



## **The Emerging Threat of ISIS**

*Aersh Danish*

*Non - Resident Fellow, CAPS*

As early as two years ago, the name Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)<sup>1</sup> would have been unknown to many in the strategic and academic circles, and yet, today, it has become one of the most discussed topics, not just among scholars but also in the households. From being an affiliate of al Qaeda, to becoming one of the deadliest terrorist organisations, ISIS has had quite a dramatic rise.

Much of ISIS's ascent could be attributed to the Arab Spring, which was used by its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, to recruit supporters and promote his group. It was the brutality with which ISIS operated that brought the group to the forefront. But al Qaeda was worried that such violence could alienate potential supporters and this led a growing rift between the two organisations<sup>2</sup>, and on June 2013, ISIS declared its separation from al Qaeda.

Although fighting for the similar goal of establishing a pan-Islamic rule, al Qaeda and ISIS differ in some critical ways. First, due to its highly prolific activity in the Arab Spring, ISIS has managed to generate an experienced and battle toughened militia force whose brutality makes al Qaeda operatives look quite gentle. Secondly, ISIS is not just an armed battalion. It actively seeks to create a "state" by forming a semi-government structure in the areas it controls. This body undertakes several development projects like building of markets, distribution of food and fuel and management of traffic.<sup>3</sup> The Sunni minority of Iraq, feeling oppressed by the largely Shia dominated Government and security forces and the Shia militias, began to look up to such demi-legal structures to seek refuge and protection. This has provided ISIS with a considerable social and political support, which has helped it to legitimise its goals. Unlike al Qaeda, whose units hide in the mountains, ISIS is more socially integrated; which makes counteractions difficult – both militarily and ideologically. And finally, ISIS is financially more self-sufficient than most other terrorist groups.<sup>4</sup> Over the years it has managed to secure its own set of private donors and it has also taken over major oil fields in Iraq and Syria<sup>5</sup>, and oil smuggling is a major source of funding along with ransom, stealing cash and revenue generated through taxation.

These strengths have further fuelled ISIS's ambitions, and, on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2014, it, declared the re-formation of the Islamic Caliphate with Baghdadi as the Caliph of the Muslim world. None of the Muslim countries have acknowledged this Caliphate and it is unlikely that they will even do so in the near future; nonetheless Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia are getting wary of the mounting confidence and capabilities of the ISIS.

India has its own reasons to fear ISIS, and such panic does not emerge from the fact that Baghdadi mentioned the country in his Ramadan message. Iraq is India's second largest oil supplier and this poses a more serious concern. Although it is highly unlikely for ISIS to operate directly in India, the regional terrorist groups might ally with it and such a situation is certainly concerning.

This possibility of change of allegiances is a concern not just for India for the global security scenario. The rise of the ISIS has been coupled with fading influence of al Qaeda, with its offshoots increasingly becoming self-directing. Terrorists groups do not form alliances arbitrarily or purely on matching ideologies, but seek those who have higher capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Several terrorist groups around the world are already pledging allegiance to the ISIS because they feel it to be more effective as an organisation. Several Palestinian groups have already done so and Tehreek-e-Khilafat became the first group in South Asia to pledge support to ISIS and it is likely that this trend may continue. Various locally limited groups, which have been craving for al Qaeda's attention, might now look towards the ISIS for support. A sign of growing influence of the ISIS could be the fact that al Nusra front broke its long lasting alliance with al Qaeda to pledge allegiance to the ISIS. But such a trend can trigger a power struggle between al Qaeda and ISIS, which could potentially change the dynamics of international terrorism. Either both the groups will become rivals, or ideological commonalities might result either of them approaching the other for a thaw.

Also, it is possible that the brutality of ISIS may drive groups away from it. Arguments have also been made that the split between al Qaeda and the ISIS is just a ruse planned to ensure that the assistance by anti-Assad groups is continued, but they have not received much backing.<sup>7</sup> Either way, a new phase of Islamist terrorism is emerging, and ISIS is amassing power everyday. The creation of a Caliphate reflects on the fact that ISIS has achieved what al Qaeda only spoke about and any group that exudes such ambitions can be taken blithely.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

<sup>1</sup> The Islamic State of and Syria is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Shaam (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). On 29th July 2014, they renamed themselves as the Islamic State (IS).

<sup>2</sup> T. Y. McCormick, "Al Qaeda Core: A Short History", *Foreign Policy*, at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/17/al\\_qaeda\\_core\\_a\\_short\\_history](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/17/al_qaeda_core_a_short_history), accessed on 16 June 2014

<sup>3</sup> Refer Matt Bradley, "Militant Leader Focuses on Gaining Ground", *Wall Street Journal*, at <http://online.wsj.com/articles/iraq-militant-leader-focuses-on-gaining-ground-1402883030>, accessed on 25 June 2014

<sup>4</sup> n. 2

<sup>5</sup> "ISIS using Oil to create its own State, Says Expert", *Daily Sabah*, 10 July 2014, at <http://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2014/07/11/isis-using-oil-to-create-its-own-state-say-experts#pp>, accessed on 10 July, 2014

<sup>6</sup> Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B. K. Potter (2014), "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (New Delhi, SAGE, 2014), Vol. 58, No.2, pp. 199-225.

<sup>7</sup> Cleo Paskal, "Expert: Global Grand Alliance Needed Against Wahhabi Terror", *Huffington Post*, 24 June 2014, See. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cleo-paskal/expert-global-grand-allia\\_b\\_5520637.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cleo-paskal/expert-global-grand-allia_b_5520637.html), accessed on 25 June 2014