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The Rise and Future of ISIS

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The article discusses the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and focuses on its future. It explores the major milestones in the phenomenal rise of ISIS, which has surprised many geopolitical and military experts. It also briefly traces its journey as it gained ground in parts of Iraq, Syria and Libya, and the support it received from unexpected quarters of the world. The strong presence of ISIS in the digital medium has become a defining feature of the group. The military and political characteristics of the ISIS have also made it vulnerable by making it a visible target, denying it the advantages of a formless, diffused organisation, which has been the traditional refuge of terrorist organisations worldwide. This article explores the future scenarios that are likely to manifest with the ISIS as it begins to lose power and influence in its traditional strongholds. It discusses three possible scenarios based on the loss of leadership, loss of territory and one in which the group retains leadership and territory in the backdrop of constant digital presence. The article also takes into account a wild card scenario envisaging ISIS obtaining a nuclear bomb from a state's arsenal or developing one on its own.

The phenomenal rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)[1] has surprised many in the geopolitical and military world alike. The rise of ISIS, which declared itself as an Islamic caliphate on 29 June 2014, has been one of the defining events of the twenty-first century. After the last Islamic caliphate was abolished by virtue of a decision issued by late Turkish President Kemal Ataturk in

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1924,[2] very few imagined the possibility of its transmutation in the form of ISIS. The ISIS witnessed an unprecedented growth in the first year of its declaration, capturing large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and garnering followers from different parts of the world. In 2014 itself, ISIS had its writ running in an area stretching from Iraq's Diyala to Syria's Aleppo.[3] The lack of cogent regional and international strategy to oppose ISIS further abetted its rise.[4]

This article traces the journey of its rise in Iraq and Syria as well as other parts of the world where the group has found resonance with local terror groups, many of whom have sworn allegiance to it. Through the narrative of its phenomenal rise, the article critically explores the possible future scenarios which are likely to manifest for the group. It takes into account the loss of its 'upper echelon leadership'[5] and recurring territorial losses in the recent past to analyse the future scenarios. In the process, it also dwells on the importance of leadership and territory to a group which proclaims it to be a caliphate. It analyses the implications of neutralisation of leadership and loss of territory for ISIS and brings out the possible options with its leaders to keep the terror group relevant.

Ideological Moorings

Towards the end of twenty-first century, two events, that is, fall of the Soviet Union and tearing down of the Berlin wall leading to the collapse of the East German state, were perceived by many intellectuals as a victory for democratic ideals. Francis Fukuyama, in his seminal work the 'End of History?', published first as an article in 1989 in the journal, *The National Interest*, argued that liberal democracy is the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and entrenched democracy is the final form of human government. Elaborating further in a book published in 1992, he proclaimed that the days of Islam's cultural conquests are over and it has no resonance for young people in the developed world.[6] But just as the world was beginning to appear more peaceful post the Cold War and the Soviets were pulling out from their engagement in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden formed Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 1989.[7] The main reason for Al-Qaeda's rise in Afghanistan was the power vacuum created by the Soviet withdrawal. Osama bin Laden was also convinced that victory in Afghanistan by asymmetric warfare can be replicated in other parts of the world. The 1991 invasion of Iraq by the United States (US) and its allies and Saudi Arabia's support to the US led Osama Bin Laden to seek refuge in Sudan from 1991 to 1996. Sudan, in

the early 1990s, was home for Islamists from many parts of the world. This is where Osama bin Laden came in touch with many important members of Muslim Brotherhood, including Ayman al-Zawahiri.[8]

A common link between all Islamic extremists in the recent past has been the basic ideology drawn from the preaching's of Hasan al-Baana and Sayyed Qutb.[9] Hasan al-Banna, an Egyptian watchmaker and school teacher, formed Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 and through his preaching, offered an Islamic alternative to the concept of nation state.[10] His thoughts provided the radicals with a foundation for the philosophical defence of an extremist form of Islam. Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimeen) came into being as an ideological movement and later, it evolved into a political movement. However, after 88 years of its existence as a political movement, Muslim Brotherhood came closest to achieving political power for the first time in Egypt when Mohammed Morsi was elected in 2012, although and ousted in July the next year.[11] However, one can argue that Hasan al-Banna and Sayyed Qutb would never have wanted to be remembered as successful politicians, but more as a guiding light to their Islamic followers, which provided an Islamic alternative to Western cultural and political thought.

Muslim Brotherhood's main achievement was, once again, reigniting the idea of an Islamic caliphate after the fall of Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. The ideology, propagated mainly by Sayyed Qutb, has been used by the extremists to motivate their followers, providing them with an opportunity of achieving a tangible goal of caliphate in an otherwise metaphysical world of religion. The Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban, Boko Haram, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS draw their ideology from Muslim Brotherhood.[12] The founder of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had joined Muslim Brotherhood during his graduate school days in the early 1990s on the insistence of his uncle, Ismail al-Badri. During that time, many of the Muslim Brotherhood members in Baghdad were peaceful Salafists[13] who wanted states to impose Islamic law but did not advocate revolt if the states fail to do so. But Baghdadi quickly gravitated towards those jihadist Salafis whose strict creed led them to call for the overthrow of rulers they considered betrayers of the faith. Baghdadi's older brother, Jum`a, was part of this movement. So was Baghdadi's mentor, Muhammad Hardan, a member of the Brotherhood at one time, who had fought in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s.[14]

Rise: The Phoenix

The 9/11 attacks by Al-Qaeda forced the Americans to re-view their understanding of the external world, and also provided another reason to the US to launch an offensive against Iraq.[15] So, in many ways, 9/11-driven US engagements in Iraq were also the precursor for creating conditions ripe for the rise of ISIS in Iraq. Although the war was won easily by the US coalition in less than three weeks, it lacked a post-conflict management plan and made some legendary mistakes in the process. Ambassador Paul Bremer, the man who replaced Lieutenant General Jay Garner in May 2003, was permitted to rule by decree. Among his most notable decrees were the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Orders 1 and 2, which dismantled the Baath Party and Iraqi Army, respectively. The orders led to dismantling of the entire civil service of approximately 15,000–30,000 people and 400,000 soldiers of the Iraqi Army, who were to provide the basic structural support to post-war Iraqi administration and military.[16] The decision also affected Sunni Arabs the hardest, further alienating this group from post-war reconstruction process. Under the former regime, Sunni Arabs received the lion's share of resources and held the most prominent positions within the government and military. The CPA orders sealed their hope of playing any role in the future power structure in Iraq. The US ground forces in Iraq were grossly inadequate in number for stabilising a country of 25 million people. Moreover, the symbol of the Iraqi Army to the Iraqi people was misinterpreted by the CPA and it changed the way Iraqis viewed the whole episode by providing it a semblance of occupation. Indeed, the CPA underestimated the volatility of disenfranchising Baathists and Iraqi soldiers. It denied the post-invasion Iraqi military experienced leaders and troops.

On 13 July 2003, the new provisional Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) was formed. The IGC represented the various Iraqi sects, in particular the three main components: Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Sectarian representation was given priority in the provisional council rather than professional competence. This criterion continued during formation of Iraqi interim government in June 2004. Political parties were formed under the sectarian vision, fuelling the rise and escalation of sectarian violence in Iraq, and sectarian division became entrenched in the society over a period of time.[17] These political divisions along sectarian lines drove many of the earlier Sunni Baathists and soldiers to join insurgency that would eventually mutate into ISIS. In June 2003, an Arab Sunni cleric in the 'Sunni Triangle'—the area west and north of

Baghdad, including Fallujah, Tikrit, Ramadi and Samarra—called for a jihad against the US and for Arab Sunnis to rise up and overthrow their occupiers.[18] Thus, the dissolution of army led to civil unrest, growth in insurgency and eight years of prolonged US operations in Iraq which resulted in death of 4,491 American soldiers.[19]

Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai, otherwise known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was born in 1971 in Samarra, Iraq, to a lower middle-class Sunni family.[20] He belonged to a tribe which claimed descent from Prophet Muhammad. Though the details are not very clear, Baghdadi reportedly visited Afghanistan in the late 1990s with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian who founded Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) after the US-led invasion in 2003. Both Baghdadi and Zarqawi had close relations with the Taliban during their years in Afghanistan. They both shared Taliban's sectarian hatred of Iranians and Shiites. It is likely that Baghdadi and Zarqawi left Afghanistan after the American intervention following 9/11.[21]

Back in Iraq, Baghdadi founded Jaysh Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamaah (Army of the People of the Sunna and Communal Solidarity), an insurgent group that fought the US troops and their local allies in northern and central Iraq. It needs little imagination to conclude that many from the dismantled Iraqi Army would form part of this group. However, in February 2004, Baghdadi was arrested in Fallujah while visiting a friend who was on the US's wanted list. He was detained at Camp Bucca for 10 months.[22] Many of his 24,000 inmates at Bucca were Sunni Arabs who had served in Saddam's military and intelligence services. After the release of Baghdadi on 8 December 2004, he reconnected with his co-inmates.

In October 2004, Al-Qaeda had established a new branch in Iraq by absorbing a jihadist militia run by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and putting him in charge of it. Zarqawi wanted to create an Islamic state by using AQI to provoke a sectarian civil war between Iraq's minority Sunnis and the majority Shiites, thereby forcing the Sunnis to turn to his group for protection. The Al-Qaeda reluctantly agreed to Zarqawi's brutal programme because they wanted a hand in the new insurgency against the Americans. Needless to say, Paul Bremer's decision to dismantle the Iraqi civil service and army would have contributed a lot towards achievement of Zarqawi's objective. As per reports, more than 25 of ISIS's top 40 leaders had once served in the Iraqi military.[23] After his release from Bucca, Baghdadi also established contact with Al-Qaeda and went to

Damascus. In Syria, Baghdadi, due to his knowledge of Quran, handled AQI's online propaganda. He used his tribal connections in Iraq and his ties with other jihadist groups to help foreign jihadists cross Syria's border into his native land.[24]

In 2006, AQI organised itself further and formed an umbrella organisation for jihadist groups. Baghdadi's group was one of the first to join. Soon after, Zarqawi declared his intent to establish an Islamic state, directly countermanding Al-Qaeda's instructions to wait until after the Americans had withdrawn. After his death in June 2006 in a US air strike, his successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, an Egyptian jihadist, went ahead with the plan. In October 2006, Masri dissolved AQI and founded the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), and the group continued to privately pledge allegiance to Al-Qaeda.[25] Masri assumed the title of Minister of War although he actually ran the new organisation; and the titular emir of the group, Abu Umar, an Iraqi, was just a figurehead in the beginning. Military setbacks forced the Islamic State to remain dormant and underground during the period. In May 2010, after the US killed the only two men above him, Baghdadi emerged as the emir.[26]

Post the Arab Spring, the growing unrest in Syria in 2011 presented Baghdadi with an opportunity to inject violence. Baghdadi set up a secret branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, by sending an AQI operative, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, to Syria to organise jihadist cells in the region of the Islamic State, which later came to be known as the Nusra Front. Initially, Nusra cooperated with other Sunni groups as per instructions of Al-Qaeda's new emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had replaced bin Laden in May 2011 after he was killed by the US Navy SEALs. Baghdadi, who had secretly sworn an oath of allegiance to Zawahiri, wanted to establish an Islamic state by territorial conquest in Syria, but Nusra's cooperation with the other Sunni rebels was not helping the plan.

In March 2013, Raqqa fell to the Syrian opposition.[27] The ISI began moving military assets to consolidate control and break into new battlefronts in Syria. Going against the diktat of Zawahiri, Baghdadi announced publicly that Nusra was part of the Islamic State and renamed it as the ISIS. Nusra's leader, Julani, rejected the merger and renewed his pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda commander, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Zawahiri accepted the oath of Nusra's leader and ordered Baghdadi to restrict his activities to Iraq. However, Baghdadi wanted the control of Syria as well. Members of Nusra loyal to Baghdadi's leadership began to

capture territory in eastern Syria, clearing it of other Sunni rebel groups including Nusra. By February 2014, Zawahiri had no choice but to expel the ISIS from Al-Qaeda. However, Zawahiri publicly denied the defection of al-Nusra fighters to ISIS, which further fuelled the tension between the groups. By March 2014, over 3,000 fighters had been killed in battles between ISIS and al-Nusra. In the summer of 2014, ISIS cleared one of its key strongholds in Deir al-Zor in Syria, which included oilfields that were an important source of al-Nusra's income. In 2014, there was also evidence of continued cooperation between ISIS and al-Nusra on the battlefield in some areas, but by 2015, there were no publicly reported instances of cooperation between the two organisations.[28]

In January 2014, the ISIS captured Fallujah in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.[29] By June 2014, ISIS had captured Mosul and Tikrit, and seized the strategic border crossing between Syria's Deir al-Zor province and Iraq.[30] With that victory, the ISIS dominated territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq allowing free passage of fighters, weapons, oil and money. On 29 June, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of an Islamic caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq. Baghdadi took the title of Caliph Ibrahim and justified it with the genealogy of his tribe, which traced its lineage back to Muhammad's descendants. This was considered an important step towards providing legitimacy to Baghdadi's leadership as caliph, as some Islamic prophecies of the end times say a man descended from the Prophet will one day rule as caliph (*khalifa*)—a religious leader and ruler of the entire Muslim community, who hasn't existed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I.[31]

The declaration of caliphate also led to number of jihadi groups from different parts of the world swearing allegiance to the caliph, including, among others, Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen led by Sheikh Mamoun Hatem; Taliban of Pakistan in Kharasan led by Sheikh Abu Yazeed Abdul Qahir al-Khurasani; Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia; and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), led by Abu Abdullah Othman al-Assimi.[32] By August 2014, ISIS had conquered Kurdish towns of Sinjar and Zumar and captured the Mosul Dam in Iraq.[33] In September 2014, US President Barack Obama called to build an international coalition to defeat ISIS and the US and Arab allies launched air strikes on ISIS in Syria and their positions in northern Iraq.[34] Simultaneously, a major regrouping exercise was carried out by Kurdish and Iraqi government forces.

Beginning of the Fall?

The year 2015 was a mixed year for ISIS fortunes; it witnessed the ISIS spreading its wings internationally to Afghanistan, Nigeria, Egypt and Libya. In January 2015, Hafiz Saeed Khan and Abdul Rauf swore allegiance to Baghdadi and ISIS, Khorasan was established in Afghanistan. By the end of 2015, Nigeria and Egypt had ISIS branches, with Boko Haram joining in Nigeria and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis—an Egyptian radical Islamic terrorist group—pledging allegiance to Baghdadi and forming the ISIS' Sinai branch.[35] The ISIS fighters also captured Ramadi in Iraq, Palmyra in Syria and took full control of Sirte in Libya in May 2015. Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam captured Derna in Libya for ISIS in October 2015. However, beginning of the year also witnessed the first military setback for ISIS when coalition forces drove ISIS out of the Syrian border town of Kobane in January and Iraqi forces and Shiite militias liberated Tikrit from ISIS in March 2015. By June 2015, Kurdish militia, backed by Syrian rebels and coalition air strikes, seized the town of Tal Abyad on the Syrian–Turkey border from ISIS, which it had occupied for more than a year. Liberation of Tal Abyad, which was one of two main transit points on a key supply route to de facto ISIS capital Raqqa, was a major achievement. In July 2015, Turkey joined the war on ISIS and Turkish warplanes bombed ISIS positions inside Syria for the first time in a dramatic toughening of Ankara's stance. Though the Turkish raids were mostly aimed at positions of the Kurdistan Workers Party in Iraq and Syria, it gave Washington the go-ahead to conduct operations over Syria from Ankara's strategic south-eastern air base of Incirlik.[36]

In September 2015, on the request of the Assad regime, the Russians commenced air strikes in support of Syrian forces and coordinated for them with an Iranian-supported regime offensive near Aleppo. It is also reported that in June 2015, a visit to Moscow by Qassem Suleimani, leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, may have been part of the planning for the eventual Iranian–Russian intervention.[37] By then, the call by ISIS spokesperson, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, to its members across the globe for attacks on citizens of the US, France and other countries against the group had started delivering results. The Sydney café hostage crisis in Australia; suicide attack during a funeral north of Baghdad; attack on the offices of French satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*; armed assault on a luxury hotel in the Tripoli, Libya, and beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians in Libya; and many more such terrorist acts that followed were

all in response to the call, which signified a fundamental shift and added the terror dimension to the ISIS strategy.[38] Thus, increasing territorial losses have also witnessed a proportional increase in terror-related activity by the ISIS, thereby indicating intransigence towards the actions of the coalition and regional armies.

ISIS has relied extensively on the Internet to spread its ideology and recruit its followers from across the world. It is not only extraordinarily adept at mastering modern media platforms but has also made it a strategic priority, apparently to spread fear and attract new recruits.[39] According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, the ISIS has the highest number of foreign fighters in its group since Afghanistan in the 1980s. Almost 30,000 young men and women from across the world have joined the ISIS in order to fight and expand its reach.[40] Many of these recruits became aware of its ideology and made initial contact with ISIS via the Internet. Other followers have been indoctrinated by the ISIS's online propaganda to carry out terrorist attacks in different parts of the world. ISIS has also relied on the digital network to wage its psychological warfare, which directly contributes to its territorial success.[41] The increasing number of lone-wolf attacks by its followers in distant parts of the world is a testimony to the effective propaganda mechanism evolved by the ISIS over a period of time.

By November 2015, Iraqi Kurds had also liberated Sinjar from ISIS. The liberation of Sinjar severed a key jihadist supply line with Syria. Within a month of this victory, the Iraqi forces retook Ramadi in December 2015.[42] In March 2016, Syrian forces backed by Russia had retaken Palmyra and in May 2016, Kurdish and Arab units grouped within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by US-led air support, had launched a two-pronged attack against ISIS fighters in north of Raqqa. Russia, for the first time, expressed its willingness to coordinate actions with both the US and Saudi Arabia defence forces in its fight against the ISIS. In Iraq, the government troops and paramilitary units besieged ISIS fighters in Fallujah and captured it by June 2016. With the fall Fallujah in 2016, ISIS had lost 25,000 fighters and about 40 per cent of its territory in Iraq, according to the Chris Garver, spokesman of the international coalition. As per another estimate, ISIS had also lost about 16–20 per cent of the territory in Syria. The areas over which it had lost control in the last six months include Heet, Rutba and Ramadi in Iraq, in addition to the strategic Tishrin Dam and its former stronghold in the city of al-Shaddadah in Syria.[43] In Libya also, by June, the United

Nations (UN)-backed unity government had retaken the Sirte Port,[44] and in Syria, the Syrian Army had closed in towards the rebel-controlled part of east Aleppo.[45]

The loss of territory in the recent past was also coupled with loss of leadership. In May 2015, Abu Alaa al-Afri, the second-in-command of the ISIS,[46] was killed. Also, Tunisian national Abu Sayyaf, a financier and senior figure in ISIS's illicit oil and gas activities, was killed in a US raid and his Iraqi wife, Umm Sayyaf, was captured.[47] In August 2015, Fadhil Ahmad al-Hayali, also known as Hajji Mutazz, who was appointed successor to al-Afri as second-in-command, was killed in a US military air strike while travelling in a vehicle near Mosul, Iraq, along with an ISIS media operative known as Abu Abdullah.[48] In March 2016, the next second-in-command of the group, Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, alias Haji Imam, and Abu Omar Al-Shishani, the Minister of War of ISIS, were also killed.[49] Apart from them, many other upper echelon commanders have been neutralised by the Iraqi and Syrian forces supported by coalition efforts in 2016, with the latest being the killing of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani in September 2016. The loss of the top line of terrorist leaders, including neutralisation of three successive second-in-command in two years, minister of war and chief spokesman of the group, is likely to have had a devastating effect on the morale of the ISIS terrorists.

The Future

The shrinking of the territory and neutralisation of its leaders by the coalition forces has put a question mark on the future of the ISIS. With the fall of Fallujah, another major red line has been crossed towards the decline of the ISIS caliphate. The group, which emerged as quasi-religious politico–military terrorist state, has always had captured areas as one of the most luring facets of its rise. However, the territory held by the caliphate is likely to shrink further in view of the consolidation of coalition efforts and losses being suffered by the ISIS in different parts of Iraq, Syria and Libya.

The group has also lost a number of its top leadership in the recent past. There are also unconfirmed reports that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in an air strike in June 2016.[50] The neutralisation of leadership and continuous loss of territory are likely to present the ISIS with limited choices. Regardless of the outcome of their leaders' death, the options which are likely to play out for ISIS can be narrowed down to three

broad scenarios (see Figure 1). The figure also shows a wild card scenario referencing the possibility of ISIS acquiring nuclear weapons.

Scenario 1: Loss of Leadership

The first scenario is that the coalition forces neutralise the top leadership over a period of time, including the self-proclaimed caliph of the group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In June 2016, both AhlulBayt News Agency (ABNA) and Turkish daily, *Yeni Şafak*, reportedly quoted Daesh news agency to have claimed that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been killed in the US-led coalition air strikes on Raqqa on 12 June 2016. However, the same has not been confirmed as yet.[51] This is not the first time that the news of Baghdadi's death has been reported. Earlier in April 2015 also, there were unconfirmed reports regarding the death of Baghdadi after being seriously injured in the US drone strike near the village of Umm al-Rous in western Iraq on 18 March, in which three other ISIS terrorists travelling in his convoy were also killed.[52] At present, assuming Baghdadi is alive, there is a possibility that Baghdadi is in the self-declared ISIS capital of Raqqa, Syria, or as another analysis brings out, observing exceptional operational security, he may be travelling from place to place to avoid being killed or captured by anti-ISIS coalition forces. Even if Baghdadi has not been killed in June 2016, it appears to be a matter of time before this becomes a reality.

In case of neutralisation of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the mantle of leadership of ISIS is likely to be taken over by Turki al-Binali (aka Abu Sufyan Al-Silmi), a fiery ISIS terrorist from Muharraq, Bahrain. Born in 1984, Binali hails from a wealthy and important Sunni family in Bahrain which was close to Al Khalifa rulers. Binali is known to have willingly left Bahrain and moved to Libya to recruit new followers for ISIS. He was reportedly present in Libya when the US commenced air strikes on Sirte in the beginning of August and left for Syria after the death of Abu Mohammad al-Adnani. Binali was also apparently the head of Research and Fatwa Department of ISIS, responsible for issuing of pamphlets that justified the raping of enslaved Yazidi women by ISIS followers. He is also known to maintain an active social media presence to recruit new followers and challenge his critics. In case Binali emerges as the next leader after Baghdadi, then such an arrangement will also reflect the transfer of power from old league of global jihadists to younger and more puritanical ones.[53] However, he is not from the Quraysh tribe, which claims Prophet Muhammad to be from the same tribe. Hence, ISIS, in
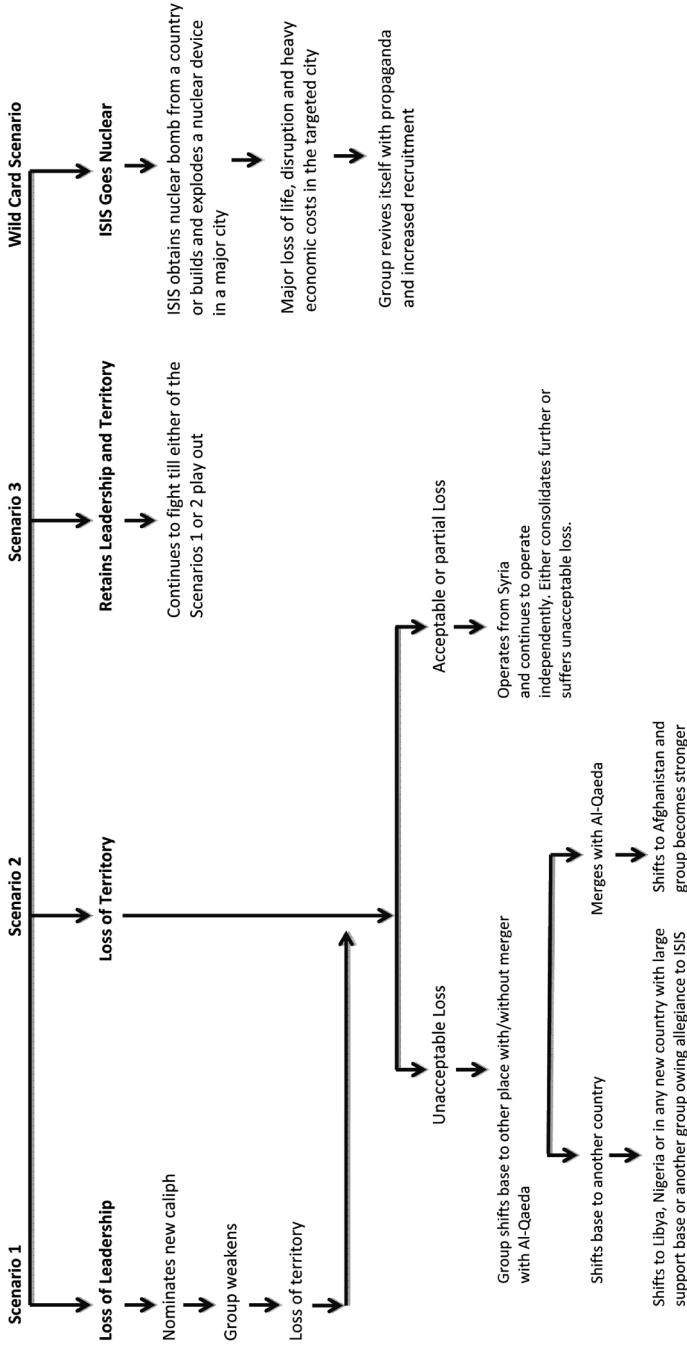
Figure 1 Future Scenario for ISIS

Source: Created by the author.

all probability, will either nominate a new caliph or declare Binali as its new leader and wait for someone more acceptable from Quraysh tribe to emerge as the next caliph.

According to a study based on a data set of 298 incidents of leadership targeting from 1945 to 2004, to determine whether and when decapitation of terrorist leader is effective, it has been found that religious and separatist organisations are more resilient to incapacitation of leaders. However, if a religious organisation has a charismatic leader, then this is more likely to fall apart when the charismatic leader is removed.[54] Applying the same analogy to ISIS, it can be assumed that while the loss of Baghdadi may not result in the collapse of ISIS, it will definitely weaken the group. Like most terrorist organisations, in ISIS too the leader has little direct contact with the active members of the organisation. So, while Baghdadi may be necessary to authorise a specific activity, the upper echelon ensures operational success. The ISIS has also lost number of leaders of upper echelon in the recent past and removal of both the upper echelon and the leader would severely hinder the ability of ISIS to coordinate and carry out further operations.

Another important issue brought out in the study is that the resilience of religious organisation can be attributed, in part, to the fact that many of these groups are older and larger. Older and larger organisations have more time to develop complex structures that makes them more resilient to leadership decapitation.[55] According to Martha Crenshaw, who has researched the life cycles of terrorist organisations, 'Possibly, there is a threshold point, beyond which the extremist organization becomes self-sustaining. The younger the organization, the greater is the likelihood of its ending.'[56] However, in case of ISIS, the caliphate has just entered the third year, though the ISI came into being in 2006. Hence, loss of charismatic leadership of Baghdadi is likely to negatively impact the group and make it more difficult for the group to find suitable replacement. However, with frequent neutralisation of its second-in-command, the ISIS appears to have developed the networks and support systems necessary to replenish its key members. Moreover, according to one estimate in 2014, ISIS has more than 50,000 fighters in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq. Hence, it can be said that the group is large enough to have an inherent resilience to leadership changes.[57]

Another issue highlighted in the study is that religious and separatist organisations which are more decentralised in structure are less likely to suffer setbacks than hierarchically structured organisations.[58] The spread

of ISIS in different parts of Libya, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Egypt[59] substantiates the decentralised nature of the group indicating that there would be no sudden collapse of the group. However, a gradual weakening of the group is definitely a possibility. Whether Binali or someone else from the Quraysh tribe, one thing which is apparent is that while loss of leadership may not result in the collapse of ISIS, it is likely to weaken the group and make it more difficult for the group to find charismatic leadership which can mobilise resources and support through digital propaganda. Weakening of the group is likely to manifest in loss of more territory, and more so in view of the consolidation of efforts by the regional armies and coalition.

Scenario 2: Loss of Territory

The loss of territory has grave implications for the ISIS as it threatens one of the basic postulates of its existence: the idea of an Islamic state ruled by the caliph, which eventually will defeat the Western powers in a decisive battle on the fields outside the Syrian village of Dabiq.[60] Thus, loss of caliphate presents an ideological dilemma for the leadership and followers of the caliphate. Although having a territory has denied it the advantage of 'formlessness', on which most of the terrorist organisations thrive by making themselves invisible, it has provide its followers with a tangible goal to defend and expand—a goal for which its followers can wage jihad with the aim of ultimate victory of the ISIS. The caliphate continues to attract a lot of followers by virtue of its territorial gains. It has also provided its followers across the world an address to go to, as well as a base for further indoctrination, training in military tactics and logistical support.

The ISIS, unlike the Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations, has sought to build the basic structure of an Islamic state in the territory it controls. It has established clear lines of authority, tax and educational systems and a sophisticated propaganda operation.[61] The ISIS has been funding itself by earning $2 million a day from the sale of oil, especially before the commencement of the air strikes. However, in December 2014, the ISIS's oil revenues dropped due to air strikes on oil facilities in Syria. Control of territory also helps the Islamic State earn money from extortion and collection of taxes in the areas it controls. The ISIS is also known to have earned at least $20 million in 2014 from ransoms paid for hostages.[62] However, with the recurring loss of territory, all this is set to change. In fact, the territorial state may also be one of the main

reasons why the decline of ISIS caliphate may become a reality, sooner than expected.

For the conventional armies, territorial boundaries present ISIS as an easier target against which military operations can be launched. Supported by modern US and Russian airplanes carrying out precision strikes on ISIS locations in Iraq and Syria, it is relatively easy for Iraqi and Syrian armies to launch conventional operations against ISIS positions than fighting a prolonged guerrilla war against an invisible terrorist organisation. Non-acceptance of territorial loss by ISIS leadership will also force their commanders to fight a war according to age-old military tactics to defend the territory. Such a scenario is likely to rob the ISIS of the ability of being invisible and seeming formlessness to the opponents. As mentioned earlier, terror organisations and networks across the world have operated as such for ages, without giving much clue about their organisational structure, members and modus operandi. In becoming a revolutionary Islamic State,[63] ISIS has lost the advantage which most terrorist organisations would prefer to have.

The loss of territory may be further categorised as unacceptable loss or partial acceptable loss. In case of partial or acceptable loss, the ISIS will continue to fight from Syria or Iraq till they consolidate or further losses take place. However, in case of unacceptable loss, the ISIS will be forced to shift its headquarters from Syria to a new place with the support of some affiliated group which owes its allegiance to ISIS, like Boko Haram or a similar group in Libya. Shifting to a new place entails both risks and advantages. The risks involve operating from unknown territory, leadership will have to trust the leadership of affiliated groups and also risk getting involved in the local political situation of the country, but it also entails that the coalition effort will have to adjust to the new reality and the ISIS may be able to gain time and formulate a new strategy for survival.

Overall, the risks outweigh the advantages in shifting to a new place with support of a smaller group. The other possibility which is more likely is merger of the ISIS with Al-Qaeda[64] and shifting base to Afghanistan. A merger with Al-Qaeda will give them the benefit of the existing network of the group and may further strengthen them. This will also present a united front, bringing together the two largest groups that ultimately have the same objective of establishing a caliphate.[65] The Al-Qaeda leadership has also kept the option open for ISIS by making statements which indicate a willingness to work together.[66] The ISIS

also has large number of fighters from Nusra Front—who were more interested in Islamic caliphate than fighting the Assad forces in Syria in 2012.[67] Presence of these fighters in the rank and file of ISIS leaves the door open for them to return to Jabhat al-Nusra or Al-Qaeda in future if the situation so demands. Thus, the possibility of a merger of ISIS with Al-Qaeda is one of the most plausible future scenarios in the immediate future of ISIS. Needless to say, the leadership of both groups may have to be flexible to arrive at mutually acceptable terms and conditions, keeping the different identity of both groups in view.

Scenario 3: Retains Leadership and Territory

The third scenario is the best possible for ISIS, wherein it retains top influential leadership and territory and continues to fight to consolidate its gains. In this scenario, the call by the ISIS leadership to all followers in distant parts of the world to move with their families to Iraq and Syria[68] is likely to be adhered to in letter and spirit, leading to further strengthening of the group. The ISIS is likely to recapture the territory it has lost and may able to prevent neutralisation of its leaders by observing exceptional operational security. The scenario will witness ISIS gaining more sources of funding from unknown wealthy patrons from different parts of the world through its digital effort. It is likely to witness overall strengthening of the ISIS army, with more fighters joining its numbers due to desertion from Al-Qaeda and its affiliates like Jabhat al-Nusra. More terror groups worldwide will swear allegiance to the group,[69] increasing the possibility of a surge in the number of terror attacks in different parts of the world, including lone-wolf attacks by online indoctrinated followers. However, under the present circumstances, that is, consolidation of coalition effort with that of the regional Arab armies and ISIS losing upper echelon leadership and territory, scenario 3 appears the least plausible.

Wild Card Scenario: ISIS Goes Nuclear

Another scenario, which at present appears as a wild card scenario, is the possibility of ISIS obtaining a nuclear bomb from a country or building and exploding a nuclear device in a major city in any part of the world. The same has been considered in a report published by a group of scientists in March 2016 at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. According to the study, there are three potential types of 'nuclear or radiological terrorism'. The first type of threat

envisages the terrorists obtaining a nuclear bomb from a state's arsenal or building and detonating an improvised nuclear bomb in a major city. The second type of threat envisages terrorists setting off a 'dirty bomb' made of radioactive material attached to conventional explosives; and the third type considers the possibility of terrorists sabotaging a nuclear facility leading to large-scale radioactive contamination.[70]

Out of the three types of threats envisaged by the scientists, the first type of threat will have the most impact, wherein the ISIS is able to obtain a nuclear bomb from a country's arsenal—like Pakistan—or gain the technical know-how to build a bomb and is able to access considerable amount of highly enriched uranium or plutonium. The intention of the ISIS to obtain a nuclear device or technology and material was propagated in the May 2015 edition of *Dabiq*, the ISIS propaganda magazine, which published an article purportedly written by John Cantlie, which discussed about the group buying a nuclear weapon from corrupt officials in Pakistan. The article provided no details about the existence of such a plan or the availability of nuclear weapons in Pakistan. At present, there are no clear indicators that ISIS is making a concerted effort to obtain nuclear technology or highly enriched uranium. Needless to say, if ISIS is able to obtain or make an improvised nuclear device and explode it at a major city in any part of the world, it has the potential to cause serious loss of life, disruption and economic loss. It would also impose tremendous psychological impact and economic costs on the country. The event will also become a major propaganda tool for the group, abetting further recruitment. On the other hand, the international community will also raise the level of response and carry out more stringent and punitive action against the ISIS. However, the possibility of the scenario playing out at this stage was considered to be least likely by the scientists as there are no clear indicators that ISIS is pursuing a focused nuclear weapons effort.

The second type of threat, that is, the possibility of ISIS making a crude nuclear weapon and detonating it along with a conventional bomb in a major city, was identified as a more likely threat by the scientists at Belfer Center. Though the radiation from a dirty bomb may not result in mass destruction and death in the near term, it could impose an exorbitant price in the form of disruption and clean-up costs.[71] This sort of a threat is also supported by reports regarding ISIS fighters or members having gained access to 40 kg of low-enriched uranium from scientific institutions at Mosul University in Iraq.[72] The third type of

threat, which envisages the possibility of terrorists sabotaging a nuclear facility, is considered as an intermediate threat, with the likelihood of terrorist's carrying out the threat also intermediate between the other two types of threats. The effectiveness of such a threat would also depend on the amount of success such an attack would be able to achieve against highly guarded nuclear facilities.[73]

Thus, it can be assumed that the scenario involving the ISIS obtaining a nuclear bomb from a state's arsenal or making and exploding one is remote at this stage. However, developments in this field will have to be monitored closely; and more so in view of certain reports, such as in November 2015, the ISIS operatives involved in the Paris attacks made a surveillance video at the residence of a senior official of SKN-CEN, a Belgian nuclear research centre. Though investigators could not confirm the intention of the terrorists in this case, the vague possibility that they intended to kidnap the official or his family to gain access to the nuclear facility cannot be ruled out.

Digital Metamorphosis

Regardless of the scenario which will play out for the ISIS, a common feature accompanying all the scenarios discussed here is that ISIS will continue to further its dominance in the digital domain. With deep presence in the digital arena, it will continue to indoctrinate new followers and recruit them online, thereby keeping the pressure on with lone-wolf and organised terror attacks in different parts of the world. However, the loss of leadership and territory will definitely impede the effectiveness of its digital effort. Recent inputs indicate ISIS having increased its digital propaganda in countries like Turkey to recruit more followers. Quoting extensively from the Quran, ISIS propaganda is calling sympathisers to migrate with their families to Islamic countries such as Iraq and Syria. However, of late, more and more ISIS propaganda videos are also calling its followers to serve the ISIS from where they are located. The increase in the presence of ISIS in digital arena is despite counter-measures taken by countries to restrict the same, which indicates the technical expertise of information technology specialists working for the group.[74] Thus, though the physical influence of the ISIS and territorial gains may be on the decline, it has retained and enhanced its capability in the digital world as a fallout of its loses in other areas. Through the digital medium the group will continue to propagate its messages, calling on its followers to wage jihad from wherever they are, and in the process, carry out a

metamorphosis into an ideology diffused in its followers in different parts of the world, giving them sanction to wage jihad.

CONCLUSION

Out of all the plausible scenarios, 'Scenario 1: Loss of Leadership', in which the coalition forces over a period of time neutralise the top leadership including the self-proclaimed caliph of the group, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, appears to be the most likely. As mentioned earlier, the loss of leadership may not result in the collapse of ISIS, but it is likely to weaken the group and make it more difficult for the group to find charismatic leadership which can mobilise resources and support. Thus, it is also likely to result in loss of territory. In case the group suffers an unacceptable loss, the ISIS will be forced to shift its headquarters from Syria to a new place with the support of some affiliated group which owes its allegiance to ISIS. In such a scenario, the merger of the ISIS with Al-Qaeda[75] and shifting base to Afghanistan is also a possibility. The merger of ISIS with Al-Qaeda will provide the group with the wherewithal of a well-established additional network and may further strengthen them. As discussed earlier in the article, both groups share the same ultimate objective of establishing a caliphate[76] and the Al-Qaeda leadership has kept the option of reconciliation open for ISIS by making statements indicating a willingness to work together.[77] The presence of a large number of fighters from Nusra Front also gives credence to such a possibility by providing them with the option to return to Jabhat al-Nusra or Al-Qaeda in future if the situation so demands.[78] Thus, the possibility of a merger of ISIS with Al-Qaeda is also likely in the immediate future of ISIS. Add to this the recurring loss of territory, it is logical to consider the possibility of ISIS leadership shifting their location to Afghanistan, where the vast mountainous terrain will provide them with natural cover and hiding places which have provided a safe refuge to terrorist leaders for decades.[79]

At present, the wild card scenario envisaging the likelihood of ISIS obtaining a nuclear bomb from a state's arsenal or developing it on its own to revive its fortunes appears less likely in the absence of clear indicators that ISIS is intending to obtain or develop a nuclear weapon.[80] However, any development towards such a move needs to be closely monitored as it provides a wild card scenario for the group to revive its prospects.

Last but not the least, the digital metamorphosis of the group is

almost a certainty with the continuous expansion of its activities in the digital arena. As it appears at present, ISIS will continue to grow digitally regardless of whichever scenario plays out. Thus, the growth in the digital arena will accompany the manifestation of any future scenario for ISIS. If left uncontested in the digital arena, it is likely to continue to indoctrinate and recruit vulnerable youth in different parts of the world to join the group in its quest to strengthen its own notion of Islamic caliphate.

Notes

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7. Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 137.

8. James Astill, 'Osama: The Sudan Years', *The Guardian*, 17 October 2001, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/17/afghanistan.terrorism3, accessed on 22 June 2016.

9. Hasan al-Banna formed Egyptian Society of Muslim Brothers (known colloquially as Muslim Brotherhood) to combat what he saw as the degrading effects of foreign influence and secular ways of life. He announced that the opportunity to create a new world order based on Islam had arrived. 'The Islamic way has been tried before', he argued, and the 'history has testified as to its soundness'. Where possible, this fight was to be gradualist

and peaceful. Assassinated in 1949, al-Banna was not vouchsafed in time to explain in detail how to reconcile the revolutionary ambition of his project of world transformation with the principles of tolerance and cross-civilisational amity that he espoused. These ambiguities lingered in al-Banna's text, but the record of many Islamist thinkers and movements since then has resolved them in favour of a fundamental rejection of pluralism and secular international order. Sayyed Qutb articulated perhaps the most learned and influential version of this view. In 1964, while imprisoned on charges of participating in a plot to assassinate Egyptian President Nasser, Qutb wrote *Milestones*, a declaration of war against the existing world order that became a foundational text of modern Islamism. Islam's modern view was to overthrow them all and replace them with what he took to be a literal, eventually global implementation of Quran. See Kissinger, *World Order*, n. 7, pp. 118–21.

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11. Patrick Kingsley, 'How Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's First Elected President, Ended up on Death Row', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/01/mohamed-morsi-execution-death-sentence-egypt, accessed on 23 June 2016.

12. Kissinger, *World Order*, n. 7, pp. 120–22.

13. 'The Salafi movement…represents a diverse community. All Salafis share a puritanical approach to the religion intended to eschew religious innovation by strictly replicating the model of the Prophet Muhammad. Yet the community is broad enough to include such diverse figures as Osama bin Laden and the Mufti of Saudi Arabia. Individuals and groups within the community reflect varied positions on such important topics as jihad, apostasy, and the priorities of activism. In many cases, scholars claiming the Salafi mantel formulate antipodal juristic positions, leading one to question whether they can even be considered part of the same religious tradition…. The different contextual readings have produced three major factions in the community: the purists, the politicos, and the jihadis. The purists emphasize a focus on nonviolent methods of propagation, purification, and education. They view politics as a diversion that encourages deviancy. Politicos, in contrast, emphasize application of the Salafi creed to the political arena, which they view as particularly important because it dramatically impacts social justice and the right of God alone to legislate. Jihadis take a more militant position and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution. All three factions share a common creed but offer different explanations of the contemporary world and its concomitant problems and thus propose different solutions. The splits are about contextual analysis, not belief.' See Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2006, pp. 207–08.

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