

DOWN, BUT DEFINITELY NOT OUT: ON FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

As the fight against the dreaded terrorist group, the [Islamic State \(IS\) is drawing to a close](#), issues such as the future of terrorism in West Asia and beyond and concerns about the human rights of those who had been wittingly or unwittingly drawn into the vortex of such movements offer food for thought.

Credible reports point to the IS nearing extinction. What was once described as a formidable 'Caliphate' of enormous wealth and with huge potential for expansion is now just a dot on the soil of Syria and Iraq. Ever since it lost control last year over two major cities, Raqqa (Syria) and Mosul (Iraq), it has lost its sheen. For once the U.S.'s strategy of forming a coalition of forces, styled the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), seemed to have paid off. Added to this was the master stroke of drawing substantially on the talent of determined and dedicated Kurdish fighters.

Final showdown: on IS

A small number of hardened IS men is likely to be still hiding in the Baghouz area of Syria to offer a semblance of resistance. The SDF has taken its own time to wind up the operations there, with a view to ensuring the orderly evacuation of civilians holed up and awaiting their rescue from the IS's clutches. Reports are that the nearest safe sanctuary for refugees, at al-Hol in northeast Syria, is now more than 60,000 strong, with women and children constituting the majority.

The temptation, however, to dismiss the IS as one of those upstarts which make an appearance once in a while in modern history and offer no lessons for the future has to be resisted. This is because the pull internationally for the IS was undeniably greater than for al-Qaeda. It projected a tighter hierarchy and structure, though in a smaller geography, and drew thousands of volunteers from different nations. The impact of this assembly of men and women, at times across religions, was lethal beyond belief. This model of organising people solely to unleash terror after acquiring formidable human and material resources — oil and government treasuries in the IS's case — could be expected to inspire all those playing the card of Islamic extremism.

However powerful the message of violence and savagery that the IS sent during the past few years may be, there are facets of individual tragedy intertwined with the sordid movement that cannot be lost sight of. For example, [the story of Shamima Begum](#), a British-born teenager who in 2015 fled with two friends to join the IS, stands out here for its uniqueness and excessive human misery.

Begum, 19, was in the news recently. Of the other two, one died in a bombing of Raqqa city, while there is little information on the third. Of Bangladeshi parentage, Begum was stripped of her British citizenship last year because of her IS links. In the past few months she had expressed her desire to return to her home country, obviously after being disillusioned with the IS, and mainly to seek medical treatment for a child who was ailing but subsequently passed away. Begum, who is "married" to a [Dutch IS fighter](#), has said that she lost two other children. The Dutch fighter, 27, is now under detention in a neighbouring prisoner camp.

The U.K. Home Secretary, who said Begum had been denied permission to re-enter the country, has been criticised for his alleged disregard of the human rights of a young British mother now in distress. The ruling against her being let back into the U.K. highlights the modern dilemma of how exactly to blend compassion with the need to combat terror relentlessly in parts of the globe. There is the charge that the U.K. Foreign Office did not act fast enough to rescue the child, who was entitled to U.K. citizenship. In its defence, the Foreign Office is said to have taken the stand that there were too many risks involved in sending a team to Syria for this purpose.

Begum is one of several IS followers in Syria and Iraq who are anxious to return to their respective home countries, but cannot do so because of the hard stance of their governments against their repatriation. These governments, mostly in Europe and nations with a Muslim minority, such as Germany, France and Belgium, believe that there is no place for mercy for their citizens who left their homes consciously in order to join terror organisations. This uncompromising stand seems cruel against the backdrop of credible accounts of IS women volunteers being subjected to slavery and sexual abuse.

In the final analysis, the IS saga provides a case study of how the draw of terrorist ideology can gain strength, expand and then evaporate at equally fast speed. We know that extremism of any kind — including Naxalism in India — is a magnet for some young minds. The heady cocktail of a spirit of adventure and frustrations early on in life is what spurs youngsters such as Begum, and no amount of censorship or counselling, either online or in forums such as places of worship, can wean them away. Equally true is a case of swift disenchantment.

It is too soon to conclude that the IS is past history. Governments are quite conscious of the gaps in their border control measures which have enabled some IS cadres to sneak back into their home countries. This is analogous to what happened soon after the decline of al-Qaeda following Osama bin Laden's death. The infiltration, even if it is a trickle, could be extremely dangerous if one considers the insidious nature of the sleeper cells of many terror groups which remain undetected for several years but come to notice only after their involvement in deadly operations, examples being the 9/11 (New York City in 2001) and 26/11 (Mumbai in 2008) attacks. Significantly, the Iraqi President, Barham Salih, went on record a few days ago to say that although the 'Caliphate' has been eliminated, there are sleeper cells and extremist groups on the Syrian border which needed to be taken care of.

The presence, however, of sleeper cells alone may not be sufficient for terror groups to gain ground. Experience in West Asia is that an unstable internal security situation contributes greatly to the growth of terrorism. A civil war such as the one in Yemen is conducive for even a small group to showcase its philosophy. Afghanistan is another example of a disturbed scenario that lends fodder to groups such as the Taliban. Pakistan is in the same boat, with the active assistance of its own variant of the Taliban and organisations such as the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Lashkar e-Taiba.

It is this scenario that cautions against any optimism with regard to the IS and its future. That organisation, in its present format, may not rear its head in the future. But its followers who have exited Iraq and Syria can find ready acceptance elsewhere. This is a real challenge to intelligence apparatuses the world over.

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