a state, however, their actions may have repercussions at the international level. These groups can enhance their activities in other parts of the world if allowed to grow unchecked. The Afghan Taliban may be categorised under this since they do not have a global agenda and their focus has been on local and national political dynamics in Afghanistan. The second type of terrorist organisation is one which

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¹ Also referred to as Daesh or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), alternatively translated as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

operates at the regional level and its subversive actions cross at least one international boundary, such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as it operates in collaboration with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The Afghan Taliban is different from TTP in many ways. The TTP believe in worldwide *jihād* (holy war) and collaborate with transnational terrorist groups, whereas the Afghan Taliban work more independently and promote their character of nationality.² The terrorist organisations falling in the third category are those which have the ability to operate at the international level and their aspirations can be transnational and even global.³ The IS and the Al-Qaeda fall into this category having a global *jihād* (holy war) agenda.

The post-9/11 shifts in affiliations of various terrorists from one group to another; decentralisation of the command structure of Al-Qaeda under Ayman al-Zawahiri; separation of ISIS from Al-Qaeda and its emergence as the Islamic State; and Pakistan's operation Zarb-e-Azb against terrorists in North Waziristan, are some of the developments that require analysis to understand the level of the threat Al-Qaeda and the IS pose.

Threat Assessment of the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda

Approximately 10,000 terrorist attacks were conducted in 2013 around the globe by radical groups like the Al-Qaeda, the IS, Boko Haram⁴ and the Taliban which resulted in colossal economic and human loss.⁵ According to the Global Terrorism Index 2015, the total number of casualties from terrorism was 3,329 in 2000; 18,111 in 2013; and 32,685 in 2014 (nearly an 80 per cent increase).⁶

Recently, the IS has been successful in expanding its global interests to re-establish the so-called 'Caliphate' and expand its influence

² Khurram Iqbal, "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: A Global Threat," *Conflict and Peace Studies* 3, no. 4 (2010): 125-138, <http://www.san-pips.com/download.php?f=58.pdf>.

³ White House, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (U.S. Government, 2003), 1, cited in Jeffrey Record, *Bounding the Global War on Terrorism* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003), <https://fas.org/man/eprint/record.pdf>.

⁴ Editor's Note: Boko Haram began to emerge in 2003 in Nigeria and gained notoriety after they kidnapped 276 girls from the town of Chibok in 2014.

⁵ "Global Terrorism Index: Terror Deaths Soar to All Time High," *Express Tribune*, November 19, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/793508/global-terrorism-index-terror-deaths-soar-to-all-time-high/>.

⁶ IEP, *Global Terrorism Index 2015-Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*, report (Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf>.

globally. Fawaz A. Gerges explains the shift in the IS strategy from a focus on the ‘near enemy’ to ‘far enemy’:

In contrast to Al-Qaeda, the IS initially focused on the ‘near enemy’—Shia, the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, and secular, pro-Western states in the Middle East. But in a tactical shift ISIS has now taken responsibility for spectacular attacks in Europe and other places beyond the Middle East, making it clear that the group is increasingly interested in targeting the ‘far enemy’ as well.⁷

Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian scholar and the ideologue of the radical fringes of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, turned *jihad* (holy war) into fighting against the spread of materialist ways of life, be they capitalist or communist, in a violent manner, rather than in a spiritual manner as the greater *jihad* asks Muslims to do. Benoit Challand refers to Fawaz A. Gerges’s book ‘*The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*’ which discusses ‘how Qutb’s ideas were picked up by a couple of radical Islamist activists who went on to establish the Al-Qaeda’:

The near enemy is the term used by radical Islamist groups to speak of the government acting in Muslim-majority countries and seen as illegitimate because it is hostile to the propagation of Islam within state structures. For decades, Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood at the front of the line, have been targeting their own national political leaders and tried, mostly in vain, to take power on a national level.⁸

In the first two years after the announcement of the so-called ‘Caliphate’ (June 29, 2014), the IS followed a policy of attacking the ‘near enemy’ and saw a gradual rise. It occupied approximately one third territory of Iraq and Syria by the end of 2014.⁹ In order to stop its expansion, the U.S.-led alliance comprising of Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) started operation ‘Inherent Resolve’ in September 2014.¹⁰ Subsequently, Russia also

⁷ Zia H. Shah, review of *ISIS: A History*, by Fawaz A. Gerges, *Muslim Times*, April 3, 2016, <https://themuslimtimes.info/2016/04/03/isis-a-history-by-fawaz-a-gerges/>.

⁸ Benoit Challand, “When the Far Enemy becomes Near,” *PublicSeminar.org*, January 10, 2015, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/01/when-the-far-enemy-becomes-near/#.V7wriFt97rc>.

⁹ Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Radu Florescu, “The Benefits and Disadvantages of Air Strikes against ISIS,” *Glasgow Global Security Network*, February 3, 2016, <http://www.gsn.gla.ac.uk/air-strikes-against-isis/>.

launched airstrikes in September 2015 against the IS targets in Syria.¹¹ The airstrikes led to the IS downfall in terms of loss of territory, as well as curtailment of its financial resources.¹² Radu Florescu, while discussing the benefits and disadvantages of the air strikes against the IS, noted that:

Although airstrikes have proved effective to halt the alarming spread of Islamic State's growing influence in Iraq and Syria, the reliance on air-based campaigns could turn out to be worthless, if not counter-productive, in the framework of a long-term strategy to wipe out the root causes of the caliphate and of Islamic terror on the whole.¹³

The IS involvement in Paris (France)¹⁴ and San Bernardino (U.S.A.)¹⁵ attacks during 2015 showed its reach around the world. While its role in the latter is disputed since it did not have any operational linkages to the perpetrators. According to the FBI investigation, the two shooters were ISIS-'inspired', but 'had conducted the attacks on their own.'¹⁶ On the other hand, the Paris attack did depict operational connections.

The IS has established linkages with other terrorist groups and recruited youth from various countries such as Bangladesh, Tunisia, and Somalia. It has become a challenging and powerful organisation that has gained strategic strength with the support of its regional and global partners.¹⁷ A United Nations review on the rise of the IS indicates that

¹¹ "Russia Carries out First Air Strikes in Syria," *Al Jazeera*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/russian-carries-air-strikes-syria-150930133155190.html>.

¹² Matthew Weaver and Julian Borger, "Syria Airstrikes: Everything You Need to Know," *Guardian*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/dec/01/syria-airstrikes-everything-you-need-to-know>.

¹³ Florescu, "The Benefits and Disadvantages of Air Strikes against ISIS."

¹⁴ Editor's Note: The simultaneous attacks in Paris on the night of November 13, 2015 by gunmen and suicide bombers hit a major stadium, concert hall, restaurants and bars, and left 130 people dead and hundreds wounded. "Paris Attacks: What Happened on the Night," *BBC.com*, December 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34818994>.

¹⁵ Editor's Note: Steve Almasy, Kyung Lah and Alberto Moya, "At least 14 People Killed in Shooting in San Bernardino; Suspect Identified," *CNN.com*, December 3, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/02/us/san-bernardino-shooting>.

¹⁶ Johnathan Kealing, "This Weekend's Terrorist Attacks are Just a Handful among Hundreds. Most of Them You Don't Hear About," *Public Radio International (PRI)*, March 22, 2016, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2016-03-22/paris-there-have-been-hundreds-terrorist-attacks-many-have-gone-unnoticed>.

¹⁷ Harleen Gambhir, "ISIS's Regional Campaign: November 2015" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War (ISW), 2015),

the group has been linked to several high profile attacks. Just in the last six months (December 2015 to June 2016), it has inspired or carried out the killing of more than 500 civilians in eleven countries beyond the Middle East such as Belgium and the United States, not counting the group's attacks in its strongholds of Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen.¹⁸ Using religion for its political objectives, the IS has become a dangerous non-state actor benefiting from porous borders and the unified global financial system threatening global security.¹⁹

In order to examine whether Al-Qaeda is still a global threat, there is a need to study three aspects: 1) What are the goals of Al-Qaeda?; 2) What are the economic and human resources at Al-Qaeda's disposal?; and 3) Where are the main reserves of Al-Qaeda and its training sites located?²⁰ Over the years, the structure of Al-Qaeda has been shattered and the group is no longer able to orchestrate attacks as fatal as 9/11. Since most of its affiliates have either been detained or executed, Afghanistan is no longer a strong centre of Al-Qaeda militancy. Following the assassination of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, there have been deeper structural transformations within the outfit. From the late 1990s to the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Al-Qaeda followed a global and regional agenda.²¹ Although during the early 1990s, it also confronted France and Russia, it never altered its principal agenda of anti-Americanism. In its nascence, the central leadership of Al-Qaeda was mostly Arab combatants from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, and Yemen. However, its members were also non-Arab fighters from Tajikistan, Dagestan, Chechnya, Uzbekistan and Western China. The now 'franchised Al-Qaeda' is more autonomous and strong. In order to

<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isiss-regional-campaign-november-2015>.

¹⁸ Colum Lynch and John Hudson, "U.N. Warns of Growing Islamic State Terrorist Threat," *Foreign Policy*, June 2, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/02/u-n-warns-of-growing-islamic-state-terrorist-threat/>.

¹⁹ Sarah Canna comp., *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats: Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-radicalization and Disengagement* (Maryland: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, University of Maryland, 2010), http://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/publications/U_Counter_Terrorism_White_Paper_Final_January_2010.pdf.

²⁰ "From Al-Qaeda to ISIS: The Changing Structure of the Global Jihad and the Implications for Israel" (working paper 23, Friends of Israel Initiative, 2014), http://www.friendsofisraelinitiative.org/uploads/papers/pdf/FOI_Paper23.pdf.

²¹ Rohan Gunaratna, "Ideology in Terrorism and Counter Terrorism: Lessons from Al-Qaeda," in *The Ideological War on Terror: Worldwide Strategies for Counter-Terrorism*, eds. Anne Aldis and Graeme P. Herd (London: Routledge, 2007), https://www.academia.edu/1194810/THE_IDEOLOGICAL_WAR_ON_TERROR?aut_o=download.

achieve their political goals, each franchise of Al-Qaeda is mainly following a local agenda. These franchises are recruiting manpower at the local level and running their training camps through local organisations. Therefore, today, the ‘franchised Al-Qaeda’ is vastly different from the ‘original’ Al-Qaeda.²²

In 1998, Professor Bernard Lewis, a Middle East expert, opined that Al-Qaeda’s top priority was to compel the U.S. to withdraw from the Middle East.²³ According to many analysts, the Israeli-Palestinian issue motivated Al-Qaeda to conduct terrorist attacks in and on the United States territory. Later, Osama bin Laden preferred Afghanistan and Chechnya for his activities.²⁴ Most of its allies profited from Al-Qaeda in terms of money, training and fighting experience.²⁵

With the growth of its franchises, Al-Qaeda saw changes, particularly in Iraq under the authority of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He had pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2001. However, Zarqawi soon separated from Al-Qaeda on operational issues. Osama firmly supported worldwide *jihād* against the ‘Far Enemy’, whereas Zarqawi desired to fight with the ‘Close Enemy’ in the Middle East, particularly the government in Jordan. The Taliban permitted Zarqawi to build his own training facility, which he set up close to the Iranian border. Contrary to his camps, Zarqawi recruited Arab fighters, mainly from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestine.²⁶

Al-Qaeda divided after the U.S. attack in Afghanistan in 2001 and Zarqawi moved into Iran and then to Iraq. At the operational level, Zarqawi in addition to his operations in Iraq also started his activities in Jordan. In order to strengthen his operation against the Hashemite Kingdom, he enhanced his power in Syria as well.²⁷

It is interesting to note that Zarqawi’s Al-Qaeda ‘franchise’ had a unique relationship with Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda central command that allowed the ‘franchise’ to operate independently. This Al-Qaeda ‘franchise’ in Iraq developed its own strategy and instead of working as a subordinate organisation and just obeying directions from the central command, it took its own initiatives. Zarqawi found that this

²² John Rollins, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, report (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2011), <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41070.pdf>.

²³ “From Al-Qaeda to ISIS,” Friends of Israel Initiative.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Angel Rabasa et al., *Beyond Al-Qaeda-Part 1, The Global Jihadist Movement* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2006), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG429.pdf.

²⁶ “From Al-Qaeda to ISIS,” Friends of Israel Initiative, 6.

²⁷ Ibid.

strategy was also being embraced by Al-Qaeda's commanders as well. On July 9, 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was then Osama bin Laden's deputy and now his successor, through a letter appreciated Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's strategy of moving the focus of the global *jihad* to the Arab countries. Zawahiri, who was then following the lead of his Iraqi franchise, lay out the next steps of *jihad* in the Middle East. He directed Zarqawi to follow a three-step strategy: 1) defeating the U.S. in Iraq; 2) extending the *jihad* to the secular countries bordering Iraq, namely Syria and Jordan, and; 3) entering into a clash with Israel.²⁸

About Al-Qaeda

Organisational Structure

Al-Qaeda has progressively devolved into four levels:

- a. Core Al-Qaeda: This group is headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri. He is the senior leader of Al-Qaeda who retains some oversight of the affiliates and resolves differences among partners and also provides strategic guidance. But Zawahiri has been facing challenges from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) while enforcing Al-Qaeda's judgments.²⁹
- b. Affiliated groups: A number of groups who have shown loyalty to core Al-Qaeda such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), formed in 2009 as a merger of Al-Qaeda's Saudi Arabian and Yemeni branches; Taliban and the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan; Al-Shabab in Somalia affiliation with Al-Qaeda since 2007; Boko Haram, based in northern Nigeria;³⁰ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) based in Algeria and neighbouring nations, and Jabhat al-Nusrah located in Syria.³¹
- c. Allied groups: There are a few allied Salafi-*jihadist* elements in Asia, Middle East, Africa, and the Caucasus whose leadership has not demonstrated dedication to core Al-Qaeda. This allows

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, "ISIS vs. Al-Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War" (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/02/24-byman-williams-isis-war-with-al-qaeda>.

³⁰ Steven Bucci, "Seven Terrorist Groups Affiliated with Al-Qaeda," *Daily Signal*, May 7, 2012, <http://dailysignal.com/2012/05/07/seven-terrorist-groups-affiliated-with-al-qaeda/>.

³¹ Seth G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of Al-Qaeda and Other Salafi Jihadists* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2014), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR637/RAND_RR637.pdf.

these groups to stay autonomous and seek their own objectives. However, they work with Al-Qaeda on special operations and trainings.³²

- d. Motivated persons and networks: This type of group has no immediate contact with core Al-Qaeda, however, they are propelled by the Al-Qaeda cause and offended by mistreatment of Muslims in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Palestine etc. They have a tendency to be persuaded by scions of the West and allied administrations in the Middle East.³³

A Global Threat?

Interpretations differ whether Al-Qaeda today is a worldwide danger or only a regional risk in the Middle East and in some portions of Africa. Some experts believe that the core Al-Qaeda is too weak and in decay to be a worldwide risk, particularly towards the West and United States. A few analysts, however, believe that Al-Qaeda is flexible and is a genuine danger to the U.S. and to world peace,³⁴ especially the devolved groups comprising of different radical sub-organisations. The decentralisation of Al-Qaeda has led to the spread of Salafi-*jihadi* groups and supporters in recent years, especially in the Levant and North Africa.³⁵ For example, groups working in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mali, Egypt (also in Sinai), Syria and Lebanon. There has additionally been an expansion in the quality of attacks executed by Al-Qaeda and other Salafi-*jihadi* sections. The most concerning is Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula which propelled the 2013 Boston marathon bombers.³⁶

It has also been reported that two of Al-Qaeda's spiritual leaders, Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, have described it as being without 'organisational structure'. According to Maqdisi, Al-Qaeda's organisational structure has 'collapsed'. Zawahiri, Maqdisi says,

³² Ibid.

³³ Seth G. Jones, *Re-Examining the Al-Qaeda Threat to the United States* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2013).

³⁴ Barbara Mantel, "Assessing the Threat from Al-Qaeda," *CQ Researcher* 24, no. 24, (2014): 553-576, <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/document.php?id=cqresrre2014062700>.

³⁵ William Braniff, "Testimony before the United States House Armed Services Committee Hearing on the State of Al-Qaeda, its Affiliates, and Associated Groups: View From Outside Experts" (Washington, D.C.: United States House of Representatives, 2014), http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTCongressionalTestimony_StateofAQandAffiliates_WilliamBraniff.pdf.

³⁶ Ibid.

‘operates solely based on allegiance. There is no organisational structure. There is only communication channels, and loyalty.’

Unfortunately, Zawahiri was geographically isolated when he took over the leadership after Osama bin Laden’s demise. He has been stuck in the remote mountain regions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, while thousands of militants have moved to the new battlefields in Syria and Iraq. With Pakistan’s Armed Forces and the American net tightening around him, it has become increasingly hard for Zawahiri to keep up communication with his administrators on the ground; and control militants in Iraq and Syria from Afghanistan.³⁷

Regardless of this, the ideology of Al-Qaeda remains a stronger danger than the organisation itself. As Al-Qaeda progressively relies upon similar groups to direct attacks, other Islamist organisations may copy it. Generally, with better training, more experience and exceptionally dedicated militants, Al-Qaeda may still attack more hard targets, particularly key targets, and leave the less demanding and strategic ones to its related groups. With its devolution, its militants are cooperating nearly on a tactical level with other groups. Accordingly, the toxicity of the attacks led by the partner organisations of Al-Qaeda is expanding.³⁸

The Islamic State

Historical Background and Evolution

Emergence of ISIS in Syria and its dramatic successes in Western Iraq is perhaps the most important structural change in Al-Qaeda. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) alone was a successor organisation to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In late 2011, ISI established Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Nusra Front for taking action in the Syrian Civil War. On April 8, 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of ISI, confirmed that Jabhat al-Nusra was an extension of his own movement and funded by it too. Keeping in view its comprehensive mandate, he renamed his own group ISIS. By early February 2014, Ayman al-Zawahiri rejected Baghdadi’s initiative and made Jabhat al-Nusra an Al-Qaeda affiliate and expelled ISIS from the Al-Qaeda network. ISIS was acquiring strength,

³⁷ Shiv Malik et al., “How ISIS Crippled Al-Qaeda,” *Guardian*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/10/how-isis-crippled-al-qaida>.

³⁸ Rohan Gunaratna, *The Rise and Decline of Al-Qaeda* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2003), http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/hearings/hearing3/witness_gunaratna.htm.

whereas central Al-Qaeda was losing power and control in the wake of the demise of Osama bin Laden in 2011.³⁹

From Al-Qaeda's franchise in Iraq to the Islamic State (IS), the former has changed its name from time to time. In 2002, it operated as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's most prominent force in Iraq under the title Jama'at Tawhid wal Jihad (JTJ) and was also known as Zarqawi's network. In October 2004, Zarqawi formally joined Al-Qaeda and named it Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In October 2006, its name was changed again and rebranded as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). This was an effort to attract local support against the Iraqi Government. In April 2013, the group's cooperation with AQ Central and al-Nusra broke down and its operations expanded into Syria. Consequently, it was referred to as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).⁴⁰ On June 29, 2014, the group announced the establishment of a 'Caliphate' declaring Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as 'Caliph.' After this proclamation, the title 'Islamic State (IS)' stuck, even though in some media reports, it continues to be referred to as the ISIS/ISIL.⁴¹

Resource Base

Within three years (2013-16), the IS has successfully made strongholds in at least 19 states. It is estimated that over 25,000 militants were recruited by the organisation via the internet and social media to fight in Iraq and Syria by capitalising on the civil war in Syria and the sectarian divisions in Iraq.⁴² Among these foreign militants, there are over 4,500 citizens from Western nations, including 250 U.S. citizens. According to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the pace of expansion of the IS was 'unparalleled', with the number of militant groups, belonging to the Philippines, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Libya and Nigeria, now affiliated with

³⁹ Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, report (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2014),

<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/228737.pdf>.

⁴⁰ The Levant refers to an area spanning Southern Turkey through Syria to Egypt.

⁴¹ "Mapping Militant Organisations-The Islamic State," Stanford University, May 15, 2015,

<https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1>.

⁴² Lisa Curtis et al., *Combating the ISIS Foreign Fighter Pipeline: A Global Approach*, report no. 180 (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 2016),

<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2016/01/combating-the-isis-foreign-fighter-pipeline-a-global-approach>.

the IS reaching 34.⁴³ Its role in Syria has added another layer to the multifaceted groups battling to oust President Bashar al-Assad's administration.⁴⁴ Since March 2012, around 250,000 persons have been killed, while nearly 11.6 million displaced from their homes in Syria.⁴⁵

Since June 2014, the Islamic State in addition to the havoc it has wreaked in Iraq and Syria, also launched over 60 terrorist attacks in 20 countries due to which at least 1,160 persons were killed and over 1,700 people were injured.⁴⁶ Its worldwide fear crusade included the October 31, 2015 crash of a Russian jet, killing 224 passengers; and the November 13, 2015 shootings in Paris that killed 130 persons.

Even though territory under their direct control has shrunk lately, the IS fighters did at one time have control of an area bigger than Finland or Belgium. This, too, motivates foreign extremists to join it.⁴⁷ Its rapid ascent has become a driving force for the so-called 'global *jihād*.' With an ideology and propaganda apparatus (especially recruitment through the social media) stronger than that of Al-Qaeda.; and finances from the oil fields which it controls in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State is in a better position to extend its ideological war. Under the guise of restoring the 'Caliphate', their message has become far more inspiring than the covert terrorist exercises of Al-Qaeda.

In an interview, author of *The Islamist Phoenix* (2014), economist Loretta Napoleoni highlighted that with an estimated funding of \$2-4 billion, it is more beneficial and 'appealing' for the IS recruits to be an Islamic 'Caliphate', especially since it functions more like a state by collecting money through taxes. She argued that the rise of the IS in Syria and Iraq surprised the world since the 'West was asleep at the wheel.'⁴⁸

⁴³ "34 Extremist Groups now Affiliated with ISIS: UN Secretary General," *Times of Islamabad*, February 6, 2016, <https://timesofislamabad.com/34-extremists-group-now-affiliated-with-isis-un-secretary-general/2016/02/06/>.

⁴⁴ Zack Beauchamp, "Syria's Civil War: A Brief History," *VOX*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/9/14/9319293/syrian-refugees-civil-war>.

⁴⁵ UN Says Number of Syrian Refugees Exceeds 4 Million," *Al Jazeera America News*, July 9, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/live-news/2015/7/united-nations-says-syrian-refugee-crisis-now-exceeds-four-million.html>.

⁴⁶ "ISIS Goes Global: Over 60 Attacks in 20 Countries," *Fox6Now.com* January 21, 2016, <http://fox6now.com/2016/01/21/isis-goes-global-over-60-attacks-in-20-countries/>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ Sue Lannin, "Islamic State Far Greater Threat than Al-Qaeda and Taliban: Terrorist Financing Expert," *ABC News*, November 7, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-11-07/islamic-state-far-greater-threat-than-al-qaeda3a-expert/5874012>.

A Global Threat?

The ‘Annual Threat Assessment 2016’ covers the forecast of terrorist threats to various regions from Southeast Asia to Central and East Asia, from the Middle East to South Asia and from Africa to South America. There were a number of high-intensity terrorist attacks all over the world during 2015 as discussed earlier, including attacks in Maiduguri in Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In most of these attacks, the involvement of the IS was evident. Some of the high profile terrorist attacks claimed by the IS in 2016 outside Iraq and Syria included:

- January 12, 2016: Istanbul bombing that killed 13 people and injured 14.
- March 22, 2016: Coordinated suicide bombings in Belgium that killed 32 civilians and injured more than 300 people.
- July 14, 2016: Cargo truck attack in Nice, France during the Bastille Day celebrations on the Promenade des Anglais, where 85 people were killed and 307 injured.
- July 23, 2016: Twin bombing in the vicinity of Deh Mazang square in Kabul, when protesters, mostly from the Hazara ethnic minority, were marching against a decision to bypass their region in the development of a mega power project. At least 80 people were killed and 260 injured.

Most Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, which were facing terrorism by traditional groups, are now also threatened by the increasing involvement of the IS in the region. Due to prevailing instability in some of the South Asian countries, particularly Afghanistan, this area also remains vulnerable to terrorist threats.⁴⁹ The poor governance and conflicts between various Taliban groups after the death of Mullah Omar is providing an opportunity to the IS to enhance its presence in Afghanistan. Religious intolerance in Bangladesh is on the rise, resulting in the spread of the IS influence in the country. Maldives which had remained traditionally safe from terrorism is now vulnerable due the involvement of the Maldivian fighters in Syria and Iraq. Sri Lanka is again under threat from the remnants of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).⁵⁰ The recruitment of Sunni Muslims from Central Asian countries and Xinjiang

⁴⁹Rohan Gunaratna, “Annual Threat Assessment: Global Threat Forecast,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis* 7, no. 11 (2015), www.rsis.edu.sg/research/icpvtr/ctta.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

region in China is likely to have serious spillover impacts. The Middle East has now become ‘the epicentre of the global *jihadist* threat’.⁵¹ The IS has benefited from the instability in Africa.

With rise of the IS, a sense of panic has developed at the regional and global level, pushing the U.S., Iran and other Middle East states towards working together.⁵² In this backdrop, a major alliance of 62 states that include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and all other Gulf countries was established to challenge the IS. Since the U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan in 2001, it is perhaps the biggest alliance in the world.⁵³ In fact, the power matrix in the region may be completely changed, especially given the active cooperation between Washington and Tehran.⁵⁴

The flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria influenced by the IS propaganda is going down as airstrikes shatter the morale of the group’s fighters. Only 200 or so foreign fighters are now joining the IS each month, which is one-tenth of the figure the organisation had achieved some time ago.

Recent estimates put the number of ISIS fighters at as low as 19,000, from a potential peak of 31,000, the lowest since the numbers were first monitored in 2014. The group has also lost 40 per cent of its territory in Iraq and 10 per cent in Syria - huge losses for the self-titled ‘Caliphate.’⁵⁵

However, despite this, the Islamic State remains a danger to global security due to lack of a common, unified strategy among the major powers of the world. On September 30, 2015, as part of an anti-ISIS operation, Russia launched airstrikes in Syria, which did not target the IS, rather anti-Assad rebels.⁵⁶ The Obama government’s response to Russian proposals is not yet clear. Several experts point to a major role of Russia in tackling the extremist group followed by the U.S., the Kurds and the Iraqi army among others.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Curtis et al., *Combating the ISIS Foreign Fighter Pipeline*.

⁵³ Zahid Hussain, “IS: a Global Challenge,” *Dawn*, November 12, 2014.

⁵⁴ Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee, “Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran’s Khamenei about Fighting Islamic State,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>.

⁵⁵ Joey Millar, “ISIS in Serious Decline but Al-Qaeda and Taliban are Back - and Planning More Attacks,” *Sunday Express*, April 14, 2016, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/660942/ISIS-decline-Al-Qaeda-and-Taliban-BACK-planning-more-attacks>.

⁵⁶ Anne Barnard, “Syrian Rebels say Russia is Targeting them rather than ISIS,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2015.

⁵⁷ Waqar Ahmed, “Daesh in Afghanistan,” *News*, May 10, 2016.

Difference between Al-Qaeda and the IS

- a. **Structure:** Unlike Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State is fighting like a ‘conventional army’ using ‘conventional military tactics’. It has been increasing its territory and declared a ‘Caliphate’ in northern and Iraq, one of the major reasons the two groups split as discussed earlier.⁵⁸
- b. **Brutality:** The IS has utilised violence to draw in considerable supporters. By executing detainees and adversaries and posting photos of its viciousness on social media, the IS has gained worldwide recognition.⁵⁹
- c. **Popularity:** Another contrast is that the IS has a larger number of young devotees. It has a following among youth (both men and women) via online networking, while Al-Qaeda adhered to more old-style enlisting techniques.⁶⁰ This is the critical difference between AQ and the IS. The IS ideology lives in the cyber domain, something AQ did not largely manipulate. Daniel L. Byman explains:

The Islamic State’s impressive social media efforts and overall appeal also make it better able to mobilise “lone wolves” to attack in the West. Many of these individuals will have had little or no contact with the Islamic State as an organisation, but they find its ideology and methods appealing and will act on their own.⁶¹

- d. **Plans against the U.S.:** After 9/11, Al-Qaeda has tried to attack the U.S. again, while the IS does not seem to have a specific bone to pick with the United States, even if it has declared that it wants to attack it.⁶²
- e. **Funding:** Al-Qaeda is dependent on benefactor subsidising, while the IS has also of late attracted donor funds, it is more reliant on unlawful activities, for example, selling oil on the black market.⁶³

⁵⁸ Kristina Wong “Five Ways ISIS, Al-Qaeda Differ,” *Hill*, September 20, 2014, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/218387-five-ways-isis-is-different-than-al-qaeda>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Daniel L. Byman, “Comparing Al-Qaeda and ISIS: Different Goals, Different Targets,” (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/testimony/2015/04/29-terrorism-in-africa-byman>.

⁶² Wong “Five Ways ISIS, Al-Qaeda Differ.”

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Difference between the Taliban and the IS

In many ways, what the group is doing to Syria and Iraq resembles what the Taliban did in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the early 1990s.⁶⁴

In the same article, Ahmed Rashid contends:

Like the Taliban, ISIS's war so far has been about conquering territory rather than launching an Al-Qaeda-style global *jihad* or issuing *fatwas* to bomb New York or London.⁶⁵

On the other hand, the Afghan Taliban do not seem to have a worldwide *jihad* motivation and have a more local agenda: political control in Afghanistan.⁶⁶ The IS chapter in Afghanistan has emerged as an imminent threat to the region. Since July 2015, it has taken control of seven districts in the southern part of the Nangarhar province. According to a recent UN report, the entity has managed to gain supporters from 25 of the 34 provinces in the country.⁶⁷ These developments indicate that the IS in Afghanistan has become a more pressing threat to stability within the country, and the surrounding region.

What is common among all three groups, however, is the use of terrorism as a major weapon to achieve their objectives.⁶⁸

Conclusion

There are several geopolitical fault lines in the Middle East that are being exploited by militant groups to their advantage. One is the issue of sectarianism. The other is the proxy wars of global powers competing for geostrategic interests in the Syrian crisis. A comprehensive response is required that identifies the factors and methods that are contributing to the spread of terrorism worldwide.

The tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia will provide an opportunity to extremist elements to enhance their influence, therefore, the reconciliatory efforts by Pakistan and China to reduce tensions

⁶⁴ Ahmed Rashid, "ISIS: The New Taliban," *NYR Daily*, July 2, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/07/02/iraqs-new-taliban/>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Zahid Hussain, "ISIS is no Taliban," *Dawn*, July 9, 2014.

⁶⁷ Sara Mahmood, "ISIS in Afghanistan: A Growing Threat to Pakistan?" (commentary no. 221, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 2015), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CO15221.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Hussain, "ISIS is no Taliban."

between these two Muslim countries should be strengthened through further diplomatic efforts by the international community.

While areas in Pakistan are no longer the epicentre of terrorism, following the country's military operations against militants, the growth of the IS in Afghanistan can have spillover impacts. The best available option for peace in Afghanistan is to make the reconciliation process a success. Playing the IS against the Taliban in Afghanistan would not work and any such strategy to exploit the rivalry between the two may lead to further instability in the region.

There is a need at the international level to discourage sectarian and communal violence and efforts should be made protect the rights of minorities and marginalised segments of society. In the absence of such protection, terrorist groups like the IS can exploit social grievances as it did in Iraq and Syria.

It is difficult to eliminate by force any terrorist organisation having an ideological base, therefore, there is a need to address the root causes of terrorism and finding innovative ways to counter the narrative of terrorist groups. ■