
Rise of Islamic Caliphate Impacting West Asia's Stability

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New Crisis: Barbarians on the March

The security environment in the perpetually strife-torn West Asian region has deteriorated so rapidly that the region has become an area of extreme concern for the international community. The triumphant march of the virulently radical Sunni militants of the recently proclaimed “Islamic Caliphate” headed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has been finally halted, but virtually at the gates of Baghdad. The militia of the so-called Islamic State or ISIS/ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham or Islamic State in Iraq and Levant), numbering between 20,000 and 30,000, now control a large area straddling the Syria-Iraq border and have seized key border crossings on the Syrian border with Jordan. After capturing Faluja in January 2014, ISIS fighters made rapid progress in advancing along the Euphrates river in Anbar province of Iraq and have succeeded in holding on to their gains. In Syria, the ISIS militia has consolidated its hold over the eastern provinces bordering Anbar province of Iraq. President Bashar al-Assad’s forces have managed to retain control over Damascus and the area up to the Mediterranean Sea. The “Nusra Front”, the Syrian affiliate of the Al Qaeda, controls

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most of northwest Syria and is gradually gaining ground. Syrian rebels known as the “Southern Front” are continuing to fight President Assad’s forces while avoiding clashes with the Nusra Front. In the north, the “Free Syrian Army” has a tenuous foothold over a small patch of territory.

Significant help is being provided to the Shia-dominated government of Iraq by Iran and Russia. And, in a move that might be a game changer in the long run, the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that had captured oil-rich Kirkuk, regarded as the Kurd capital, have joined the fight against ISIS in the Syrian border town of Kobani. Known as tough fighters, they are expected to drive the ISIS militia away from the areas claimed by the Kurds. So far, 500,000 to one million refugees have been added to the large number of displaced persons already struggling to stay alive in the steaming hot cauldron that is West Asia today. After vacillating for several months and admitting that he had no strategy, President Obama decided to join the fight against ISIS by launching air strikes against the ISIS forces. The United States has been joined in this endeavour by Australia, Britain, Canada and France and five Arab countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). In early November 2014, President Obama approved the deployment of 1,500 additional troops to take the strength of ground troops to 3,100. For the time being, they will continue to have only a training and advisory role. So far, the air strikes have been only partially effective in military terms, but have succeeded in buying time for the disorganised Iraqi forces to regroup to offer a more cohesive fight.

The newly proclaimed Islamic State, not recognised by any other state as yet, is also called ISIS; ISIL; and Daesh. Its leadership’s ideology is so primitive and barbaric that Osama bin Laden is reported to have declined to have anything to do with them when they had approached him. The video-taped beheading of three innocent hostages has exemplified its brutality. Al-Baghdadi has openly proclaimed the intention of ISIS to

expand eastwards to establish the Islamic state of Khorasan that will include Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics, eastern Iran and Pakistan. The final battle, Ghazwa-e-Hind – a term from Islamic mythology – will be fought to extend the caliphate to India. An ISIS branch has already been established in the Indian subcontinent. It is led by Muhsin al Fadhli and is based somewhere in Pakistan. Some factions of the TTP (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) have already declared their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Afghanistan's new National Security Adviser, Mohammad Hanif Atmar, has said that the presence of Daesh or ISIS is growing and that the group poses a threat to Afghan security. And, some ISIS flags have appeared in Srinagar.

Volatile Region

The ongoing civil war in Iraq and Syria and the sudden flare up between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas in June-July 2014 are only the latest manifestations of conflict in West Asia that is driven by unstable states and deep-rooted sectarian divisions in society and the deep-rooted interest of the West in oil. During the Cold War, the turmoil in West Asia was an accurate barometer of the world's political climate. Although most 'balance of power' rivalries and superpower proxy wars have now ended, West Asia remains the most unstable region in the world. Stretching from the edge of the Indian subcontinent in the east to the Horn of Africa in the west, West Asia has often been called the "Arc of Crisis". The popular image of West Asian instability is that of a chaotic world, crumbling everywhere and always falling apart, an area governed by abrupt, sweeping changes and unpredictable developments. The West Asian states are locked in internecine quarrels due to religious, ethnic or historical rivalries and inherited colonial legacies such as boundary disputes. West Asia is a house divided, an Islamic world divided against itself despite the strongest possible motive for unity – a shared hostility towards Zionism.

Palestinian Conflict

The long-standing Arab and Palestinian opposition to the existence of Israel as a nation-state and senseless terrorism directed against the Jews, have led Israel to pursue a belligerent foreign and national security policy that is not conducive to peace in the region. Israel's annexation of the whole of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights in Syria in the 1980s was unacceptable to the Arabs and the Muslim world. Israel's excursion deep into Lebanon in 1982, all the way up to Beirut, created more problems than it solved. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), whose evacuation from Lebanon was secured by Israel at great cost, was soon back in strength. Palestinian and Hezbollah terrorism has abated somewhat after Israel's pull-out from the occupied territories in Gaza and South Lebanon, but sporadic violence continues; and, Israel's on-off rocket, missile and air attacks against Hamas militiamen remain in the headlines. The continuing deadlock over Palestine remains a vexatious issue. Though the world accepts the Palestinians' right to an autonomous state, the issue is still to be finally resolved. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's historic handshake with Chairman Yasser Arafat in September 1993 appeared to have had the potential to change the course of history but has so far led only to a temporary reprieve. The installation of a Hamas-tolerant Palestinian government has further exacerbated the situation.

Lebanon was more strife-riven and unstable during the last two decades of the 20th century than at any other time in its bloody and chequered history. The Israel-Lebanon conflict of July 2006, sparked by the capture of Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah, was a new watershed in a volatile conflict zone. Without the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) on the Israel-Lebanon border, daily incidents of terrorism and violence would have continued unabated.

Instability in Iraq and Syria

The occupation of Iraq by the US-led coalition forces in 2003, ostensibly to capture and destroy Saddam Hussein's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) – which were never found – further destabilised the region, shattered Iraq's economy and drove up oil prices. The vacuum left behind in Iraq by the withdrawal of the US-led coalition forces in December 2011, led to the rise of Sunni militancy, which, in its early days, was supported by Saudi Arabia. The participation of a large number of Saudi nationals in the September 11 attacks in the US and Saudi support for Sunni uprisings, have gradually cooled the cosy relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring protests in Syria, which began in March 2011, degenerated into a full-fledged civil war by July 2012. It has been reported that President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-controlled military has used chemical weapons, mass starvation, indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas and denial of drinking water to kill hundreds of thousands of mostly Sunni Syrians. The aim of the opposing forces is to overthrow Assad's Ba'ath government that has been in power since 1963. The main motives of the broad range of opposition groups, from Islamists to left-wing secular parties and youth activists, are to end repression and undertake political reform. Iran and Russia have traditionally supported the Assad government.

The European Union has estimated that 2,000 European citizens have joined the *jihadist* groups fighting the government forces. European governments are concerned that these battle-hardened combatants would pose a long-term security threat when they return. The crisis in Syria has led to the exodus of a large number of refugees and could soon assume ominous regional dimensions. It has already spilled over into Iraq in the form of a Shia-Sunni conflict.

Weak Counter-Strategy

By all accounts the ISIS militia is slowly but surely gaining ground. It has proved itself adept at fighting simultaneously on multiple fronts.

Not surprisingly, ISIS has carried the war into cyberspace and is deftly exploiting the Internet as an effective propaganda tool to spread its message. It is using Facebook and bulletin boards to influence the minds of Muslim youths and gain recruits. The international community has not yet found an answer to this potent threat. The triumphant forward march of ISIS has taken place despite the air strikes being launched by the United States and its allies and the help provided to the Shia-dominated government of Iraq by Iran and Russia. ISIS has absorbed the air strikes well so far, much like the Vietnamese did half a century ago. A major lesson that has emerged from the recent conflicts, particularly those in Afghanistan and Iraq, is that a guerrilla force that operates from safe havens among the rural population cannot be defeated from the air alone. The US and its allies are unlikely to prevail over the ISIS militia without committing troops on the ground to fight a long-drawn counter-insurgency war against them. Alternatively, the US can prime the Iraqi forces to fight ISIS. This would be a better option.

The ISIS militia faces no serious opposition on the ground except from the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Kurds are unlikely to be willing to fight beyond the land for which they seek autonomy. The Obama Administration is banking on hope and the passage of time to prevail over the ISIS militia. The President is hopeful that in due course, the air campaign will begin to become effective, the Iraqi forces will become a more cohesive fighting force, and the Kurds will exert meaningful pressure on the ISIS militia from the north. The probability of any of this happening is low. The US has been arming the Syrian opposition led by the Free Syrian Army, for several years to fight President Assad. It now hopes the Syrian opposition will join the fight against ISIS. The US President is aware that American troops are not welcome in Iraq and even less so in Syria, besides the lack of support at home for involvement in yet another unwinnable war in West Asia. A pragmatic move would be to support the rise of a militarily

strong Kurdistan as a bulwark against further ISIS expansion, but Turkey will have to be convinced that such a course of action is necessary. Jordan needs to be given the support necessary to thwart the growth of ISIS to the west.

Implications for India

US officials have been dropping broad hints to the effect that India should join the US and its allies in fighting ISIS as it poses a long-term threat to India as well. India has a large diaspora in West Asia, which includes female workers. Some Indian nurses had been taken hostage by ISIS fighters, but were released unharmed. India also has a large Muslim population that has remained detached from the ultra-radical ISIS and its aims and objectives, except for a handful of misguided youths who are reported to have signed up to fight. This may change if India joins the US-led coalition to fight ISIS. However, India should cooperate closely by way of sharing information and intelligence. Instability and superpower rivalry in West Asia does not augur well for India's security and commercial interests. Combined with the escalation of force levels in the Indian Ocean, the heightened tensions in West Asia may ultimately lead to a spillover of the conflicts to adjacent areas. India now imports almost 75 per cent of the oil required to fuel its growing economy and most of it comes from the Gulf. The long-drawn conflicts of the last two decades of the 20th century had forced India to buy oil at far greater cost from distant markets, with no assurance of guaranteed supplies. The 1991 oil shock had almost completely wrecked India's foreign exchange reserves. The situation could again become critical. Oil prices had shot up to US\$ 115 per barrel, but have since stabilised below US\$ 100 per barrel.

Since the early 1970s, Indian companies have been winning a large number of contracts to execute turnkey projects in West Asia. The conflict in the region has virtually sealed the prospects of any

new contracts. Also, payments for the ongoing projects are not being made on schedule, leading to unabsorbable losses for the Indian firms involved, and a dwindling foreign exchange income from the region. A large number of Indian workers are employed in West Asia and many of them have had to be evacuated. Hisham Melhem, the Washington bureau chief of Al-Arabiya has written: "The Arab world today is more violent, unstable, fragmented and driven by extremism — the extremism of the rulers and those in opposition — than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago." The conflicts in Gaza, Iraq, Israel, Libya and Syria – a number of seemingly unrelated crises – have the potential to blend together to unleash a regional nightmare with much wider repercussions. The Arab world must collectively accept responsibility for the failures that have led the sorry state prevailing at present.

A concerted international effort is needed to first contain and then comprehensively defeat ISIS, failing which the consequences will be disastrous not only for the region, but also for most of the rest of Asia and Europe. However, it is for the Arabs to find the resources necessary to seek and destroy ISIS fighters on the ground. As an emerging power sharing a littoral with the region, India has an important role to play in acting as a catalyst for West Asian stability through negotiations and dialogue rather than confrontation.