

ISIS and the Scourge of Global Jihad: Regional Implications and Challenges for India*

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Almost every day, there are reports of a jihadi organisation perpetrating some atrocity or the other in which several innocent victims are killed or badly injured. Images of widespread carnage at airports, shopping malls, concert auditoria, hotels, restaurants, and busy streets fill our television screens while grim-faced reporters inform us that security agencies suspect this to be an attack by the Islamic State (or IS, also known as the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”, or ISIS) or its local affiliate or even an individual, a “lone wolf”, who was indoctrinated to carry out a suicide attack by IS propaganda on social media. This paper discusses the ideological and political bases of this scourge and its proliferation, the implications it has had on West Asian politics, and the challenges it poses for India’s national security interests.¹

The ideology and motive-force of the Islamic State (IS) originates in what contemporary scholars refer to as “Salafi-jihadism”. Its roots lie in Islam’s first texts, the Quran and the Hadith (the “traditions” of the Prophet Muhammad, referring to his words and actions), and the commentaries of early scholars. Jihadi ideologues have reinterpreted these ideas to analyse the Muslims’ present-day predicament and provide justification for contemporary confrontations between “Islam” and its enemies. Thus, the ideology of jihad and its modern-day protagonist, the IS, is within the mainstream tradition of Salafi-Jihadi thought, but whose beliefs and practices have been greatly influenced by political experiences of Muslims over the last 200 years.

“Salafism” refers to the thought and conduct of the first three generations

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of Muslims, a period that roughly covers the first 200 years of Islam. Based on a hadith of Prophet Muhammad, these first Muslims are said to reflect the characteristics of the best Muslims in terms of the authenticity and purity of their faith and hence are worthy of emulation by later generations to realise the perfect Islamic life. All through the 19th and 20th centuries, as Muslims experienced defeat and despair in the face of the colonial onslaught, it is to these “righteous ancestors” that their intellectuals turned, seeking to derive from their words and deeds the ability to cope with the present-day dilemmas of their community through a fresh interpretation of their early conduct and precepts.

In terms of their political orientation, these Salafi intellectuals have traditionally been divided into three groups: quietists, those who decry political activism by the citizenry and leave decision-making to the ruler, who is then expected to rule on the basis of Islamic precepts; activists, those who advocate an active role for citizens in shaping their political order on Islamic lines; and jihadis, those who are willing to use violence to realise a society that is based on God’s law.² The latter approach is clearly explained in a statement by Al Qaeda, the world’s first transnational jihadi movement: “We believe that the ruler who does not rule in accordance with God’s revelation as well as his supporters are infidel apostates. Armed and violent rebellion against them is an individual duty on every Muslim.”³ This category of Salafism is referred to as “Salafi-jihadism”.

Attributes of Salafi-Jihadism

Salafi-jihadism has had numerous ideologues over the past 70 years who have described its various characteristics based on their interpretation of Islam’s texts and the later commentaries on these texts. In this effort, they frequently stretch the limits of old texts and imbue them with meanings that support their present-day interests, even as they compete vigorously with each other to uphold the value of their own offering.

From this copious body of diverse literature, five attributes can be said to define Salafi-jihadism: jihad; *takfir*, excommunication of those guilty of apostasy; *al-walaa al-bara*, the concept of “avowal and rejection” for Allah; *tawhid*, the idea of oneness or unity of God, and *hakimiyya*, the establishment of Allah’s sovereignty in a political order.⁴ Most of these concepts are rooted in Islam and have been discussed by scholars for centuries; what makes them relevant in the context of Salafi-jihadism is the unique meaning that jihadi ideologues have imparted to them. Such meanings have usually been

derived in periods of conflict and reflect the sense of being at war with dangerous enemies.

Jihad has been a central part of Islamic faith; rooted in the Arabic term that means labour or struggle or effort, it has traditionally meant the individual's personal struggle against temptation and sin. But, it has also referred to a struggle against the enemies of Islam to defend the faith from external threat. It is the latter meaning that has motivated jihadis, so much so that their ideologues such as IbnTaymiyya (1263-1328) and Abdullah Azzam (1941-89) have placed it as the foremost obligation for a Muslim after belief in Islam. Jihad, Azzam says, should be viewed as an "ordinary act of worship", on par with prayer and fasting.⁵ The current head of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has said that jihad "takes precedence over feeding the hungry, even if the hungry would starve as a result".⁶

Contemporary thinking on jihad by its ideologues was fine-tuned on the battlefields of Afghanistan during the "global jihad" of the 1980s. It was here that Osama bin Laden and his companions imbued jihad with its fierce anti-Western character, particularly seeing the US as the evil power behind the thrones of the Arab autocrats, a view that was consolidated when the Gulf countries sought Western help to overturn Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait.

Takfir and Tawhid

The concept of *takfir*, declaring a Muslim an apostate, is being used to sanction violence against other Muslims in the name of protecting Islam from unbelievers. IbnTaymiyya used this idea to vilify the Mongols who had destroyed the Abbasid caliphate and threatened his own home, while 20th century ideologues such as SayyidQutb and Shukri Mustafa used it to describe their entire society as un-Islamic and thus make jihad a legitimate weapon against the rulers.⁷

However, political developments have ensured that *takfir* has become a potent instrument in jihadi hands. After the US invasion of Iraq, the country's jihadis, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, used it to target the Shia community, describing it pejoratively as *rafida* (rejectionist), seeing them as those who have left the fold of Islam and are now collaborating with the US - occupiers of their country.⁸

On the same lines, Salafi-jihadis have used the concepts of *al-walaa al-bara* and *tawhid* as instruments of war, taking them far beyond their original meanings. The former, which means "loyalty and disavowal" for the sake of

Allah, has traditionally referred to the personal conduct of Muslims. Over the past two centuries, its meaning has expanded steadily to separate the believing and practising Muslim from “the Other”, the non-believer.⁹ More recently, ideologues have imparted to it an aggressive character, positing, in the words of modern-day ideologue, Abu Mohammed al Maqdisi, that “[t]he Muslim has not openly declared his religion until he opposes every assembly in whatever disbelief it is famous for, while declaring his enmity towards it”.¹⁰

Similarly, *tawhid*, which initially merely referred to the oneness or unity of God, has acquired a strong political connotation in that ideologues now insist that it requires not just belief in God’s oneness but that this belief should constantly be manifested in action. This means the rejection of all those actions that constitute association with God or seeking intercession (for example, of a saint or an amulet or an incantation) to reach God. What the jihadis have done is take this idea to an extreme by insisting that Islam as a “living ideal” demands that acceptance of *tawhid* inform and be apparent in every action of the Muslim.¹¹

Hakimiyya

Hakimiyya refers to the realisation of God’s sovereignty in an Islamic political order. This is one idea that is not Salafi in that it is not derived from Islam’s first texts. Also, the idea was not developed in West Asia, like other Salafi-jihadism concepts, but in South Asia, shaped by the pioneering contributions of the philosopher-poet Mohammed Iqbal, the ideologue-activist Abul Alaa Maududi and the quietist-intellectual Abul Hassan Ali Hasani Nadwi (1914-99). Nadwi used to translate Maududi’s writings into Arabic, which were then read by Sayyid Qutb, the most distinguished jihadi ideologue of modern times. But, Nadwi made his own contribution to Qutb’s thinking by introducing him to the idea of the contemporary Muslim world being in a state of *jahilliyya*, an age of ignorance, reminiscent of the era that the Prophet Muhammad had corrected with the message of Islam.¹²

Briefly, the concept of *hakimiyya* posits an Islamic political entity that has God as the sovereign authority, thus providing no space for a constitution, a democratic order, or popular sovereignty, all of which suggest a secular system of governance. Thus, this approach is founded on a sharp separation between an Islamic and a Western political order; indeed, it places the two in confrontation with each other. As the prominent jihadi ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, has said: “Islam would have to survive within its own silo: isolated, distinct, and diametrically estranged from

anything other than Islam itself.”¹³

To summarise, in response to contemporary political challenges facing the Arab and Muslim people, Salafi-jihadi ideologues, over the past 200 years, have attempted to reconcile their faith with the demands of contemporary times. In their view, their faith, as defined by the first three generations of Islam, is under threat from the allure of a secular order that removes religious belief from the public space, replacing it with materialism and immorality. Linked with this, they see an even more dangerous challenge: that the Islamic realm is in danger of being overwhelmed by Western powers led by the USA, which seek to subjugate Muslim lands, plunder their wealth and subvert their political, economic, cultural and spiritual order.

ISIS is the latest movement espousing this belief system.

The Origin and Proliferation of ISIS

ISIS is a fierce jihadi militia that seeks power across the Arab and Islamic world. In early June 2014, the world watched with shock and bewilderment as ISIS militants marched across west and north Iraq, capturing town after town with no resistance. The fall of Mosul in mid-June was particularly surprising: this mixed community town, with a population of nearly two million, had a functioning civil administration as also armed forces personnel numbering over 20,000.

These successes were crowned by another dramatic development: on June 29, 2014, on the eve of the holy month of Ramzan, an ISIS spokesman announced the establishment of a “caliphate” in the territories occupied by the ISIS in Iraq and Syria, which would henceforth be referred to simply as the “Islamic State” under the leadership of the caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the ISIS. The shadowy Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made a dramatic public appearance on July 4, when he delivered a sermon at the Mosul mosque after Friday prayers. He described himself as al-Quraishi by lineage, al-Samarrai by birth, and al-Baghdadi by upbringing. (His descent from the Quraish tribe, the tribe of Prophet Muhammad, is particularly important since caliphs, in Islamic tradition, can only come from that tribe). He also announced plans for global expansion, saying: “You will conquer Rome and own the world, if Allah wills.”¹⁴

ISIS has as its immediate ancestor the fierce jihadi of Jordanian origin, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Like many modern-day jihadis, Zarqawi gained exposure to jihad in the battlefields of Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Following

the USA's assaults on the Taliban and Al Qaeda after the events of 9/11, Zarqawi came to Iraq, where he was associated with various jihadi organisations; but he was not a prominent figure at that time. His defining moment came after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 when he acquired a reputation for extreme ferocity and violence not just against occupation forces but also against Shia shrines and individuals.

In October 2004, he pledged his formal allegiance to Osama bin Laden, cementing "a marriage of convenience" in that Zarqawi now obtained access to Al Qaeda's donors, recruitment, and logistical networks, while retaining the independence of his organisation, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Zarqawi was killed by the US forces in June 2006. However, his organisation continued on its violent path under its new leadership. In October 2006, it was renamed the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to emphasise its distance from Al Qaeda, its new focus on Iraq, and its ultimate goal to set up an Islamic state.¹⁵

The unabated violence of the ISI - particularly the zealous punishment of individuals based on a narrow reading of the Sharia - led to a new initiative to confront it: the Sunni tribes of Iraq's Anbar province, deeply concerned about the destruction of their nation and the emerging sectarian divide, organised themselves (with US help) into an armed militia. This movement, known as *Sahwa* (Awakening), fought the ISI during 2006-09, and inflicted convincing defeats upon it. The ISI, now dispersed in northern Iraq, indulged in random acts of violence in Iraq, including car and suicide bombings, kidnappings, and targeted assassinations.

The first months of the Arab Spring uprisings in Syria in early 2011, and the civil conflict that followed, gave a fresh lease of life to the ISI. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (who had taken over in May 2010) sent jihadi fighters and fighters trained in guerrilla warfare into Syria. These fighters, headed by Abu Mohammed al-Julani, named themselves Jabhat Nusra (Victory Front) in January 2012 and, by the end of 2012, had emerged as the most effective fighting force against the Bashar al-Assad government.

At this point, al-Baghdadi decided to enter the conflict: he renamed his organisation the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS), and, in April 2013, announced the merger of the ISIS with Jabhat Nusra. This merger was rejected by al-Julani. This brought the ISIS into conflict with Jabhat Nusra and the other anti-Assad militia groups. In the second half of 2013, a few thousand fighters were killed in this internecine fighting. In February 2014, Ayman al Zawahiri ended all affiliation between Al Qaeda and the ISIS.¹⁶

Following the split with Jabhat Nusra, ISIS began to consolidate itself in

Syria. It took Raqqa in May 2013 from Jaabhat Nusra and its allies, and made it its “capital” in Syria. It then expanded into eastern Syria, taking the town of Deir Al-Zour at the Iraqi border, and later the entire province that is rich in agriculture and petroleum, thus bringing 80 percent of Syrian oil under its control. ISIS attracted new recruits, particularly from other militant groups, who were impressed by its “military might, resilience, and financial solvency”, compared to their own groups.¹⁷

ISIS’ Constituents and Allure

In its early period, jihadis made up just about 15-20 percent of the ISIS membership, with other constituents being Sunni elements alienated from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s sectarian regime. These included members of Sunni tribes which have set up a unified central command, the Military Control of the Tribes of Iraq which has over 40 militia groups, including soldiers from Saddam Hussein’s army. Another element is the Jaish Tariqa al-Naqshbandi, set up in 2006 by Saddam Hussein’s interior minister, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri; it includes several thousand Baath party members, as well as Sufi and Muslim Brotherhood adherents.¹⁸ Baathist officers and soldiers played an important role in the early ISIS victories, i.e., the capture of Fallujah, Tikrit and Mosul. However, al-Baghdadi quickly showed that he does not share power with any other entity or tolerate any possible challenge to his authority by purging Baathists, tribal leaders, and Sunni clerics who did not accept his leadership. From the summer of 2014, Izzat Ibrahim became a severe critic of al-Baghdadi and ISIS, castigating them for their violence against Shia and religious minorities.¹⁹

By the end of 2014, the IS controlled half of Syria and a third of Iraq, territory nearly the size of Britain, with a population of six million. It had put in place a hierarchical leadership structure and a functioning administrative and judicial setup. It had an experienced and trained military force made up of jihadis, Saddam’s commanders and soldiers, tribal leaders, and had access to substantial revenues from oil sales, robbery and ransom, which made it the richest terrorist group in history.²⁰

The IS has used digital technology for propaganda, recruitment and battlefield strategy and tactics, earning the description of being a “digital caliphate”. The distinguished Arab writer Abdel Bari Atwan has asserted that, without digital technology, “it is highly unlikely that the Islamic State would ever have come into existence, let alone been able to survive and expand”.²¹ He has pointed out that most of its leaders and members are “twenty-first

century men” who have never known a world without the internet, mobile phones, and social networking platforms.

IS makes extensive use of social networking facilities, such as YouTube, Twitter, Just Paste, Instagram, and Skype to disseminate their high-quality films and images, enter into conversations, post links to their propaganda material, set up their own sites and video games, facilitate secret discussions, provide recipes for bomb-making, identify and locate ‘enemies’, and even hack into government sites. They also strive to stay ahead of state authorities: in 2014, the US removed 45,000 jihad-related items from internet sites, while in the UK some 1100 items were removed weekly.²²

The digital effort of the IS has been particularly effective in recruiting foreign members from across the world. The videos are of high quality, and contain a variety of alluring messages. They are in different languages, often using the slang used by young people: the focus for young men is on the brotherhood of the street or ‘gang-bonding’; other inducements include references to the heroic and just causes they are supporting; and recently, the appeal has been to the sectarian factor as a motivational force. Martyrdom is projected as the cherished aim of jihad.²³

This media effort has obviously been successful: out of over 200,000 IS members there are 30,000 foreigners from eighty countries, with 7000 having European nationality, including France, the UK and even Australia; women recruits number about 2500.²⁴

Following IS’ early military successes, more and more jihadi organisations in different parts of the world came out in support of this new transnational jihadi body. These included leaders of the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP], traditionally closest to Zawahiri, and those of Al Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Ansar al Sharia in Libya, and Ansar Bait al Maqdis in the Sinai. Sections of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan [TTP] and even the Afghan Taliban expressed support for the IS and called for the unity of the jihadi movement.²⁵ IS and AQAP were said to have collaborated in carrying out the *Charlie Hebdo* and related attacks in France.²⁶

The IS is, of course, anchored in mainstream Salafi-jihadism, so much so that its ideologues have satisfied themselves with short pamphlets, and have not bothered to produce detailed tracts to explain their thinking as earlier ideologues did. But, it has also been shaped by specific developments in Iraq after the US invasion, particularly the deliberate US policy of defining Iraqi politics in sectarian terms, which was specifically aimed at promoting divide-and-rule policies rather than building a multicultural and united nation. Hence,

as Fawaz Gerges says, besides the Salafi-jihadi tradition, the IS is also influenced by “a hyper-Sunni identity driven by an intrinsic and even genocidal anti-Shia ideology”.²⁷

However, while the IS may seek sanction for its excesses from ancient sources, Gerges points out that its unrestrained violence has more recent roots, such as the harsh Baathist order of which it is a legatee, the wanton cruelty of its ideological and organisational ancestor, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as also the generally deep sense of exclusion, victimhood, and sectarian prejudices of its rural cadres.²⁸

In Iraq and Syria, the IS - following its predecessors, the AQI and the Islamic State of Iraq—has built itself up on the support base of a largely rural and small-town constituency. Outside Iraq and Syria, its appeal has emerged from its dramatic military successes and the imaginative declaration of the caliphate. Its main appeal is to Muslim youth in Arab and Western countries. Gerges points out that “the lure of the caliphate ...imbues [them] with a greater purpose in life: to be part of a historical mission to restore Islamic unity and help bring about redemption and salvation”.²⁹ The IS’ appeal has had particularly lethal consequences when it has inspired individuals to extraordinary acts of violence based merely on powerful messages sent through the Internet.

ISIS’s role in the region is an integral part of West Asian politics, and its future too is deeply anchored in the likely flow of events in the region. These aspects are examined in the next section.

The Regional Dimension

Iran saw an important opportunity for itself in the US intervention in Iraq, with the Shia authority in Baghdad providing an opening for the extension of its regional influence. For the same reason, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regimes felt that the US assault that empowered the Shia had also transformed the regional balance of power to the benefit of Iran and to their own strategic disadvantage. From their perspective, West Asia is now dominated by Iran whose influence extends to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (through the Hezbollah). The last straw for the GCC was the call for “reform” in Bahrain in 2011, in the context of the “Arab Spring” then sweeping West Asia and North Africa.

Seeing in these demands Iranian “interference” in GCC’s domestic politics, the GCC, led by Saudi Arabia, gave up its hitherto quiescent approach to

regional affairs and robustly challenged Iranian influence in the region, commencing with promoting regime change in Syria. From the GCC perspective, this, when achieved, will have three advantages: it will bring Syria back into the mainstream Arab fold; it will snap Iran's outreach to the Mediterranean and limit its influence to the Gulf; and it will dilute Iran's capacity to fund and arm the Hezbollah so that Lebanon, too, will have political stability, with new leaders beholden to the GCC.

At the same time, there is little doubt that the GCC regimes' support for Sunni elements in the Syrian insurgency against the Shia "Alawi" regime of Bashar al-Assad has aggravated the sectarian divide in the region. Initially, most GCC countries backed the moderate secular Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, the FSA's failure to garner local support and obtain military success led the GCC countries to nurture and support the Salafi militia which, with Saudi backing, consolidated themselves into the Islamic Front (IF) at the end of 2013.

The GCC was anxious to ensure that its support in funding arms supply for the Salafi forces in Syria did not embrace the jihadi entities – Jabhat Nusra and the ISIS. However, observers now believe that the groups that make up the Islamic Front work closely with Jabhat Nusra, both in conflict zones and in governance activities in occupied areas. Studies have also revealed that the Salafi militia in Syria are imbued with a deep sectarian outlook, and see the Shia and Alawite communities as monolithic blocs, subservient to Iran and outside the Muslim community.³⁰

Turkey is the third principal role-player whose policies will have a significant impact on the regional scenario. In the early stages of the Syrian uprising in 2011, it had been quite accommodative of the Salafi role in effecting regime change in Syria, and had even encouraged the movement of jihadis across its border into Syria; many of them joined the Salafi militia, and later ISIS. However, the strengthening of the jihadis in the Syrian imbroglio, the proliferation of ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria, and the increasing territorial gains of the Kurds in both countries, have compelled a policy review in Ankara.

Over the last two years, Turkey has adopted a tougher approach against jihadis moving freely across its border with Syria. More importantly, it has moved its troops into both Iraq and Syria to curb Kurdish ambitions. In Iraq, its forces are located outside Mosul, with the declared intention of preventing the Kurds from annexing Mosul to the Kurdish Region, protecting the interests of the local Turkoman people, and generally ensuring that the "Sunni" character of the region is maintained. In Syria, Turkey has responded to the attempt of the Kurds to consolidate their "Rojava", western homeland along the Syria-

Turkey border by splitting the territory with a buffer zone that is 90-km wide at the border, and goes about 55-km deep inside Syrian territory.

To check the Kurds, Turkey has distanced itself from Saudi Arabia and other GCC partners, and has moved closer to Russia and Iran: it worked with Russia to shape the cease-fire that took effect from 30 December 2016, and will bring Syrian rebels from the “National Coalition” to the negotiating table convened by Russia in Astana, Kazakhstan. The US, the UN and the GCC are, as of now, not part of this peace process.

Challenges for India

India, with its large Muslim population, has every reason to be concerned about the allure of radical Islam for its Muslim youth, particularly those who might wish to be a part of this major global enterprise that is anchored in their heritage, and has attracted thousands of their co-religionists in different parts of the Muslim world to become part of ISIS cadres in Syria.

The first concern is that some Indian Muslim youth could go across to Syria and join ISIS, and then, at some point, return home as indoctrinated, trained and battle-hardened jihadis ready to perpetrate violence at home. Other concerns are that, inspired by the ISIS, some Indian Muslims, on the lines of the “lone-wolf” attacks in the West, could be indoctrinated by social media and indulge in acts of violence against soft targets or on sensitive occasions like religious festivals. More seriously, increasing numbers of Indian Muslims could fall to the blandishments of Pakistan-based jihadi groups, and actively participate in terrorist acts in India in association with them. These actions would, over time, aggravate communal polarisation in the country, and corrode the national commitment to a secular and accommodative national order.

While these concerns are legitimate, as of now, ground realities in India would suggest that, over all, the scenario in India is far better than in most countries with large Muslim populations. First, the Indian Muslim community is deeply anchored in the national polity and understands that its interests lie in India’s democratic and secular order. Hence, while a hundred thousand Muslims flocked to the Afghan border in 1982-92 to join the “global jihad” in Afghanistan, not a single Indian Muslim was among them; nor did any Indian Muslim go to Afghanistan in the 1990s to join the Taliban, in spite of widespread communal violence in the country during this period.

Second, Indian Muslims have little interest in West Asian politics or doctrinal contentions. They are deeply embedded in India’s mainstream and

in the popular practices of Islam that eschew the rigidities of Wahhabism and the religion-based activism of the Brotherhood. These practices are founded instead on the “soft” credos of “*pir-parasti*”, the teachings and guidance of *pirs*, and the celebration of the *urs* of venerated saints. Third, the Indian Muslim community is not attracted to Pakistan either as a concept, or political system, or an economic model which is viewed in poor light as compared to India’s Constitution, its robustly functioning democracy, its independent judiciary, and its free press.

Could this situation change? It is possible that some Muslim youth could get disenchanted with the Indian political order, and get attracted towards violence. However, this will no doubt be a response to the domestic political scenario and not due to any inspiration or motivation from ISIS, or any other West Asian radical group.

The Outlook

While the bulk of ISIS’s forces come from Iraq and Syria, it has attracted Arab youth in the thousands from West Asia and North Africa, as also from Muslim migrant communities in Europe, particularly Belgium and France. It is the latter who have also been the principal perpetrators of twenty or so “lone-wolf” attacks in Europe - five of them in France, in which several hundred people were killed. Their trail is both destructive and confusing, with observers increasingly unable to see the dividing line between their ideological belief and personal nightmares. The backgrounds of these purported jihadis show little evidence of religious faith and zeal on their part; instead, the more forceful image is that of troubled, angry, lonely and volatile personalities with confused sexuality, a record of personal, marital and professional failure, uncertain religious identity, poor social adjustment, and a record of mental instability and petty crime.

These misfits find both comfort and a sense of higher purpose in the ISIS and other jihadi websites, which create for them a “virtual community”, appeal to their sense of personal and communal victimhood, channelise their anger into an assault on the enemies of their faith and identity, while assuring them that theirs is a historic role that will be celebrated in years to come. They have been appropriately described as “followers of a borderless loyalty”. ISIS’s mastery over the social media is likely to ensure that its doctrinal messages continue to motivate “lone wolf” attacks, referred to by terrorism expert David Kilcullen as “remote radicalisation”.³¹ In recent messages intercepted in Amman, ISIS leaders were heard exhorting supporters not to come to Syria, but to fight their enemies at home.

Today, the IS is clearly at a crossroads: its successes and its barbarity

have helped unite the US, Russia, and all the regional states to put together coalitions to crush it militarily. Hence, over the last year, it has lost about 40 per cent of its territory in Iraq, and about 20 per cent in Syria, including some major towns on the Turkish border, to Kurdish forces. This has severely limited the flow of new recruits. However, as the IS has lost ground in its home territories, its adherents have fanned out across West Asia, North Africa, and Europe to establish new bases, and carry out lethal acts of violence against local peoples to terrorise them, as well as demoralise and discredit their governments.

What lessons do the last fifteen years since the events of 9/11 have for us? First, external military interventions in West Asia aimed at re-shaping regional politics as also mobilisations by regional states of communal and sectarian support in West Asia's geopolitical competitions will only perpetuate cleavages that will not heal. Both will also help to structure alliances that will engage in prolonged internecine conflict. Thus, the US assault on Iraq unleashed the demons of sectarian violence, while the Saudi recourse to unabashed sectarian mobilisation in its strategic confrontation with Iran have together convulsed West Asia in a sectarian conflict that is unprecedented in Islamic history.

Second, the breakdown of state order opens the doors for penetration by jihadi forces. As states fail to provide their populations with security and welfare, jihadi organisations - anchored as they are in the authentic cultural ethos of West Asia and are well-organised and disciplined - provide the security and services that are missing in the beleaguered polity, besides giving their followers a sense of participation in an enterprise that is defining history.

Third, ISIS and Salafi-jihadism in general have emerged from the "organic crisis" in the Arab political order that is made up of an authoritarianism that is often paternalistic but turns severely tyrannical when challenged. This political order consists of subjects with no rights of citizenry; it does not foster national unity in an accommodative multicultural way but encourages divisions on an ethnic or sectarian basis; it operates in near-total opacity; it provides for no accountability regarding state resources or national decision-making; and it provides no opportunity for popular participation in national assemblies or in legislation.

As they are presently organised, West Asian polities just do not fulfil the aspirations of their populace: they are non-transparent and non-accountable; they are generally associated with crony capitalism and corruption; they are totally intolerant of dissent; and they provide no scope for popular participation in national policy-making and legislation. These archaic models of governance

are being enforced at a time when West Asia is in state of a pervasive economic, political, and cultural crisis, in which young people, poorly educated and often unemployed, are crying out for leadership, guidance, and inspiration - none of which is forthcoming.

It is this political order that imparts resilience to Salafi-jihadism as an alternative idea, a force for dissent and opposition in the sterile cesspool of authoritarian Arab politics. It has the advantage of being rooted in the people's authentic and revered tradition. The IS, Gerges says, is "a symptom of the broken politics of the Middle East [West Asia]",³² particularly after the coalition of autocrats stifled the Arab Spring at birth. It is thus that some of their young take up arms to achieve with their own effort an Islamic utopia.

What then is the outlook for the IS and, indeed, for Salafi-jihadism in general? Gerges points out that the IS "does not offer a positive programme of action, only a bleak future"; its weakest link, he says, is "its poverty of ideas" and opines that over the long term its anti-Shia genocidal ideology "cannot serve as a basis for legitimation". But, he adds, the IS is hardly likely to disappear as a result of military action; it will "mutate and go underground".³³

Gerges points out that Salafi-jihadism has now "evolved into a powerful social movement with a repertoire of ideas, iconic leaders, worldwide support, theorists, preachers, and networks of recruiters and enablers". He concludes that regardless of the fortunes of the IS, this ideology "is here to stay and will likely gain more followers in politically and socially polarised Arab and Muslim societies".³⁴ Salafi-jihadism is extremely resilient, and has survived three decades of forceful repression by regional and global state powers; even when several of its leaders are killed, it inspires its adherents with the IS' strident slogan: "We remain and we expand."³⁵

Notes :

¹ Though some parts of this paper have appeared earlier, this is a thoroughly revised and updated presentation of the views of this writer on ISIS and the scourge of global jihad.

² Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29:207-239, 2006

³ Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Millelli (ed.), *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 228

⁴ For details, see Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, London: Hurst and Co, 2016

⁵ Kepel, p. 115

- ⁶ Maher, p. 33
- ⁷ Gilles Kepel, *The Roots of Radical Islam*, London:Saqi, 2005, p. 41-2
- ⁸ Kepel, *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, p. 257
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 209--13
- ¹⁰ Maher, p. 33
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 149
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