

## South Asia, a fertile ground for ISIS

*Does the rise of the Islamic State have anything to do with Islam? What does it want and what is its strategy? In The ISIS Caliphate: From Syria to the Doorsteps of India, Stanly Johny, International Affairs Editor of The Hindu, explains what makes it stand apart from other jihadist groups and why it continues to inspire Muslim youth from different parts of the world, including India. An extract:*

What makes ISIS different from other jihadist groups is that it's an insurgency as well as a proto-state at the same time. The way it operates is different from other organisations. Al-Qaeda, the most powerful force in the global jihadist landscape till the rise of ISIS, is largely a hit-and-run outfit. Osama bin Laden didn't create a state. Nor did he declare himself as the Caliph of the world's Muslims. He was always at the mercy of foreign governments or intelligence agencies — Saudi Arabia and Pakistan during the Afghan civil war, Sudan in the early days of al-Qaeda, Taliban during the most important operational phase and again Pakistan in his final years. They operated from caves and deserts and used asymmetric forces against those whom they deemed enemies. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on the other side, established a proto-state that at one point of time was as big as the United Kingdom, ruling over about 2 million people. ISIS used both asymmetric and conventional warfare tactics in the battlefield.

This unique positioning is the key reason ISIS managed to attract more foreign fighters than any other jihadist group. It looks at the world through a core and periphery prism. It doesn't believe in nation states, but only in a perpetually expanding Caliphate. The territories which the Caliph has direct control over make up the core of the world system, according to ISIS. The rest is periphery from where it will attract fighters and resources to enrich the core and expand it beyond the boundaries "created by men". This theory of expansion has been the fundamental foreign policy doctrine of Baghdadi's Caliphate. Despite large-scale military setbacks at the core, ISIS still remains a global terrorist force. In Nigeria, Boko Haram, the jihadist group that controls parts of the country, has declared allegiance to ISIS. In Libya, a branch of the Islamic State controlled Sirte, the assassinated former dictator Moammar Gaddafi's home town, for months and has presence in other cities and the country's deserts...

In Afghanistan, ISIS members and sympathisers have already set up a wilayat called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant — Khorasan Province in the eastern Nangarhar province. The group has carried out several suicide attacks, mainly targeting Shias in the already troubled country. It's from Khorasan that ISIS is handling its South Asia operations, including in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. ISIS hasn't carried out any major terror attack in India, nor does the group have any organisational presence in the country. But it has lured dozens of Indians into its fold.

It's evident from its actions that the ISIS leadership has seen South Asia as a fertile ground for the organisation. The history of jihadist insurgency, high Muslim population and growing tensions between communities may all have prompted the group to focus on the region in its quest for expansion. Understandably, it chose Afghanistan, which has been at war with itself for decades, as its operation centre...

India has also been high on the group's agenda. In the 13th issue of ISIS's online English magazine *Dabiq*, Hafiz Saeed Khan, the Wali of Khorasan [who was later killed], said it won't be long before Kashmir is run by the organisation.

From across India dozens were attracted by ISIS. Some have gone from India to Khorasan, while some others travelled from the Gulf countries they were working in to Iraq and Syria to live under the Caliphate. Indian authorities have arrested several people who they say were part of ISIS cells from different parts of the country. But surprisingly, one of the most-affected States by this ISIS

influence was India's most socially advanced one. In fact, ISIS's India connect became national headlines when 21 people, including women and children, from the southern State of Kerala went missing in 2016. Most of the youth who went missing are educated professionals hailing from middle class or upper middle class families, nullifying the argument that lack of education and poverty drive extremist ideas among the youth. All these developments, from establishing wilayats in Afghanistan and Libya to attracting youth from India and Pakistan, suggest that ISIS may have been weakened at its core but it's far from defeated.

The India-Japan economic relationship remains underwhelming in relation to strategic ties

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