

ISIS: The Face of Terrorism: A Threat We Can't Ignore
by Arun Mittal
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The book *ISIS: The Face of Terrorism: A Threat We Can't Ignore* written by Arun Mittal provides a comprehensive chronology of the development of Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS). The author of the book, Mr. Mittal has focused on the historical roots and development of the terrorist organisation and in process has highlighted its characteristics, ideology, and distinct features with regard to its structural and functional aspects. The book is based on secondary sources of information, comprising interviews of ISIS sympathisers, reports published by different governments and the international organisations, and media reports to supplement the narrative with key facts of the organisation. The timeline of the events associated with the ISIS is also discussed in the book.

The book provides useful information regarding ISIS and could be helpful to those who are interested in knowing about the organisation. However, it lacks critical analysis of ISIS and a reflection on its global outreach. Moreover, it neglects other terrorist organisations which have franchised themselves under the umbrella of ISIS and are pursuing the same tactics.

The book comprises of eight chapters. The preface of the book begins with socio-political fragmentation in Iraq and the wider region as a result of the US invasion and premature withdrawal, which left a security vacuum in the country from 2003 to 2011. Moreover, the Shia-Sunni schism exacerbated under the National Shi'ite regime of Nouri-al-Maliki as it alienated the former Sunni rulers. This situation was exploited by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which is an insurgent organisation and many groups splintered and formed ISIS out of it. Hence, the author rightly points towards the socio-political under-currents but fails to

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highlight geo-political factors which catalysed these waves into clouds of destabilisation in the region and beyond.

The first chapter of the book titled “Introduction to ISIS” highlights the distinct belief system of ISIS which strictly views the religion on rigid Salafist interpretation of Islam. The author also suggests the West to use the same belief system for predicting the behaviour and nature of the organisation. Pointing towards the strategic error by the West in neglecting such ideological foundations, the author quotes the US Special Operation Commander, who said, “We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand it.”(p.1) The book emphasises the point that ISIS is not a terrorist organisation like al-Qaeda, but a militant body with a state-building project characterised by extreme violence and justified by distorted references to early followers of Islam and the Holy Prophet (PBUH). This distinct feature sets it apart from prior and existing terrorist organisations. However, the author fails to highlight the reasons for brand ISIS appeal to different terrorist organisations and its relevance in different socio-political contexts.

The introduction establishes that ISIS principally rejects peace; it is constitutionally incapable of certain types of changes and most importantly considers itself a harbinger of the end of the world. However, the author fails to recognise that al-Qaeda, too, had similar aspirations and followed a narrative which was knitted around the end of times, highlighted by the late journalist, Saleem Shahzad in his book.

Moreover, the author argues that we have misunderstood the nature of ISIS in two ways. Firstly, we see jihadism as monolithic which is not true in case of al-Qaeda, and secondly, unlike other terrorist organisations, it has a territorial caliphate. It is in contrast difference with al-Qaeda, which did not have a territorial caliphate but exercised its influence in Afghanistan through Afghan Taliban. However, reading the book to its length one can find several distinct features. Amongst them the most important and underlying belief is ISIS’ role as a catalyst to the end of times, which is exercised through tactics of bloody violence.

According to the author, ISIS rebranded and replaced al-Qaeda as a paradigm organisation of Salafi-jihadists. Its founding father, Al-Zarqawi, introduced bloody tactics. His jihad against Shiism, according

to Mittal, holds key to any radical change in Iraq. The author cites examples of Islam's medieval nature and is of the view that ISIS depicts and follows basic teachings of Islam. Following '*Takfiri*' doctrine, ISIS is committed on killing apostates to purify the Islamic world. The distinction between apostate (*Takfiri*) and a sinner may be subtle but it is a point of contention between al-Qaeda and ISIS. Also it is the same basis which gives ISIS the rationale for its violent means, which is unjustifiable if understood in totality of the religion. However, the interpretation and the role ISIS seeks in the end of times gives a spin to these doctrines which is arguable. The author instead of finding ISIS at fault has painted Islam in a negative light. He starts a theological debate and fails to understand or at least conclude it with reasons and logic.

The chapter two of the book titled, "Historical Background of Islamic State (IS)," gives a comprehensive account of its historical roots in Iraq and roots of its appeal to the masses. The information provided in this chapter is the core of the whole book and is very valuable for those studying ISIS, as it presents key facts and a chronology of important events. However, the story of ISIS is repeated on several occasions in the proceeding chapters, which at times becomes monotonous for the reader.

Over the years, ISIS has become the richest terrorist group in history, with assets totalling over US\$2 billion. The author highlights the key ingredients of its operational structure and its strategic planning in territorial gains in Iraq and Syria, which gave it access to oil refineries, smuggling of artefacts and other criminal activities. In Syria, it recruited and functioned with Al-Nusra Front and other Sunni insurgent groups, which also led to inter-group fighting. ISIS asserted its influence with violence and used car bombs and explosives to target its enemies. Chapter four and five give account of the major stages in which ISIS grew to what it is at present i.e., from a coalition of eight Sunni groups to one caliphate. The author argues that the West has underestimated the capacities of the organisation and its possible threat.

Notoriously known for its tech-savvy approach to propaganda and recruitment, ISIS has used social media to expand its outreach and also, unlike al-Qaeda and Taliban, it takes feedback from the masses on social media forums. Chapter six, seven and eight analyses the international response to ISIS. The author argues that arming the rebels in Syria didn't

helpmuch and in fact it has led to further chaos. He also argues that the same weapons can be used against the US interest. The author also takes a swipe at duality of Saudi Arabia on Wahabism and Salafi jihad which is now hurting its own creator.

Finally, concluding chapters once again present the reader with key issues and characteristics associated with ISIS including its social media campaign, violent tactics, attacks on minorities, the use of child soldiers and chemical weapons. He emphasises that territorial control and the establishment of caliphate is the founding stone of ISIS which if taken back can dent the phenomenon. However, such a force will require convergence of interests of all actors, which is presently lacking. Therefore, ISIS is taking advantage of the lack of strategic response from the international community, which if not formulated, can exacerbate the regional security situation. The book is a valuable resource in terms of providing basic information regarding the ISIS and details of the events associated with it, however it lacks a comprehensive critical analysis of the emerging trends in trans-national terrorism.