

# ISIS: Assessment of Threat for Afghanistan, Pakistan and South and Central Asia

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## Abstract

*The near-complete state breakdown in Iraq and Syria explains the meteoric rise of ISIS in a short span of time. It grew so strong that it was able to occupy territories in these two Middle Eastern states by defeating their national armies. The successes of ISIS made it a magnet for other militant groups throughout the Muslim world and among the Muslims in Europe, many of whom have travelled to Syria to join ISIS. The transnational agenda of ISIS and its growing appeal among Muslim radicals have raised fears about its expansion into other regions. Such fears have been expressed by media, national governments and by international players. However, it seems that in most of other regions, where the fears of ISIS' expansion are being raised, state is strong enough to deal with any challenge posed by ISIS. The militant organisation is unlikely to strike roots in these countries, except in Afghanistan where high degree of state fragility makes the threat of ISIS' expansion relatively more genuine. However, poor governance and lack of equitable economic growth and political space in some countries mean that they will remain vulnerable to radicalisation, which could create instability in these countries. Tackling these challenges should be the part of broader efforts against ISIS or any other radical organisation.*

**Keywords:** ISIS, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, Bangladesh, Radicalisation.

## Introduction

Having emerged as an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has grown to be widely recognised as the most lethal *Jihadi* group in the Middle East. Adept at terrorizing its foes and

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common people alike and merciless in its treatment of opponents, ISIS is also the most feared terrorist group. Moreover, ISIS is a highly organised militia, which has conquered territories in Syria and Iraq defeating the national armies of these two Middle Eastern states. The rise of ISIS has rung alarm bells throughout the world as is evident from a flurry of statements from several world leaders fearing that it could pose serious threats to regional and global security. These fears have been accentuated by the news of militants in several parts of the world swearing allegiance to ISIS, with many of them travelling to Syria to join ISIS' ranks. This paper is an effort to assess whether the fears of ISIS' expansion into other regions are real or otherwise.

The paper undertakes this assessment with regard to four regions/countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, South and Central Asia. It argues that the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was the outcome of near complete state breakdown in these two states. Such conditions do not exist in the regions being studied in this paper, except, to some extent, in Afghanistan. Hence, the threat of ISIS' expansion into these regions, except Afghanistan, are not real. However, even in Afghanistan, ISIS is unlikely to become as potent as it is in Iraq or Syria. Pakistan and other South and Central Asian countries are strong enough to ward off any attempt by ISIS or its affiliates to make significant inroads. Moreover, major international players are also concerned about such threats. Their interest in preventing ISIS' ingress into some of these states would make this possibility even remote. Nevertheless, the problems like economic deprivation, political repression, and poor governance rampant in most of these states mean that religious radicalisation will remain a problem for them, which means movements like ISIS could find some sympathy among the radicalised elements, which could prove to be a destabilizing factor for these states.

The first part of the study briefly discusses the genesis and rise of ISIS. The succeeding four sections assess threats posed by ISIS in four different countries/regions. Discussion in these sections revolves around the issues such as the present status of ISIS' ingress in these regions, factors that have facilitated this ingress or could do so in future, official response(s) to this phenomenon, and the likely future scenario. The final section discusses in detail what should Pakistan do to deal with the challenge posed by the rise of ISIS.

## ISIS: Genesis and Rise

Now widely recognised as “the most powerful and effective *Jihadi* group in the world,”<sup>1</sup> ISIS has its genesis in the mayhem of post-Saddam Iraq, when the country’s Sunni population’s political marginalisation at the hands of a Shia-dominated government created a fertile ground for Sunni militant organisations. Among many such organisations that emerged in Iraq, one was the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), established on October 15, 2006. In fact, ISI had come into being after several Sunni militant organisations joined hands. Prominent among these organisations were Abu Musab al-Zarqai-led al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Jund al-Sahhaha and the Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Its original support-base, mostly consisted of the loyalists of Saddam Hussein and former members of the Baath Party. Although these elements were secular and nationalist in their outlook, they found a common cause with the *Jihadi* ISIS in its goal of restoring Sunni dominance in Iraq. Their expertise in war-fighting and network of connections made them valuable assets for ISIS.<sup>3</sup>

ISI subsequently expanded to Syria, and changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in April 2013,<sup>4</sup> with Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi as its present head. Though ISIS grew out of al-Qaeda, it has now evolved to become a separate entity and has been disowned by al-Qaeda. The two organisations now differ on both strategy and ideology. In Syria, they actively compete with each other for power and recruits.<sup>5</sup>

In a very short span of time, ISIS has become the most well-known *Jihadi* group in the Middle East. It sent shockwaves across the

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<sup>1</sup>Patric Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 2.

<sup>2</sup>“The Evolution of ISIS,” *Al-Monitor - The Pulse of the Middle East*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/security/2013/11/syria-islamic-state-iraq-sham-growth.html#>

<sup>3</sup>Jasen M. Breslow, “How Saddam's Former Soldiers Are Fueling the Rise of ISIS,” *Frontline*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/how-saddams-former-soldiers-are-fueling-the-rise-of-isis/>

<sup>4</sup>“Syria Iraq: The Islamic State militant group,” *BBC*, August 2, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>

<sup>5</sup>“The Islamic State,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>

globe when it captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, and Tikrit in June 2014. Prior to that, ISIS had captured territories in Syria as well. Its first major victory in Syria came in March 2013, when it took over the city of Raqqa – the first provincial capital to fall under their control. These military victories have played a major role in the rising international profile of ISIS. Not only did they show the organisation's military muscle, they also provided it with additional opportunities to generate revenue to sustain its operations. Owing to these victories, ISIS is ruling over the territories that encompass some six and a half million residents. Raqqa is often referred to as the de-facto capital of ISIS.<sup>6</sup> These successes have attracted thousands of fighters from various parts of the world to Syria. According to its own claims, ISIS has recruited fighters from Europe, the US, Arab world and the Caucasus.<sup>7</sup> Militants from Pakistan are also believed to have joined ISIS ranks to fight against the Syrian regime. Moreover, militants in several other regions, including Central, South and South East Asia, have sworn allegiance to ISIS.

After seizing these territories, ISIS proclaimed itself a caliphate, claiming exclusive political and theological authority over the world's Muslims. Its state-building project, however, has been characterised more by extreme violence than institution building. There have been countless reports of ISIS committing worst type of atrocities against its opponents, which not only include non-Muslim minorities, but also Shia Muslims, including petty criminals. ISIS has been in the news for damaging several historical places. Lately, the militant group destroyed 2000-years old ruins of Palmyra's temple of Bel, which was described by UNESCO as a war crime.<sup>8</sup> These developments have led to the rising profile of ISIS and its growing appeal among the militants across the globe. Also these raised concerns about the spread of its influence in many parts of the world, some of which are being discussed below.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>"Syria Iraq: The Islamic State militant group," *BBC*.

<sup>8</sup>"ISIS shows proof of Palmyra ruins blast," *CNN*, August 26, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/08/25/middleeast/syria-isis-palmyra-ruins-temple-photos/>

## Afghanistan

After Iraq and Syria, it is perhaps Afghanistan where the threat of ISIS' ingress is most profound. Afghanistan, in fact, has been central to global ambitions of several *Jihadi* organisations, mainly because of the Islamic traditions about Khurasan (a province in present-day Afghanistan) being the birthplace of an Islamic army that would help Mehdi establish his Caliphate at Mecca.<sup>9</sup> ISIS is the latest aspirant among such organisations. It has shown clear intentions to create a stronghold for itself in Afghanistan. ISIS formally declared its presence in Afghanistan in January 2015, by announcing the formation of *Wilayat e Khurasan*, its unit in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> This was a strong signal about its plans about Afghanistan, where the Taliban are the dominant militant force, therefore, ISIS also launched a verbal attack against the Taliban leader, Mullah Omer, challenging his credibility.<sup>11</sup>

According to media reports, ISIS has not only managed to recruit an increasing number of militants has won adherents from both the ranks of Afghan Taliban and the foreign militants in Afghanistan since the formation of *Wilayat e Khurasan*.<sup>12</sup> With its ranks swollen, ISIS is emerging as a potent militant force in Afghanistan, perpetrating acts of terror with increasing ferocity. In one such act, an ISIS suicide bomber blew himself up in front of the Kabul Bank in Jalalabad on April 19, 2015, killing 33 and injuring more than 100 persons.<sup>13</sup> In addition to this, ISIS fighters have also been fighting against the Afghan Taliban, which

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<sup>9</sup>Husain Haqqani, "Prophecy & the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent," *Current Trends in Islamic Ideology*, vol. 18: 5-17, <http://www.hudson.org/research/11167-prophecy-the-jihad-in-the-indian-subcontinent>

<sup>10</sup>Lauren McNally, "Is the Islamic State Escalating in Afghanistan," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/islamic-state-escalating-afghanistan>

<sup>11</sup>"Mullah Omar is a fool and illiterate warlord, al-Baghdadi says," *Khaamaa Press*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.khaama.com/mullah-omar-is-a-fool-and-illiterate-warlord-al-baghdadi-says-9291>

<sup>12</sup>"Taliban losing to ISIS in battle to recruit foreign fighters," *Fox News*, September 3, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/09/03/taliban-losing-to-isis-in-battle-to-recruit-foreign-fighters/>

<sup>13</sup>"ISIS militant bomber on motorbike kills 33 at bank in Afghanistan," *CNN*, April 19, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/18/asia/afghanistan-violence/>

clearly shows the militant organisation's interest in creating its niche in Afghanistan. On June 8, 2015, ISIS militants ambushed and beheaded 10 Taliban fighters in the eastern province of Nangarhar.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, they have also captured territories by defeating the Taliban fighters. These growing activities have prompted the US military to launch a bombing campaign against ISIS in Eastern Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> ISIS is likely to become stronger after the death of Taliban's Leader, Mullah Omar, as a large number of disaffected and leaderless Taliban fighters could join ISIS.<sup>16</sup>

The growing activities of ISIS-affiliated militants show ISIS' increasing ingress into the war-torn Afghanistan, which has also been recognised by the US military and Afghan leadership. General John Campbell, the top US commander in Afghanistan, recently said that ISIS had gone from being "nascent" in Afghanistan to "operationally emergent." General Campbell even feared that the emergence of ISIS could trip up the US plans to leave Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, is more vocal about this threat and in his address to the US Congress in March 2015, said that ISIS posed a terrible threat to his country. Ghani is reported to have requested the US President, Barack Obama, to keep the US troops in Afghanistan after 2016. He even suggested that the US and its allies could use Afghanistan as a counter-terrorism base to oppose the rise of [the] ISIS throughout the region.<sup>18</sup> The regional players also believe that the danger of ISIS' ingress into Afghanistan is real. During the June 2015, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Ufa, Russia, the member states showed

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<sup>14</sup>"ISIS terrorists ambush and behead 10 Taliban fighters in Afghanistan as the bloody rivalry between the terror group intensifies," *Daily Mail*, June 8, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3114979/ISIS-terrorists-ambush-behead-10-Taliban-fighters-Afghanistan-bloody-rivalry-terror-groups-intensifies.html>

<sup>15</sup>"US Steps Up Airstrikes in Afghanistan, Even Targeting ISIS," *New York Times*, July 15, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/16/world/asia/afghanistan-us-steps-airstrikes-isis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/16/world/asia/afghanistan-us-steps-airstrikes-isis.html?_r=0)

<sup>16</sup>Michael Kugleman, "How Death of Taliban's Mullah Omar Could Boost ISIS in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/07/29/how-death-of-talibans-mullah-omar-could-boost-isis-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>17</sup>"Islamic State could trip up U.S. plans to leave Afghanistan," *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/afghanistan-pakistan/la-fg-afghanistan-us-dempsey-20150719-story.html>

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

great concern over the threat to regional stability posed by ISIS' growing inroads into Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

## **Pakistan**

Alongside Afghanistan, Pakistan has remained in the news for facing the threat of ISIS' ingress. While many observers have pointed to this possibility, Pakistani authorities have maintained that there is no presence of ISIS in the country, nor would it be allowed to have any. A closer analysis of Pakistan's socio-political and security context reveals that while ISIS' appeal among radical elements in Pakistan cannot be ruled out, the presence of a strong government and a powerful military, both committed to and capable of countering terrorism, makes the fears of ISIS establishing a foothold in the country seem speculative.

Several media reports and commentaries pointing to the possibility is based on the analysis that parts of Pakistani territory along the Pak-Afghan border fall in the so-called *Wilayat e Khurasan*. It interprets this fact as an indication of ISIS' intentions to have a stronghold in, at least, some areas of Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> In addition to this factor, some argue, "a ripe environment for potential growth of ISIS"<sup>21</sup> makes the danger of ISIS' ingress into Pakistan real. This environment, in their view, is characterised by: (a) the presence of militant organisations some of which may have ideological affinity with ISIS, particularly with regard to their sectarian outlook; (b) the existing collaboration between these organisations and ISIS, which has reportedly resulted into Pakistani militants joining ISIS in Syria and Iraq;<sup>22</sup> This view is widely contested by officials and a number of academics.

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<sup>19</sup>Nikolay Surkov, "CO ready to expand and fight ISIS," June 15, 2015, [http://in.rbth.com/world/2015/06/15/sco\\_ready\\_to\\_expand\\_and\\_fight\\_isis\\_43659.html](http://in.rbth.com/world/2015/06/15/sco_ready_to_expand_and_fight_isis_43659.html)

<sup>20</sup>Muhammad Amir Rana, "What ISIS and the 'caliphate' mean for Pakistan," *Dawn*, July 3, 2014.

<sup>21</sup>Hassan Abbas, "Origin of ISIS; global impact and potential foothold in Pakistan," *Jinnah Institute, Islamabad*, December 23, 2014, <http://jinnah-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ISIS-PB-by-Hassan-Abbas.pdf>

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

A few isolated incidents such as pro-ISIS graffiti in some cities, hoisting of an ISIS flag in Taxila, and the reported pledge of allegiance by some local militants to ISIS, have been cited by some observers as signs of ISIS' growing inroads into Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> These observers also point to a story published in the *Dawn* about a secret report sent by the Balochistan government to the Federal Government, pointing to the increasing footprint of ISIS in Pakistan, and its offer to Sunni militant organisations, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Ahl-e-Sunnat WalJamat (ASWJ), to join hands.<sup>24</sup>

Pakistani authorities, however, have consistently maintained that ISIS has no presence in the country. Speaking at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in February 2015, Pakistan's Interior Minister Chaudry Nisar emphatically said, "I can say with confidence that the ISIS only exists in the Middle East... It absolutely has no presence in Pakistan."<sup>25</sup> Pakistan's Foreign Ministry also rules out the possibility of ISIS' presence in the country.<sup>26</sup> Pakistan Army's high command has also made similar statements. Peshawar's Core Commander, Lieutenant General, Hidayat-ur-Rehman, in March 2015, said that ISIS did not pose any threat to the country, because the militants claiming to be affiliated with ISIS were actually the former Taliban, who had defected from their previous groups due to the Operation Zarb-e-Azb. He said the Army was fully aware of the situation and capable of handling it.<sup>27</sup> Hence, seen against this backdrop, the prevailing policies of the government and the security situation in the country, the claims about ISIS presence in the country sound implausible.

Though having had a history of militancy fuelled by ethnic, political and religious factors, Pakistan has shown its ability to defeat

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<sup>23</sup>Muhammad Amir Rana, "The impact of the Islamic State on Pakistan," *NOREF*, January 15, 2015, [http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow\\_site/storage/original/application/049ee274000481e510fd0414ba61d63b.pdf](http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/049ee274000481e510fd0414ba61d63b.pdf)

<sup>24</sup>"IS recruiting thousands in Pakistan, govt warned in secret report," *Dawn*, November 8, 2014.

<sup>25</sup>"Islamic State poses serious threat to Pakistan: FO," *Express Tribune*, February 23, 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/842924/is-pose-serious-threat-to-pakistan-fo/>

<sup>26</sup>"FO rejects presence of ISIS in Pakistan," *Nation*, June 19, 2015.

<sup>27</sup>"IS not a threat to Pakistan: Peshawar Corps Commander," *Dawn*, March 14, 2015.



such forces. The recent successes achieved in fighting against militant violence in Balochistan, Karachi and Waziristan are ample proof of state's commitment and ability to counter violent extremism. These successes also provide assurances against the ingress of any type of anti-state, external ideology including ISIS. Hasan Askari Rizvi has elaborated this point:

Extreme movements take roots in states that experience sustained internal chaos and strife, and where the state is paralysed or it is unable to assert its primacy in parts of its territory. Such signs can be identified in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia. In Pakistan, the ongoing security operation in North Waziristan and the assertion of the primacy of the state in other tribal areas aim at denying the militants any opportunity for controlling an exclusive and secure area to entrench themselves and set up hideouts, and training and weapons storage facilities on a permanent basis.<sup>28</sup>

## **South Asia**

Much of what has been discussed about ISIS in South Asia deals with the militant organisation's presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the so-called Af-Pak region. There has been, however, some discourse on ISIS' threat to other South Asian states include India and Bangladesh. Both the countries offer vastly different scenarios to assess the threats posed by ISIS.

India is in fact different from all other countries being discussed in this study. While all these countries are Muslim-majority states, India is a Hindu-majority state. It is, however, home to a large Muslim population. According to the latest census, Muslims are the largest minority group in India, constituting 14.2 per cent of a population of more than 1.2 billion.<sup>29</sup> Indian Muslims have not enjoyed equal rights despite India's claims of being a secular democracy. According to

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<sup>28</sup>Hasan Askari Rizvi, "The Islamic State Movement and Pakistan," *Express Tribune*, November 3, 2014.

<sup>29</sup>"Hindus drop below 80 percent of India's population," *Aljazeera*, August 26, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/hindus-drop-80-percent-india-population-muslims-census-150826052655585.html>

Tankel, Muslims in India have “suffered from relative deprivation, are sometimes suspected of harbouring loyalty to Pakistan and have been the victims of communal violence over the years.”<sup>30</sup> In the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir, which India has illegally occupied, they have been subjected to worst kind of atrocities.

It is this background which, some have argued, could provide ISIS an opportunity to make inroads into the India’s large Muslim population. ISIS, too, seems aware of this situation. In one of his speeches, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi mentioned India as one of the countries where Muslims’ rights were denied. He also made a reference to Indian atrocities in occupied Kashmir.<sup>31</sup> ISIS, however, is unlikely to win many adherents among Indian Muslims, who have a history of remaining aloof from transnational *Jihadi* elements. At a time when India is emerging as a major economic power and enjoying rising international stature, Indian Muslims are more likely to strive to bring themselves into Indian mainstream, both political and economic, than to adopt any course of action that would pitch them against the state, thereby exacerbating their marginalisation.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, faces a more serious threat of ISIS’ ingress, not only because it is a Muslim majority state but also because it has a history of religious radicalisation. Several incidents reported in the media show the growing appeal of ISIS’ among the radical elements. There have been reports of the emergence of several pro-ISIS outfits, pledges of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS recruitment drives, both on the ground and online.<sup>32</sup> In recent months, at least 12 people have been arrested in various parts of the country for suspected involvement with ISIS. One of those arrested is said to have confessed that he had persuaded 25 students to join ISIS.<sup>33</sup> These

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<sup>30</sup>Stephen Tankel, “Indian Jihadism: The Evolving Threat,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 37, no. 7, (2014): 570.

<sup>31</sup>“Rise of ISIS in South Asia,” June 19, 2015, <http://tacstrat.com/content/index.php/2015/06/19/rise-of-isis-in-south-asia>

<sup>32</sup>Iftexharul Bashar, “Islamist militancy on the rise in Bangladesh,” *East Asia Forum*, August 8, 2015,

<sup>33</sup>“IT chief at Bangladesh Coca-Cola unit arrested as ISIS suspect,” *Al Arabiya English*, May 26, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2015/05/26/IT-chief-at-Bangladesh-Coca-Cola-unit-arrested-as-ISIS-suspect.html>

developments have taken place at a time when the country is already facing growing radicalisation, which is becoming increasingly violent. Only this year, three secular bloggers, including a US citizen, have been killed by radical Islamists in Bangladesh.<sup>34</sup> Another, and perhaps more alarming, dimension of ISIS' ingress into Bangladesh is the role of Bangladeshi Diaspora in the UK. There is evidence that some of the members of this community have joined ISIS, and are also involved in recruiting for ISIS from amongst the Bangladeshi youth.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically, Bangladesh was one of the Muslim-majority states, which ISIS had not included in its five-year expansion plan,<sup>36</sup> unveiled in 2014. Yet, the fears about ISIS' presence in the country have been increasing. ISIS may not be interested in creating, or able to create, a foothold for itself in Bangladesh, but its growing international profile has the potential to fan radicalisation in Bangladesh, causing violence and instability in the country.

## Central Asia

Central Asia has remained in the news as one of the regions, which are particularly vulnerable to ISIS' ingress. The lack of political and economic openings and a history of religious radicalisation and violent militancy in the region are seen as the major factors, making it vulnerable to this threat. Despite this politico-economic milieu, the threat of ISIS making inroads into the region in near future does not seem high as the militant organisation, so far, has not shown much interest in the region. Moreover, the SCO member states' resolve to fight against ISIS' ingress into Central Asia means that the organisation would not be able to expand into this region, even if it so desired.

The fears about ISIS' ingress into Central Asia — a region comprising five Muslim majority states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>“Briton arrested in Bangladesh ‘confessed to recruiting’ for Isis,” *Guardian*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/briton-arrested-bangladesh-recruiting-islamic-state>

<sup>36</sup>Atif Jalal Ahmad and Michael Kugelman, “Will ISIS Infect Bangladesh?,” *The National Interest*, August 4, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-isis-infect-bangladesh-13483>

Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan — emerged in the backdrop of the news that increasing number of Central Asian citizens, both male and female, had been travelling to Syria to join ISIS ranks. According to a January 2015 International Crisis Group (ICG) report, the number of such citizens who had left their countries during the last three years could be as high as 4000.<sup>37</sup> Such fears were compounded when the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a major militant group in the region, announced allegiance to ISIS.<sup>38</sup>

These developments, when viewed against the backdrop of the obtaining socio-political and economic conditions in the region, were interpreted by many observers as signifying a serious threat of ISIS' expansion into Central Asia. Moreover, the observers see this region a natural place for this phenomenon because its residents “are politically marginalised by repressive authoritarian regimes, and the region itself face bleak economic prospects, suffer from poor governance, and face extensive corruption.”<sup>39</sup> The above cited report also mentions the factors such as political and administrative failures, discriminatory laws and policies and lack of jobs for disadvantaged youth as the factors which explain ISIS' growing appeal among Central Asians.<sup>40</sup>

Such an atmosphere seems ripe for the diffusion of radicalisation in any society; hence the fears about the region's vulnerability to the growing ingress of ISIS may not be entirely misplaced. In fact, the danger could become more real in the wake of the return of these people to their countries. However, there are two other factors, which, when taken into account, lead us to conclude that the prospects of ISIS' expansion into Central Asia may not be as real as some observers have argued.

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<sup>37</sup>“Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia,” *International Crisis Group*, Policy Briefing, January 20, 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf>

<sup>38</sup>“Uzbek militants declare support for Islamic state,” *Dawn*, October 6, 2014.

<sup>39</sup>Anna Dyner, Arkadiusz Legiec and Kacper Rekawak, “Ready to Go: ISIS and its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia,” *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, Policy Paper, no. 19 (121), June 2015, [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=20020](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=20020)

<sup>40</sup>“Syria Calling: Radicalisation in Central Asia,” *International Crisis Group*,

First, ISIS has not shown much interest in establishing a foothold in the region. A report on the subject has noted that ISIS largely ignored the pledge of allegiance by IMU and has not tasked it with establishing an ISIS “province” in the region. ISIS propaganda literature mentions Central Asia relatively rarely.<sup>41</sup> It seems that ISIS is more interested, at least so far, in getting recruits from Central Asia to sustain its wars in Iraq and Syria than devoting its resources to establish a foothold in Central Asia.

Second, Central Asian states, though having many political, social and economic problems, are not as fragile as Iraq and Syria or even Afghanistan. Moreover, their powerful neighbours such as Russia and China are fully aware of the danger posed by ISIS, and are ready to fight against this menace. Strong international support for Central Asian regimes in their policies against the threat posed by ISIS would mean the militant organisation would find it extremely difficult to expand into the region.

### **What Should Pakistan Do?**

As has been discussed earlier, the fears of ISIS having made inroads into Pakistan are largely unfounded, as the state and its institutions are strong enough to thwart any plans by ISIS to establish its foothold in the country. Pakistan’s policy makers should, therefore, earnestly commit themselves to devising and implementing strategies to deal with the challenges posed by ISIS. Such strategies ought to be formulated keeping in view all aspects of the problem.

However, Pakistan need not panic about the allegedly increasing presence of ISIS, as has been suggested by some news reports citing anonymous sources or by the claims made by the so-called “ISIS commanders” in the region. Also, Pakistani militants are known to make exaggerated claims about their real strength.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, most of the incidents mentioned above, which have been interpreted by some as the signs of the ISIS’ presence, are in fact isolated incidents, perpetrated by

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<sup>41</sup>Anna Dwyer, Arkadiusz Legiec, Kacper Rekawak, “Ready to Go: ISIS and its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia.”

<sup>42</sup><http://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-attack-prison-in-pakistan-free-militants/>

some local militants. These, in no way, can be viewed as an indication of ISIS' imminent rise.

It is pertinent to mention that Pakistan is not a fragile state like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. It has a well-functioning government, a thriving economy, an increasingly robust democracy, which is serving as an effective channel for aggregating and reconciling diverse societal interests, and a strong military, which is committed to countering terror in every form and at every place in the country. The ongoing Operation Zarb-e-Azb, which has drastically brought down the level of terrorist violence in the country, is ample proof not only of the military's commitment to fight the menace of terror, but also of its ability to successfully handle this challenge.<sup>43</sup>

In its counter-terrorism efforts, the military enjoys support of all segments of society and the state institutions. Operation Zarb-e-Azb's successes have been complimented by National Action Plan (NAP) — a national counter-terrorism plan announced by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in the wake of the horrendous terrorist attack on Army Public School Peshawar on December 16, 2014.<sup>44</sup> NAP is a comprehensive counter-terrorism plan that adopts a multi-pronged strategy, from execution of convicted terrorists to banning hate speech and choking financial sources of terrorism,<sup>45</sup> to eradicate extremism from Pakistan. If followed in letter and spirit, NAP also provides an effective means to deal with the challenge posed by ISIS.

On the other hand, Pakistan should not reject the threat to its security and stability by radical extremist groups such as ISIS, howsoever remote it might seem at present. Keeping in view the enormous human and material losses in recent past, due to home-grown terrorism, Pakistan should adopt a proactive instead of reactive policy in

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<sup>43</sup>Zahid Hussian, "Beyond Zarb-i-Azb," *Dawn*, June 17, 2015.

<sup>44</sup>"Nawaz constitutes special committee to implement National Action Plan," *Dawn*, December 26, 2014.

<sup>45</sup>National Action Plan,

[http://nacta.gov.pk/Download\\_s/Presentations/National\\_Action\\_Plan\\_NACTA\\_Pakistan.pdf](http://nacta.gov.pk/Download_s/Presentations/National_Action_Plan_NACTA_Pakistan.pdf)

order to counter the threat.<sup>46</sup> Had there not been the horrendous terrorist attack of December 16, 2014 on Army Public School Peshawar, some believe that a determined effort to fight terrorism might have eluded the country once again. So now the resolve at all levels is not to allow similar prevarication in the case of ISIS so as to nip this evil in the bud.

For that, the state institutions should remain extraordinarily vigilant to the threat posed by ISIS. They should not allow the recent successes of Operation Zarb-e-Azb and NAP to lull them into complacency. ISIS cannot establish a stronghold in Pakistan as it did in Iraq or Syria; yet, it has the potential to be a destabilizing factor. Its growing international profile could make joining ISIS an attractive option for Pakistani militants who are under immense pressure from the state's concerted anti-terrorism efforts, which are making it increasingly difficult for them to operate in Pakistan. An observer of militancy in Pakistan notes that such groups are trying to forge direct linkages with ISIS or its so-called Khorasan chapter.<sup>47</sup> This could pave the way for ISIS being able to establish foothold in Pakistan. This "splinter group" phenomenon has the potential to create serious security challenges for Pakistan, and the country should devote special attention and resources to monitor and eradicate such elements.

Pakistan must take Operation Zarb-e-Azb to its logical end; implement NAP in letter and spirit and make National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) fully operational. It needs to establish an effective mechanism of cooperation, including information and intelligence sharing, among all stakeholders in its fight against terrorism and violent radicalisation. To this end, all the stakeholders should be willing to forego their 'institutional turfs' and personal egos in the pursuit of collective good. Alongside these efforts, the country should also focus on shoring up the research and analysis capacities of the relevant organisations so that the intelligence and information gathered through diverse sources can be better analysed to deduce the most appropriate policy recommendations. This is all the more important keeping in view the country's ever-changing militant landscape.

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<sup>46</sup>“50,000 killed, \$80 billion losses incurred in war on terror, NA told,” *Express Tribune*, December 5, 2013.

<sup>47</sup>Muhammad Amir Rana, “Assessing the IS Threat,” *Dawn*, August 23, 2015.

Pakistan's foreign policy also has a role to play in its struggle against violent radicalisation, epitomised by ISIS. It is well established that such radicalisation is as much a political phenomenon as it is religious. It is political not only in the sense that the ultimate objective of such radical organisations, be it al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or ISIS, is to establish political control over nation-states or some territory of these states, but also because such organisations thrive mainly by exploiting political grievances of Muslims. Israeli occupation of Palestine, Indian occupation of Kashmir, and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are the major political grievances of Muslims, which such radical organisations have exploited to win over adherents to their respective cause. Pakistan should proactively take up such issues at diplomatic forums. Pakistan's proactive role might not have a decisive impact on the fate of such issues, but it can signal the state's commitment to the causes, which are dear to Muslims. In this way, the state cannot only present itself as being responsive to the people's wishes, it can also counter the radical narrative which questions its legitimacy by accusing it of damaging Muslims' interests by playing second fiddle to the powerful non-Muslim states, especially the US, or even by bracketing it with such states.

More importantly, Pakistan should focus on broader economic, governance and security sector reforms, particularly with regard to urban policing. Although poverty-militancy nexus has not been conclusively established,<sup>48</sup> it is fair to assume that a person who sees no hope in life is more susceptible to the appeal of religiously-motivated extremist ideologies. A well-functioning economy underpinned by an equitable apportioning of national resources, a working democracy which gives people a sense of ownership of the system, and governance that delivers and is responsive to people's needs and concerns are the main factors which keep common man's hopes alive, and prevent him from falling prey to extremist ideologies, such as the one espoused by ISIS.

Finally, an unwavering focus on countering extremism is *sine qua non* to deny ISIS and similar elements' continuous supply of indoctrinated young recruits. Education sector, including Madrassa

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<sup>48</sup>Safiya Aftab, "Poverty and Militancy," *PIPS Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2008, 1(1): 65-86.



reforms should be the cornerstone of these counter-extremism efforts. These reforms should focus not only on the ideological aspect of the education but also on its quality so that young men coming out of our schools, colleges and madrassas have both an enlightened worldview and sufficient skills to contribute positively to the nation's social and economic development. These efforts can succeed only when Pakistan has its own compelling national narrative, which guides all these efforts.