

The Islamic State and Civil War in Syria

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Introduction

Egyptian Goddess ISIS was worshipped all over Greco-Roman empire in ancient times. She resurrected her slain husband, the divine King Osiris. She was believed to help the dead enter afterlife. The 21st Century ISIS is anything but that Goddess, but could do with Her help and guidance.

Jama'at al Tawhid Wal Jihad was established in Iraq in 1999 and became Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2004. By late 2009, over 80 per cent of AQI leadership in Iraq had been killed or captured. Only eight leaders were at large. In May 2010, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi took over as the leader of AQI also known by then as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). By 2011 ISI started rebuilding in Iraq, helped by release of Al Qaeda prisoners by the US and Iraq and freeing of prisoners by ISI. The released prisoners, discharged soldiers of the Iraqi Army and disgruntled Sunnis formed the core of ISI cadres and senior leadership. They were already well trained when they joined ISI. In this background, developments in Syria provided the opportunity to ISI to expand its base and area of operations.

AQI rechristened itself as Islamic State (IS) in June 2014, following proclamation of the Caliphate. Various referred to as Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Daesh; IS is a Jihadist terrorist organisation that has used cruel tactics to establish a Caliphate, initially in Iraq and Syria. An ISIS map of 2006 gives a clear indication of the plans of IS. The territory they wanted to control in Syria and Iraq largely overlapped the oil and gas fields. A later map indicated that IS wanted to spread their influence across the Middle East. They had visions of realising their dreams, with successes on ground in 2013, but their dreams came crashing down in the face of

concerted efforts by the international community, since 2014-2015.

Expansion into Syria

AQI was involved in the Syrian civil war from the beginning in March 2011. Around 20 April, they overran two security posts on the highway from Damascus to Jordan border and beheaded the soldiers. In June, in Jisr al-Shughour, AQI was at the forefront when security forces offices were surrounded and overrun and reinforcements sent were intercepted and beheaded, the trademark way that AQI was known for.

The crisis in Syria was an important factor in AQI gaining strength. They found a safe haven. They had access to weapons, resources and real time intelligence, thanks to support extended by many countries to the opposition. AQI was able to benefit from all this since they had battle hardened cadres. Senator Rand Paul was right when he blamed the US Government of indirectly supporting ISIL by arming their allies and fighting their enemies. The disturbed conditions provided the ideal chance to IS to realise their dream of controlling territory.

AQI started sending cadres experienced in guerilla warfare to Syria regularly since August 2011 with a clear plan: to build an organisation. Areas of their concentration were Sunni dominated areas of the provinces of Deir ez Zor, Raqqa, Idlib and Aleppo. It helped them establish control in contiguous areas, which had a border with AQI controlled areas in Iraq. This facilitated easy movement of cadres and in due course helped AQI declare a Caliphate.

Their differences with the other Groups were more over influence and lust for control of territory than doctrinal. Their ruthlessness, sectarian attacks and imposing of Sharia law distinguished them from the others, but also led to their being viewed by locals as foreign occupiers. Though they accepted assistance from other countries, they were conscious of the need to reduce dependence on external funding.

For about two years, many of the major operations were coordinated with other Groups. In many operations it was difficult to distinguish AQI cadres from the others. AQI was never hesitant

to display their banners in areas of operation. The brutality of AQI, proved an attraction for cadres from other groups to gravitate towards AQI. Further, AQI paid higher salaries than the other groups. Once AQI established itself, Baghdadi unilaterally announced in April, 2013 that Al Nusra Front, another Al Qaeda group operating in Syria has merged with ISI. This marriage proved short lived and the divorce was announced in February 2014. By then fierce clashes had broken out between AQI and the rest of the opposition. AQI was set on establishing control over areas and did not show any hesitation in getting rid of anyone who stood in their way. AQI thus emerged as the leading opposition group in Syria, but this also meant that they became the targets of everyone else on the ground.

Phenomenal Growth

During 2013-15, IS achieved phenomenal advances in Syria and Iraq. In 2013, when AQI started seizing and holding territory, they renamed themselves as ISIL. They became prominent in early 2014, when they succeeded in forcing Iraqi troops to withdraw from several cities in Western Iraq and captured Mosul and Sinjar. They captured large areas in Syria. They gained notoriety for beheadings, ethnic cleansing, destruction of artifacts and sights of cultural heritage and implementation of their interpretation of Sharia law. IS proclaimed the Caliphate on 29 June 2014 and came to be known as Islamic State. Baghdadi was proclaimed the Caliph. Raqqa became the headquarters in Syria. Declaration of the Caliphate, successes on ground and effective social media campaign attracted more cadres. By early 2015, IS had 30,000 strong armed cadre, of whom nearly 50 per cent were foreigners, who were mostly from Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tunisia, with significant numbers from France, UK and Germany. In January 2015, they controlled nearly 90,000 Sq Kms of territory in Syria and Iraq, including a third of Syria. An estimated 10 million people lived in that area.

From the beginning, IS was aiming to become financially self-sufficient. In Syria its sources of revenue were oil, gas, taxes, extortion, sale of artifacts, looting, kidnapping etc. and foreign donations primarily from the Gulf. According to one estimate, its revenue in 2014, '15 and '16 were US \$1.9 billion, 1.7 billion and

.9 billion respectively. However, another estimate puts the annual revenue significantly lower at between US \$ 200 and 300 million, with assets totaling US\$2 billion.

In July 2014, IS took control of Syria's largest oilfields and soon thereafter a gas field in Homs province. It took control of all the cities in a stretch of 140kms from the provincial capital of Deir ez Zor to the border with Iraq. On 14 Nov 2014, UN Independent International Commission of Enquiry on Syria concluded that IS has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UN declared it as a terrorist organisation; not that these worried IS. In May, 2015, it captured Palmyra, the ancient Syrian city in the middle of the desert, surprisingly easily. IS had also started using chemical weapons. In November 2015, Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed use of sulphur, mustard gas by IS in August 2015 in Northern Syria. This passed by without any strong international action against IS and those who supplied the ingredients to IS. By end 2015, the Caliphate extended from Al Bab near Aleppo, to the border with Iraq and beyond up to the south of Baghdad. In August 2016, IS was reportedly operational in 16 countries.

Foreign Support

It is widely suspected that the rapid success of IS had foreign backers. The former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton alleged that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are providing financial and logistical support. German Minister Ger Muller blamed Qatar. US Secretary of State, John Kerry, however, blamed the Syrian Government of collusion with IS and said Syria had purposely ceded territory to IS. This may be off the mark as 43 per cent of IS attacks during March 2016 to April 2017 were on Syrian Government forces and only 17 per cent against the US supported Syrian Democratic Front (SDF). Their biggest supporter was Turkey, which had been accused by the US Vice President Joe Biden of colluding with IS, based on evidence uncovered by the US Special Forces. Nature of help included financing, medical services, transit for IS cadres, military assistance, weapons transfers and logistical support. IS leaders have acknowledged Turkey's help. It is also true that the US, UK, France, and Gulf countries shared real time intelligence, weapons, equipment etc., with the rebels, even after knowing that

these were being passed on promptly to IS. Their objective of overthrowing Assad Government took precedence over need to check IS.

Direct Action by the US and Russia

Alarmed at the spread of IS, the US announced a strategy for destroying IS in September 2014. Since then it has carried out air strikes and trained and armed local groups. Their initial effort to enlist local 'moderate' Arab groups was a disaster, but they found a useful ally in the Kurds, who were also at the receiving end of IS. Syrian Democratic Front [SDF] consisting primarily of Kurds and a few Arabs was formed to take on the IS, with US support and air power assistance. On 30 Sep 2015, Russia got involved directly in the Syrian conflict, which added pressure on IS. Russia helped in throwing out IS from near Damascus and Homs and from Palmyra. It helped ward off IS attack on Syrian forces in many places.

Serious Setbacks for IS

The downhill journey of IS was swifter than their uphill journey due in large measure to their own indiscretions. To send a message to the US led coalition that if they hit IS in Syria and Iraq, they have the capacity to take the battle to mainland Europe, they struck in Paris in November 2015 and in Brussels in March 2016. This only ended up strengthening the resolve of the alliance. The tide turned decisively against IS when it lost Mosul in July 2017 and Raqqa, their main control centre in Syria in October 2017. Earlier in March 2017 they had been driven out of Palmyra, which they had recaptured in December 2016.

After the recent setbacks, IS has lost over 95 per cent of the territory it had captured since 2013 and now controls three pockets in Syria: the border town of Abu Kamal and surrounding areas on the banks of the Euphrates, a stretch above Abu Kamal in Eastern Syria along the border with Iraq and a small pocket on the border of Syria with Jordan and Israeli occupied Golan heights, to the south of Damascus. The first two pockets are in the area controlled by SDF and the US. With the Caliphate losing territory and resources dwindling, cadres started deserting. IS are probably left with about 2500-3000 cadres. Al Baghdadi is

believed to be near Abu Kamal. IS is also present in some other areas including in the outskirts of Damascus, north east of Palmyra and south east of Deir ez Zor.

US Policy on IS and Eastern Syria

Having bottled up IS in Eastern Syria, the slow pace at which the US led alliance and SDF are carrying out operations is inexplicable, particularly since the US President has publicly stated that he wants to withdraw troops from Syria soon. The US intelligence services and the army seem to be prolonging the operations so as to retain *raison d'être* for continued presence in Syria which also serves the interests of Syrian Kurds, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and most importantly Israel. One of the reasons given by the US forces is that SDF cadres have moved to the North following Turkey's invasion of Kurdish strongholds. This is partly true. The Saudis and Israel want US forces to stay as that would prevent Eastern Syria from falling into the hands of Iran, which wants to establish a land corridor from Iran to the Hezbollah stronghold in South Lebanon. It is for this reason that Israel is extending support to the IS in the enclave adjoining Golan. Turkey wants the continued presence of the US to keep the Kurds under check.

President Trump announced on 30 Mar 2018, that he wants to get the US troops back home. The announcement left the rest of Washington, coalition allies, Turkey, Israel, Jordan and the Kurds shocked, each for their own self-interest. It came as a surprise since on 17 Jan 2018, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had laid out what one thought would be US policy for Syria after IS are decimated. He said that the US will maintain 2500 troops in Syria to the East of the Euphrates; the military campaign against IS will be sustained, UN peace process would continue, Turkey's concerns would be respected, the US will work to diminish Iran's influence in Syria and train and arm 30,000 Kurds. Tillerson's broad strategy pleased Israel, allies and Kurds, but Turkey was alarmed at the US training and equipping Kurds. Earlier US Generals had reportedly assured Turkey that the weapons being given to the Kurds to fight IS would be taken back. Tillerson lost his job on 31 Mar 2018.

US allies and Trump's military advisers and intelligence officials want US troops to continue in Syria for more time till IS are neutralized completely, but in reality for multiple reasons: to ensure that there is no vacuum in the area to be vacated by the US which could fall into Iranian hands; stranding of Kurds, who had thrown in their lot with the US; to ensure that friction between Turkey and the Kurds doesn't erupt into a conflict; and to retain leverage in a political settlement to the Syrian conflict. It is to be noted that early normalization of the situation in Syria and welfare of Syrian people is, regrettably, not a reason. Achieving these objectives will take a long time. Their entreaties with the President has earned some reprieve; the withdrawal will not be immediate. The reason why President changed his mind may also be the alleged use of chemical weapons by Syria on 07 Apr, which for valid reasons, many suspect was organised by some in the coalition to get the President to change his mind. The White House Spokesperson made it clear that the US Mission hasn't changed; it wants US forces to return as quickly as possible. He added that the US expects its regional allies and partners to take greater responsibility both financially and militarily to secure the region. Troop withdrawal issue may become alive closer to elections in 2020.

SDF, with the help of the US is in control of a third of Syria. Apart from a good part of the agriculturally rich Euphrates valley, almost all the oil wells of Syria are in that area. Kurds total 10 per cent of the population of Syria. Main area of their habitation is the province of Hasake which forms the northern part of the area they control now. Not all the Kurds of Syria are in that area. They are spread all over Syria. For them to hope to control a third of the area of Syria and the oil wells is unrealistic. It will not last and lead to problems with Syria very soon. Given their past record, it should be possible for the Kurds to work out an honourable deal with Syria, if only the US would allow it.

Gulf Troops in Syria?

The suggestion to bring in forces from the Gulf to take over from the US forces will only aggravate the situation and prolong the conflict. The Kurds, who are non-Arab Sunnis, have had serious problems with Arab Sunnis and were happily living alongside other

minorities in Syria including Alawites. Presence of Saudi and Qatari troops will be a red rag to Syria and Iran and the security situation will escalate beyond redemption. Any chance of Iran minimising its presence will evaporate. Syria blames Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey of having supported the opposition terrorists, including IS throughout the conflict. Revival of terrorist groups, presently in Idlib, and who had earlier been sponsored by them, is a distinct possibility.

Implications for India

There was suspicion from 2012 onwards that a few Indian nationals from the Gulf may have joined IS in Syria. Initially there was reluctance to believe that Indians would fall for jihadi or IS propaganda. The arrest of over 50 cadres or persons having some connection with IS in 2015-16 from Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh shook our agencies out of complacency. Investigations revealed the reach of IS in India through social media. While the number of IS cadres may not be many, they have the potential to cause serious disruptions through lone wolf terrorist operations. Already there is suspicion of involvement of IS in the unrest in Jammu and Kashmir, though in a limited way. IS is active in our neighbourhood. It is probable that IS cadres exiting from Syria will reach our neighbourhood and would be available for mercenary operations, which will pose serious challenges for us. IS may be down, but their ideology and pernicious propaganda are found appealing by some and will need to be guarded against. We need to be vigilant both within India and at our borders.

Conclusion

Reports indicate that IS is down but not out. They have been carrying out sporadic attacks across the Euphrates in Eastern Syria, Deir ez Zor and even in the outskirts of Damascus. The US seems to be playing a double game. While they are fighting IS they had reportedly given safe passage to IS leaders in Raqqa. This is in contrast to their bombing of IS cadres given safe passage by the Syrian Government near Damascus. There have been many reports of IS cadres in trouble in Deir ez Zor being taken to safety by US helicopters, probably to hold them as assets for possible use in future. Russian FM Lavrov is reported to have

said on 03 May 2018, that the US forces positioned in al-Tauf area and al-Rukban camp are training terrorists. Further the US is reluctant to move decisively against the cornered IS. Israel is also helping IS in the enclave south of Damascus for possible use in due course against Iran. If this game continues, the IS would get undeserved relief.

The military advisers of President Trump are right in saying that IS would make a comeback, should the US withdraw its troops quickly. They are speaking from their experience in Iraq. Apart from the project to eliminate IS, every effort should be made to counter their ideology, and massive digital reach. For the present IS will continue to hope that they will be able to turn things around. Even if they don't succeed in doing that, the organisation would splinter into groups and involve in terrorist activities in many parts of the world. Some of the splinter groups may join hands with the groups holed up in Idleb and start a new round of conflict in Syria. People of Syria deserve better after seven years of continuous suffering.

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