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## Issue Brief

# Global Coalition to Counter ISIL: How can Pakistan Contribute

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The formation of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) owes much to the socio-political fragmentation in Iraq and the wider region as a result of United States of America's (USA) invasion and premature withdrawal, which left a security vacuum in the country from 2003-2011. In addition, the Shia – Sunni schism exacerbated under the National Shi'ite regime of Nouri-al-Maliki further alienated the former Sunni rulers. This situation was exploited by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) resulting in splintering and ultimately establishment of ISIL.

Over the years, ISIL has become the richest terrorist group in history, with assets totaling over \$2 billion.<sup>1</sup> The success of ISIL owes much to its robust operational structure and strategic planning in territorial gains in Iraq and Syria, which gave it access to oil refineries, smuggling of artifacts and other criminal activities used for terror financing. In Syria it recruited and functioned with Al-Nusra Front and other Sunni insurgent groups, which also led to inter-group fighting. However, ISIL asserted its influence with sheer violence and used bloody tactics of car bombs and explosive to target its enemies.

On September 10, 2014, President Obama announced the formation of a global coalition to “degrade and ultimately defeat” the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).<sup>2</sup> At present, the coalition has 67 partners including nation-states, transnational and non-governmental organisations contributing along five major lines of effort:<sup>3</sup>

1. Supporting military operations, capacity building and training (led by United States and Iraq);
2. Stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (led by The Netherlands and Turkey);
3. Cutting off ISIL access to financing and funding (led by Italy and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United States)
4. Addressing associated humanitarian relief and crises (led by Germany and the United Arab Emirates); and
5. Exposing ISIL's true nature (led by United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States).

According to the latest available data, the coalition has conducted more than 13,500 air strikes in both Iraq and Syria. As of the early July 2016, more than 11,500 artillery strikes from Turkey hit over one thousand ISIL targets in northern Syria.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, 18 coalition partners assist and train local security

personnel, and so far 30,000 Iraqi forces personnel have undertaken these capacity-building initiatives. As a result of these kinetic efforts, ISIL has lost 50 per cent of its territory in Iraq and 20 per cent in Syria, and it continues to shrink with time and increased efforts of the coalition. The kinetic military effort has provided the basis for non-kinetic engagement, destroying terror safe heavens and infrastructure thereby impeding their expansionist ability to strike, restrained their financial flows and busted their economy which depended on smuggling of oil and other resources.

In terms of stopping the flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178, adopted at the UN Security Council in September 2014 provides a framework and recognises the effort and mandate of INTERPOL in fight against trans-national terrorism. In line with that resolution, 40 countries have either passed or updated existing laws to more effectively identify and prosecute foreign terrorist fighters. Fifty five international partners have concluded information-sharing arrangements with the United States and INTERPOL. The latter currently holds data on some 7,700 suspected foreign terrorist fighters contributed by nearly 60 nations – a 600 per cent increase in the past two years.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, at least 23 countries have completed national action plans to counter terrorism and violent extremism, and 11 have launched programmes to counter radicalisation and recruitment of foreign fighters in their countries.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of humanitarian assistance, European Union (EU) is the leading partner. In Syria and neighbouring refugee-hosting countries, 565 million Euros have been committed in humanitarian assistance by EU. Moreover, the Australian government has pledged \$220 million for next three years, and similarly other coalition partners are contributing to help stabilise regained territories, providing health and medical needs of the affected.

In addition to these emergency relief and rehabilitation efforts, understanding ISIL's ideology and narrative becomes imperative to any comprehensive counter terrorism strategy.

As President Obama rightly pointed out in his press conference in Arlington on August 4, 2016, "we have taken all necessary measure but they are not sufficient, we need to defeat their ideology." In order to counter their online propaganda and motivational videos which instigate and attract foreign fighters, coalition partners have established social media anti-ISIL messaging centers. As a result of the counter narrative and exposing the true nature of ISIL's atrocities, according to a recent Rand study, on average there are now six people opposing ISIL's message online for every one supporting it. There has been a 45

per cent decrease in the overall volume of pro-ISIL tweets since June 2014 and the average number of followers per pro-ISIL account has dropped from a 2014 high of 1,500 to around 300.<sup>7</sup>

While a lot has been done, a lot still remains to be done. The global coalition to counter ISIL has the mandate and objectives limited to “degrading and eliminating ISIL”. However, the larger problem of violent extremism, whose symptoms are manifested in the shape of such terrorist groups as ISIL is still an imminent threat to global peace.

Addressing the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of United Nation General Assembly (UNGA) President Obama said that we have learnt lessons from the past, i.e. Iraq and Afghanistan, to strengthen new capabilities for peace keeping. Presenting the Syrian conflict as a litmus test for international community, he equated human suffering with terrorism, and while highlighting the political aspect of the conflict said that “lasting stability can only be ensured when people of Syria forge a coalition.” Vladimir Putin, President of Russia also demanded a resolution for coordinating actions against ISIL and other terrorist groups based on UN Charter in his speech at the 70<sup>th</sup> session of UNGA.

However, each partner is contributing to the coalition in a manner commensurate with its national interest and comparative advantage, which at times causes divergence and conflict of interest. Such friction can only be avoided if all policy actions are undertaken in congruence with international law and UN Charter. Also, there is a need for a continuous review and sensitised implementation of Global Counter Terrorism Framework.

### **Pakistan and ISIL**

According to the commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan General John Nicholson, a large chunk of ISIL fighters and leadership comes from Pakistan and are associates of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).<sup>8</sup> Whereas, Pakistan has denied any strong ground presence of ISIL in the country, however, it cannot ignore the fact that some terrorist groups in Pakistan may join this network for influence, cheap publicity and their own vested interests. It is through a network of terrorist groups in different parts of the world that ISIL has expanded its ability of staging an attack anywhere, especially in areas where it has established links with like-minded terrorist organisations. One of the effective ways of doing this is through its messaging propaganda aimed at swaying young minds and turning them into ‘lone wolves’ carrying out individual attacks of mass shooting or other optionse as witnessed in Paris, Brussels and Orlando in US.

So far, Pakistan is not a member of the global coalition to counter ISIL, and whatever contribution it is making comes under the unilateral umbrella of National Action Plan (NAP) and military operation Zarb-e-Azb against terrorist in the country. As a result of these efforts, Pakistan has been able to reduce 70 per cent of the terrorist activity.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, after the formation and effective action against the terrorists and their safe havens in the country, they have not been able to mount any successful operations in the past one year. This shows that Pakistan's efforts are yielding positive outcomes and are geared in the right direction.

As highlighted above that both kinetic and non-kinetic engagement is required to dent terrorism; Pakistan's military operation ensured the kinetic engagement with an effective outcome. Similarly NAP ensures a domestic framework of counter-terrorism with an emphasis on non-kinetic engagement which includes madrassah reforms, legal reforms, challenging extremist narrative and socio-judicial reform to address public grievances. Pakistan armed forces have launched a series of military operations and counter-terrorism tactics. The lessons and sharing of best practices by Pakistan can help NATO and other armies engaged in battling ISIL and other terrorist groups. In the past and present, Pakistan has also been holding joint military exercises with some of the coalition partners. The latest in the series is the ongoing joint military exercise in Pakistan with Russian troops.

Moreover, intelligence information sharing is a core component and an effective tool in countering FTFs and global terrorism. Pakistan's Joint Intelligence Directorate (JID) is one forum where inter-agency intelligence is shared. Their reports and information has proved vital in conducting targeted operations and also sharing these with foreign intelligence agencies, i.e. INTERPOL under the mandate of National Authority Counter Terrorism Act (NACTA). This can help in profiling and tracking FTFs, especially those of Pakistani origin.

Pakistan military operation in Swat and subsequent stabilisation of the area is a success story. Life is now back to normal in Swat, with tourist visiting the valley and festivals held in seasons. Pakistan can share its experiences with the global coalition who can learn and replicate Pakistan's model elsewhere in troubled areas, including the Middle East.

Moreover, religious scholars in Pakistan have played an important role in condemning terrorism and highlighting the true values of Islam. Their services for Islam and humanity should be spread to other countries, especially where sectarian violence is bleeding the unity of Muslims.

In conclusion, Pakistan has much to offer and contribute to the global coalition to counter ISIL and the wider war against terrorism. However, it is important to understand that grievances feed violent extremism, and coalition members should address these matters of governance and social justice to stop terrorism from reappearing. Finally, while Pakistan has been contributing and will continue its support to counter terror, it is also the responsibility of global coalition members and the larger international community to commit their assistance and support to Pakistan and other countries that are struggling to contain terrorism.

## Notes and References

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  - <sup>2</sup> <http://theglobalcoalition.org/>
  - <sup>3</sup> Kathleen J. McInnis, "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State", Congressional Research Service, August 24, 2016
  - <sup>4</sup> <http://theglobalcoalition.org/military-progress-update/>
  - <sup>5</sup> <http://theglobalcoalition.org/global-law-enforcement-cooperation/>
  - <sup>6</sup> <http://theglobalcoalition.org/countering-foreign-terrorist-fighters-progress-update/>
  - <sup>7</sup> <http://theglobalcoalition.org/progress-update-countering-daeshs-narrative/>
  - <sup>8</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/most-isis-fighters-afghanistan-are-former-pakistani-taliban-members-us-commander-1573568>
  - <sup>9</sup> <http://tribune.com.pk/story/953303/over-last-9-months-70-decline-in-terrorist-attacks-in-pakistan/>