



CLAWS

Caliphate of the 21st century

■ Shweta Desai

In one of the first surveys conducted inside war ravaged Syria, three years since the pro-democracy protests began, public opinion on the newly formed Islamic State or the Caliphate has been glaringly defiant. After having lost vast swathes of its eastern region to rebels from the Islamic State (earlier known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham or ISIS) in June, where the strict implementation of Sharia is the rule of law and Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi holds direct legislative and political power, only 4 per cent Syrians support this version of State.

The establishment of the Caliphate on the first day of Ramadan, on June 29, sent shockwaves across the world, particularly in the Muslim world with prominent religious leaders, organizations and academics rejecting the new Islamic State. In an audio recording released, the Sunni rebel group ISIS declared its leader, 42 year old Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 'the caliph' of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims. 'Listen to your caliph and obey him. Support your state, which grows every day,' was the message to all Muslims, to immigrate to the Islamic State and live a life of honour under Islamic law rather than the laws of the *kafir* or unbelievers.

Considered as the last bastion of secularism in West Asia, the constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic guarantees freedom of religion, and is home to minorities Alawite Islam (11 per cent), other Muslim, including Ismailia and Ithna'ashari or Twelver Shia (2 per cent), Christianity with minorities like Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic (10 per

cent) and Druze (3 per cent). Though Sunnis (74 per cent) are the dominant sect, according to the survey --conducted by Opinion Research Business (ORB) with 1,014 adults in face-to-face interviews across 13 out of 14 governorates in Syria (except in the Deir ez Zor province which is under the Islamic State)--96 per cent Syrians would not prefer to live under the Islamic state, which is essentially an ideological state, and is thus radically different from a national state.

Ninety years after the last Islamic state was dismantled by the reformist leader Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1924 which began the creation of modern day Turkey, ISIS destroyed the post-Ottoman nation state borders enshrined in the Sykes-Picott agreement and declared statehood for the new Caliphate of the 21st century, which submits to fundamentalist Islamic law.

Since making its entrance in Syria from Iraq in the early months of 2013, the Sunni rebel group ISIS has significantly changed the dynamics of the uprising which began first as street protests and then a localized armed resistance in 2011. The radically stark strategy adopted by the group's leader, Iraq based military strategist Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, which includes applying the harshest *hudud* punishments, sets it apart from the other extremist rebel groups including the Al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat al Nusra front. By invoking verses from Quran and declaring *takfir* (apostate), ISIS carried out public executions, crucifixion, amputation, and flogging and refused participation in Islamic-

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court mediation efforts as means of justice. It was this brutal approach of the group along with the infighting with al Nusra which led al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to disown the ISIS on February 2, 2014.

Nevertheless, with a large number of foreign fighters influenced by its Jihadi ideology joining ranks, ISIS made considerable gains in Syria and by February 2014 had control of Raqqa and Deir ez Zor governorates and key transport routes which allowed it to maintain a direct supply link with its established presence in western and northern Iraq, especially in Anbar province. Through this supply link, IS rebels were able to transfer experienced foreign fighters and captured Syrian army equipment to Iraq, including vehicles and anti-tank guided munitions. The seize of Deir ez Zor provided unchallenged border access to Iraq which became easy after ISIS took over two critical border crossings, Qaim and Waleed on Iraq side. By June it made stunning advances, taking over an 800km stretch of border with Iraq. On June 28, ISIS insurgents swept through eastern Syria and northern Iraq has rattled.

Now stretching from al-Bab in eastern Aleppo province in Syria to Suleiman Bek in Iraq's Salahuddin province, an estimated 20,000 non-contiguous square miles, is an independent territory called the 'Islamic State'.

Financial prospects of the IS

The ISIS is touted as one of the wealthiest and financially self-sustainable terrorist organization in the world. The reported heist of 500 billion Iraqi dinars or \$ 425 million has raised its assets from the earlier \$ 900 million in June to the current \$ 2 billion. The fall of Mosul, which saw the Iraqi army abandoning its uniforms, posts and weapons in the hands of IS, has provided it with huge cache of sophisticated military equipments, which were paraded publicly on the streets. This includes unknown quantities of M114 Humvees, other armoured personnel carriers and Stinger missiles, explosives and small arms and an unspecified number of M198 155m howitzer artillery pieces with a conventional range of 22km, which were originally provided by the US to Iraq. The financial and military assets have been crucial for the IS to reinforce its strength and capability to hold control in the newly acquired territories. It also indicates that the group does not have to depend

on its financial security to buy arms or support its fighters from external donors.

From the points of entry in the towns under control of IS, checkpoints have been established on the border across Syria and Iraq and along key trade routes. As of 2013, there were 30 checkpoints at which taxes to enter the ISIS controlled areas are collected from the traders and travellers, making it a lucrative source of income. Money from extortion, kidnappings of foreign nationals, diplomats has also been widely used as a strategy for gaining more finance.

Syria's oil and gas reserves, which was an essential source of income for its economy, has also been tacitly compromised, under IS's control. The eastern corridor stretching from the border town of Boukamal to Deir ez Zour to the northwest is dotted with some of the most important oil production areas: al-Jafra oil field, the Conoco plant, and the al-Omar oilfield. Deir ez Zour supplies about 10 percent of Syria's natural gas needs. Before the conflict began in 2011, the Syrian government would extract 385,000 barrels per day. Now, the control of this region and the energy reserves has bolstered the fortunes of IS. In the vicinity of Raqqa, as much as 30,000 barrels daily is being extracted by the IS men, according to one intelligence official. The al-Omar field, which constitutes of a gas plant and a satiation for generating electricity, has a production capacity of 75,000 oil barrels a day. Conoco gas fields, the largest and the only US investment in Syria, is now under control of the IS militants and so is Baiji, the site of Iraq's largest oil refinery and power plant. Multiple credible reports have revealed that ISIS militant are selling crude oil and electricity generated from captured oil fields and power plants to the Syrian government. By operating these crucial economic resources and establishing a chain of supplies with the government, IS rebels have secured long term revenue generating mechanisms, without being dependent on funding from external sources.

Life and local governance

By breaking the boundaries established in the Sykes-Picott agreement, the ISIS aspires to restore the Muslim land where one is not recognized by nationalities but by his religious identity as a Muslim. All across the captured territories which mark the entry points of the Islamic State, the

group has put up large black flags and painted prominent government institutional buildings, courts, police stations with black, pronouncing its control. Legal courts are now preceded by local clerics and verdict is delivered on laws based upon the Islamic religion. The militant group is also indulging in self aggrandizement by taking over goods and property left behind by residents fleeing Raqqa and Mosul, for its foreign fighters to settle and bring their families in.

Raqqa is the first and only major Syrian city under ISIS control and is led by Emir Abu Luqman. According to the cabinet of IS (revealed by Iraqi intelligence), the leaders are non-Syrians and Sheikhs from Iraqi, Tunisia and other Arab states, while Egyptians, Europeans, Chechens and Syrians occupy lower ranks. Life under the Islamic State, as issued in the 16-point charter of governance of the IS highlights the puritanical brand of Islamic governance wherein women have to cover themselves with a full-face *niqab* in public, music, arts and entertainment is banned, consumption and use of western products including chocolates, beauty cosmetics, smoking of cigarettes and *shisha* is forbidden and all citizens must pray five times a day. A patrol of IS men regularly travels around the city on foot or in cars to check on their commitment to the rules. An all female unit called the al-Khansaa' brigade is formed to ensure women follow strict Shari'a codes for dressing and prevent mixing between the two sexes. On violation or loose use of Islamic laws, one can be lashed, issued verbal threats or even tutorials. For example, IS has forced everyone to pray, shops are kept closed at praying time and those who do not perform the prayers are issued warnings.

For those who ISIS men believe to be a *kafir* - government officials, police and army men, regime supporters, or not enough Muslims - are declared as deceivers and apostates, leading to executions. Shia mosques, ancient churches and other religious worship sites have been systemically demolished. Non-Muslims who do not adhere to the ideology of the Islamic State have no voice. Though they are allowed to live under the IS protection as heavily taxed second class citizens. In Raqqa, IS has imposed *zakat* - an alms giving tax on the Christian population in order to secure "protected status" and continue practicing their religion in private. Although they are banned from working or participating in social life, a tax \$250 per individual who

works and \$500 per couple guarantees them no death.

In a bid to win support of the local population, the Islamic State is indulging in social service, philanthropy and aiming for a high model of governance. In Raqqa, the ISIS has established offices for health, education, security, Islamic relief, post office and *zakat* office, tribal relations and even an 'embassy' for the province of Aleppo north of the country. It has opened flour mills in the al-Salhahiyah, Salouk and Tel Abyad neighborhoods and a new *suq* for locals to exchange goods. A Consumer Protection Authority ensures the quality of goods sold in supermarkets and shops. It has also taken charge of civic amenities like road repairs, electricity supply and monitoring electricity-use levels to ensure blackouts not more than six hours a day. In Mosul it brought chartered accountants to manage the finances of the banks.

Most importantly, the Islamic State territory includes the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates, which are the lifeline for both Iraqis and Syrians for water, food and agriculture. The Samarra barrage located at west of Baghdad on the Tigris and areas around the giant Mosul Dam all fall under IS's control. It has continued operating the Tishrin dam on the Euphrates River renamed as al-Farouq. Securing water infrastructure has given ISIS rebels an added edge as it can use water as a weapon of war to either deprive population and create food/water crisis or release dam water to cause flooding.

Support

Since its entry in the battlefield in Syria, ISIS distinguished itself from the hundred other rebel groups and Jihadi elements by remaining unconcerned with the broader aim of revolution - to oust President Bashar al Assad's regime. Instead it remained focused towards establishing a single, transnational Islamic state based on Shari'a. While establishing a Caliphate has been a declared end goal of various Jihadi groups, none had achieved the objective. By declaring the beginning of this caliphate in its territorial gains in Syria and Iraq, ISIS has presented itself as an ideologically superior alternative to al-Qaeda within the international Jihadi community while also challenging its legitimacy. This is indicative through the pledging of *bai'at* (religious pledge of allegiance) by a number of small rebel factions including the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat

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al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham in Al-Ishaara, who have vowed to not fight against the Islamic State in Deir ez Zour. There are however other militant and Jihadi groups who have rejected the Caliphate and even ridiculed its formation.

To run a Caliphate in the post modern world is equal to running a government and will require a continuous source of revenue to provide governance services, law and order mechanisms, justice delivery system. ISIS has gained substantial financial resources through its territorial gains and by establishing trade links and taxation, created a viable blueprint for state funding. Its financial power also enables it to ensure steady supply of ammunitions,

recruit young foreign fighters by paying high salaries and encourage them to settle in the Islamic State and lead a life of honour under the Islamic rules. By portraying itself as the liberators of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, the IS offers Sunnis a rare opportunity to be a citizen, a concept widely abused in the throes of sectarian politics, military autocratic rule and monarchy kingdoms in the West Asia North Africa region. As Israel as a state propagates the Jewish supremacy, Iran dominated by the Shias, the IS will be a land for Sunnis. "People tried secular forms of government: republic, Baathist, Safavids," ISIS declared. "It pained you. Now is time for an Islamic state." While, the IS features may appeal to some section of Sunni Muslims who wish to adhere to the Islamic code of life and migrate to the land, it has alienated Shias, other sects of Muslims, Jews, Christians and minorities who have been publicly executed or spared life to live as second class citizens. As the IS establishes its rule and

starts to govern millions of Muslims and other minorities, the ideals of justice, peace, tolerance, freedom and equality will come to confront its leadership at some point.

Like in late 2005, when insurgency in Iraq was at its peak, Baghdadi's group then called as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) sought to secure control of provinces. While the AQI tried to win local support, its strategy of targeting other Sunni insurgent factions, killing tribal elders, imposing harsh religious programs, brutal punishments, forbidding cultural practices like smoking water pipes and forcing local girls to marry their foreign fighters, soon made the local population hostile towards the militant group. The growing intimidations by AQI lead the Sunni Arab tribes to revolt (Anbar Awakening movement) against the Sunni militant group as AQI forced them out of Anbar, Diyala, and parts of northern Iraq.

The Islamic State's current tyrannical leadership imposing its harsh decisions on the local population, with no form of democracy, is a close replication of the events that lead to its expulsion with the Anbar Awakening. Whether this time the local population collates in an uprising against the ISIS militants or no remains to be seen; but three in five (60 per cent) Syrians, as the survey reflects, would want an international military involvement to end the conflict and oust the militant groups to free Syria. Till then, the success or failure of the Islamic State will largely be determined by its leadership in governance, stability in society and command on the loyalty of its citizens. For how long the citizens of the Islamic State will continue to endure the tight grip of extreme restrictions and laws remains uncertain.



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