



## GLOBAL TERRORISM IN 2016

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### **Abstract:**

With the emergence and the growing clout of Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), the terrorist threat confronting the international community has undergone a profound and dangerous transformation. At the same time Al Qaeda is still in the game – a bit diminished but lethal. Unfortunately however, governments – individually and collectively - continue to be ambivalent about the threat, leading to lackluster responses highlighted by lack of understanding of the threat, political will and coordination of operations against these groups.

**Keywords:** ISIS, Al Qaida, terrorism, threats, political coordination, response.

### **Resumen:**

*Con el surgir, crecimiento y creciente influencia de del Estado Islámico de Irak y la Gran Siria (ISIS), la amenaza terrorista a la que ha de hacer frente la comunidad internacional ha sufrido una profunda y peligrosa transformación. Al mismo tiempo Al Qaida todavía está en la escena, algo debilitada, pero letal. No obstante, los gobiernos, de forma individual y colectiva, desafortunadamente continúan siendo ambivalentes ante esta amenaza, dando paso a respuestas mediocres que demuestran la falta de comprensión de la amenaza, la falta de voluntad política y la ausencia de coordinación en las operaciones contra estos grupos.*

**Palabras clave:** ISIS, Al Qaida, terrorismo, amenazas, coordinación política, respuesta.

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## **1. Introduction**

The rise of ISIS in 2014 and its claim of the establishment of the Islamic State have introduced a threat of unprecedented magnitude to the international community. Even as the Al Qaeda remains significant despite having diminished in size, strength and influence, the threat from the group and its affiliates and supporters has begun to eclipse due to ISIS. With territorial control, huge resources, savviness in exploiting modern communication technology, especially the social media and brutality and barbarism, ISIS has presented a new version of extremism and terrorism to the world. Despite counter-offensives like aerial bombings and ground combat on multiple fronts, ISIS continues to survive and has been able to demonstrate its robust and lethal capabilities with attacks in many countries and to spread its influence worldwide.

ISIS (originally Islamic State of Iraq - ISI) evolved out of Abu Musab al Zarqawi-led Al Qaeda in Iraq. Though the initial objective of ISI was to create a Sunny enclave in Iraq to counter the growing dominance of the Shias and the Kurds, instability in the country together with disbanding of the Iraqi military and intelligence apparatus and dismantling of Ba'ath party and its affiliated governmental apparatus let the group to grow and expand. The post-Arab Spring chaos in many Middle Eastern countries specifically in Iraq's neighbourhood allowed the group to capture territory and establish its rule projecting it as the Islamic State – the Caliphate. As Al Qaeda's leadership of the jihadist movement began to wane especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden, many groups and individuals that Al Qaeda mentored with ideology, training and financing are now increasingly turning to ISIS and Abu Bakr al Baghdadi for strategic leadership and inspiration.

## **2. ISIS's Strategy**

Today, ISIS has become a transnational phenomenon with an estimated 80,000 fighters including 30,000 Iraqis and Syrians and 20,000 foreigners combating in Iraq and Syria and hundreds of thousands of supporters worldwide. According to Western security and intelligence estimates ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq grew from 30,000 in 2014 to 50,000 in 2015 and likely to increase further in coming months as the group grabs more territory. ISIS strategy is to govern the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria and expand to other Muslim territories by accepting pledges of allegiance from local jihadist groups. Specifically ISIS seeks to control territory and administer the caliphate; expand the caliphate into other permissive areas; and exploit and destabilise areas not under its control. By demonstrating the establishment of the Islamic State, propagating the idea of a global caliphate and at the same time undermining competing groups and co-opting likeminded groups, ISIS is garnering more support and resources including manpower thereby the potential for future expansion. ISIS has also inspired individuals to carry out attacks in their home countries as it become increasingly challenging for foreign recruits to travel to Syria and Iraq. This nevertheless benefits the group in its quest for global expansion.

## **3. Dynamics of ISIS's Expansion**

ISIS grew in territories where states failed to govern. This has been mostly the case in Iraq and Syria. As the rulers got entrapped in state-building initiatives (Iraq) or dealing with the chaos induced by Arab Spring (Syria), ISIS was able to grab territory, amass wealth and armaments from all vulnerable sources including oil and natural gas production and distribution systems, financial institutions like banks and even the disbanding Iraqi army. The



group also aims to establish more satellites of the Caliphate known as wilayats (governorates or provinces) in other permissive areas across the world. For example, in Afghanistan, poor governance, lax security and fractionalisation of the Taliban after Mullah Omar's death allowed ISIS to grow, where it refers to itself as Wilayat Khorasan. Though Taliban is still the key player in most of Afghanistan, ISIS has occupied the eastern Nangarhar province, adjacent to the tribal areas of Pakistan operating from more than eight districts in the province and expanding.

Wilayat Khorasan has conducted multiple attacks targeting Hazara Shi'ites and the security forces in Afghanistan and released an array of brutal beheading videos. This group comprises members largely of breakaway factions of the Pakistani Taliban who are based on Afghan soil. The group has expanded further into other parts of Nangarhar in the east, Farah in the north and Helmand in the south in Afghanistan. It also maintains influence in specific parts of Pakistan. ISIS has also been engaged in sporadic clashes with the Taliban, which refuses to acknowledge the former as a stakeholder in the Afghan state. With the drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan ISIS is likely to emerge as a formidable force posing a challenge to the Taliban in the mid to long term.

ISIS has also expanded in to Libya. Numerous terrorist groups took roots in the country after Muammar Gaddafi was killed in 2011. Majlis Shura Shabab Al Islam (Islamic Youth Consultative Council) and a faction of Ansar Al Sharia in Libya pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi creating Wilayat Al Barqah, Wilayat Fizzan and Wilayat Al Tarabulus respectively. In addition to consolidating control in the declared provinces, ISIS is likely to expand further. Sirte, a backup capital for ISIS, has become a base for the group's operations, logistics and training.

Similarly, Boko Haram based mainly in northern Nigeria pledged allegiance to Al Baghdadi and subsequently renamed itself Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) also known as Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya. In Algeria, ISIS created Wilayat al-Jazair; in Yemen, Wilayat Sanaa; and in Saudi Arabia, Wilayat al-Haramayn. In addition to mounting attacks in Algeria, ISIS conducted and claimed attacks against the Houthis in the Yemeni provinces of Lahij, Aden, Abyan, Shabwah, Sa'ada, Sana'a, Ibb, Taiz, al-Jawf, al-Bayda, and Hadramawt. On 20 March 2015, ISIS targeted two Zaydi mosques in Sana'a and a government facility in Sa'ada killing 137 and injuring 345.

ISIS also seeks to attack Saudi Arabia to take control of Islam's two holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina before attacking Israel to take control of Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem - the third holiest site in Islam. Calling for the overthrow of the House of Saud, ISIS has carried out attacks in Saudi Arabia's Najd and Hejaz provinces and likely to target the ruling family in Saudi Arabia.

In June 2015, ISIS proclaimed Wilayat Qawqas in northern Caucasus under the leadership of Abu Muhammad Al Qadari. The terrorist groups in the four out of six subdivisions that come under Al Qaeda's Islamic Emirates of the Caucasus have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Moreover, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, an Egyptian militant group that pledged allegiance to Al Baghdadi in 2014, creating Islamic State of Iraq and Levant - Sinai Province or ISIL-SP (Wilayat Sayna), bombed the Russian airliner killing 224 on 31 October 2015. The attack was carried out in retaliation to the Russian support for the Assad regime and bombing of ISIS positions in Syria.



#### **4. Mapping the Threat into the Future**

A number of issues characterise the future trajectory of the threat. First, despite losing territory in Syria and Iraq, ISIS will continue to attempt to expand into parts of Africa, Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus and Asia. ISIS is actively recruiting in western Balkans, including Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, the Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro. Similarly, ISIS is recruiting in Southeast Asia with the intention of declaring a Wilayat either in Eastern Indonesia or southern Philippines. In 2015, Bahrum Naim of Katibah Nusanthara (Archipelagic Battalion of ISIS in Syria) issued instructions to Southeast Asian groups to attack both domestic and coalition targets. With recruitment of Chinese Muslims, ISIS is likely to declare a Wilayat in Western China where a large number of Uighur recruits and their families from Xinjiang have joined ISIS though some have also joined its rival group - Jabat al Nusra which is an Al Qaeda affiliate.

Second, using its newly constituted external operations wing staffed by foreign fighters, ISIS will attempt attacks including spectaculars like 9/11 in the countries which, either individually or jointly are in offensive against the group in Iraq and Syria. The November 2015 Paris attacks demonstrated ISIS's capability to collaborate with locals to strike overseas. The Paris-template, a copycat version of the attacks in Mumbai in India in November 2008, is likely to be repeated in a number of countries.

Third, online activity will continue to garner recruits for ISIS and help it radicalise more Muslims from vulnerable segments all over the world. ISIS ideology of hatred seeks to replace mainstream Islamic teaching among Muslim communities. However, even as about 80 to 90 percent of social media sites transmitting ISIS propaganda are hosted on U.S. and European servers, lack of political will and clear strategy have failed the governments and their agencies from counter-messaging, taking down ISIS platforms and degrading ISIS's strategic communication and information capabilities.

Fourth, without unanimity and unity among the countries, offensives against ISIS will continue to be ad-hoc and ineffective. Until now cooperation at the strategic level and coordination of operations beyond exchange of information and intelligence has eluded the countries fighting ISIS or being affected by its atrocities.

Last but not the least, refugees and asylum seekers from conflict zones to the West are susceptible to ISIS's message. ISIS is likely to exploit them to target its enemies in the countries that the refugees are flocking to in large numbers. Unfortunately countries involved do not have effective policies and plans of action to mitigate the humanitarian crisis arising out of the outflow of refugees in such a large number.

#### **5. Responding to the Threats**

Today, ISIS presents a four dimensional threat to most governments - ISIS Core in Syria and Iraq, ISIS Branches, ISIS Global and ISIS online. Countering these threats requires both conventional combat strategies including boots on the ground and creation of new capabilities especially those involving communication management to produce and disseminate counter narratives against radical messages. It also involves community engagement. More specifically, these capabilities include expanding elite counter terrorism tactical units; increasing the numerical strengths of national security services; developing a robust legal framework on preventive detention; raising dedicated units to police the cyber domain; and an integration of capabilities by shifting from counter- terrorism cooperation to collaboration.



Arguably, the key to dismantling the ISIS core in Iraq, Syria and Libya is increased intelligence-led military operations to kill or capture its leaders, dismantle its support and operational structures, training camps and financial infrastructures. Both special and general purpose forces on the ground, in addition to air campaign, is essential to degrade and destroy ISIS.

Governments must take steps to deny ISIS the opportunity to expand its territorial control. This involves identifying and securing vulnerable areas as a physical deterrent. Building trust among the inhabitants of these areas for their respective governments is equally important. Moreover, tempo of ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria created the momentum for the spawning of associated groups outside the primary theatre. In order to break this momentum, it is paramount to focus on both the core area and the satellite provinces and break their nexus.

New executive and legislative tools are necessary to proscribe entities and personalities that advocate, support and participate in ISIS activities. They should be investigated, charged, and prosecuted.

Given ISIS's growing presence in the virtual domain, governments should step up their efforts to prevent extremist and terrorist exploitation of the internet through a robust legal and governance framework. This also requires partnerships with business firms, civil society and community groups. The key to building enduring and effective partnerships lies in complementing the whole-of-government approach with a whole-of-society approach. The strategy is to build and sustain a community of experts including religious scholars to develop and disseminate counter-narratives to the extremist propaganda through the internet, more specifically through the social media to prevent radicalisation. It also involves measures to implement de-radicalisation programmes to rehabilitate those that have already fallen victims to extremist propaganda.

Most importantly, governments, irrespective of whether they are directly affected by the threat and despite political and ideological differences, must put their acts together and present a common front to degrade and destroy ISIS, Al Qaeda and other similar groups. However as mentioned earlier the responses have so far been ad hoc, piecemeal and lacking in cooperation and coordination which have largely been ineffective and often counterproductive.

## **6. Conclusion**

Terrorism is not new to the world. Throughout the ages it has manifested in many forms most notably from ethno-political and left and right wing terrorism as the predominant source of political violence of the 20th century to its current politico-religious variety spearheaded by groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. While the previous versions of political violence could be contained though not eliminated altogether, it is not easy to speculate how and when the current threat can at least be managed. This is due to the peculiar nature of the threat itself – a hybrid with potent mix of distorted religiosity with pseudo politics that moreover does not recognise any constraint in the use of violence.

The world, led by the U.S. fought Al Qaeda and significantly degraded its core capabilities including its core leadership. With ISIS, a newer version of the threat confronts the international community. But it will be naïve to believe that groups like ISIS can overthrow the existing world order. ISIS has sustained itself so far due mostly to inaction or ineffective response. Notwithstanding the current capabilities of these groups there are key vulnerabilities like territorial control and increasing revulsion among the Muslims themselves



due to extreme brutality and barbarism by these groups that the governments can exploit. On a positive note, a consensus of sorts is slowly emerging among the countries involved with regard to the strategy to deal with ISIS, especially with the Vienna plan and its aftermath though it is difficult to speculate on its implementation. But there is no substitute to a multi-pronged and multi-national response to the type of threat that groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS pose against humanity.