

Rise of the Non-State Actors in Middle East: Regional Dimensions

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Abstract

The situation in the Middle East has become extremely precarious due to issues which can be traced back to the colonial era. Imprudently drawn state borders, unsettled disputes like Palestine and ethno-religious schisms accentuate the inter-state and intra-state rivalries which have spun out of control due to foreign interventions. Extremist radical Islam acquired new dimensions after 9/11 which consequently painted the 2003 Iraq war in ideological colours. A new trend of radicalization is visible across the region from Lebanon to Pakistan, which has resulted in the emergence of non-state actors. The raging conflict in and across the Middle East can only be pacified by devising regional strategies under international actors. Any further foreign intervention would have catastrophic consequences for the whole region.

Keywords: Middle East, Radicalization, Militants, Islamic Movements, Non-state Actors.

Introduction

The present map of the Middle East was drawn by the colonial powers after the demise of the Ottoman Empire. The strategic and economic interests of these European powers made them oblivious of the religious-sectarian and ethno-cultural complexities that would result from drawing such artificial borders which would accentuate the divisive fault lines across the communities and further complicate the complex mosaic of the region. These newly created geographical boundaries scattered these sectarian and ethnic communities across different states under the British and French mandates. In the aftermath of the European decline, loyal tribal leaders were handpicked by the colonists to serve as rulers and servants of their old masters. These handpicked rulers mostly remained loyal to their old colonial masters and kept the people under subjugation. Resultantly, even large states with modern militaries, like Iraq, Libya and Syria, actually remained fragile with frail institution pivoting around the idiosyncrasies of the rulers. Thus, once these rulers were deposed, either after foreign intervention or internal revolts, the entire state structure crumbled letting

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loose the sectarian and ethnic rivalries. The emergence of the ISIS ogre is the result of the follies committed by the undemocratic rulers, usually under the auspices of the old colonial masters.

Genesis of Islamic Movements in the Region

The genesis of Islamic militancy can be traced back to the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which laid the foundations for the creation of Israel in 1948. The displacement of Palestinians from their homeland resulted in an unending and vicious cycle of violence between Arab states and Israel. After the fall of Jerusalem in subsequent Arab Israeli Wars, the conflict acquired global dimensions inspiring Muslims all over the world to join the struggle of liberating Al-Quds also known as “Qibla Awal” or (first abode of worship) from Israeli occupation. The conflict in Palestine even inspired troops from regular armed forces of distant states to rush and join the militaries of Arab nations engaged in fighting the Israeli forces.¹ This struggle thus gradually paved the way for ‘global militancy’ which in the past was primarily limited to occupied territories around Palestine.²

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent US policy of training and arming Muslim guerrilla fighters to battle the Soviet Army set a precedent for global jihad. After rejoicing in the Soviet defeat, many jihadists returned to their respective homes, most of which were ruled by either monarchs or military dictators. They soon engaged themselves in fighting their own governments for political reforms, religious freedom and implementation of sharia law. Jihadists from other states who had struggled alongside their ‘brethren in the battlefield’ extended help and support thus resulting in formation of global networks crisscrossing the state and regional boundaries.

There is yet another dimension to the raging militancy issue. European colonization also brought Muslims in contact with the western way of life. Scholars like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Ziya Gökalp, Mustafa Kemal, Taha Hussain, Rifa el Tahtawi, Mustafa Kamil and Fazalur Rehman Malik etc advocated adoption of these values; on the contrary, ideologues like Syed Qutab, Hasan al Banna, Maryam Jameelah, Muhammad Asad and Syed Abu-Ala Maudaudi etc. rejected this form of rationalist modernism in

¹ One of the frequently cited examples is of several officers from Pakistan Air Force who left the services to join Egyptian and Syrian Air Force and shot down several Israeli jets during the combat. See: “Pakistan Air Force Combat Experience,” *Global Security.org*, www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/pakistan/air-force-combat.htm.

² John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (England: Penguin Books, 2007), 54, 59, 62-70.

favour of orthodox³ faith. This schism between seculars/liberals and orthodox/fundamentalists led to the formation of Islamic movements, notably in Egypt and Pakistan, which gradually spread to other states. These popular movements were excluded from the mainstream political discourse by the authoritarian rulers perceiving an existential threat to their dynasties. Persecution and oppression coerced these activists to justify violence towards political ends.

Political parties like Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Levant, Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria and Shabiba al-Islamiya (Islamic Youth) in Morocco, peacefully entered the political arena, but became violent reactionaries due to state persecution ultimately resorting to armed struggle and terrorism. Corruption, nepotism, injustice, joblessness, educational backwardness and governance issues, known to be the hallmarks of autocratic regimes, became the catalyst for the disenfranchised, hopeless and disillusioned youth, to join the armed struggle. Interestingly Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan remains one exception which, after pursuing a radical agenda of change through popular movement and facing persecution, reconciled with its revolutionary agenda in February 1957 to struggle within the mainstream political arena like other political parties.⁴ Other movements within the Islamic world were either crushed by the undemocratic rulers or went dormant waiting for an appropriate time to pursue their agenda.

The Jihad in Afghanistan however provided these radicals and movements with a new enemy in the shape of communism. This new war front also provided relief to the Arab states from these radicals. The Afghan Jihad thus became a catalyst to resurrect the new pan-Islamic sentiments which subsequently resulted in the creation of al-Qaeda and a new generation of jihadists dying to bring the sharia based political Islam to their countries of origin. After the end of Afghan war most of these fighters returned back taking along with them the dormant volcano of political Islam which exploded after the US intervention in the Middle East.

Pax-Americana, which according to some scholars was enshrined and disguised within the folds of the “New World Order”,⁵ was primarily

³ Maryam Jameelah, *Islam versus the West* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965), 31-68. See also: Maryam Jameelah, *Islam and Western Society* (Lahore: Muhammad Yusuf Khan, 1984), 20-35.

⁴ Shamim A. Siddiqi, “The Islamic Movements of Indo-Pak Subcontinent,” *Dawahinamerica.com*, December 27, 1999, www.dawahinamericas.com/Indo_Pak.htm.

⁵ Nadia El-Shazly and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, “The Challenge of Security in the Post-Gulf War Middle East System,” in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East*

responsible for the progress of the global jihadist movement.⁶ A chain of events in the aftermath of the Gulf War-I of 1991, for example, genocide in Bosnia, inhuman treatment of Palestinians, intervention in Somalia and brutality in Kashmir etc., enraged sizeable sections of Muslim societies across the world spreading the seeds of hate and revenge among the youth. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were no freak occurrence. The subsequent invasion of Iraq on the false pretext of WMDs proved disastrous for the region as the Al-Qaeda and its affiliates succeeded in portraying the invaders as ‘Judo-Christian’ crusaders who must be defeated by waging a global jihad. Many analysts believe that the rise of the contemporary militant Islam in the shape of ISIS/ISIL (or IS) is an implicit consequence of US invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁷

Radicalizing Trends in the Region

Saudi Arabia

A significant factor contributing towards radicalization remains the narrow interpretation of religious texts leading to a harsh version of Islam. A classical example is of Juhayman al-Otaybi who, despite being a student of a leading Saudi Salafi cleric, Abdul Aziz al-Baz, orchestrated the seizure of the holy mosque in Mecca due to his flawed understanding of religious texts.⁸ This trendsetting event acquired new dimensions initially under the Russo-Afghan war and particularly after the Gulf War-I, thus becoming catalyst in fuelling the sentiments of radical individuals, ultimately leading to the formation of al-Qaeda. Although al-Qaeda is said to have been born somewhere along Pakistan-Afghan border, it enjoyed financial support for different reasons from the governments and private citizens all over the Muslim world, especially the Gulf Region. Most of the Gulf monarchies have curbs on political rights and freedoms and people have no peaceful options for political change or redressal of grievances. This encourages

States, ed. Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2002), 72-75.

⁶ Manuel R. Torres, Javier Jordan and Nicola Horsburgh, “Analysis and Evolution of Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 18, no. 3(2006): 410-411.

⁷ Ben Reynolds, “Iran Didn’t Create ISIS; We Did,” *Diplomat*, August 31, 2014, www.thediplomat.com/2014/08/iran-didnt-create-isis-we-did/.

⁸ For a detailed account on the nature of the Saudi state and the gradual radicalization process, see: Robert Lacy, *Inside the Kingdom* (London: Arrow Books, 2010), and also: Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising* (England: Penguin Books, 2007).

resort to violent means as happened in cases like Juhayman al-Otaybi's and Osama bin Laden's.

However, interestingly, the Saudi government which labelled the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization has been accused of supporting the militants groups fighting in Syria and Iraq.⁹ This alleged support, nonetheless, has been withdrawn recently after some of these groups, like ISIS and Jabatal Nusra etc. were identified as a direct threat to the Saudi ruling hierarchy as well.¹⁰ Despite the government's efforts to tackle the issue through de-radicalization programmes,¹¹ the problem would not fade away without introducing political and social reforms.

According to reports Saudi authorities apprehended sixty-two members of ISIS associated network in May 2014, while over forty were believed to have gone into hiding. Reports of fighters abandoning al Qaeda to subsequently join the ISIS reflects the ISIS's growing strength and popularity. According to the Brookings scholar, Michael O'Hanlon, in 2005 the US administration had considered contingency plans of deploying up to 300000 troops backed by fighter aircrafts in case of a fundamentalist takeover. This is kite flying indeed in the dark as just 10 years back there was no ISIS, no Arab spring and Bashar was in full control of Syria. The issue of succession in the kingdom which is blown out of proportion sometimes in the Western media supposedly threatening stability had many mouths shut when the mantle was smoothly and quietly passed on to the heir on King Khalid's death.

Though conservative, the Saudis are a mature lot. The Saudi kingdom is stable under good governance and rule of law. There is a programme of reforms being gradually introduced by the government which not only

⁹ Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood predicament," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/. See also: Patrick Cockburn, "Iraq Crisis: How Saudi Arabia helped Isis take over the north of the country," *Independent*, July 13, 2014, www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/iraq-crisis-how-saudi-arabia-helped-isis-take-over-the-north-of-the-country-9602312.html.

¹⁰ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Saudi Funding of ISIS," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy watch 2275, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis.

¹¹ Joseph Braude, "Saudi Reforms Rising Quietly from Within," *The American Interest*, April 3, 2014, www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2014/04/03/saudi-reforms-rising-quietly-from-within/.

allows more economic and political freedom for the citizens but also elevates the status and role of women in Saudi society.¹²

Egypt

Egypt, in the past enjoyed one of the most dominant positions in the Middle East, that however changed after it signed a peace treaty with Israel at Camp David in 1978, which resulted in Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League.¹³ Egypt also happens to be the birth place of Pan-Islamism in Middle East after the foundation of Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, which aimed at establishing a sharia based government in Egypt. The Brotherhood's struggle was put down by successive governments and ultimately the Brotherhood renounced violence as a means to attaining political power. It won the 2011 elections under the leadership of Muhammad Morsi who was ousted by the secular military under the command of General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in July 2013.¹⁴ Since then there has been a dramatic rise in terrorist incidents. The backlash from the Muslim Brotherhood is based on two assumptions: that change through peaceful democratic movement is not possible, and second, the only way to establish sharia is through violent means of Jihad.¹⁵ The takeover by the military in Egypt has made the country drift into extremism and terrorism which is gradually becoming a new abode for the jihadist fighters, either crossing over from Libya or having contacts with the ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq.¹⁶ It is now becoming self-evident that Egyptian society now faces a grim future at a time when the wave of militant Islam is sweeping across the region.¹⁷

¹² Michael Stephens, "The Kingdom of No Surprises," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2013, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/19/the_kingdom_of_no_surprises_saudi_arabia.

¹³ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Camp David Accords," January 20, 2014, www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/91061/Camp-David-Accords.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Raymond Ibrahim, "The Return of al Qaeda and Jihad," *Frontpage Mag*, August 8, 2013, www.frontpagemag.com/2013/raymond-ibrahim/the-return-of-al-qaeda-and-jihad/.

¹⁶ *Jerusalem Post*, "Egyptian militants say Islamic State guiding Sinai-based jihadists," September 5, 2014, www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Egyptian-militants-say-Islamic-State-guiding-Sinai-based-jihadists-374561.

¹⁷ David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Jihadist Return is Said to Drive Attacks in Egypt," *New York Times*, February 6, 2014, A1.

Jordan

Jordan's grafted democracy has just a ceremonial role while the actual power lies with the King. This became apparent amid the unrest in Jordan, once King Abdullah had to dismiss the whole cabinet along with the Prime Minister following the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. Despite the fact the Jordanian economy has improved under King Abdullah II, the influx of refugees from Syria has forced the government to raise the fuel and electricity prices by withdrawing the subsidies leading to protests as were witnessed in the city of Maan during 2013. Maan was considered the political home of the Muslim Brotherhood but, with the passage of time, Muslim Brotherhood has lost its popularity in favour of more violent and militant groups.¹⁸ Public resentment in Jordan is rising and unless appropriate measures are taken the youth in particular faces the prospects of radicalization through their increased personal interaction with theological primaries. There have been instances where whole group of friends having lost hope in the system and have subsequently ended up with al Qaeda affiliated groups.¹⁹ The situation has become even more alarming due to war in Syria, and the porous border resulting in smuggling of weapons into Jordan. As a consequence, prices of small weapons, like Kalashnikov, have dropped by 75 per cent from \$ 2000 to \$ 500 per weapon. The growing tensions between Muslims and Christians over the conversion issue and the divide between Shiites and Sunnis has reached a perilous stage after Hezbollah and Iranian extremists entered Syria on Assad's side. The politicians in Jordan have described the situation in the following words, "Fire is under the ashes, and the wind is nearby." It just appears to be a matter of time before the volcanic situation erupts in Jordan.

Turkey

Turkey, by certain standards is a much closer model of the western liberal democracy. The Turkish military has always ensured the continuation of the country's traditional secularist policy. Consequently, pro-Islamic parties like The National Order Party, The National Salvation Party, The True Path Party, The Welfare Party, The Motherland Party and The Virtue Party have been kept out of the political realm.²⁰ Justice and Development Party (AKP)

¹⁸ Jean Aziz, "Islamic extremism on Rise in Jordan," *Al-Monitor*, May 18, 2014, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/jordan-fears-syria-war-islamists.html.

¹⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2005), 18, 22.

²⁰ Ömer Taşpınar, "Turkey: The New Model?," *Brookings, The Woodrow Wilson Centre*, Research Paper (April 2012), www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/04/24-turkey-new-model-taspinar.

remain as the unique exception which despite being pro-Islamic have managed to form the government. The party's success is mainly accredited to its pragmatic approach and its ability to attract more votes every time it has gone for elections since 2002. Due to AKP's consistent economic policies and objectives, the military or for that matter the Turkish judiciary could not override the popular mandate.

Turkey remains a unique example in the Muslim world where its founding leaders introduced a radical agenda of social, cultural and religious engineering programme by adopting the Western norms in their entirety. However, despite almost a century long enforced secular order, the stunning success of pro-Islamic Welfare Party in 1994, headed by Necmettin Erbakan, was a clear indication that secular values had just superfluously influenced the Turkish society and its core largely remained pro-Islamic.

The ouster of Erbakan's government in 1997 by the military not only taught some important lessons to the pro-Islamic politicians but it also created a soft corner for the Islamic parties among the Turkish people. AKP's victory in 2002 elections was the manifestation of the same sympathy for pro-Islamic leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The AKP had set a clear agenda of focusing on economy and reducing the role of military in politics. It so far has remained successful in taming the military's influence in Turkish politics mainly due to its alliance with the apolitical movement 'Hizmet', led by Fethullah Gülen, who enjoys a widespread following in police, bureaucracy and judiciary. Hizmet maintained a cooperative relationship with AKP, which has now become strained over investigations related to Ergenekon probe, which resulted in several arrests of AKP members over corruption related charges. AKP alleged that the investigators are affiliated with Hizmet movement, which is running a parallel shadow government through its supporters in civil and military bureaucracy. On the other hand, government's critics fault the AKP's authoritarian leadership which is seeking to introduce political Islam in the Turkish politics.²¹

Seculars and liberals in Turkey consider AKP politics a manifestation of Political Islam, which is not a correct assessment as the party has so far not overtly pursued an Islamic agenda.²² Political Islam is inherently

²¹ Bayram Balci, "What Consequences for Democracy in Turkey of Split Between the AKP and Fetullah Gülen Movement?," *Foreign Policy Journal*, (accessed December 9, 2013), www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2013/12/09/what-consequence-for-democracy-in-turkey-of-split-between-the-akp-and-fetullah-gulen-movement/

²² Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (California: RAND Corporation, 2008), 2-4. Also see: Marc Lynch, *Islamists in a*

different from the progressive (or conservative) democratic Islamic model, as the former involves divine scriptures to be the primary source of legislation, which is not the case in Turkey. Despite this fact, some visible fissures in the level of religious tolerance are appearing in Turkey, which indicate the growing radicalization in the society. Recent incidents of arson at Shiite mosques in Esenyurt district of Istanbul and an alleged veiled glorification of ISIS 'Jihad' after Eid prayers and clashes in Istanbul University between anti and pro-ISIS supporters also illustrate of the rising radicalization phenomenon.²³ The real challenge for the AKP still looms ahead. The leadership of the party needs to be cognizant of the fact that if it consolidates on to more power at the cost of economy, political freedom and basic human rights, it would lead to further divisions and radicalization within the Turkish society which could have serious implications not only for Turkey but for the region as a whole.

Radical elements could find these divisions and instability an attractive opportunity to forge an alliance with the newly emerging Islamic State (IS) in a bid to revive the old Ottoman sultanate or caliphate. Thus the IS militants could in return consider Turkey as their second home due to contagious nature of the region. At the same time any attempt to destabilize the AKP government, by the secular protesters, could also become a recipe for a disaster. Such a scenario could provide military with an excuse to intervene thus endowing Islamists with the justification of waging an armed struggle as has been witnessed in Algeria and Egypt. Exercising power by the institutions within the constitutional framework thus remains imperative for the stability in Turkey.

The current crisis could further enrage and arouse the Kurds, who are already thinking for independence. Recent protests by Kurds in Turkey resulting in several deaths are illustrative of this growing trend.²⁴ Arming them and other militias holds an inherent risk of inciting ethnic and sectarian wars, which could also provoke them to proclaim an independent Kurdistan, thus making fulfilment of peace a distant dream.

Changing Middle East (Washington: Foreign Policy Group, 2012): 34, 41-43, 64, 97-102.

²³ *Hurriyet Daily News*, "Video: Islamists attack students protesting ISIL at Istanbul University," September 26, 2014, www.hurriyetdailynews.com/video-islamists-attack-students-protesting-isil-at-istanbul-university.aspx?PageID=238&NID=72219&NewsCatID=341.

²⁴ Josh Levs, "19 die as violent protests over ISIS sweeps Turkey," *CNN*, October 9, 2014, [www.edition.cnn.com/2014/10/08/world/meast/turkey-isis-protests/](http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/08/world/meast/turkey-isis-protests/)

Syria

Syria has been under the rule of Assad family for over forty years now. Hafez-ul-Assad, who became the President after a coup in 1971, remained Syrian President till his death in 2000. His rule over Syria lasted for almost three decades, during which tens of thousands of Syrians are reported to have been killed by the government agencies. Assad's rule over Syria is remembered as an era of tyranny and oppression, during which Syrians were deprived of their basic human rights and political freedoms. After his death, his son, Bashar-ul-Assad, became president and like his father has kept a tight grip over the state affairs. Being from the minority Alawite sect, comprising 11 per cent of the total population, Assad's family rule was viewed by the majority Sunni population, comprising 74 per cent of the total population,²⁵ with deep scepticism and resentment over human rights issues.

Influenced by the sweeping Arab Spring across the region, Syrian public followed suit taking to the streets. The protests spread far and wide across Syria in early 2011. The Syrian Ba'athist regime resorted to excessive use of force hoping to put down the uprising but instead enraged the public forcing it to turn violent against the government. Within a few months armed resistance appeared in the shape of Free Syrian Army, mainly comprising defected troops from the Syrian armed forces. Syria descended into a civil war. Being from a minority faction President Bashar-ul-Assad even feared his own military, which was gradually thinning out after thousands of defections, and therefore had to depend on mercenaries from outside Syria. Alongside European mercenaries, Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and Shiite militias from Iran are amongst the most prominent groups defending the Assad regime.²⁶ The involvement of these outsiders has added sectarian dimensions to the Syrian conflict, thus making it a Shiite-Sunni regional war and Syria the new hub of global jihad. The pan-Islamic radicals, both from Shiite and Sunni sects, started rushing to this new war front drawing analogies of the 'End Times' apocalyptic prophecies which has paved the way for the emergence of non-state actors like Jabat-ul-Nusra and ISIS or ISIL.²⁷

²⁵ Eyad Abu Shakra, "The Sectarian Map of Syria," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 1, 2013, www.aawsat.net/2013/09/article55315507.

²⁶ *Asharq Al-Awsat*, "Syria: Assad Recruiting East European Mercenaries via Hezbollah", February 25, 2014, www.aawsat.net/2014/02/article55329377

²⁷ Interestingly, both Shiite and Sunni groups engaged in fighting in the Levant consider themselves to be the group which would ultimately conquer the Jerusalem under the awaited Mahdi and kill the anti-Christ or Dajjal. The End Times prophecies predict the great battle of Armageddon would have its origins in Syria which is interpreted both by Shiites and Sunnis in their favour. For

Rise of the ISIS and Other non-state Actors

The origin of the al Qaeda phenomenon in the Levant is primarily attributed to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Later in reaction to reported Iranian proxies' involvement in Syria, like Hezbollah and Shiite militias, to save Assad's regime a number of Sunni militias notably ISIS (now IS) have emerged on the scene. Although the Syrian government at times targets the IS, in a bid to win Western support by convincing them that it actually is fighting the Islamic extremists, but Assad is alleged to be colluding with the IS and buying oil and gas from it, when it suits him.²⁸ After having captured several oil fields, tens of artillery pieces and tanks in Iraq, the ISIS is now believed to be the world's most powerful non-state militant group. Its recent successes are an indication of its growing strength and ability to even take on the conventional armies. Although, the US aerial strikes have brought a halt to its advances in Iraq but to what extent its capabilities of launching fresh offensives have actually been destroyed, still remains unclear. Even if the IS successes are rolled back, the possibility of other non-state actors, emerging out of the same ideology remains fairly high and prospects of this problem spreading to other states within and outside the region appear plausible.

The Israeli-Palestinian Issue — Adding Fuel to Fire

The IS zone of conflict currently includes Syria and Iraq while its zone of influence is trickling down even beyond the Middle East to include states in Europe and North America. Several hundred fighters, including Muslim converts, from European and American continents have joined the ISIS in recent months. Thousands other have crossed over from neighbouring states including Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and even Egypt. It is intriguing that Israel — which has expressed no worry about this group so far and watches its barbaric acts with amusement as they damage the image of Islam and spread mayhem and disorder in the strategic regions of the Muslim world — has not appeared on the radar screen of the IS so far. Its brutal murderous acts, including harshest treatment of minority sects and

details see: Aaron Y. Zelin, "International Jihad and the Syrian Conflict," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Analysis, August 7, 2013, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/international-jihad-and-the-syrian-conflict. See also: Ryan Mauro, "Shiites: Syrian War Will Ignite End Times," *FrontPage Mag*, September 16, 2013, www.frontpagemag.com/2013/ryan-mauro/shiites-syria-war-part-of-end-times-prophecy/.

²⁸ Aryn Baker, "Is the Assad Regime in League with al-Qaeda?," *Time*, January 27, 2014, www.world.time.com/2014/01/27/syria-assad-geneva-al-qaeda/.

communities which have happened to fall in the unfortunate territories under its bloody rule have earned widespread condemnation from the international community. However, despite such outrage this is still receiving recruits and support primarily due to Israel's inhuman treatment of Palestinians with complete impunity. The Palestinian genocide in Gaza has significantly helped the IS to fetch new recruits from across the world on the assurance that the newly established caliphate would ultimately free Jerusalem and Palestinians from the Israeli occupation.²⁹ However such claims even if true do not bother Israel since there is no dearth of allegations that the IS itself could be a creation of Western powers to acquire complete control over the Middle East oil reserves.

The contradictory and biased attitude towards brutalities committed by Israel on the one hand and non-state actors like ISIS on the other cause desperation and enrage the Muslim youth to join these militant organizations. Sunni militant Palestinian groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad etc. could also find motivation to join the ISIS, thus bringing ISIS to the very borders of Israel. There have been reports of defections of Lebanese and Syrian soldiers from their militaries to join the ISIS. Reports regarding defection of al-Qaeda operatives in Syria, Yemen, Jordan and elsewhere, to the newly established 'caliphate', are also indicative of the ISIS expanding to other regional states. Reports of some ultra liberals from Egypt joining the ISIS show the effectiveness of its propaganda techniques. There have been reports of large rallies in favour of IS in Jordan's capital. The influence of radical Islamic militants is spreading towards the states bordering Israel. If trouble erupts anywhere near the Israeli border the latter's response will be ruthless as it has always been. The brunt will be faced by the hapless Palestinians in the destruction of their lives and property. The western community will watch the killing and destruction silently but this time will have a new element to blame for the trouble — the IS, instead of the traditional Hezbollah. Conspiracy theories suggesting western hand in the creation of the IS and earlier the Al Qaeda will become murkier but the net loser and sufferer will be the Muslim world where disorder is increasing helping Israel to grow stronger and more lethal. Whose are the global interests that the non-state actors like al Qaeda and the IS serving – the Muslim world's or the West's? That is the question to ponder by the frustrated young Muslims who are joining their ranks.

²⁹ Dalit Halevi and Ari Soffer, "ISIS Explains Why 'Islamic State' Not Supporting Hamas," *Arutz Sheva 7 Israel National News*, July 10, 2014, www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/182751#.U_W3wcWSxJE. See also: Roi Kais, "Jordan, Israel cooperate in face of ISIS threat," *Yedioth Internet (ynet news)*, June 25, 2014, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4534226,00.html

Considerations outside the Region

Afghanistan and Pakistan

Afghanistan is the state which would be most profoundly affected due to the escalating conflict in the Levant and Iraq. The Taliban, who aspire to implement the sharia based system coupled with their tribal version of Islam, would be the natural beneficiary after the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan due to the demographic advantage which they enjoy. The Taliban spokesman recently welcomed the gains made by the ISIS in Iraq and Syria and have promised to send fighters in support of their cause.³⁰ Although the Taliban fighters lack the capacity and capability to launch an offensive in an ISIS style invasion towards Pakistan, but they would try to consolidate their hold on the tribal belt along Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where they could thus practice their version of sharia law.

Afghanistan is already falling under the Taliban control. Districts like Ghazni, Helmand, Musa Qila and Sangin etc. have almost slipped out of government control after fierce fighting.³¹ These gains by militants in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria would boost the morale of the rebel groups in Pakistan, some of which are already weighing the option of maintaining a cooperative relationship with the ISIS. Despite the signing of Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan government, it is unlikely to change the overall strategic equation of the future. Taliban are likely to dominate the Afghan landscape on the rural side and their traditional strongholds like Kandahar, Helmand and Nangarhar provinces,³² while the urban centres are likely to be dominated by Afghan security forces. These successes could embolden the militant groups in Pakistan to step up their activities against military targets and the minority sects.

Anti-Shiite groups, like Jais-ul-Adal, have already started imitating the ISIS tactics to attack Iranian border posts from the Pakistani side,³³

³⁰ Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan: The Allure of ISIS," *New York Review of Books* (NYR), October 6, 2014, www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/oct/06/allure-isis/.

³¹ Rod Nordland and Taimoor Shah, "Afghans Say Taliban are Nearing Control of Key District," *New York Times*, September 6, 2014, A12. See also: Mirwais Harooni, "Afghan forces battle for control of symbolic Kunduz province," *Reuters*, August 37, 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/27/us-afghanistan-north-idUSKBN0GR0V A20140827.

³² Azam Ahmed, "Taliban Making Military Gains in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, July 27, 2014, A1.

³³ Thomas Erdbrink, "Insurgents in Pakistan Stepping Up Iran Strikes," *New York Times*, October 10, 2014, A12.

which could further complicate the already fragile equation between Shiite and Sunni sects within Pakistan. Such attacks, if continued, could cause tensions between Pakistan and Iran at diplomatic level. Pakistani Taliban leaders are also gradually showing their allegiance to the self-appointed Caliph of ISIS, Abu-Bakar Al-Baghdadi, which could attract militants from the region to come and join the Taliban or vice-versa.³⁴ Pakistan is presently engaged in fighting the terrorist gangs on its western front while its relationship with India continues to be problematic with skirmishes on the LOC disturbing the fragile peace. Pakistan thinks the skirmishes are aimed at diverting Pakistan's attention from its campaign against the extremists.

Is There a Way Forward?

The situation in the region is extremely complex and numerous issues seem to be overlapping. Contradictory approaches of states within and outside the region and competing global interests have made it almost impossible to craft a cohesive policy over the escalating crisis in the 'Greater' Middle East. Challenges like resolution of the Palestinian dispute, unsolicited foreign intervention in the strategic region, formation of legitimate representative governments, political and religious freedoms etc are some of the most immediate and compelling issues which have to be resolved by the regional states considering the geographical realities, ethnic tensions and sectarian issues. In this whole crisis the most critical role envisaged is that of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the US under the umbrella of the Arab League, which at the moment is completely out of action due to internal divisions. The UN has to assume a larger role under which regional organizations should be devising the action plan.

Contemplating the dangers of this escalating conflict, the Europeans have started to take critical steps in the right direction as Sweden becomes the first European member to recognize the Palestinian statehood while the British Parliament has also voted in its favour.³⁵ Such steps are just preliminaries in showing the seriousness towards adopting the right approach for the resolution of the conflict in Middle East which, at the

³⁴ Zahir Shah Sherazi, "Six Top TTP commanders announce allegiance to Islamic State's Baghdadi," *Dawn*, October 14, 014, www.dawn.com/news/1137908/six-top-ttp-commanders-announce-allegiance-to-islamic-states-baghdadi.

³⁵ Ian Black and Peter Beaumont, "MPs' vote on Palestine state recognition is part of growing international trend," *Guardian*, October 13, 2014, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/13/mp-vote-palestine-state-recognition-growing-international-trend

moment, appears to be escalating into a major regional war along ethnic and sectarian lines and might take decades to stabilize or normalize.

Conclusion

The rise of new non-state actors across the region, including ISIS, appears to be even a bigger challenge than al Qaeda. Any direct intervention by the US or NATO could prove to be a bigger mistake than that of Iraq's 2003 invasion, which provided the opportunity to these militants to depict the Western forces as 'crusaders invading the Muslim lands'. Such militant rhetoric would be difficult to refute under the prevailing circumstances, consequently the situation would benefit the militants/terrorists. Arming the Shiite, Sunni and Peshmerga fighters would strengthen the sectarian and ethnic militias which could subsequently result in even greater divisions leading to war along the existing ethno-sectarian fault lines. The only rational course of action therefore is to apply a regional solution to this complex issue. Consequently, important states like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran would have to rise determinedly against the ethno religious challenge and devise a coherent strategy to pacify the contending forces. Even Israel would have to heed the voice of sanity and freeze its settlements and seriously resume the peace process. Finding a peaceful and durable solution to the Palestinian issue, besides safeguarding political rights and religious freedom in authoritarian states, is imperative to mitigate threats posed by rising extremism. European powers also need to understand that they have to come together for fixing the problems created by them almost a century ago, which entails taking regional states on board and encouraging them to find a political solution. The time is running out and inaction could result in devastating consequences for the region and beyond. ■