



Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its South Asian Connection: An Indian Perspective

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A Brief Background to the Evolution of ISIS:

Today, one of the most serious threats that have engulfed a large portion of the Middle East is the emergence of the Sunni Muslim extremist group, infamously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). After capturing a sizeable territory in Iraq and Syria, the group changed its name to Islamic State (IS). The main objective behind the inception of this dreaded armed group was to establish a caliphate, or an Islamic state, based on Sharia law, across the world. On 29 June 2014, IS declared its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the new caliph, or the “leader of the faithful”. His real name is Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, but to his followers, he is Caliph Ibrahim. The word Caliph or Khilafa in Arabic means “successor” and this signifies the ultimate ambition of the leader to establish the above mentioned state. The last Caliphate was destroyed with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the World War I.¹

A rather quick unfolding of such a situation in this already war-torn region has shaken up security establishments in the region. Most importantly, the alarming pace at which the militant group is gaining control over a large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria is something that the affected countries’ political and security establishments need to grapple with. IS’s resonance is being felt in Europe, Central Asia and South Asia, including India.

Before getting into the emerging trends of the IS and how it is impacting India, it is imperative to understand the origins of the group; their main motives; their source of funding; their global outreach and the kinds of military tactics they have come deploying in their fight against the state forces of Iraq and Syria.

The roots of the IS can be traced back to the early 2000s, particularly, the United States (US) invasion of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003. While the US-led coalition forces were trying to establish control in Iraq, a group by the name al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was formed in 2004, primarily to wage a guerrilla war against the coalition forces and their domestic allies within Iraq.² In other words, IS had started as an al-Qaeda franchise. The first leader of AQI was an Arab of Jordanian descent named

¹ For further readings, refer to Daniel Pipes, “Caliph Ibrahim’s Brutal Moment”, *Middle East Forum*, 5 August 2014, <http://www.meforum.org/4769/isis-caliph-ibrahim>. Also see “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: The man who would be caliph”, *The Week*, 13 September 2014, <http://theweek.com/article/index/267920/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-the-man-who-would-be-caliph>

² Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria”, *Backgrounders*, Council on Foreign Relations, 8 August 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state-iraq-syria/p14811>

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The US State Department declared AQI as a terrorist organization. Al- Zarqawi's AQI started an extremely brutal campaign to "ignite a sectarian war against the majority Shia community".³ However, al- Zarqawi's leadership was cut short as he was killed in a US airstrike, and he was replaced by Abu Ayyub al-Masri in October 2006. Abu Ayyub al-Masri changed the name of the group from AQI to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), and named Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as its leader.

The name ISI was given with an aim to garner support from the people of Iraq. In 2010, Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi met the same fate as al-Zarqawi (as he was killed in a joint US-Iraq operation). From April 2010 onwards, the onus of running ISI fell on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who again changed the name of the outfit to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or ISIS. ISIL has been named after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in early 2013, declared the absorption of al-Qaeda backed militant group in Syria, known as Jabhat al-Nusra or Al-Nusra Front.⁴ By this time, Al-Nusra's popularity in Syria had already gained prominence and this came in conflict with the proclamation of Abu al-Baghdadi for the merger of AQI and Al-Nusra to form ISIS or ISIL. The ISI's declaration of adding Al-Nusra to its group clearly expressed the vision of its leader for a broadened objective of controlling a larger territory of Syria by fighting the regime of the President Bashar al-Assad and various opposition groups in the country. It should also be noted that Al-Nusra is considered to be one of the best armed and most successful groups fighting against Bashar al-Assad, and is known for carrying out some of the deadliest attacks in the ongoing Syrian crisis, including several suicide bombings.

The rift between Al-Nusra and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ISIS was first exposed in April 2013 when the former's leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani publicly denied the announcement of their merger. This was a clear indication that things had turned sour between the two militant groups, which was attributed to their quest for dominance in the region, particularly, inside Syria. The merger announcement did not go down well with the parent organization of al-Qaeda. After failed attempts to ease out differences between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, on 3 February 2014, Al-Qaeda formally dissociated itself from its onetime affiliate in Iraq and Syria, and announced that ISIS "is not a branch of the al-Qaeda group...does not have an organizational relationship with it and [al-Qaeda] is not the group responsible for their actions".⁵ This brought to an end the love-hate relationship between the two

³ "ISIS Fast Facts", *CNN*, 6 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/world/isis-fast-facts/>

⁴ For a brief introduction to Al-Nusra Front, see "Al Nusra Front", *Mapping Militant Organizations*, 24 July 2014, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>

⁵ Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq", *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html

militant groups. ISIS's targeting of civilians alienated local populations and ran contrary to al-Qaeda's mission to unite all the Muslim across the region and became one of the most important factors for the break between the two outfits.

The ISIS, right from its establishment, has followed stringent behavioural norms and strategies, which makes it starkly different from other militant organisations operating in the region. It is known for its brutal tactics and also for its harsh implementation of Islamic laws. Actually, they first came to notice when they started massacring their rivals. But they attracted global attention after they executed thousands of Iraqi soldiers and 100 odd Syrian troops, during mid-2014. Their extreme intolerance to external interventions in the Middle Eastern crisis, particularly, in Iraq and Syria has been signified by the killings of foreign nationals, including aid workers and journalists. ISIS's administering of Islamic punishments like floggings; imposing ban on smoking and music; and other social restrictions, which are deemed as un-Islamic, do not go well with the Syrians as well. As a result, considering extreme brutalities of ISIS, terror outfits such as Al-Qaeda appears to be more lenient.

Another dimension that is of global concern is ISIS' source of funding. One of the most important sources is the kidnap-for-ransom tactics, and often European citizens (mostly corporation employees) have been their prime targets. In one such case, a Scandinavian corporation reportedly paid a ransom of \$70,000 to release a kidnapped employee.⁶ But this was not the case with James Foley, the American journalist beheaded by ISIS. The failure of the US to pay a ransom of approximately \$132 million⁷ as demanded by his ISIS captors became of the reasons for his murder. But ISIS also used Foley to send a message of defiance to the US which had started intervening to stall their march in Iraq.

There are also reports of funds being transferred to ISIS by Persian Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. This was believed to have been done through Kuwait, with the tacit approval of the regimes in the mentioned countries.⁸ Iraq's former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki even accused Saudi Arabia and Qatar of the financial assistance to ISIS. But along the journey, ISIS exploited various means to garner financial support.

During the initial days, ISIS had could gather a large sum of money out of petty crimes and bank robberies. After capturing Mosul's central bank, ISIS is believed to

⁶ "Multiple Kidnappings for ransom, funding ISIS, source", *CBSNews*, 21 August 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/multiple-kidnappings-for-ransom-funding-isis-source-says/>

⁷ Rukmini Callimachi, "Before Killing James Foley, ISIS Demanded Ransom from U.S.", *The New York Times*, 20 August 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/21/world/middleeast/isis-pressed-for-ransom-before-killing-james-foley.html>

⁸ Josh Rogin, "America's Allies are funding ISIS", *The Daily Beast*, 14 June 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/14/america-s-allies-are-funding-isis.html>

have looted 500 billion Iraqi dinars, approximately \$425 million and, with a total fund worth about \$2 billion, it has become “world’s richest terrorist group”.⁹ With such enormous amount, ISIS has acquired the capability of paying about 60,000 people, who are associated with the group, a salary of \$600 a month for a year.¹⁰ According to a recent estimate by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), there are about 20,000 to 31,500 fighters across Iraq and Syria.¹¹ This dramatic rise is due to strong recruitment tactics used by the group. Another breakthrough happened when they captured large oil fields in Syria and Iraq.¹² The oil seized from these fields are sold at a discounted price, which is estimated at \$25 to \$60 for a barrel, as against the market price of \$100, and the total profits from such sales are over \$3 million a day.¹³ The suspected recipient of such oils is Turkey. Beyond this, using latest technology and social media, ISIS is believed to have appealed for funds from individual donors.

ISIS’s military capabilities are another important feature of the group. This terror organisation has been successful in acquiring a few sophisticated weapons systems, of different origins. Large sums of funds they have accumulated are used in buying military items, apart from those captured from the Syrian and Iraqi troops. While the exact figures and types of the weapons are hard to identify, there are a few estimations. For instance, ISIS has Russian-made T55 and T72 tanks which they captured from Syrian troops and Iraqi Army, respectively.¹⁴ Other items included rifles, grenades, machine guns, truck-mounted machine guns, and munitions. ISIS fighters are believed possess towed and mounted anti-aircraft guns, including powerful 12.7mm DShK machine guns and a Chinese-made Type 65 or Type 74 37mm twin-barrelled anti-aircraft gun.¹⁵ During mid-July, ISIS captured from Iraqi

⁹ Terrence McCoy, “ISIS just stole \$425 million, Iraqi governor says, and became the ‘world’s richest terror group””, *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/12/isis-just-stole-425-million-and-became-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “How foreign fighters are swelling ISIS ranks in startling numbers”, *CNN*, 14 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/12/world/meast/isis-numbers/index.html?iref=allsearch>

¹² Helen Lock, “How Isis became the wealthiest terror group in history”, *The Independent*, 15 September 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/how-isis-became-the-wealthiest-terror-group-in-history-9732750.html>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “ISIS weapon inventory grows”, *Daily Sabah*, 3 July 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2014/07/03/isis-weapon-inventory-grows>

¹⁵ “ISIS propaganda videos show their weapons, skills in Iraq”, *The Washington Post*, 18 June 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/06/18/isis-propaganda-videos-show-their-weapons-skills-in-iraq/>

military around 52 155mm M198 howitzers, 1,500 U.S.-made Humvees and 4,000 PKC machine guns.¹⁶

A report which documented a few weapons captured from ISIS by Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria included the following items: U.S. M16A4 rifles, two Chinese Type 80 machine guns, a Croatian sniper rifle, a 9mm Glock pistol, various Soviet-era small arms and anti-tank weapons (manufactured in former Yugoslavia).¹⁷ Adding to their military prowess, ISIS also captured a major military air base in north-eastern Syria during late-August. However, it is still unknown as to how much of what they captured from the airbase, or from the troops could actually be utilised. That said the continuous stockpiling of arms and ammunitions is a rather worrisome factor in the long run.

ISIS and its Impact on India:

The rapidly unfolding events in Iraq have become a matter of great concern for the Indians (approximately 16,000 before the crisis erupted), living there as well for the newly-installed Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, in New Delhi. Apart from the safety of the Indians in Iraq, and the economic impact this crisis would have on India, the most serious concerns is the likely impact on the internal security of India. The following section discusses the abduction episode of the Indian workers and the nurses and how the present government is planning to tackle the possible resonance of ISIS within the country, particularly among the radicalised Muslim youth.

When the wave of this dreaded phenomenon began in the Middle Eastern countries of Iraq and Syria, India was watching the developments very cautiously. However, the wait-and-watch policy did not last for long after 40 Indian workers were kidnapped by the suspected ISIS militants from Mosul during mid-June 2014, the city wracked by the heavy clashes between the Shia-¹⁸dominated Iraqi government and the Sunni militant groups. In a quick succession, 46 Indian nurses were taken by ISIS militants from the city of Tikrit. These events sent shocks across India. New

¹⁶ Jeremy Bender, "ISIS Militants Captured 52 American-Made Artillery Weapons That Cost \$500,000 Each", *Business Insider*, 15 July 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.in/ISIS-Militants-Captured-52-American-Made-Artillery-Weapons-That-Cost-500000-Each/articleshow/38437515.cms>

¹⁷ "Report: Islamic State may have taken anti-tank weapons from Syrian rebels", *The Washington Post*, 7 September 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/09/07/report-islamic-state-has-anti-tank-weapons-taken-from-syrian-rebels/>

¹⁸ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "40 workers abducted in Iraq, Ex-ambassador Suresh Reddy despatched to Iraq; New Delhi seeks help of US, Israel, Iran and Turkey", *The Economic Times*, 19 June 2014, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-06-19/news/50710913_1_abducted-indians-iran-and-israel-northern-iraq. Also see Suhasini Haidar, "Suresh Reddy is India's crisis manager in Iraq", *The Hindu*, 19 June 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/suresh-reddy-is-indias-crisis-manager-in-iraq/article6127462.ece>

Delhi responded by dispatching a career-diplomat, and the former Indian ambassador to Iraq Suresh Reddy. The said Indian diplomat is well-known for his contacts in Iraq, and he was instrumental in establishing contacts, not only with the Iraqi officials but with the larger regional powers and several American security and intelligence officials. There was also speculation that India approached Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Turkey and Israel for assistance while rescuing the abducted Indians. Besides reaching out to Saudi Arabia, a country which has a significant influence in the region, India also sought assistance from Russia to secure the safe release of the Indians.

The abduction crisis posed the first big challenge of Modi after he became the Prime Minister of India. The Indian Minister of External Affairs (MEA) Sushma Swaraj and the National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval, also played important roles in the rescue efforts of the kidnapped citizens.

During the initial days into the kidnapping, it was a huge challenge for the Indian authorities, particularly the security establishment, as no one knew exactly where they had been kept, and who abducted them, although hints were pointed towards ISIS. Moreover, ISIS, being considered even more brutal than the al-Qaeda and other militant organisations, the room for negotiations was limited. The absence of any ransom calls added to the sense of disquiet. It was at such juncture when Indian officials came up with probabilities of kidnapped workers being used as “human shields”, or “first line of defence”¹⁹ in the possible advent of any combined airstrikes by the US and Iraqi forces. However, the successful rescue operations during early-July which resulted in the release of the kidnapped Indian nurses from the clutch of the ISIS militants were lauded back home. But what has remained as a major challenge is how to rescue those Indian workers who are still in the captivity of IS militants.

After the rescue operations of the nurses, a few questions that had cropped up were how the Indian officials negotiated with the militants; what were their terms and conditions for the release of the Indians; and was there any cooperation between India and the Middle Eastern intelligence agencies during the rescue efforts. These questions were left unanswered as the nature of the entire operation was considered to be an “extremely difficult” one, and continue to be a mystery, till today. Even while briefing the media, the Indian MEA’S spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin said,

“At the diplomatic level these negotiations were involving the External Affairs Minister herself. At the ground level, obviously we will not be able to share, and I had repeated it previously, because diplomacy works through

¹⁹ Harinder Baweja, “ISIS unwilling to negotiate release of Indian workers abducted in Iraq”, *Hindustan Times*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/iraqonthebrink/isis-unwilling-to-negotiate-release-of-abducted-indian-workers/article1-1233311.aspx>

the front door. I had said we are using other doors. How those doors were used and knocked on, how they were opened up, is a story for another day. The story for today is that one of those doors opened and we were able to extricate our nationals.”²⁰

Serious concerns have been expressed over the possible spill-over of this latest Middle Eastern crisis to India. While the problem is actually taking place in a distant region, it is considered as a “danger far closer home than it appears”.²¹ In the first place, the main objective behind the establishment of an outfit like ISIS is to create an Islamic state of which India would also be a part. A map released by the outfit shows large part of India as a part of the Islamic province of Khorasan,²² To some, this might appear to be rhetoric because of the party’s ambition to carve its own unique niche but it is a matter of grave concern for India, for various reasons.

Prior to the abduction crisis, one of the earliest impacts of ISIS that hit India was the news of 30,000 odd Indian Muslims who reportedly signed up to defend Iraq's holy Shia shrines and fight Sunni Islamist militants in the country.²³ Although this did not lead to any immediate impact on India, the willingness of the volunteers, who are mainly engineers, students and police officers, raised warning bells for the security agencies in India. It is the presence of such educated and middle-class Indian Muslims that is posing to be a major challenge while trying to douse the fire that is spreading due to the Middle Eastern crisis. For India, which is home to about 175 million Muslim population, such acts could trigger untoward sectarian crisis. Intelligence Bureau officials warned concerned authorities to plan sensitisation measures as there were reports of a clear division among Shia and Sunni religious leaders on supporting either the Sunni outfit ISIS, or the Shia-dominated al-Maliki government. Moreover, the demographic nature of the Indian sub-continent where many Muslim youth appear to be dissatisfied and the instant communication that is facilitated by the cyber technology have become key factors for ISIS’s successful penetration in India.

²⁰ “Transcript of the Media Briefing by Official Spokesperson”, *Media Briefings*, 4 July 2014, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, India, <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/23559/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+by+Official+Spokesperson+July+04+2014>

²¹ Deeptiman Tiwary, “ISIS has designs on India: Experts”, *The Times of India*, 9 June 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ISIS-has-designs-on-India-Experts/articleshow/36795859.cms>

²² ISIS has `bigger plans` for India in its aim for global jihad, warn experts”, *Zee News*, 19 June 2014, http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/isis-has-bigger-plans-for-india-in-its-aim-for-global-jihad-warn-experts_940975.html

²³ “Thousands of Indian Muslims sign up to defend Iraq's shrines” , *The Times of India*, 26 June 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Thousands-of-Indian-Muslims-sign-up-to-defend-Iraqs-shrines/articleshow/37264170.cms>

The above development, in a subtle manner, indicated the gradual and growing connection between ISIS and India. Moreover, as most Jihadist groups have their eyes set on India, ISIS's influence in the country is not a surprising outcome. An Indian strategist was of the view that,

“Strategy is a function of capability. We are not focusing on events in the Middle East because we have no capability to influence them. Earlier too, people have been kidnapped in the region and we have had to depend on third party negotiators. All global jihad will have India in its crosshairs. We can ignore them only at our own peril.”²⁴

There is a growing concern that is developing within India in regard to ISIS's gaining influence, and the above statement reflects one of those voices. Moreover, the short duration within which ISIS has gained prominence can be considered as the most important feature of this group. India's worst nightmare came into a reality when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, during his Ramzan speech, vowed war against several countries, including India.²⁵ The reiteration of India a few times in his speech strongly signalled the possibilities of India being one of the prime targets of the ISIS, and he connected this with the plight of the Muslims in Myanmar, Pakistan and Jammu and Kashmir. The call of the self-proclaimed Caliph to the Indian Muslims did not go well with most Indian Muslim leaders. Despite their opposition, radicalised Muslims are getting attracted to IS, something that was illustrated by radical Kashmiri youths, who are believed to be deeply indoctrinated by the Deobandi school of thought, seen waving ISIS flags during a demonstration against the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip during July and August.²⁶ This is a serious issue which the Indian government needs to grapple in the days to come.

Radicalisation of the Indian Muslim Youths: The Impact on Internal Security

The rapid radicalisation of a few Indian Muslim youths, in consonance with the rising influence of the ISIS, has turned out to be one of the most critical challenges for the Indian security agencies. The Sunni militant outfit, which is very techno savvy unlike other militant groups, has been able to lure young Muslims not only from India, but also from Central Asia and European countries. The group is known for its heavy usage of internet and social media tools. Moreover, the ability of the group to convey their messages using a few Indian regional languages, namely, Hindi, Tamil and Urdu as subtitles, make the recruitment process easier. In this regard, Facebook and Twitter have become the hotspots for various “ads” posted by

²⁴ Deeptiman Tiwary, “ISIS has designs on India: Experts”.

²⁵ Praveen Swami, “India among jihad targets of ISIS”, *The Hindu*, 2 July 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/india-among-jihad-targets-of-isis/article6167595.ece>

²⁶ “Pro-ISIS stir a disturbing trend in Valley: Separatists”, *The Times of India*, 2 August 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Pro-ISIS-stir-a-disturbing-trend-in-Valley-Separatists/articleshow/39450949.cms>

ISIS.²⁷ Most of the youths who are believed to be highly radicalised hail from the states of Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Jammu and Kashmir.

Interestingly, unemployment or poverty is not the only factor attributed to joining the ISIS, but youths with proper educational backgrounds and from middle-income families, are increasingly enticed towards this dreaded phenomenon. This was the exact case with the four youths from Kalyan (in Maharashtra) who reportedly joined ISIS to fight in Syria and Iraq, as early as July.²⁸ Similar participation of Indian youths was also reported for fighting in Syria. In a strange case, a 26-year-old Adil Fayaz, an Indian student (from Srinagar) in Australia reportedly joined the ISIS in Syria to fight the Assad regime. Similarly, a Kerala youth who was studying in Dubai and another one of Hyderabad-origin from Texas have reportedly joined Islamist fighters in Syria.²⁹ However, there are no concrete reports on how many Indians from the expatriate communities in the Middle East have joined the ISIS.

Most of the youths have been so brainwashed that they left their jobs in India and decided to take up terror path. What needs to be investigated thoroughly is the root cause of the problem that has driven the youths to travel to Iraq and Syria. While the angle of ideological commitment as a main motive behind joining ISIS cannot be ignored, some of the recruits could be joining ISIS for purely mercenary motives. According to a report, there are about “1.2 to 1.3 lakh mercenaries fighting in Syria alone, and only 15-20% of ISIS members are ideologically driven”.³⁰ The Indians, according to this report, could also be a part of the mercenary group.

With the passage of time, the severity of ISIS's influence on India is also on the rise. Amid the investigations over the movements of Indian youths to Iraq, a photograph, of 26 Muslim youths sporting black T-shirts with the emblem of the ISIS in front of a mosque at the coastal town of Thondi in Ramanathapuram district (in Tamil Nadu) in early-August rang further warning bells. ³¹ As a quick follow-up to this, an Imam

²⁷ “ISIS uses internet to reach Indian youths to wage jihad”, *India Today*, 13 August 2014, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/isis-uses-internet-to-reach-indians-youths-to-wage-jihad/1/376788.html>

²⁸ For a brief report on the four youths, see Praveen Swami, “Four men from Mumbai believed to have joined Iraq jihad, a father appeals for help”, *The Indian Express*, 14 July 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra/four-men-from-mumbai-believed-to-have-joined-iraq-jihad-a-father-appeals-for-help/>

²⁹ “Young Indians joining ISIS call for jihad in West Asia”, *Hindustan Times*, 6 August 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmiri-youth-joins-jihad-in-syria-says-intel/article1-1248672.aspx>

³⁰ “Kalyan youths may have gone to Iraq as mercenaries”, *The Times of India*, 19 July 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Kalyan-youths-may-have-gone-to-Iraq-as-mercenaries/articleshow/38651842.cms>

³¹ D.J. Walter Scott, “Muslim youths sporting ISIS T-shirts cause a flutter”, *The Hindu*, 4 August 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/muslim-youths-sporting-isis-tshirts-cause-a-flutter/article6278285.ece>

responsible for procuring the T-shirts with the pro-ISIS slogans on them had been arrested, and he revealed, during the investigation, “that the main accused were active supporters of the ISIS and allegedly trying to brainwash Muslim youths for the cause that the ISIS was fighting for”.³² This incident is a serious issue as such religious leaders have been involved in promoting the extremist ideologies propagated by the ISIS, which is deeply anti-India. India-based Islamic organisation such as Jamaat-e-Islami Hind reportedly said “ISIS caliphate is binding on all Muslims”³³ and a similar support was also endorsed by a cleric from Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama. In a letter allegedly written by the cleric, he expressed “confidence that Iraqi Sunnis were with ISIS and that Baghdadi's "clean and pious character is worth praise", and he also allegedly asked the “Saudi government to prepare an army of five lakh Indian Sunni Muslim youth to fight against the Shia militias in Iraq and elsewhere”³⁴ Another man from Bhatkal in Karnataka, who is also a cleric reportedly trained at the Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama seminary in Lucknow, called on the Indian Muslims “to join the global jihad”.³⁵ He is highly believed to be impressed by the advancements made by the Islamic State's success. Such acts could also have far-reaching implications at this juncture when discontents among the Muslim youths are wide owing to real and imagined social and economic deprivations. An Indian Mujahedeen (IM) man was believed to be instrumental in recruiting for the ISIS poor Muslims in the aforementioned states. If this nexus between ISIS and India's home-grown terror groups manages to establish a robust link, then the headache of combating such amalgamated force will be a hard task for Indian security agencies.

The involvement of a few Indian Muslim youths with the crisis going on in Syria and Iraq is worrying for a few reasons.

³² D.J. Walter Scott, “Imam held for supplying T-shirts with ISIS slogan”, *The Hindu*, 7 August 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/imam-arrested-for-supplying-tshirts-with-isis-slogan/article6288657.ece>

³³ 'Supporting the ISIS Caliphate Is Binding On All Muslims, ISIS Fulfils Maulana Azad And Maududi's Aspirations For The Islamic Caliphate,' Says Jamaat-e-Islami Hind”, *New Age Islam*, 26 August 2014, <http://www.newageislam.com/radical-islamism-and-jihad/-supporting-the-isis-caliphate-is-binding-on-all-muslims,-isis-fulfils-maulana-azad-and-maududi-s-aspirations-for-the-islamic-caliphate.--says-jamaat-e-islami-hind/d/98745>. Also see Prakash Nanda, “Reviving the Sufi/Bhakti Tradition”, *Uday India*, 13 September 2014, http://www.udayindia.in/english/content_13sept2014/right-angle.html

³⁴ “Nadwa cleric asks Saudi govt to prepare an army of Sunni youth for Iraq”, *The Times of India*, 26 July 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Nadwa-cleric-asks-Saudi-govt-to-prepare-an-army-of-Sunni-youth-for-Iraq/articleshow/39012903.cms>

³⁵ Come to motherland of jihad: Call to arms from first Indian group in AfPak”, *The Indian Express*, 22 August 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/come-to-motherland-of-jihad-call-to-arms-from-first-indian-group-in-afpak/>

The first reason is that it could set a trend for other like-minded youth who are easily susceptible to radicalisation process. Although a large section of the Indian Muslim society is well-integrated with the rest of the society, there seems to be a growing unrest in many areas where youths and influential leaders have taken up staunch anti-India stance. Even if the number of the youths adhered to the ideology of the ISIS might be minuscule, the act of siding with such organisation itself is very dangerous. Second reason and a more dangerous one, is how the returnees (from Syria and Iraq), with their first-hand experience of the entire turmoil could easily brainwash their peers at home. That said this would depend on how far they have been indoctrinated during their stay either in Iraq or Syria. Investigations upon their arrival back in India could only give a picture as to why they have joined the militant outfit, and how they have travelled to the conflict-ridden countries. Another critical issue is the use of the social networking sites and internet-related activities that are fuelling this problem. There is already a paramount concern within Indian security establishment about the use of information technology and other cyber-related activities while fanning the ISIS propaganda.

Furthermore, the news of the death of one of the four youths from Maharashtra while fighting in Iraq was quite a disturbing one. Although this is one of the isolated incidents, the act of giving life could be considered as the depth of commitment of such youths towards the cause of the ISIS, and the influence the organisation has gained in India in the span of a few months. Al-Qaeda, despite operating widely in Pakistan and Afghanistan, has not been able to leave such imprints where it could recruit Indians and make them fight to death. Likewise, the unconfirmed report of a young suicide bomber of the ISIS, who was from Tamil Nadu, blowing himself up in the Syria-Iraq theatre became a matter of grave concern.³⁶ If this report is found to be true, it is going to be the first suicide attack by an Indian origin in the world and, it will have a serious repercussion on matters related to India's internal security. Such incidents would be viewed, especially by security establishment, with utmost importance as there is a fear that those youths with similar intentions, upon their return to India, could introduce this form of extreme terrorism. Reports of Indian jihadists having received training on extreme form of terrorism abroad³⁷ raise fears that the home-grown terrorists could be leaning towards suicide attacks, although no such incidents have occurred so far. Attempts had already been made during the attack against the election campaign rally of the current prime minister in December 2013 in Patna. The recently-released report by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) mentioned that, "the terrorists planned everything from using firearms to employing a suicide bomber and ultimately using a series of bomb blasts to

³⁶ "Tamil Nadu man first ISIS suicide bomber from India?", *The Times of India*, 13 September 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Tamil-Nadu-man-first-ISIS-suicide-bomber-from-India/articleshow/42391955.cms>

³⁷ For a succinct account on the Jihadist movement in India, see Stephen Tankel, "The Indian Jihadist Movement: Evolution and Dynamics- Analysis", *Eurasia Review: News and Analysis*, 10 September 2014, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/10092014-indian-jihadist-movement-evolution-dynamics-analysis/>

assassinate the BJP leader and then Gujarat chief minister”.³⁸ NIA’s report also mentioned about the usage of videos and lectures by the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) cadres to recruit young boys from Ranchi.³⁹ As a result, the burgeoning enticement of the Indian youths towards such extreme terror organisations is posing as a major challenge to Indian internal security.

The above developments have come at a time when the leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahri released a video-tape wherein he mentioned the establishment of al-Qaida in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Given the low-profile activities of al-Qaeda in India since the last few years, the Indian security apparatus do not see an immediate threat emerging out of this announcement, but it is not taken lightly either. In fact, this is a worrisome factor as both the militant groups, that is, al-Qaeda and ISIS, have a similar objective to target India and to turn this South Asian country as one of the recruiting grounds for extremists. With such motives, the rapid radicalisation of the youths could go in their favours.

Way Ahead for India:

As the influence of the ISIS has already been felt in India, New Delhi will be compelled to take certain steps to prevent it from making further inroads in to the country. Establishment of robust intelligence sharing networks with the Persian Gulf countries, where there is a huge Indian expatriate population, should be a priority for the new government in New Delhi. Although such efforts have already been initiated by the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, cooperation in this particular aspect lacks substance. The time has come to look at the Middle East not only from the prism of oil, energy and commercial angle, but from that military-security arena, too. The already-existing military-cooperation between countries such as Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and UAE should be promoted further, where counter-terrorism, intelligence and information-sharing cooperation should be high on the agenda. The least-explored opportunities of India-Iraq military cooperation should also be revived.

At this moment, the possibility of India joining hands with the US-led military attack on ISIS does not seem to be a feasible option. The US President Barack Obama has expressed his desire to rope in India in his efforts to tackle the menace militarily. Although India has major concerns with the pace at which ISIS and al-Qaeda are gaining visible influence in the country, New Delhi will ponder upon the participation in any military strike in a distant country where it has major interests.

³⁸ For a brief report, see “Aman Sharma, “Blasts in Narendra Modi’s Patna rally were revenge for Gujarat riots: NIA”, *The Economic Times*, 11 September 2014, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-09-11/news/53811431_1_gujarat-riots-charge-sheet-narendra-modi

³⁹ For the report by NIA, see “Bodhgaya Serial Blasts Cases”, *Press Release*, National Investigation Agency, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, <http://www.nia.gov.in/writereaddata/PressRelease11092014-2.pdf>

Alongside this, the safety of the Indians in Iraq as well in other Persian Gulf countries remains a major concern for India. India would like to avoid similar circumstances as faced by those three foreigners, including journalists and an aid worker (of American and British origin) for their respective country's military operations in Iraq.

At this stage, when India is exploring mechanisms to curb the influence of ISIS, New Delhi has shown some signs of advancement. The present government which is known for its no-tolerance attitude to any form of terrorism has started to keep a strict vigilance over movement of youth from India to Iraq and Syria, other Middle Eastern and the neighbouring countries as well. Moreover, the NSA and IB, with a robust cooperation with the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and security establishments, are expected to play a greater role in affairs related to internal security, including home-grown radicalisation. The Indian MHA is particularly interested in the de-radicalisation process of the youths and this itself is an enormous challenge.

As a part of the ongoing efforts to prevent the rise of ISIS-related activities in India, anti-terrorism squad (ATS) in Mumbai reportedly interrogated a few people who were suspected to have indoctrinated and motivated the Kalyan boys for their ISIS-related activities. Similarly, a special branch detained four college drop-outs in Kolkata, who are originally from Hyderabad. They were believed to be on their way to Iraq via Bangladesh for allegedly joining the ISIS, a claim refuted by a few Muslim leaders. But it is clear from the vigilance that the authorities have started taking steps before the matter spirals out of control.

Owing to the burgeoning ISIS-connected activities within India, it is highly probable that the government is likely to ask the NIA to file an FIR against unknown persons affiliated to the organisation, with an aim to prevent more Muslim youth from going to Iraq and this would also be applicable to those who return after a brief stint. According to a report,

The NIA can register an FIR on the basis of the UN Security Council Resolution 2170 that has placed the ISIS under terror sanctions and asked the member countries not to allow fighters from joining the extremist Wahabi group headed by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.⁴⁰

Indian security agencies are also believed to be exploring the possibility of banning of ISIS as a terrorist organisation by listing it under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).⁴¹ But a section in the government is of the view that this

⁴⁰ Shishir Gupta, "Crack the whip on Indians joining ISIS, Centre may tell NIA", *Hindustan Times*, 14 September 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/crack-the-whip-on-indians-joining-isis-centre-may-tell-nia/article1-1263989.aspx>

⁴¹ Ibid., Also see "The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967", Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, http://mha.nic.in/hindi/sites/upload_files/mhahindi/files/pdf/UAPA-1967.pdf.

move could be detrimental to those Indian workers who are still under the captivity of the ISIS in Mosul.

Conclusion:

It is evident from the above developments that India has a major challenge of tackling the rising influence of ISIS in the country. For this New Delhi, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, should build up a strong network of intelligence sharing within the country as well as with the Middle Eastern countries. Efforts should be made to reinvigorate existing security dialogues and exchange of intelligence information with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Israel. As a result, India needs to give considerable importance to its military-security cooperation with the mentioned countries amid its Middle Eastern foreign policy that is heavily driven by oil, energy and commercial transactions. India should also go an extra-mile in forging strong cooperation with the security establishments of European countries and the US, which are also equally concerned with the rise of the ISIS.

India needs to adopt an inclusive policy in order to tackle the rising radicalisation of Muslim youths in the country. In other words, the government and its security establishment needs to build a strong rapport with the larger Muslim society in India, as a majority of them denounce the extremist thought process of organisations such as ISIS. As a part of the process, a strong channel of communication with the Muslim leaders in different parts of India should be established so as to understand their problems as well as their suggestions. In short, this should be done empathetically.

Finally, a robust cyber surveillance mechanism is the need of the hour, particularly considering the rising online campaign and advertisements used by terrorist outfits. There should be strict monitoring over the banking systems to prevent money laundering. Along with this, a closer coordination between different ministries, private corporations, security agencies, and most importantly, local populace, should be promoted.

Image Sources:

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